

You could cook while on the toilet: a night in one of Tokyo's micro-apartments

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. What must every living space have? Add any other ideas of your own.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a bed | <input type="checkbox"/> a fridge-freezer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a private sleeping area | <input type="checkbox"/> an oven |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a wardrobe | <input type="checkbox"/> a kitchen worktop |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a toilet | <input type="checkbox"/> a sofa |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a sink | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ windows |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a shower or bathtub | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a separate living area | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a home office | |

b. Could you live in a micro-apartment (a one-room living space under 32 square metres)? Why? Why not?

2 Key words

a. Choose the word that best matches each definition. Then, complete the sample sentences to use them in context.

boom	commute	cosy	cramped	cubicle	envision
kitchenette	occupancy	rental	real estate	tenant	tumble

- a noun meaning *a small, enclosed area in a room, separated from the rest of the room by thin walls or curtains* _____
Only the director has her own office. The rest of the workers all have a _____ and little privacy.
- a noun meaning *a small area used as a kitchen* _____
We chose a hotel with a _____, so we could heat food.
- an adjective meaning *warm, comfortable, and making you feel relaxed* _____
My first flat was tiny but very _____ – I loved it!

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4. an American English noun meaning *the business of buying and selling land and property*

He likes working with people, so he is thinking of going into _____.
5. a noun meaning *an amount of money that you pay for renting something such as a house*

The average _____ in New York is around \$4,000 per month.
6. a noun meaning *a sudden increase in the popularity of something* _____
The oil _____ completely reshaped Saudi Arabia.
7. a noun meaning *someone who rents a flat, house, office, piece of land, etc., from the person who owns it* _____
He is a friendly landlord and has a good relationship with all of his _____.
8. a noun meaning *the use, or period of use, of a place* _____
The hotel has 20 rooms, and ten are currently empty, which means that the _____ rate is 50%.
9. an adjective meaning *small and crowded* _____
Today, Mr Hopkins's group is attending our classes, so it feels very _____.
10. a verb meaning *to fall to the ground* _____
As the horse jumped over the fence, Ophelia _____ from the saddle.
11. a noun meaning *the journey to and from work every day* _____
My office is a two-hour _____ from the suburbs.
12. a verb meaning *to imagine something that has not happened or does not exist*

When she designed her house, she never _____ how much the area would change.

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Justin McCurry

20 March, 2023

- 1 Through the open door, every part of the living space except the sleeping area is visible. A tiny entryway leads to a small shower cubicle on the right, next to a toilet that – with the door open – you could sit on while making dinner in a kitchenette 50cm away on the other side of the “corridor”.
- 2 The *Guardian* spent the night in Shanti Casa, in Tokyo, the answer to growing demand among young people who are unable to afford the capital's high and rising rents.
- 3 Each micro-apartment measures just nine square metres – just under half the size of a typical studio apartment in Tokyo – white walls, a large window at the back and a 3.6-metre-high ceiling balance out their cosy proportions. The block is among 100 buildings opened in Tokyo by the real-estate company Spilytus in the past seven years.

Gap in the market

- 4 Rents for micro-apartments can be as low as ¥50,000 (\$376) a month, rising to ¥80,000 in more fashionable locations. At Shanti Casa, the monthly rent is ¥20,000 to ¥30,000 lower than the average rental in the area.
- 5 Some say the micro-apartment boom shows the lack of affordable urban housing for young, underpaid workers, with quality of life sacrificed for convenience and affordability. But Keisuke Nakama, the firm's president, says the idea is to give tenants a chance to save while they consider their long-term futures.
- 6 “Many younger people these days don't have many possessions. They have a few items of clothing and not that much money, so these apartments are ideal for them,” said Nakama, whose 1,500 micro-apartments have an occupancy rate of 98%.
- 7 “We want to provide a place for people who are moving to Tokyo from outside the city and who can't afford the high rents here,” said Nakama, “Most of them stay in these apartments for two or three years, save some money and move to a bigger place, maybe after they've met a partner and want to settle down.”

