

THE BIG league

BY LUCY CORNE

In Japan, bigger really is better, at least when it comes to wrestling. And Tokyo's Grand Sumo Tournament is the largest of them all, attracting thousands of spectators with glorious pomp and ceremony – and just a touch of tussle.



The crowd roars as the two fighters eyeball each other, cheers and applause echoing around the stadium even when the wrestlers rise and momentarily leave the ring, each slapping his belly in a bid to psyche out his opponent. I have virtually no idea what's going on but it doesn't matter – the atmosphere is electric and I feel immersed in a sport that's far removed from anything I've witnessed.

Attending a Grand Sumo Tournament in Japan is one of those inimitable travel experiences that makes you feel both somewhat lost and entirely enthralled; one of those occurrences that makes the jet lag and long journey worthwhile.

The day starts early: unable to secure tickets over the phone due to a command of Japanese that stretches no further than a cheery *konnichiwa*, we make a dawn pilgrimage to Tokyo's

sumo stadium, the Ryogoku Kokugikan, clutching *nikuman* (steamed bun) breakfasts, and join the queue. Each morning of the tournament – held just three times a year in Tokyo – last-minute tickets go on sale, and those who opt for an extra hour in their hotel beds will arrive well rested but most likely be disappointed, as seats are snapped up quickly.

A biting winter wind whips around us as we wait for the ticket office to open; colourful *nobori* flags, each bearing a wrestler's name, flutter above our heads. The queue grows as the first of the wrestlers arrives for a day in the ring – a moment that passes without too much attention from the locals but triggers a succession of camera clicks from the smattering of tourists. The early arrivals are the most junior fighters, relatively diminutive in their proportions, but the

sight of topknots, robes and sandals is enough to awake even the groggiest of morning haters.

Two minutes later, we're clutching our cheap-seat tickets – and just in time, it seems, as the drums atop a nearby turret start to beat, signalling the start of the day's proceedings. But instead of heading inside the stadium, we venture out to explore Tokyo. Early bouts feature *jonokuchi*, novice wrestlers, and while it was unlikely we'd be able to appreciate the differences in technique, we decide to join the sumo aficionados later in the day to watch the more accomplished athletes.

It's eerily quiet as we head north along the Sumida River towards Nakamise-dori in the Asakusa district. Like most visitors to Japan's capital, we've come to admire Sensoji, Tokyo's oldest temple, to shop for souvenirs and to enjoy the food. Our second breakfast is a meal of rice crackers wrapped in seaweed and *kaminari okoshi*, a sweet snack of puffed rice and peanuts. It's still early when we finish but the Asahi Super Dry Hall beckons, with its controversial façade and alcoholic offerings.

The Philippe Starck-designed building is said to represent a beer glass in design, the porthole-shaped windows in its black granite finish meant to look like bubbles from afar. Sitting atop the building is a much-talked about sculpture, the Flame d'Or. Its significance, as with any piece of art, is in the eye of the beholder – some see it as the burning flame of the company; others imagine it as the frothy head of a beer; and many liken the sculpture to an altogether less appealing image, referring to the statue atop Asahi HQ as O Gon No Unko ("The Golden Poo").

We sip mid-morning Asahis in the Asahi Sky Room, perched 22 floors up in the neighbouring and less controversial sister building, whose gold-tinged, white-topped exterior is supposed to resemble liquid amber from afar. After a second pre-lunch brew, gazing out over the cloud-coated city, we decide it is time to take our sumo seats.

Diehard fans are trickling in to the Kokugikan as we make our way to our seats in the very back row. We have a great overview of the stadium, but I want to get up close and personal with the wrestlers. Leaving our hats and jackets to reserve our assigned seats, we make our way ringside for some photos of the hand-clapping, belly-slapping, salt-throwing action before the auditorium fills up. At once mesmerised and utterly baffled by these bizarre rituals, we leave the *dohyo* (ring) and wander across to the museum, hoping to find a little enlightenment. As intriguing as the mostly historical artefacts are, they fail to shed much light on the rules of the sport and we leave as mystified as we had arrived.

We soon regret leaving our warm clothes to reserve our seats. A crowd has formed outside the stadium so naturally we join it, having no idea what we are looking at but excited nonetheless. The pack is silent as they whip out the latest in digital cameras to record the arrival of the *makunouchi* – the highest-ranking wrestlers; the wrestlers people have really come to see. They arrive on foot – three men at the top of their much-revered game, walking together from the nearby "stables" where they live and train.

