

Benjamin Freeland

unveils five remarkable train journeys in Japan that are located off the beaten track

JAPAN IS A RAILROADING NATION par excellence. Blessed with one of the world's densest, most well-maintained rail networks and practically unrivaled in the field of advanced rail technology, Japan's trains have for the past half-century set a standard for speed, safety and efficiency that is the envy of the rest of the world. However, in spite of the country's rail supremacy (or perhaps because of it), train travel Japanese-style scarcely evokes the sort of romanticism and mystique that it does elsewhere in the world, as it invariably conjures up images of hellishly jam-packed – albeit punctual – commuter trains and the *shinkansen*, which, for all its space-age splendor,

has more in common with the new Boeing 787 Dreamliner than with the Orient Express.

Nevertheless, although Japan may not have a true equivalent to the Orient Express, the *Rossiya* or the *Canadian*, one would be mistaken to assume that rail travel in Japan is a purely functional affair. A wide range of beguiling train journeys are available to the unhurried traveler, ranging from luxurious overnights such as the *Cassiopeia* and *Hokutosei* to the innumerable one-car train-sets that ply through the Japanese countryside.

Moreover, the domestic travel boom in Japan in the past decade or so has generated renewed

interest in rail travel beyond simply transportation from A to B. Tourist trains, ranging from preserved steam trains running on historic lines to Odakyu's long-popular *Romancecar* express between Tokyo and Hakone, have become increasingly numerous in recent years, suggesting that while rail transportation has perhaps declined over the past decade in terms of percentage of total passenger movement, railway romanticism is very much on the rise.

An entire book could be written on the full breadth of Japan's lesser-known rail journeys. Here, however, we've chosen five recommended routes to get you started.



A



PHOTO: JREAST

Aboard!

The Cassiopeia & Hokutosei (Tokyo – Sapporo)

The rapid expansion of the shinkansen system and domestic air travel in Japan in recent decades has largely rendered obsolete Japan's once-numerous overnight express trains, with only a handful of such trains remaining in service. However, the privatization of Japan National Railways in the late-1980s – and its increasing profitability as JR – and the recent domestic travel boom in Japan has succeeded in breathing new life into long-haul luxury train travel in Japan. Exemplifying this renewed interest in train travel are the Hokutosei (the Japanese name for the Big

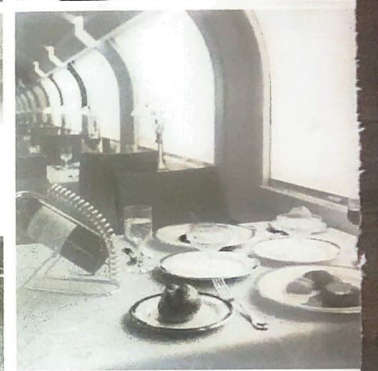
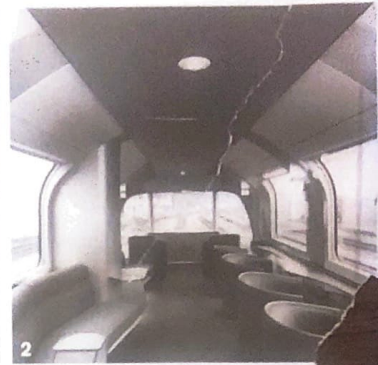
Dipper constellation) overnight express train between Tokyo (Ueno Station) and Sapporo and its more opulent sister train, the similarly astronomically-themed Cassiopeia, the latter of which is widely regarded as Japan's most luxurious train. Inaugurated in 1988 upon the opening of the Seikan Tunnel linking Hokkaido and Honshu by rail (to this day, the world's longest undersea railway tunnel), the twice-daily Hokutosei proved to be an enormously popular service, leading to the addition of the Cassiopeia, which covers exactly the same route on a daily basis. The 16.5-hour overnight journey on the Cassiopeia is a strictly first-class affair, featuring twin and deluxe rooms

and luxury suites (at a cool ¥44,460 per traveler), an opulent lounge car and a dining car offering a gourmet French dinner course for ¥7,800 (as well as a slightly cheaper Japanese kaiseki course). The less expensive Hokutosei features A- and B-class berths, and offers essentially the same services offered as the Cassiopeia, albeit in a less extravagant form. In spite of the fact that air travel between Tokyo and Sapporo is significantly faster and often cheaper than passage on these two trains, both are typically booked solid well in advance, particularly during the summer months, indicating that for many travelers the journey is indeed as important as the destination. >>



