

## **The Great Train Rider**

**By Kent M. Keith**  
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Sometimes I think that the best way to learn about Tokyo and Tokyoites is to ride the trains. Just go down to the nearest train station and buy the minimum fare on the Japan National Railway (JNR). As long as you never try to go through a ticket stall and leave a train station, you can transfer from one JNR line to another and ride all over Tokyo and back to where you started for only 30 yen. Once in a while a genuine train conductor will come wandering through to check tickets, so you tell him “*orimasen*” (I will not get off) and “*modorimasu*” (I will go back to where I started). That will blow his mind, but it shouldn’t blow your 30 yen. Pick a sunny day, pack some munchies, and climb on board Tokyo’s rolling life sample.

Sit back and watch the intense young students in their black uniforms, the mothers and their wide-eyed children, the old women who carry whoppingly large bundles of vegetables and rice on their backs for delivery to market, the young couples smitten with aw-shucks first love, the exquisite white and red *kimono* of young women and the peaceful grays and blues of their elders, the businessmen in precisely pressed suits and company badges, and the laborers in their leggings and short hair. It’s a continuous show, with new acts coming on at every station. Take your time and enjoy it. Remember that in the summer, most trains serve as Turkish baths for no extra charge, and in the winter, the heating is free. As you circle the city, in fact, you may discover that a few other people are doing the same thing. Students and part-time workers know that in winter trains are one of the cheapest forms of heating available. For 30 yen they can get onto the Yamanote Line and ride around Tokyo in circles, sleeping and reading for a few hours before getting off to go to class or an afternoon job.

Walking on the street or in department stores, people are always moving and you can only get glimpses of them. Train rides, on the other hand, form a captive group and you can study at leisure the faces and features of the people riding along with you. They form a very representative sample. With the exception of a few company executives who prefer to spend hours with their chauffeurs in traffic jams, everybody rides trains in Japan. Although Japan is second only to the U.S. in automobile production and car ownership has zoomed upward in the last decade, trains still handle billions more passengers per year than cars. In 1971 the national and private railway lines handled 16.5 billion passengers, which comes out to 45

million passengers per day. Assuming that most people are counted twice in those statistics because they are commuting or shopping on a round-trip basis, that still means 22.5 million passengers per day—or 20% of the nation’s entire population. As for the Tokyo metropolitan area, all forms of publicly available transportation including trains, subways, buses and taxis together move about 20 million passengers per day, or roughly 10 million people commuting or shopping on round trips. The trains handle 6 million of these people every day. That’s a third of the metropolitan population, from the littlest *akachan* to the oldest *obasan*. You can see them all for only 30 yen.

You can also gain some important insights into a very important aspect of daily life in Tokyo. I spend an average of four hours per day riding trains, buses, and subways while studying and working in the Tokyo area. I feel a little sorry for myself, losing more than 20 hours per week that way, but the fact is that I don’t put in much more time than the typical Tokyo commuter. The Tokyo salaryman spends as much as three hours per day throughout his working life commuting between his home and his office. Projecting that three hours per day on a career basis, the Tokyo commuter who works for 40 years will have spent *five years* of his life crushed together with his fellow citizens on the local express. That’s a staggering amount of time.

Not all the time is lost, of course. If you ride the train early before the morning rush and late after the evening one, it is easy enough to use the time productively. Many executives are able to read the morning news on the train just as thoroughly as they could at their home or office; some listen to tapes of English conversation and grammar drills, holding cassette recorders in their laps and listening through earphones; and some make notes and try to plan their working day. Especially on the evening trains, there is a great profusion of periodicals. There are the horse-racing sheets, the chatty movie and society weeklies, and the sporting magazines. Most of them, however, are *manga* cartoons, the “adult comic books” which feature cool detectives, alluring women, and a creative variety of rapes, or else the lone, righteous *samurai* who enjoys cutting off people’s ears and noses and heads—several pages being devoted to pictures of the blood flying through the air. Whatever the reader’s fancy, reading makes the time go by faster. These millions of man-hours held in quarantine on trains each year account for the high per capita consumption of printed matter in Japan. I know that I read a daily newspaper, two news magazines, and most of a book each week on the train—and that is the highest amount of printed matter that *my* capita has ever consumed on a continuing basis. The only alternatives, at any rate, are thinking and sleeping. Sleeping is pretty popular.