At first I marvel at the lack of minders, of overzealous fans, of pushy paparazzi, but then I look at these guys – almost two metres tall and more than 140 kilograms apiece – and realise that the absence of bodyguards is hardly a mystery. Still, the fact that a group of sporting demigods is able to walk the streets with nothing more than respectful and admiring



glances or the occasional coy photograph from the fans strikes a stark contrast to the celebrity-chasing that is par for the course in the western world.

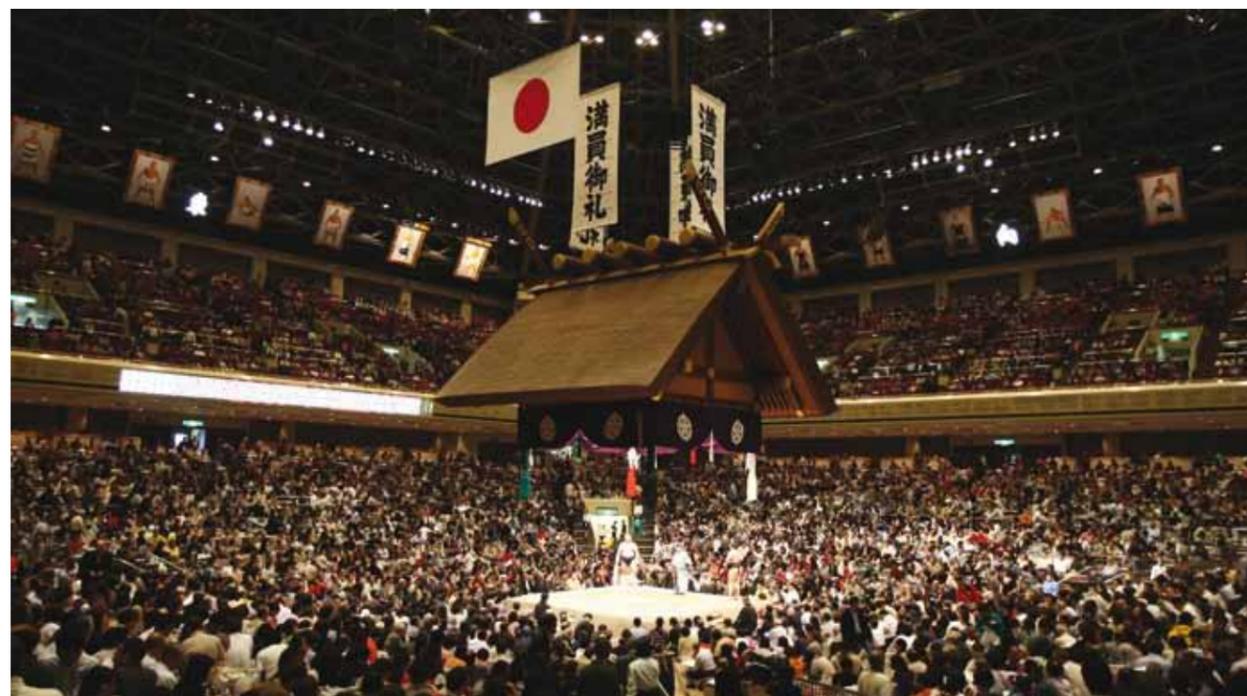
The mid-morning beers are starting to take their toll and the stadium canteen is calling. If there's anything that can stave off a midday hangover, a sumo-sized lunch is it. *Chanko-nabo*, we read, is the one-pot meal choice of sumo wrestlers: it's a robust combination of chicken, fried fish balls, tofu and vegetables, simmered in broth and served with rice or noodles. Our guidebook assures us that this is the dish ordered by the men we've come to watch so despite our misgivings – namely, the raw egg on the plate we're unsure of how to incorporate – we order *chanko* for two, keen to get the complete sumo experience.

It's a hearty lunch, ideal for shutting out Tokyo's wintery January temperatures and with protein levels designed to sustain some of the largest of earth's athletes. We are just debating what to do with the egg when a trio of high-level wrestlers takes a window table, again with no greater hassle than a few grins and nudges and a casual photo, taken by two tourists. We're feeling a part of the scene by the time the wrestlers' lunches arrive – not "sumo stew" at all, but altogether tastier-looking plates of pork cutlets and salad.

