

Museum

JAPAN



Train travel in Japan is an ingrained part of the culture, to which the new Kyoto Railway Museum pays tribute, writes **Anthony Dennis**.

When it was recently revealed that an official and abject apology had been issued for a train in Japan having departed a station 20 seconds early, the international reaction was one of understandable wonderment and incredulity. What would the reaction had been had the train been late?

Japan's rail system, as anyone who has experienced it would be aware, prides itself on obsessive levels of punctuality and courtesy unmatched anywhere in the world.

When departing each carriage, immaculately attired conductors unfailingly ritually bow as a sign of respect to passengers, admittedly some of whom are likely to have their heads buried in often lurid manga comics.

Train travel in Japan is as ingrained in the culture as much as sushi, sake and sumo. Few days in the life of a Japanese person do not feature a train, whether they be commuting for work, travelling for pleasure, or even standing or sitting in one spot since in crowded Japan a train, and a train line is

never far away. Ensuring that the Japanese retain an unstinting confidence in its railways as a means of dependable conveyance and for providing a kind of societal adhesive can go some way to explaining why its operators are so fixated on its continuing near-impeccable record for safety, efficiency and punctuality.

Aside from actually travelling by train in Japan, whether that be aboard the renowned shinkansen, meaning trunk line or more commonly bullet train, or even just a standard local service, you need

The engine room: Locomotives within the fan shaped locomotive house at Kyoto Railway Museum.
Photo: Alamy

to journey to Kyoto for the next best way to understand the profound place that railways occupy within Japanese society and its complex, at times impenetrable, national psyche. There you'll find what might well represent the world's finest railway museum.

The Kyoto Railway Museum is located in Shimogyo-ku, one of the 11 wards of Japan's former ancient capital. It was originally the Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum, which opened in 1972. The institution, which is owned

Five more ways to enjoy train travel in Japan

BUY A JAPAN RAIL PASS
Still one of the world's best travel bargains, the Japan Rail Pass allows access to a huge range of train services, except for the most express shinkansen. The pass is best organised and bought in Australia and validated in Japan as close as possible to your first train departure to maximise its value.

HANG AROUND THE STATIONS
In most countries, such as those in Europe, it's advisable to exit

major train stations as soon as possible, lest you be robbed or molested. But in Japan stations, including the main facility in Kyoto, as large and overwhelming as they can be, you'll find plenty of mostly excellent and affordable places to eat and drink as you rub shoulders with local commuters.

GRAB A BENTO BOX
Few if any Japanese trains have dining cars or even cafeterias, with the Japanese relying on delicious packaged bento box



Delicious: A packaged bento box meal. Photo: Alamy

meals bought at stations, on platforms or from sweet-voiced female attendants who pass

through the train with carefully stacked trolleys. Each bento tends to be reflective of its local region, with the ingredients prepared fresh daily.

PACK CAREFULLY
Japanese trains are not designed for luggage storage, with most locals travelling lightly with overnight bags for short trips. It can be a good idea, therefore, to not only avoid hefty pieces of luggage but also to try and be among the first to board your carriage to secure what little

space is available (if the luggage rack is full try the space under the last seats at the rear of the carriage).

LOOK OUT FOR MOUNT FUJI
A good many visitors to Japan travel on the route between Kyoto and Tokyo, and vice versa. On clear days it is possible to view sacred Mount Fuji in all its snow-capped conical glory as you pass, even on a high-speed bullet train, so be sure not to nod off at the crucial point.

It's the shinkansen that rightly remains at the heart of the museum and its main attractions.



On track: (Clockwise from top) A bullet train passes below Mount Fuji; Kyoto Station's main hall; a boy takes a turn on a driving simulator, used by professional train drivers for training, at the Kyoto Railway Museum; a display inside the museum. Photos: Alamy

and operated by the West Japan Railway Company (JR-West), part of the massive Japan Railways group, was dramatically expanded last year, rendering it the biggest train museum in Japan, with its displays featuring shiny, mint-condition bullet trains.

