

Toys for the 25th century

A journey to Japan in search of the latest gadgets

by Carl Thompson

IT'S late when I check into the Park Hyatt, and I spend the first 10 minutes struggling to open the curtains. After calling room service, a slightly embarrassed staff member appears and efficiently clicks a button I hadn't noticed. The curtains glide back silently unveiling Tokyo's 25th century skyline. My mission: to discover the latest gadgets poised to conquer the European market. This is going to be a challenge.

Next morning, a subway train whisks me to Shinjuku station, where I'm carried on the human tide out through one of the 63 exits and into an electronics store. A crowd has gathered around a pocket-sized device called a Body Composition Analyzer. An assistant explains how this measures four indicators of fitness using bio-impedance analysis. Nodding as if this makes sense, I enter a few details and press the sensors. Seconds later, I learn that I comprise 237kg of bone, 40.25kg of water, too much fat and not enough muscle. "But your body type comes out as average," he adds, as if this were consolation. Before I leave, I enquire about a stylus for my record player. This is too much even for the faultlessly polite assistant, who can't keep from smirking.

Newly conscious of being 21.5 per cent fat, I walk to the Shibuya offices of Sanyo Electric for a private viewing of Banryu, an intimidating security robot. One of the developers proudly shows me some mugshots of burglars photographed by his creation. They look comically stunned, as well they might when confronted by a "mechatronic" dinosaur with 50 heat-detecting sensors and a revolving camera beaming live video to the police. When he demonstrates Banryu sitting, begging and even climbing stairs, my own expression must match that of any luckless intruder.

Satisfied that Japan's corporate premises are protected, I sleep soundly at the design-conscious Four Seasons near Tokyo station as the traffic below is rendered silent by triple glazing. Next day, I ride a looping monorail to the futuristic island of Odaiba. The prototypes in Panasonic's Future Lifestyle Lab showroom include a wardrobe that selects your outfit according to the weather and the occasion, a sofa bed that reclines when you fall asleep and a web-enabled fridge with built-in cam-



The future here and now: triple glazing in Tokyo's top hotels means you can have a 25th century view, plus silence

era, allowing you to check by mobile whether you need eggs.

Then there's the automatic vacuuming machine. "It uses sensors to move around obstacles," says the demonstrator. Ominously it has had a flood of enquiries from the elderly: while the labour-saving benefits are evident, a 10kg box zigzagging at random seems certain to knock old people over like skittles.

Even in the loo there's no

respite. A Healthy Toilet offers to analyse my urine and supply an instant diagnosis. I'm in no mood for health advice from another machine, so before it tells me the end is nigh, I scurry out and head for the TEPIA (Technology Utopia) exhibition centre in Aoyama. Here I meet Mariko, who has come to check out the iSeePet remote feeding device. This 18in-high plastic cylinder has a mounted camera linked to

the internet, via which she should be able to view her dog, play a feeding-time melody and dispense up to 60g of food.

Chained to a lamppost outside is Kasumi, her pampered German shepherd — and he's wearing a Bowlingual microphone. I beg Mariko to show me how Japan's most popular gadget works. She switches on a handheld receiver with a small screen, capable of translating 200 barks into plain text. Conscious of the absurdity of the situation, we stand and wait for Kasumi to speak. "Woof," he says. "Where have you been?" we read. It works! He barks again: "I'm confused." I know how he feels.

● Carl Thompson flew to Tokyo with Japan Airlines (0845 7747 700), daily from Heathrow, advance fares from £741. He stayed at the Park Hyatt Tokyo (0845 888 1234), doubles from £223, and the Four Seasons at Marunouchi (00800 6488 6488), doubles from £300.

TECH THIS INTO ACCOUNT

JAPAN'S new labour-saving devices won't come cheap. Here's the shopping bill:

- Body Composition Analyzer, Ya-Man Ltd, ¥9,500 (£50)
- Banryu (pictured right), Sanyo Electric/Tmsuk, ¥1,980,000 (£10,000)
- iSeePet, AlphaOmega Soft, ¥118,000 (£600)
- Bowlingual, Takara Toys, ¥14,800 (£75)
- Meowlingual (for cats), coming soon