Before returning to our seats to watch the fights, I make a brief and worthwhile stop at the souvenir shop where, between postcards and posters of wrestlers past and present, sits a booklet (an English booklet!) explaining the finer points of the sport. It's the local equivalent of "Sumo for Dummies" and it couldn't have found a needier home.

Safely back in my seat I begin to read up on the sport, offering witty and insightful commentary on the bouts to my (not so) tremendously grateful husband. Suddenly, sumo starts to make sense.

Each bout begins with a religious-cum-superstitious ritual: the clapping is a way to attract the attention of the gods, just as when the devout visit a Shinto shrine; the stamping is to squash any demons that might be lurking in the ring. This pre-match moment has me grinning like a child. Thanks to movies and TV, the sight of this far-from-slender chap clad in what's



SUMO A-GO-GO

Clockwise from above: The stadium packs out for Tokyo's Grand Sumo Tournament, held three times a year in the Japanese capital; attend a tournament in May and you'll also witness Tokyo's cherry blossoms; wrestling is actually rather rare in sumo bouts.

Previous spread: Tokyo at night.



BIGGER IS BETTER
Tokyo's sumo stadium, the Ryogoku Kokugikan.



essentially an outsized g-string, lifting his leg into a vertical version of the splits is strangely familiar – only now, thanks to the trusty booklet, I understand why he's doing it.

When the bouts finally begin, they're almost too fast to follow, but the delicious pomp that has preceded them has the crowd roaring. The rituals are also meant, the booklet says, to intimidate the opponent – think, the Maori *haka* in a one-on-one setting – and the constant near-starts must put sumo wrestlers on edge as much as Olympic sprinters waiting for the pistol. The wrestlers crouch and glare in a ritual called *shikiri* – and just when you think the action will start, one stands and leaves the *dohyo*, scattering salt menacingly as he attempts to unsettle his opponent further. These days, pre-fight intimidation can last up to four minutes, but the pre-1928 *shikiri* came with no time limits.

The bouts themselves can be blink-and-you'll-miss-it short – the final fight of the day we're there, the one featuring the *yokozuna* or grand champion, lasts just three seconds, following full after four minutes of preamble. The *shikiri* doubles, whipping the crowd into a frenzy, and the *yokozuna* – who survives the lightning-fast bout victorious – knows exactly what his public wants.

We leave elated, feeling just a little more enlightened about Japan's national pastime. And while expert Sumo status may be a long way off, I know I'm more likely now to score a point if there's an obscure-sports round in my local pub quiz. •

Photography by Douglas Schafer and courtesy of the Japan Sumo Association and Japan National Tourism Organization.

travel facts

GETTING THERE

Jetstar flies every day to Osaka and Tokyo from most Australian cities, via the Gold Coast or Cairns. 131-538; jetstar.com/au

JAL flies from Sydney to Tokyo, daily. 1800-802-228; au.jal.com

GETTING AROUND

Tokyo's metro system is fast, frequent and well priced, though avoiding the notoriously busy rush hour is a fine idea. The Ryogoku Kokugikan is close to both the Ryogoku metro station (Oedo line) and the mainline train station.

WHEN TO GO

There are only six Grand Tournaments each year, lasting 15 days each. The Tokyo tournaments happen in mid-January, mid-May and mid-September. There are also tournaments in Osaka (March), Aichi (July) and Fukuoka (November). Tickets go on sale a month before each tournament. sumo.or.jp/eng

WHERE TO STAY

In the bustling Ginza district and close to the Imperial Palace, the Imperial Hotel offers well-located opulence with a distinctly Japanese air. 81-3/3504-1111; imperialhotel.co.jp

The Shangri-La Hotel Tokyo is the city's newest luxury lodgings and comes with 200 smart rooms designed with Asian flourishes. 81-3/6739-7888; shangri-la.com

It's hard to look past the understated elegance of the Peninsula Tokyo. Rooms here come with every mod-com you could ever want, including in-room nail dryers for the ladies. 81-3/6270-2888; peninsula.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Japan National Tourism Organization has an office in Australia. 61-2/9279-2177; jnto.org.au

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*Best availability dates apply. See below for details.

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