Trains also have a direct effect on social life in Japan. Most of the train lines which service the suburbs don't run for long after midnight. If it takes you an hour and a half to get home, then you'll have to be on a train by 10:30 to make sure you'll catch all your connections. That means night life in Tokyo shuts down pretty early for the commuter. If he arrives as late as 11:00 he may be able to ride the main line, but ends up with a \$25 taxi bill when he arrives in the suburbs and finds that the local lines have stopped running for the night. If he had a car, of course, he could go home any time he pleased.

With the 30 yen you've invested in the JNR, you can get much more than a visual festival and sociological insights. As you have probably heard, you can get some contact sports, too. Riding a main line commuter train during rush hours, you can become intimately involved with the people of Japan. Rather than being shy and withdrawn, they will literally press themselves upon you. Direct contact is as easy as just standing there.

People say that the public transportation system in Tokyo is the worst in the world, but when they say that, they aren't complaining about the way the system is laid out. It's a marvelous network of trains, subways, and buses which will take you anywhere in Tokyo, usually faster and always cheaper than by car. Nor do people complain about the frequency of the trains: during rush hour, it seems, one train barely gets out of the station before the next one comes in. The only problem with the system is that during rush hours, it carries almost three times as many people as the maximum capacity it was designed for.

Fourteen lines come into Tokyo carrying as many as 1.4 million passengers during the morning rush hour alone. All fourteen lines carry more than double their maximum capacity, with the Yokosuka Line carrying 2.95 times capacity, Shonan Line carrying 2.91 times, Yamanote Line 2.75 times and Chuo Line carrying 2.72 times capacity. People are so tightly packed into these rush hour trains that it makes a difference how thick their clothing is. JNR officials fear cold winters, because the overcoats worn by passengers can take up as much as 5% of the space which is usually filled by bodies. A ten-car train on the Yamanote Line, which circles Tokyo, normally carries 3,000 people wall to wall. If passengers wear overcoats, that means 5% or 150 people can't get on the train anymore. And that's a lot of people left standing on the platform waiting to fight their way onto the next train.

And believe me, they *will* fight their way onto the next train. A lot has been said about professional “pushers” hired by the railway lines to shove passengers into the trains during rush hours. I have seen very few “pushers” during my time, and I think it is because they aren’t really needed. Every Tokyo commuter is his own best pusher. He will press, plunge, and scuffle to get inside the doors before they close, and he is usually successful. I have seen a few hardened commuters wait at the end of the line until the train is almost ready to depart, and then take a virtual running broad jump into the pack of people already pressed together inside the train. With this kind of participant enthusiasm, the station officials who work on the platforms during rush hour have comparatively little pushing to do. Their job is to tuck in the odd arm or leg or posterior which is hanging through the doorway, preventing the train doors from closing completely. A little pressure applied in the crucial places and the doors slam shut, signal lights flash, and the train speeds off. More important work for the station officials is crowd control. Many stations rope off the stairs or areas leading to the train platforms, only admitting a certain number of people at a time, so that the platforms are not too crowded for orderly movement. But roping off and tucking in don’t change the fact that the main line rush hour trains are absolutely packed.

During railway “go slow” strikes when far fewer trains are running, they are so packed that injuries are common. Crowds push into the trains with such force that bodies are bent into impossible positions which result in broken legs and arms, countless bruises, and strained muscles. Even during “normal” times, however, people get hurt. A while back, the young, slightly built secretary who works near my desk was absent for two days, and when she came to work again, she looked pale and weak indeed. The flu had been going around, so I asked her if she had been sick. “No,” she said, and proceeded to explain that she had cracked a bone in her chest and had gone to the doctor. She had been standing in line on a subway platform during the rush hour. When the subway doors opened, the crowd behind her lurched forward, pinning her to the edge of the subway door. She couldn’t free herself, and the crowd kept pushing until the pressure built up to such a point that a bone in her chest cracked. There are countless horror stories like this about train life, and they are more likely to be true than false. Emblazoned in my own mind is the story of an old man whose head was smashed through a train window during one of the “go slow” strikes. I don’t know if the story is true, but I believe it. I really do.

