



# Japanese Trains

Courtesy: A. Ito

Last year, I visited a fishing village south of the Kii peninsula, a region with difficult access and scattered steep mountains. The coastline is indented with numerous creeks connected by a single railway line. This village has a beautiful crescent beach of golden sand at the foot of hills dotted with houses. One evening, I saw a sinuous light moving high on the hills above the village still sleeping in the humid night air. Then, I heard a short whistle that broke the silence like a loud voice. It reminded me of the train in the famous Japanese cartoon called *Ginga Tetsudo* telling the story of a young boy who travels by train with a beautiful woman going from stars to strange planets. In the cartoon, the small train runs through the universe announcing its arrival at each celestial station in the same manner as the train running through my fishing village.

The Japanese are so fond of trains that they even turn them into poetic heroes. Ever since coming to live in Japan, I have noticed the Japanese fondness for this means of transport. I have actually seen young boys enraptured by pictures of trains, and adults talking about all the possible itineraries of a train trip. Perhaps railways make Japanese dream they are travelling beyond the sea, the natural border keeping them within their insularity—perhaps trains stimulate their desire to get away.

In a country where culture tends to be similar between North and South, the interval of travelling is undoubtedly a rare moment where people can escape from their usual surroundings. Nevertheless, the charm of travelling has been replaced, here more than in any other country, by the banality of efficiency. Today, taking a train is merely seen as a means of getting from one place to another pleasantly, but quickly and punctually. However, considering the discomfort that salary men endure during rush-hour commuting, the shorter the journey, the more pleasant it is.

The old trains, those that were designed for the pleasure of travelling—like the slow ones the hero of Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country* had to take are disappearing. They are being replaced by models resembling the *Shinkansen*. They are 'nervous' aerodynamic creatures, light in weight and sensitive to high speed. Try writing a letter in a *Shinkansen*—it moves so much it is impossible. I tried comparing the French TGV with the *Shinkansen*; on the *Shinkansen*, my daughter fell asleep rocked by the movement of the train (but I could not write my letter). On the TGV, the vibration kept my daughter awake but I could have written my letter—had she let me! The conclusion? I would rather travel by TGV when alone and on the *Shinkansen* with my daughter.

The word 'comfort' has different connotations in Japanese and French. In Japanese, it suggests service, but in French, it means well-being. In first class on the *Shinkansen*, a young woman hands you a warm towel and serves a cup of tea or coffee all free-of-charge. On the TGV, you go and grab a sandwich in a rather narrow buffet car. But when you return to your seat, you find yourself in a sophisticated cocoon with an out-of-this-world quality. The inside of the *Shinkansen* is comfortable but it lacks that little something bringing a feeling of well-being to a westerner.

Between the 'haute couture' TGV and the 'pret-a-porter' *Shinkansen*, my preference would go to the former if it weren't for the *bento* lunch boxes that make the latter so nice. What a delightful tradition, these nicely-wrapped packed lunches that you buy on the platform or in the train. Recently—probably because they were sacrificed on the altar of rationality, they had become almost inedible—there has been a silent boom for *bento*; old-fashioned recipes like 'ofukuro no aji' bring back the taste of travel where you can enjoy the scenery while eating.

So far as service is concerned, the other peculiarity of all Japanese trains that astonishes foreigners is the incredible number of public announcements; you are informed about the next station, the connecting buses, the express trains, the transfers, not to forget your personal belongings and, on rainy days, not to forget your umbrella. Every time I hear the announcement to watch my things, I can't help but remember that Japan has the lowest crime rate of all developed countries which is why Japanese tourists abroad are so vulnerable to pickpockets—they are not used to protecting themselves. If pickpockets were as common in Japan as in France or Italy, Japanese Lost Property offices wouldn't be packed with handbags, wallets, umbrellas and even cremation urns.