Photo Credits

- 1. The Cassiopeia (Photo: JR East)
- 2. Cassiopeia viewing car (Photo: JR East)
- 3. Cassiopeia compartment (Photo: JR East)
- 4. Cassiopeia suite (mazzanine type) (Photo: JR East)
- 5. Cassiopeia suite (panorama type) (Photo: JR East)
- 6. The Cassiopeia dining car (Photo: JR East)



The Kumagera (Akita – Aomori)

Thanks in large part to the extension of shinkansen services to Akita, Aomori and elsewhere, Japan's long-neglected Tohoku region has been one of the greatest beneficiaries of the country's recent domestic tourism boom, with the region's unspoiled natural beauty and bucolic rural atmosphere attracting visitors in unprecedented numbers. The region is also home to some of the country's most scenically spectacular rail lines, most notably the Gono Line, which hugs the craggy coastline shared by northern Akita and southern Aomori prefectures, and offers breathtaking views of the mountains and virgin beech forests of Shirakami Sanchi (a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1993) and Tsugaru Quasi-National Park on one side and the Sea of Japan on the other. Tourism in the area has been bolstered in recent years with the addition of several tourist trains, the latest of which is the Kumagera express, which since its inauguration in April 2006 has been providing daily service between Akita and Aomori stations (at ¥5,000) by way of one of Japan's most spectacularly scenic rail routes.

Named after the region's iconic bird, the black woodpecker, the Kumagera is the latest of three JR East operating along this route, under the name Resort Shirakami. The first, the Aoike (blue pond), which covers half the Akita-Aomori Line, was inaugurated in 1998, joined by the Buna (beech tree) in 2003, which covers the other half of the journey, with the Kumagera, which covers the entire journey, rounding out the trio three years later. With its plush compartment seating, large observation windows and liquid crystal monitors installed for the purpose of filling in gaps in travelers' views, the five-hour journey on the Kumagera is an unbeatable scenic rail experience, particularly in autumn when the forests of Shirakami are in their full fall splendor.

The Ueda Line (Ueda – Bessho Onsen)

The one-car train-set winding through rice fields and villages is one of the most enduring images of rural Japan, and for those who savor the notion of hypnotic, no-frills rail jaunts through off-the-beaten-path Japan, there is virtually no end to the possibilities. Several gems

nevertheless stand out, especially Nagano prefecture's venerable Ueda Line, a private line owned by Ueda Dentetsu (KK) that since 1923 has connected JR Ueda Station with the alpine resort town of Bessho Onsen, with around 25 daily departures between the two stations.

One of Japan's oldest resorts, Bessho Onsen has been attracting bathers with its hydrogen sulphide waters for about 1,000 years, and since 1923 it has been connected via the Ueda Line to downtown Ueda City, which since 1997 has been connected to Tokyo via the Asama Shinkansen. While the 30-minute jaunt on Ueda Dentetsu's vintage 1950s-style electric train is strictly a no-frills affair, there are few more stunning approaches to the Central Alps of Nagano than on board these carriages, and a late-afternoon, early-evening departure from Ueno graces passengers with an awe-inspiring sunset behind the mountains to the west, a particularly stunning vista in winter. For a short, inexpensive (¥570), rail-bound stroll through the mountainous geographic heart of Japan's main island, this 85-year-old resort train is hard to beat.

