



## No kissing, no sharing: can Tokyo's hostess bars survive Covid-19?

Kabukicho is far quieter than usual but is being accused of fuelling a coronavirus second wave

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**Justin McCurry** in Tokyo

Thu 23 Jul 2020 13.16 BST

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Kabukicho's host and hostess clubs, where as many as 10,000 men and women are employed to pour drinks, light cigarettes and engage in small talk with customers.

Smaller clubs where physical distancing is all but impossible have closed, while others have carried on in the faint hope that the capital's nighttime economy will be able to survive a brief surge in infections. But they include those that have failed to take preventive measures.



Aya Yumiko poses during lockdown in a bar in Kabukicho where she used to perform as a burlesque dancer. Photograph: Kim Kyung-Hoon/Reuters

“Some places have a proper understanding of the risks posed by the virus and do the right thing, but some don’t,” said Koichi Teratani, an authority on Kabukicho. “The area is really struggling.”

Her said the closure of clubs and sex shops had affected the area's restaurants and bars too, with footfall dropping by as much as 90% for some. About 150,000 people once passed through Kabukicho every day, but now the number is closer to 30,000.

A return to even a semblance of normality is a long way off. Japan reported a record 750 new cases on Wednesday, weeks after the government lifted a nationwide state of emergency to encourage economic activity and, inevitably, more human contact.

On Thursday, Tokyo reported a record 366 new infections, a day after the city's governor, Yuriko Koike, urged residents to stay at home during the four-day holiday weekend. With host and hostess clubs now synonymous with the spread of the virus, industry representatives say this vital part of the capital's entertainment scene has become a scapegoat for the authorities' failure to give clear guidance on public health measures.

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Staff of the Tokyo's city authority urge people to go home from the Kabukicho district in April. Photograph: Eugene Hoshiko/AP

The NBA has drafted safety rules for its members, including disinfecting karaoke microphones, as it found government recommendations, such as wearing masks and two-metre physical distancing, were impractical.

Shinya Iwamuro, a urologist and public health advocate who has been visiting nightlife districts in Tokyo to educate bars and clubs on hygiene and infection control, said staff needed practical rules on how to interact with customers.

That means no kissing and no sharing plates of food, he said, with conversations held at right angles to avoid droplet contamination. “As much as possible, kiss only with your partner, and avoid deep kissing,” Iwamuro said, outlining what he described as “kiss etiquette”.

Erin, who has worked as a hostess in Kabukicho for a decade, wears a mask at work, as do her customers, who are asked to sanitise their hands and have their temperature taken before they are admitted.

But keeping a distance becomes more difficult as the evening wears on. “We sit at a distance side by side, but some customers start flirting and touching, especially the drunk ones,” she told the Guardian. “The early evenings are dead, and the overall number of customers is much lower than before. We used to get lots of salarymen, but their companies have told them to stay away from hostess clubs.



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Naming and shaming businesses where there have been outbreaks will do little to contain the virus, according to Koga, who estimates that more than a million people work in the industry.

“Workers are horrified by the thought they could be responsible for the closure of their club because they had become infected,” she said. “That means that workers might try to hide their symptoms and avoid getting tested.

“Lumping together businesses that are taking proper coronavirus measures and those that are not isn’t the answer. For Japan to overcome this crisis and for its nightlife to get back to its vibrant self, we need more understanding, not criticism.”

*Erin’s name has been changed at her request*

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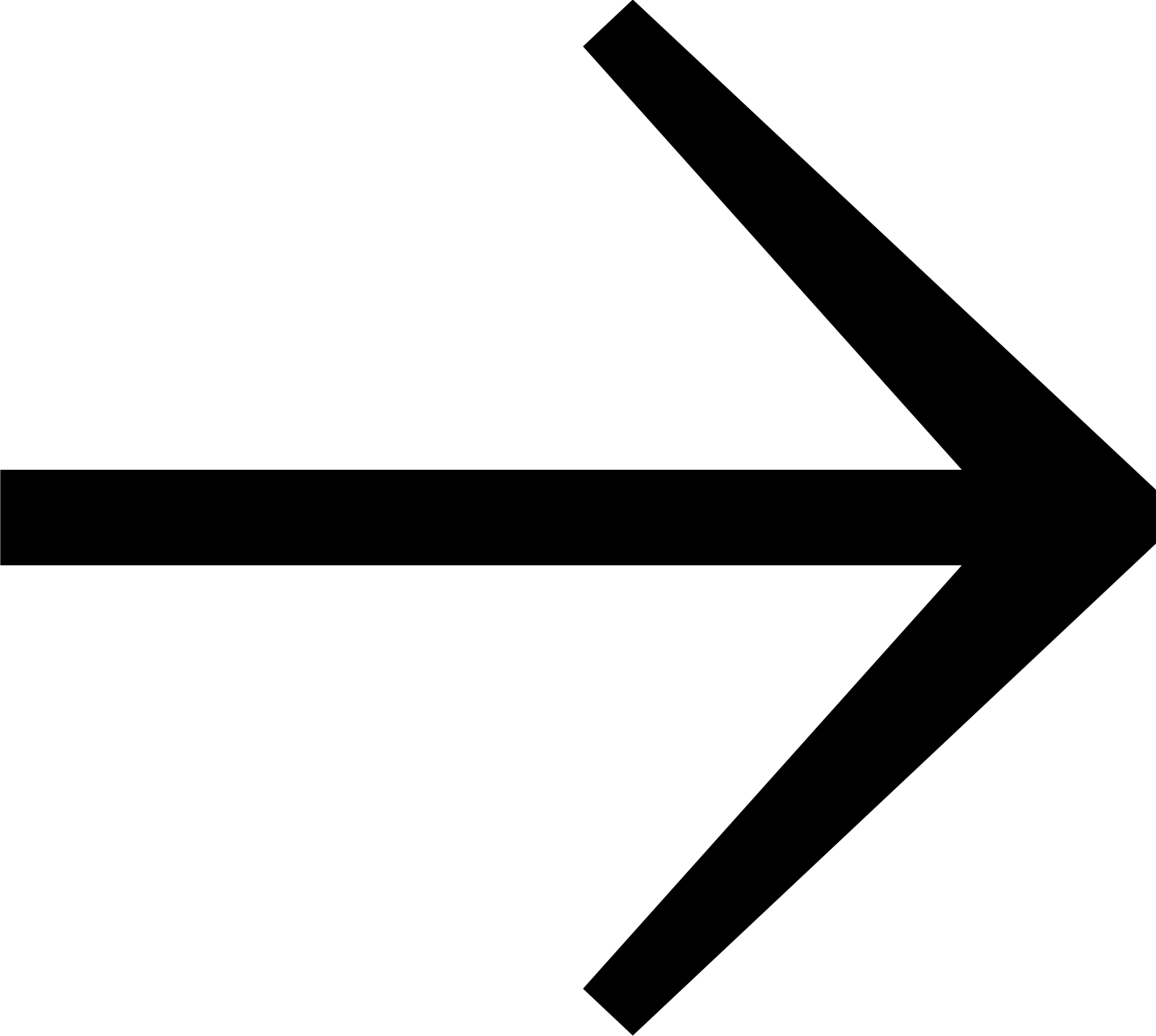
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