

# By Train!?

Steve Emmer

**"...over 2000 kilometers across northern Japan? By train!?"**

When he first asked, I thought he was crazy. I didn't like trains very much. The only experience I'd had on trains was riding the crowded subways in Tokyo. They were clean and always on time, but during peak hours were anything but comfortable. From the outside, they looked like long metal and glass sausage skins packed with sweating flesh. Two-dimensional faces pressed against the glass wore expressions similar to those of freshly-caught fish hanging in a large net. Once inside, one's fate depended on the height, size, and hygiene of the people one was squeezed between. And he wanted me to travel over 2000 kilometers in one of those?

**"...in one week!?"**

Now I knew he was crazy. He calmly explained where we would go and what we would do. First, we would take the shinkansen to Morioka, transfer trains, and then go to Noheji where we would spend one night. Then, we would travel around Aomori Prefecture by local train stopping in Asamushi Onsen and Tsugaru. We would then travel along the Sea of Japan coastline stopping at various inns until we reached the Noto Peninsula. From there, we would return to Tokyo by night train. He reassured me that he had used a JR train schedule and that he had planned everything, but I wasn't listening. I was desperately trying to think of a polite Japanese expression for "NO."

**"...and you're going to pay for everything?"**

Finally, he was speaking my language. He may have been crazy, but what he said about life being difficult for a university student in Japan and about seeing as much of Japan as

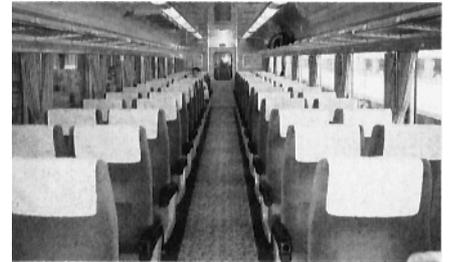
possible while I was here sure started to make sense. As he told me about the variety of seafood we would eat, I recalled the times I had instant noodles for days on end and plain white rice with only the smell of my neighbor's supper to add flavor to it. When he described the inns we would be staying at, I couldn't help but think of my apartment. It was so small that I could touch the north and south walls at the same time. And the hot springs had to be better than a pay shower stall.

**"Sure! Let's go."**

Before hanging up the phone, he told me that he would give me a copy of the itinerary. He brought it over the next day and it was the most complete and precise schedule I had ever seen. He had planned everything down to the last minute. All transfers were timed precisely so that no time would be wasted. At some points throughout the journey, there were only a few minutes between transfers. What if the trains were late? What if he had made a mistake? He had made generous allowances for the few boats and buses we would have to take because the former are at the mercy of weather conditions and the latter are only as fast as the flow of traffic. But with the trains I thought he was cutting it a bit close. I decided to take a wait-and-see attitude and didn't voice my misgivings about the schedule.

The ride on the shinkansen was a treat. I tried to absorb as much of the landscape as possible and to track our course along a map because I wanted to know what was rushing by me at 240 kilometers per hour. When my face wasn't pasted to the cold window, I was listening to the numerous announcements before stops and looking at a scrolling display that supplied not only location but information about world news and financial matters as well. Every now and then, an attendant with a cute, high-pitched voice pushed a cart down the aisle loaded with food and drinks. I would usually ask a question even if I didn't really want to know the answer because it was a pleasure to hear her beautiful, polite Japanese. The grape juice they sold also became a favorite; it had pieces of crushed grape mixed into the juice. The words '30% Real Juice', however, always scare me. If 30% is 'Real Juice,' what is the rest made of?

My friend didn't seem to share my excitement about the shinkansen. Like other people on the train, he was either reading or sleeping. Some people talked while others ate. Groups of four sometimes reversed the seats in front of them so they could face each other while they chatted and drank beer or sake. We talked a bit over a bento lunch, but he didn't seem interested in the scenery or the



■ Contrast to Tokyo Commuting! (author)

shinkansen ride itself. The Japanese people, for the most part, ignored the scenery completely. At times I looked at my friend while he was sleeping and wondered. Had he taken the shinkansen so many times that it no longer interested him? Did the landscape all seem the same to him? Perhaps it was the fact that I was a visitor in Japan. My time was limited in Japan and I probably wouldn't have another chance to see this scenery again. But I wondered...?

