

# My travels in Japan

Gordon Rushton

Exploring the human factors that make Japan different from anywhere else in the world is a journey in self-discovery. We visited Japan in 2009 and three differences stand out from the huge number of pleasant memories of that visit.

Japan offers consistent, friendly and profound politeness, of a kind never before experienced. Japanese people seem to bring a level of dedication to their work that is not found elsewhere. The sense of obligation and duty has a strength to it that is unique in my experience.

Only in Japan is it possible to see the successful application of myriad, innovative features working in service. Such a large number of variations would not be allowed in Britain, and admiration for innovation is not encouraged in the same way.

There are basic differences that make a visit fascinating. Japan has not had the glaciation that strongly defines the British landscape. The deep river valleys of Japan, together with the seismic activity, make locations for settlements difficult, heightening the importance of the coastal strip, and demanding massive civil engineering for protection. Japan looks different, and it takes time to work out why. The concentration of population is ideal for a land of railways, but the contrast between the original narrow-gauge lines and the newer, standard-gauge-shinkansen is great, and a fascinating experience for the visitor.

The Tokyo Fire Service offered a unique tourist experience that could be discovered by anyone curious enough to plug their laptop in to the free, lightning-swift internet service, available in the hotel. We found that a short earthquake survival course was available to all on demand. We arrived at the big Fire Service building, and were immediately offered an English language course, with some English speaking, Chinese people from Hong Kong. The video was in Japanese, but the meaning was so clear that this was no barrier. The brutal experience afterwards, of the shaking floor with household objects crashing around, was something never to forget. All in Japan must be ready to accept such events for real—and this more than anything else explained much about how people live.

We were told about Japanese politeness before arriving in Tokyo. This is particularly important to British people. There is a custom that you treat your neighbour as they treat

you. When treated with politeness, older British people react very well to accepting the duty of a correct response. The careful collection of cases loaded on to the coach at the airport, together with the issue of a ticket for each, clearly indicated the obligation of an ordered reclaim of the case at the hotel. No one tried to beat the system by grabbing their case as soon as they saw it placed on the ground. It is most unlikely that, for example, Italians, or younger British people would observe such a system properly!

When in the glory of the Green Car (First Class) at speed on an early morning San'yō Shinkansen, a very polite young man appeared with the refreshment trolley. Breakfast was a distant memory and buying from him was a discovery of what educated politeness should be. Some items had been chosen from the trolley but, alas, he had no change for the money he was given, and this made him pink with embarrassment. Others, taking an interest in the transaction, immediately searched for change. However, he left the items selected with us, returned the money with a bow, apologized as though it was his fault, and came back later full of sorrow with the correct change. This trivial incident illustrates attitudes that prevail in Japan. The same might have happened in Europe, but more likely the assumption would be that offering correct money is the purchaser's responsibility—a less refined concept.

In a large department store in Kumamoto, there was an immaculately clad and beautiful girl acting as lift attendant. She pressed the buttons for the automatic lifts, and received customers, saluting those leaving with greeting, bow, and smile. Few Japanese acknowledged her politeness. We did, and when we returned later, she was still offering a lovely greeting, yet took time to thank us each with a personal bow. In the West, an employee with such a low status job would either ignore the customers, or talk over their heads to other staff. They certainly would not take pride in being the best lift attendant in the world as she did.

From Kokura we took the *Sonic* train to Beppu. The tracks now changed from 1435-mm to 1067-mm gauge. In the Green Car, we were able to sit behind the driver, and look forward out of the panoramic window, over his shoulder. The view was educational. Most conventional track in Japan is 1067-mm gauge. It is therefore tightly curved,



Shinkansen service –all ready to go

(Author)

In Tsuwano Mama and Papa delight their children with big *Koi* Carp – a wonderful sight to see.

(Author)

*Sonic*, the comfortable tilting train on 1067mm gauge, where it is possible to see out of the front – a big favourite

(Author)



Traditional Japan can still be found, it has not disappeared under the modern world.

