

My Train Life in Japan

William Hancock

Japan, and especially Tokyo, is a unique place quite unlike the United States or United Kingdom where I have travelled quite a few times. What makes Japan so different is the Japanese lifestyle and love affair with trains. Whenever people go almost anywhere in this country, millions of them use the train as their main transportation and some train fanatics even have computer software that emulates the view from a driver's cab! Whenever I go to popular places, such as Shinjuku, Shibuya, or Kichijoji, to 'hang-out' with my friends, I always take the train because I am still 17 years old and cannot get a car driving licence (at a great cost of almost US\$3000 in tuition fees) until I am 18. And there is no danger of drunk driving because people under 20 cannot legally drink here.

Living in Japan is challenging, especially because I am not 100% Japanese. I was born in an international family; my father is English and was born in London, while my mother is Japanese and was born in Sasebo in Kyushu. I would be classified by 'pure' Japanese as a 'half' meaning a person with dual citizenship (but my parents tell me to think of myself as a 'double' with the best of both worlds). I can speak both English and Japanese fluently but my Japanese reading skills are not as good as they could be, despite studying as much Japanese as English each day. My life, which I like to keep as simple as possible, consists of working and studying, and socializing with friends to have fun and overcome teenage ennui. My school year starts from late August and ends in early June, which is different from the Japanese school year that starts in April and ends in March. During the year, most of my time is spent doing homework or participating in extracurricular school activities. My school is in Chofu City in the western suburbs of Tokyo and very far from where I live. To get there in time for the 08:45 start, I leave the house at approximately

07:00 and ride my bicycle for about 20 minutes to a train station called Ogikubo on the JR East Chuo Line. Ogikubo has a very bad bicycle parking problem because it is a large station on an important commuting line. Luckily, I managed to get a place in a bicycle park two stories underground close to the station—I only had to wait 3 months for a spot to come free! The alternative was leaving the bike in the street and risk getting it impounded by the municipal authorities who require a \$50 release fee. From Ogikubo Station, I travel to Musashisakai Station and then switch trains by walking across the platform to the Seibu Tamagawa Line and journey on to Tama Station. Next, it is a

10-minute walk to the school. The train part of the trip is only about 30 minutes but the bike ride and walk at each end push the trip time up to about 1 hour. This might seem like a long time, but quite a few kids in Tokyo are commuting up to 2 hours each way. I am quite lucky because my journey in the morning is against the rush-hour flow but even so, the trains are so crowded that I cannot sit down most mornings. On Fridays after school, I socialize with friends and usually get home late. One thing that is very unusual about Tokyo is that the last train on most lines is soon after midnight, so there is always a mad rush to the station or face a long walk home. I think this is in sharp



Author performing *no*, a form of Japanese musical dance-drama originating in 14th century

(Author)

contrast to other major cities around the world like London where the tubes run into the very early morning hours. But my parents are pleased that it forces me to be home at an almost reasonable time! Perhaps the early last trains are a parental conspiracy.

When the 3-month summer vacation begins, I usually try to find a summer job. Last year, I worked at Toshimaen Amusement Park close to central Tokyo and owned by the Seibu Railway. Although it was just a 10-minute ride by bicycle from my home, the job interviewer told me that I would have to take the train and they paid my train fares. This is quite common in Japan where companies almost always pay 100% of employees train commuting costs. It might explain why some Japanese workers are happy to ride the trains for 4 hours a day to and from work—it does not cost them anything and if they can get a seat, it is an extra 4 hours of sleep each day. Some even manage to sleep while strap hanging.

Trains are a very important way for me to get around but I would like to get a 50 cc motorcycle licence, although I realize they are really dangerous to ride in this crowded big city. As well as summer work, I have to study for the SAT entrance tests taken by students who want to attend colleges in the USA. This summer, I also took the train to a cram course in Shibuya. Trains are important not only to commuting teenagers but also to Japanese 'salarymen,' college students and *arubaito*—a term coined from German and meaning part timer.

Although I have spent most of my 17 years in Japan, I have been lucky enough to travel to different places around the world, where I been exposed to different train cultures. From my experience riding the trains in England, I think trains in Japan are the best. They are much more sophisticated (with LCD TVs and information panels) and are always on time. The negative aspect is that they are



Early morning long-distance commuters catching a few extra hours of sleep on the Keio Line near Tokyo (EJR/CF)

always crowded too but the London tubes come close to Tokyo trains in this aspect. What it was like on London tubes without air conditioning when the temperature was 38.1°C last August, I can only imagine.

Unlike trains in America, which are usually covered with graffiti and trash, Japanese trains in the early morning are so clean that sometimes the floor actually shines and looks clean enough to eat off. Other hi-tech pleasures are the blast of freezing-cold air conditioning on summer days when it is 35°C outside, under-seat heating in winter, and computerized ticket wickets that feed people through clacking gates at astonishing rates like bottles on a production line. Another thing about Japanese trains here is how foreigner friendly they are—most Japanese people can speak a little English to help strangers with directions but every train sign has English and sometimes Korean *hangul*

translations too. I sometimes read the English translations because even I have trouble reading the more difficult *kanji*. However, one thing I don't like is the cost of tickets, which I personally think are too expensive because there are hardly any reduced-price day passes, etc. Just to travel around Tokyo to a few popular spots can easily eat up ¥1000 each day of the summer vacation and weekends and that's a lot of money from my allowance. Commuting to school is less expensive because I use a student pass but the train companies should also offer half-price tickets for students travelling outside rush hour periods on holidays and weekends too. But on the whole, I prefer to ride city trains in Japan much more than in the UK and USA where most people seem to ride in fear of mugging or panhandling. I suppose home is best after all. ■

William Hancock



Mr Hancock is a senior high-school student in Tokyo with plans to study Japanese drama in the USA. He spends at least 2 hours a day riding trains in Tokyo and has an intimate knowledge of the last train home.