Without the worries of road maps and traffic, we were always relaxed when we arrived at our destination and had enough energy to explore towns in the evening. The streets were darker than I was accustomed to but had an inexplicable warmth to them. There were no bright lights or loudspeakers competing for the money in our pockets. Nor were there people in purple suits shoving pamphlets and tissues into your hands to advertise anything from hair salons to conversation schools. Noren, small curtains traditionally hung in the doorways of restaurants and bars, fluttered gently in the wind. They invited the weary and the cold with the promise of a steaming bowl of soba noodles and a hot cup of sake guaranteed to burn the tongue of the impatient. Hearty laughter could be heard from the sidewalk, and even those who can't read kanji could tell what kind of food was being served without even looking inside. As we walked by one small shop, the scent of tender pieces of chicken barbecuing over an open flame and the smell of beer told me as surely as any sign that this was a yakitori shop.

As time went by, I couldn't help but admire the local trains in northern Japan. When I was in Canada, I had never been on a train nor did I have a good opinion of trains in general. I thought that trains were for people who have time to waste or those who like to look into poor people's back yards. Only now did I realize how closed my mind really was. The natural beauty that I saw just outside my window and the majesty of distant mountains could never be captured by film or canvas, nor could it ever be forgotten. Slower than the shinkansen, the local trains let me take my time drinking up the scenery. And the windows opened allowing me to take pictures without my own reflection in the photograph.



■ Sunset over Sea of Japan

(author)

And if the scenery outside the train could be called a moving picture, the inside of the train was a perfect picture frame. On one small line in Aomori, the cars had probably been in service while I was still a babe in my mother's arms and had an antique charm to them. There were painstakingly made by warm, loving hands in the days before robots and automation. There were no automatic doors like those in Tokyo that open to let the cold air in even if nobody wants to get on or off. To get off, you opened the door yourself when the train stopped. An old-fashioned stove that brought back childhood memories squatted in one corner to heat the car in the winter. And in the summer, there were no vents breathing dry, icy air down your back whether you liked it or not. If opening the windows was not enough, fans on the roof could be turned on by the passengers. I appreciated this sense of control over my surroundings because, small as it is, this control is not available on modern trains.

Even the station that we stopped at on that particular line was a trip back to the days of



■ Lake Tazawa

(author)

old. A small wooden shack sat inconspicuously between the road and the tracks. The inside was not wallpapered with violently-colored posters advertising this and that. A white train schedule made of wood was hanging on one wall and I was sure that there were fewer trains here on a weekday than there were in an hour in Tokyo. There were no electronic ticket gates waiting to trap those who had bought the wrong ticket. Nor were there faceless machines that ate money, spewed tickets and gave change without saying a word. Tickets were sold and collected by the conductor on the train with a warm smile and a thank you.

I was glad we had taken the train because it gave us a chance to talk. I found out more about him in that one week than I had in the two years I had known him. Despite the difference in culture, his childhood experiences sounded a lot like mine. In addition to getting to know my friend better, I learned a lot about the Japanese language and culture. He taught me about word origins, rules and etiquette in Japanese business, and things about life in general. By talking to the people sitting next to or across from us, we both learned a lot about northern Japan as well. The people

were warm and friendly, and were not suspicious when I said hello. One old lady with a bundle of sticks strapped to her back even taught us a healthy and traditional way to cook fish! The people taught me basic things about Japan that cannot be found in a textbook and listened intently while I spoke of Canada. It was a rare opportunity to increase our mutual understanding of Japanese and Canadian culture.

Before the trip started, I didn't like traveling by train because I didn't know what traveling by train was like. The trains were not crowded. In fact, on one train the conductor, my friend, and I were the only people on board. I was worried about some of the transfers in our itinerary, but even the local trains were always on time. In addition to being efficient, the cars themselves were shining testaments to the age long gone when machines were still forged by the hands of men. The trains, natural surroundings, simplicity of the stations, and friendly conductors all combined to make the trip an unforgettable experience. I saw more of Japan in that one week on the train than I could have seen in Tokyo in a year. It was on this trip that I fell in love with Japanese trains. More important, traveling by train gave my friend and me the opportunity to talk to other passengers. We achieved communication on a personal level which, in my opinion, does much more for the relations of two countries than any amount of diplomacy. ■



■ Shira Ito Waterfall

(author)



## Steve Emmer

Born in Canada, Steve came to Japan in 1991. In addition to traveling and mountain climbing, he is studying traditional Japanese dance, has earned his black belt in Judo, and has been awarded prizes in various speech contests in Japanese including the Minister of Education Award. He has appeared on television and radio, and is currently studying International Relations at the Asia University in Tokyo.