

Cruising the Dotonbori Canal

(target: 250–500 ww, actual: 400–455 ww)

A cruise up and down the Dotonbori Canal provides an eye-opening look at the popular shopping and dining district from a nostalgic, pre-automobile perspective.

Osaka has been a nexus for transport and trade since ancient times, connecting sea and overland routes near the center of the Japanese archipelago. Its natural river system has been augmented over the centuries by a network of canals to move goods and people more smoothly. By early modern times, Osaka was known as the “city of 808 bridges.” Its waterways bustled with barges and pleasure craft well into the twentieth century.

With the rise of motorized transport after the end of World War II, much of this traffic shifted to the road system, and Osaka’s waterways lost their place at the heart of civic life. To reverse this trend and reclaim Osaka’s heritage as Japan’s “water capital” (*suito*), the city launched a campaign in 2001 to revive the pleasures of waterfront life for visitors and residents alike.

Metropolis from the Waterline

A short river cruise reveals the Osaka cityscape from a fresh point of view. By day, the rivers and canals sparkle in the sun. As night falls, the waters take on an air of mystery, reflecting the streetlights and neon signs of the city or the reds and golds of sunset in the harbor.

There are chartered cruises along the shores of Nakanoshima and its iconic architecture, around Osaka Bay, and past Osaka Castle further inland. One popular option runs along the Dotonbori Canal, under Ebisu-bashi Bridge, and past landmarks like Glico’s “Running Man” sign, led by a guide who keeps up a steady commentary in Osaka-ben dialect.

Bridges of Dotonbori

A Dotonbori Canal cruise reveals the great variety of the canal’s bridges. Apart from Nippon-bashi Bridge, which was built by the Tokugawa shogunate as a public works project in the early seventeenth century, every bridge across the canal was originally constructed by a private citizen hoping to transport goods or attract customers more

efficiently.

Ebisu-bashi Bridge was originally built around the same time as the canal, which was completed in 1615. The bridge appears regularly in sightseeing guides and illustrations from the early modern period and remains the neon-lit hub of the district today. In 2007, it was rebuilt with a circular plaza at the center to accommodate the huge volume of visitors—and, in a nod to Osaka’s foodways, the railings are shaped like *okonomiyaki* spatulas.

Ukiniwa-bashi Bridge, on the other hand, is a recent addition: a pedestrian span built in 2008 to connect the Horie district to the canal’s southern shore. “Ukiniwa” means “floating garden,” and the bridge is covered with vines and other plants, a quasi-park suspended above the water.