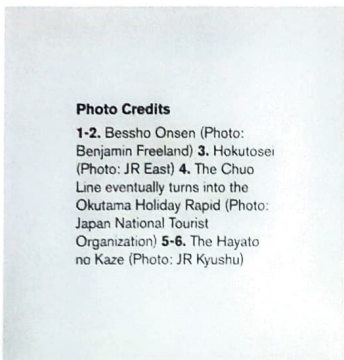
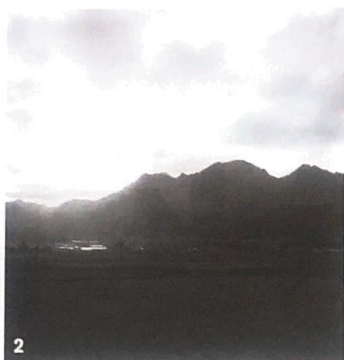


Photo Credits

1-2. Bessho Onsen (Photo: Benjamin Freeland) 3. Hokotosei (Photo: JR East) 4. The Chuo Line eventually turns into the Okutama Holiday Rapid (Photo: Japan National Tourist Organization) 5-6. The Hayato no Kaze (Photo: JR Kyushu)

**The Hayato no Kaze
(Kagoshima - Yoshimatsu)**

Although the vast majority of Japan's rural train lines are plied by non-descript, no-frills electric train-sets, the last decade has seen a number of regions seek to invigorate local tourism through the introduction of souped-up local trains featuring amenities, unorthodox paint-jobs and creative interior designs. One such region is southern Kyushu, whose scenic Hisatsu and Nippo lines feature a number of leisurely train treks into the verdant heart of the region, with access to its numerous hot springs and tourist sites, which include Shiki no Sato Park, Lake Ezu and the eighth-century stone statues of Hayato (within Kirishima City). Of the trains that ply this route, the most recent addition has been JR Kyushu's vintage-styled Hayato no Kaze (the wind of Hayato), which since its launch in the spring of 2003 has been operating five daily round trips between Kagoshima Chuo Station and Yoshimatsu at a cost of ¥2,230 a person. Billed as a throwback to the golden era of Japanese railroading, the interior of the two-car sightseeing train evokes

the Meiji and Taisho periods, as do the well-preserved century-old wooden stations that break up the train's 80-minute trek through Kyushu's heartland. The train features a Meiji-style coach car and a lounge car with large, curvilinear observation windows, and a concession stand purveying various rail-themed souvenirs. Paired with the similarly historically-themed Isaburo-Shinpei at Yoshimatsu, the Hayato no Kaze offers a scenic journey through Kyushu aboard a rolling museum piece.

**The Okutama Holiday Rapid
(Shinjuku - Okutama)**

It is safe to say that very few Tokyoites - if any - harbor fond feelings towards the Chuo Line. A lifeline for many thousands of people, Tokyo's central railway line is nevertheless synonymous with chronic overcrowding, lengthy traffic delays at level crossings and all-too-frequent train suicides (lending its name to the now-popular Japanese-English portmanteau, Chui-cide). Nevertheless, the line represents Tokyo's primary western escape route and, as such, offers a number of attractive journeys for

those looking to flee the metropolis. One such escape route is the northwestern Ome Line, which hives off of the Chuo Line at Tachikawa Station and terminates at Okutama Town, Tokyo prefecture's westernmost municipality, located within Chichibu-Tama National Park.

While access to Okutama from central Tokyo normally involves several transfers, the Okutama Holiday Rapid (Okutama Horidee Kaisoku) provides, on statutory holidays only, direct service between Shinjuku Station and the Okutama region and its numerous attractions, which include the Nippara limestone caves, Mount Kumotori, Lake Okutama (Tokyo's primary source of drinking water) and several onsen. Utilizing specially adapted Chuo Line rolling stock, the Holiday Rapid features observation cars with sideways seating, facilitating passengers' viewing of the grand scenery on the Ome-Okutama leg of the trip, as the train climbs into old Edo's mountainous western backyard.

A little-known gem, the two-hour ride costs ¥1,050 and serves as a handy means of escaping the metropolis, particularly during the dog days of summer. ★