(Author)

and steeply graded. From time-to-time, bridges and tunnels are unavoidable to circumvent the severe geography. The problem was that although electrified, the infrastructure constrains speed at times to 60 km/h. The modern *Sonic* train has tilt capability, but even so, to maintain reasonable passenger comfort on the snaking curves, only relatively modest increases in speed are possible. And the limits of speed are already restricted by the ratio of height to width of narrow gauge. It is clear why the 1435-mm gauge shinkansen had to be built, because spending large sums on re-engineering the narrow-gauge lines is not good value for money. The *Sonic* train was fast and comfortable, and the actions of the driver made the journey worthy of careful study. Japanese operational rail staff seem to wave their arms about, in what seems to European eyes an extravagant manner. However, with consideration, it is obvious that by pointing to each of the items in turn, the platform inspector was indicating to the train conductor that the signal was displaying a proceed aspect, the doors were closed, and that permission for departure was being given. The end of the process was emphasised by a blast on the whistle. On a crowded platform at a busy station, such indication was

clear and unmistakable. The arm motions were a reminder to the inspector as well as an indicator to the train conductor that these important safety items were correctly checked. In Britain, such clarity could well avoid the incidents of signals passed at danger that occur from time to time.

On the *Sonic*, the driver acknowledged each signal aspect by pointing to it, and each level crossing white light indicator, as it was passed. Whilst running through each station, he checked the timekeeping, by pointing at the stop list and passing times displayed on the control desk. In front of him was a traditional pocket watch, which fitted snugly in a padded cubbyhole. Later examination of the stop list showed timings to the nearest 20 seconds. We became really interested (as railwaymen do) and timed the train—it ran precisely to time. We noticed that all our trains did—with very few exceptions. Observations of the staff indicated that all were enthusiasts for exact, on-time running. This zeal did not extend to harassing the passengers. The game was planning and preparation. Get the staff in position, the passengers on board, the signal cleared, the doors shut in time, and then the train will leave punctually. Regulate the train to line speed, have the power on promptly after speed



The local interurban branch line from Kamikumamotoekimae. (Author)



Typical Japanese food, delicious to visitors from Britain! (Author)

restrictions, keep careful watch on intermediate passing times, keep to speed limits, and apply appropriate braking force, and the train will run on time. We asked our senior railway host about how and why this was possible. We saw that the question was not clearly understood.

'It is our duty to operate our trains to the timetable, if we did not, then people may be inconvenienced.' was his reply. Running on time is part of the definition of a railway in Japan. It is we who did not understand.

The impression we had before our visit was that all in Japan is new and shiny. This is not so. We found old rolling stock in service in Southern Kyushu. It should have been faded and worn, but it was not. The same efficient service was on offer. The only way that the age was obvious was from those who knew the types, and had books about it, and from the interior fit, where the latest materials and electronics were absent. For those who like the truly ancient electric train, these could be found, if you knew where to look. In Kumamoto, we discovered the old train from Kamikumamotoekimae, and rode it to Kitakumamoto and Miyoshi. This was delightful 50-year-old, second-hand metro stock and we were enthusiastic to see and ride in such vehicles on an electric interurban with overhead line on wooden supports. At Kitakumamoto, several men in uniform rushed out with concerned faces. We thought they were security men, come to stop us taking photographs—they were not. They were concerned tourists might have become lost in such a place!

Traditional Japanese food was available to those who wanted it. More interesting to us was to discover that the Japanese have a fondness for European food, but in typical fashion they have made subtle alterations that take a while to notice. Ice cream was delicious but different, not in taste but in texture. There was a surprise flavour, however, green tea—that needed some getting used to. Fat and sugar content had been reduced, leaving the more delicate flavour of a water-ice. Likewise the fatty American doughnut had

been civilized and was much the better for it. Other Western foods were widely available, but always with reduced fat and sugar. Beautiful little cakes, terrible for causing waistlines to grow, were suddenly accessible without conscience! The Japanese *ramen*, a kind of noodle in soup, was voted the most easily obtained and delicious choice. Cheap and easy to find it was enjoyable from station restaurant to market café. *Tempura*, a type of fritter, too was delicious and widely enjoyed. With raw fish, we had to remind ourselves that this is exactly what smoked salmon is, and problems departed—it was delicious.

Lastly, in Shinagawa Station, Tokyo, we were trying to link the network map with the fares, to know what ticket to buy. We were clear on Mita (三田) and Kanda (神田), recognition was coming slowly but we wanted to go to Asakusabashi (浅草橋) and that was beyond our powers of recognition. We were standing looking puzzled, and the most beautiful girl came up to offer help. Within a short time we were on our way, but it was clear now how to meet good-looking Japanese girls! ■



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