Cramped but restful

- 8 The *Guardian*'s stay in one of the firm's model flats lasted just 24 hours.
I spent the night alone. My biggest fear – of tumbling out of bed to the floor – never happened. Actually, the night was more restful than in my own apartment, which is almost four times bigger.
- 9 Tenants living in Shanti Casa's 30 units are spread out over three floors. Each flat comes with a ground-floor living space, shower and toilet, and an upper-floor “bedroom” accessible by a ladder. About 60% of the tenants are male, and most are in their 20s or 30s, with just one in 10 over 40.

'Saving for somewhere bigger'

- 10 The idea for compact living spaces came to Nakama after he moved to Tokyo from rural Oita and was shocked to find that a flat cost more than four times as much in Tokyo.
- 11 Exhausted from his long daily commutes, Nakama envisioned accommodation with just enough space to eat, sleep and store a few essential belongings, and in locations that made it possible to walk or cycle to work.
- 12 Reina Suzuki, who began living in her micro-apartment in western Tokyo in the summer of 2022, was initially surprised by how small it was. “I found it difficult to stretch out and relax. But it's a 10-minute walk to work, I like the interior ... and I've got used to sleeping on the upper floor,” said Suzuki.
- 13 With just a single electric hob in her kitchen, Suzuki, 30, likes to eat out but occasionally makes stir-fries and salads. She plans to move out in a couple of years. “I'm going to save up for somewhere bigger. When I moved in, I felt tired a lot of the time but, over the months, I've got to quite like the place. Surprisingly, I can relax here.”

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3 Comprehension check

- a. Are these statements True (T) or False (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false
1. Shanti Casa is one of 1,500 buildings in Tokyo opened by Spilytus, a real-estate company.
 2. Keisuke Nakama, the firm's president, got the idea after he moved to Tokyo and was shocked at the rental prices and tired of long commutes.
 3. Micro-apartments are uncomfortable, but they allow people to live close to work while saving money.
 4. Many of the micro-apartments are empty now.
 5. Each flat has a living space, shower, toilet, and an upper-floor "bedroom".
 6. The writer feared falling out of the bed on the upper floor.
 7. One convenient thing about micro-apartments is that people can flat-share with friends.
 8. People who live in micro-apartments are mostly over 30.
 9. A flat in Tokyo can cost more than four times as much as in a rural location.
 10. One tenant says she can relax in the micro-apartment now but felt tired when she first moved in.

4 Key language

- a. Choose the adjective form that best completes the following statements from the text. Then, go back to check your answers.
1. It is one of _____ viewings in estate agency history.
a. shorter than b. the shortest c. as short as
 2. Rents for micro-apartments can be _____ ¥50,000.
a. lower than b. the lowest c. as low as
 3. At Shanti Casa, the monthly rent is ¥20,000 to ¥30,000, which is _____ the average rental in the area.
a. lower than b. the lowest c. as low as
 4. The night was _____ in my own flat, which is almost four times bigger.
a. more restful than b. the most restful c. as restful as

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5. A flat is _____ in Tokyo.
- a. more expensive b. the most expensive c. as expensive as
6. "I'm going to save up for somewhere _____."
- a. bigger b. the biggest c. as big

b. Complete the questions using comparatives or superlatives. Add two questions of your own. Then discuss the questions.

1. What is _____ (small, *superlative*) place you have ever lived?
2. Would it be _____ (good, *comparative*) to live in a small place by yourself or share a larger space with others?
3. What is _____ (important, *superlative*) space in a house for you?
4. _____ ?
5. _____ ?

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- How much of your income would you spend to improve your living situation?
- How important is it for you to save money?
- What would be the hardest thing about living in a micro-apartment?

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6 In your own words

- a. You are going to design a micro-apartment building for the town or city you live in. You can use the ones described in the article as inspiration. Design a new one that will appeal to students or young people where you live.

Look back at the Warmer task to help create your design. Label each area clearly and give as much detail as possible.

- b. Present your design to your group. Compare it to the one described in the article.

Useful language

It has a more ... style.

It has a larger / smaller / more...

The ... is better because...

The ... is more comfortable/convenient because ...