Listen carefully, even on urban trains you can recognise the different 'styles' of speaking. Some conductors (the one making the announcements is posted at the end of the train) talk in a theatrical voice. Others speak their litany by rote and make un-noticed mistakes. It is the unexpected, the small mistake that

breaks the perfect 'white-glove' service of Japanese trains.

Watch the gestures of conductors and other employees of JR; every time the train passes a light or crossing, they check that everything is in order by moving their hands in a coded, expressible and visible manner. In their narrow cabin, they are like an actor on stage, alert and meticulous. In the meanwhile, the 'audience' is quiet; with so many announcements, one can see why. This even applies to executives travelling on the Tokyo-Osaka main line. They start reading a magazine—very seldom a file—and fall asleep 1 hour later (because of the rocking?).

I believe that a train journey is an occasion to escape; my mind roves at the same speed as the train. I cannot read, I just day dream, make plans and change them over again. I relax by using my imagination with my eyes wide open because I am too excited to sleep. For executives or mothers travelling with more than one child on the train, the favourite way to kill time is sleep—they sleep not to dream but to recover from lack of sleep or make up for over tiredness.

Even when travelling in groups, Japanese are relatively quiet even though they drink beer or eat snacks. If a foreigner has a seat amongst Japanese, they will usually try to talk in poor English asking questions about his or her life. In the foreigner's opinion, the questions are always a little private and if answered, the interlocutors will know almost everything about his private life at the end of the journey; age, marital status, hobbies, food preferences and purpose for coming to Japan will all be known. On the train, Japanese who travel alone stay alone, but when in groups, they try to create a simple conviviality. So the foreigner needs to choose his travelling neighbour according to his own mood.

People like me for whom travelling does not mean merely reaching a destination on time, but instead enjoying some time between places, avoid standing on platforms at peak hours when white-gloved 'packers' push anything protruding into the car as the doors close. We also avoid main lines where the *Shinkansen* is king and choose the few lines served by trains with comfortable compartments, drawn by majestic locomotives through un-



Courtesy: Kotsu Shimbun

cleared countryside.

I recently travelled on one such train in northern Japan where winter is severe. I had a feeling of comfort and safety like in a soft cocoon protected from the elements by a thick metal skin. I could dream and think one thing after another in a peaceful state of mind—the most important factor when I travel.

In the old trains that seem to have been hand built, the feeling of safety comes from the coachwork but the *Shinkansen* styles come from factories where the workers are mainly robots. When climbing onto the old trains with cars high above the rails (watch your step), one 'feels' safe. But entering a *Shinkansen* is like stepping into a room—one 'believes' one is safe. Safety is not really felt, it is imagined. There is no doubt that modern technology protects our journeys and so does the driver by his vigilance. The *Shinkansen* is like an aeroplane—we put our life in its hands without wanting to think too much, because if we do, we get scared. In a *Shinkansen*, the journey is real and virtual, it sets the pace for the industry. The next

fullyvirtual step will be not having to travel anymore!

JR has trains for people like me, people who enjoy travelling. The compartments are designed to make one feel in an-out-of-the-ordinary atmosphere with salon-type amenities and even a *karaoke* set. Since these trains are not as fast as the main liners, you can enjoy the scenery while eating, drinking and singing. *A priori*, I am not keen on this type of travelling because I like to travel as I feel. In these trains, I would feel that my pleasure is arranged or that someone is making me travel.

I still like the old trains, the ones with a beam of light in the night proudly announcing their passage in every village and then disappearing as if on the way to another planet, taking me and my dreams through a Japan never crossed by *Shinkansen*. ■

### Corinne Bret



Born in Morocco as a French citizen, Bret visited Japan in 1975 after graduating from the Department of Law at the University of Paris. After 3 years in Japan, she returned to France where she graduated from the Japanese Department of the Ecole des Langues Orientales in 1981. After graduation, Bret returned to Japan as a freelance journalist and correspondent for Liberation (the French daily newspaper) from 1982 until 1991. She is also a contributing writer for several Japanese magazines, and has written three books published in Japan.