Kyoto itself, like most big Japanese cities, has an abiding relationship with trains. The gargantuan Kyoto Station, which turned 20 earlier this year, is not just an important terminal for arriving and departing locals and visitors, it's also a major and dominant landmark and architectural statement, a virtual small town with its own five-star

hotel, a major upscale department store and a range of restaurants, cafes and shops.

Fitting, then, that Kyoto should host such a museum celebrating the role of the train in Japanese society. Frankly, most railway museums around the world are run by enthusiastic, if not obsessive, overall-clad and aged train-spotting volunteers with an unfailing focus on the steam age. But the Kyoto Railway Museum couldn't be any more distinct with those bullet trains taking pride of place in the vast main exhibition hall. Then there's memorabilia including an exhaustive display of what appears to be every book and

film written and made about train travel in Japan.

Yet it's the shinkansen, with its maximum operating speeds of 320 kilometres an hour, that rightly remains at the heart of the museum and its main attractions. It was this revolutionary train, after all, with its record-breaking speeds that in 1964, along with the Tokyo Olympics, led Japan's global re-emergence following the horrors and ignominies of World War II.

It provided the country with an instant icon, especially when juxtaposed shooting past the monumental and sacred Mount Fuji. One of the original series

shinkansen, among others, is on display at the museum and it still looks nearly as modern as the day it was commissioned.

Although the technology behind bullet trains has been copied around the world, most notably by the Chinese who now boast the world's biggest network of high-speed trains and, at 370 million passengers a year, the biggest patronage, the singular quality and enjoyment of everyday train travel in Japan remains unsurpassed.

Aside from the impressive new main three-storey building, the museum also features the Roundhouse, an imposing locomotive shed built around a vast turntable and which is designated by the Japanese Government as an Important Cultural Property. From near here visitors to the museum can also take short vintage steam train rides along a specially designated track that runs along a public park.

Nearby is a traditional Japanese-style two-storey station building that once formed the entrance to the more modest original museum and which today houses the institution's well-patronised souvenir shop. It provides an attractive contrast to the contemporary design of the new main building from the open-air Sky Terrace, from which visitors can observe bullet trains, as well as other services, sweeping in and out of Kyoto. It's a thrilling sight, even if you aren't a train fancier, with barely a second passing before another train, well, passes.

Before lunch in the museum's cafe (so efficient, large and hygienic, it reminds me of an Ikea cafeteria – and the rice is served in the shape of a locomotive), I'm invited to test my skills on one of the museum's train simulators.

Such is the popularity of the shinkansen simulators that a daily lottery has to be held for the right to access to them. I end up on an ordinary local train simulator, having declined the offer to don a driver's cap and coat from a wardrobe full of them.

Eventually, after a series of embarrassing platform overshoots and some gratuitous use of the train whistle, I feel almost compelled to issue one of those Japanese-style public apologies. Instead I shrink away, headed for the cafeteria for a lunch of moulded loco rice and sausages. **T**

Trip notes

VISIT

The Kyoto Railway Museum is open 10am to 5.30pm. Admission is JPY1200 for adults and JPY500. See kyotorailwaymuseum.jp/en/

FLY

ANA (All Nippon Airways) operates daily flights from Sydney to Tokyo's Haneda Airport with regular connections to Kyoto. See ana.co.jp

TOUR

With its knowledgeable English-speaking guides, Experience Japan Travel can tailor a wide variety of holidays throughout Japan including Kyoto. See experiencejapantravel.com

STAY

The Ritz Carlton Kyoto is located beside the Kamo-gawa River and close to major attractions. Elsewhere, Iori Machiya Stay offers self-contained, luxuriously appointed traditional townhouses. If you fancy staying inside Kyoto Station itself, consider the 536-room Hotel Granvia Kyoto. See ritzcarlton.com/Kyoto; kyoto-machiya.com; granvia-kyoto.com

MORE

■ traveller.com.au/Japan
■ kyoto.travel/en

Anthony Dennis visited Kyoto as a guest of Visit Kyoto, ANA (All Nippon Airways) and Experience Japan Travel.

1HERSA1 D015

