

Ameyoko Today

The Ameyoko shopping street, which runs along and partially underneath the elevated railway tracks between Ueno and Okachimachi stations, comprises about 390 stores dealing in everything from seafood and fruit to cosmetics and chocolate. These shops line the 600-meter thoroughfare and the numerous alleys that branch out from the main street, and often display their products in eye-catching ways under awnings out front. While some of the shops are general stores, most of them focus on a specific product, such as sunglasses, jeans, belts, or even surplus military gear. This specialization has its roots in the early history of Ameyoko, when the street hosted many merchants dealing in merchandise procured from the U.S. military, which occupied Japan from 1945 until 1952.

Ameyoko is also distinguished by its old-school business practices. Most shops take only cash, allow price bargaining, and would much rather give customers an extra item or two than provide change. Just about every shop at Ameyoko depends on a core group of regular customers, carefully cultivated over many years, so shop staff rarely feel the need to attract everyone who passes by. When a first-time customer does show some interest, though, the merchants are usually eager to chat face to face and suggest deals on the spot. Shopping around is also recommended, as the competition among Ameyoko stores is fierce and merchants are constantly trying to undercut each other.

While far from the prettiest-looking shopping street in Tokyo, Ameyoko is a down-to-earth, welcoming spot brimming with energy that reverberates especially during the days just before New Year's. At year-end, shoppers from all over Tokyo descend on Ameyoko to procure holiday delicacies and revel in the festive atmosphere, in a tradition that goes back to the mid-1970s.