

# Riding Japanese Trains

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I came to Japan on a 1-year internship at the JR East Safety Research Laboratory. Like most people, I took the train to work and occasionally had the opportunity to travel around Japan. I would like to share a few of my thoughts and experiences while riding Japanese trains.

## Train Music

One of the things that foreigners immediately notice about Japan is the platform music played before the train doors close. In America, you only hear the whistle and a conductor yelling 'All Aboard.' But in Japan, passengers are treated to a 10-second tune or song. While most Japanese do not pay much attention to these tunes, I found several websites that list all the tunes played at every station in the Tokyo area. Curious, I conducted a survey in my office about which stations had the best songs. The most popular was Kamata Station where *Kamata koushin kyoku* (Kamata Marching Song), a tune from a locally set movie, is played. Perhaps playing popular local songs to indicate that the doors are closing lifts the spirits of Japanese people. For example, Yurakucho Station could play the Japanese classic oldie *Yurakucho de aimashou* (Let's Meet at Yurakucho) and Chigasaki Station could play a song by Southern All Stars, a famous pop group from the area. I can only see great benefits coming from this.

## Train Racing

Trains can be seen everywhere in Japan, from movies to cartoons and video games. I have often seen a mystery drama where the murder suspect is caught with the help of a train timetable. The police would discover that the suspect's alibi was false because the train timetable did not match the suspect's statement.

One of my most interesting encounters with trains involves two trains racing from station to station. In Tokyo between Tabata and Tohoku, the Yamanote and Keihin Shinagawa lines run side-by-side for 14 stations. During my morning and evening commute, both trains arrive simultaneously at the station and I have to choose which train will take me to my destination faster. Sometimes, I see people jumping from one train to another, simply because the 'doors closing' music starts earlier on the opposite train. I usually take the less-crowded train, but some people are set on cutting a few seconds off their commute by jumping to the other train. Not surprisingly, a train racing game came out recently. You would never see anything like this in the USA.

## Train Video Games

Another thing that surprised me is train simulation games like the popular *Densya De Go!* (Let's Go By Train!)

When I told my friends in America about this game, they did not seem to understand the point. 'So you just push a bar back and forth, making the train go faster and slower? You don't race any cars or shoot any enemies?' they ask. I had to explain that because trains are everywhere in Japan, many kids dream of taking control of a train and that you often see people watching the driver through the front car. However, a new computer game was recently released that involves two trains racing each other on parallel tracks. I don't understand this game at all.

## How Do You Get To...

Mobile phones are incredibly popular in Japan. Apart from calling friends, a common feature of these phones is Internet access. Since the display is rather small, the number of easily readable sites is limited but there are many new phone-friendly sites created every day. One



Take your pick of services on parallel lines.

(H. Taura)



Large bookstores and restaurants inside ticket gate of Tokyo Station (H. Taura)



Books store in Tokyo Station packed with customers (H. Taura)

such site allows users to input an origin and destination station and displays all train routes between the two stations. It was by using this site that I realized how incredibly complex the Tokyo railway system is. For example, if I wanted to take a train from Tokyo to Yokohama, I could take any one of the JR East Tokaido Line; JR East Yokosuka Line; JR East Keihin Tohoku Line; Eidan Ginza Line–Tokyu Toyoko Line; Toei Asakusa Line–Keikyu Line; Tokaido Shinkansen–JR East Yokohama Line; JR East Chuo Line–Odakyu Line–Sotetsu Line.

Luckily the website prioritizes each route, letting you know which is cheapest, most convenient, and fastest. Hey, maybe train racing isn't so crazy after all!

## Train Stations

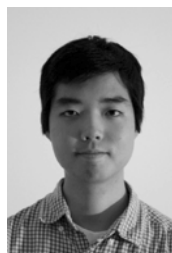
Navigating the train system in Japan is difficult, but it is just as difficult to find your way through major stations. Most stations are separated into two parts: inside the ticket gates where people transfer freely between trains, and outside the ticket gates where there are large bookstores, clothing stores, restaurants, food retailers, etc. In Tokyo and

Shinagawa stations, there are large restaurants and retailers inside the gate. I was amazed to see how these places were often packed with customers.

I now realize that Japanese train stations have become more than just a commuting venue—they have become small cities and community centres. Osaka residents go drinking at the underground mall in Umeda, the central train station. Kyoto residents shop at Isetan Department Store within the enormous ultra-modern new Kyoto Station complex of stores, offices and restaurants. If you ask a New Yorker where they live, they might say, 'The Upper West Side.' If you ask a Tokyoite, they might say, 'Shin Okubo Station on the Yamanote Line.'

Riding the trains in Japan is truly a unique experience from the packed-like-sardines rush-hour trains to the sudden change

from cityscape to mountain valleys. Anyone who visits Tokyo should not be intimidated by the rail system—English signs are plentiful and help is readily available. However, driving in Tokyo is another story. ■



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