I have sustained no injuries myself during two years of regular train riding. Of course, I have been thrown out of trains by the explosion of exiting passengers and thrown against iron bars and closed doors by the powerful thrust of boarding

passengers. I have had my head knocked against the top of train doors, and have been in a train so packed that the sheer pressure on my body turned my arms completely numb from shoulders to fingertips. I have had books knocked out of my hands, and have found it difficult to hang on to my briefcase— someone always seems to hook it and drag it along with him as he presses in or out of the train. Once I nearly lost my muffler. It was pulled off one shoulder by a man trying to get out of the train, and then it was pinned between the shoulders of two men who got on. When *they* tried to get off a few stations later, they took the muffler with them, still pinned to their shoulders. I gripped my end for dear life, and the muffler stretched nearly six feet before the two passengers parted and it snapped back into my hands. My only real problem is that sometimes I carry an art portfolio, and I have to balance it on my head to keep it safe from the twisting, bending, crush of the crowd. It's 4 feet long and 2½ feet wide, and I get a lot of strange looks trying to wear it as a hat.

At first thought, it seems contradictory that the Japanese should be so polite in the social relations, and then become ruthless mobs during the rush hour. One reason may be that the Japanese are not trained to be polite to everyone— just to their friends, neighbors, customers, and work associates. Trains are full of strangers, and the same code doesn't apply to them. A better reason, however, is that it is impossible to be polite when you're crammed into a train at three times the maximum capacity. In uncrowded trains I have seen countless acts of kindness among total strangers. I have seen people run after someone who forgot his umbrella on the train, or help people get their luggage down from the overhead rack, or loan their newspaper to someone who has nothing to read. Every day I see people give up their seats to old ladies or mothers with children. A lady clambered down the stairs after me one day to give me 300 yen in coins which had fallen through a hole in my pocket as I got off the train. Another day, I noticed that a little school girl had dropped a notebook when she got on the train, so I picked it up and took it over to her. Half a dozen stops later, she came over to me and gave me a thank you note that she had just written in English and Japanese: "Thank you. I need very much. *Domo arigato gozaimashita.*" It seems to me that the nation's politeness is pretty well intact.

And so is the nation's self-control. It is amazing that in spite of the intense crowding, the bumping and shoving, the jostling and jamming, there are few fights or even signs of anger. The Japanese do not like being packed in together *sushizume* (as tight as wrapped *sushi*) but they are conditioned from early childhood and the conditioning means turning off one's senses and sensitivity. There is pain and displeasure, mumbling and groaning— but the crowding and

pushing is accepted because people feel it has to be. Everyone just wants to get to work or get home with as little fuss as possible.

I am convinced that some commuters are so well conditioned that they are completely impervious to the outside world. I put my collapsible umbrella up on the luggage rack one day, but it jiggled and fell through the open bars of the rack, clobbering a seated man on the head and rolling onto the floor. I mumbled my apologies. The man never blinked, nor uttered a sound, nor even looked up. Maybe it happens to him all the time.

A friend of mine tells how he was riding a crowded train one morning when a mother and baby tried to board. The baby was tied to the mother's back, and the mother didn't get far enough through the door, so when the doors closed, they closed on the baby. My friend gasped and jumped to help, straining to force the doors back open, and succeeding just enough so that the mother could lean forward and free the baby. My friend let the doors go and they slammed shut. The woman seemed not the least bit disturbed by the whole experience. Turning her head a little in the direction of my friend, she said in a dull voice, "*Domo.*" That was all. "Thanks."

The Japanese commuter's tolerance of bad conditions has its limits, certainly. Last year, for example, some commuters who were kept waiting for hours on packed platforms during the "go slow" strikes finally went berserk, attacking train drivers, smashing windows, and raiding ticket machines. But the tolerance level is much higher than in most Western nations. Shinjuku station currently handles more than 2.2 million passengers per day on six different train lines. I find it hard to imagine 2.2 million people *anywhere* in a day without an endless series of fights, but Shinjuku station is completely peaceful. In a thousand hours on Tokyo trains, I have seen tempers flare only three times, and once it seemed to be a private dispute which happened to be taking place in a train station. Perhaps one reason people control their tempers on rush hour trains is that they are usually pinned flat against the person they would like to be angry with. Packed in at that close range, you can neither fight nor walk away—you can only keep it to yourself.

After two years on trains I find that I have become rather well conditioned to the jabbing and jostling and pressing, but I am still not accustomed to the foul smells and suffocation. During the summer when it is already hot and stuffy, a little rain squall is enough to cause everybody to close the train windows and turn it into a limited oxygen zone. I've seen one or two people pass out under these

conditions, and I always feel like I'm about to join them. I reserve my wrath, however, for a despicable breed of people I call The Knucklers. The members of this species will put their knuckles into your back and press hard when shoving their way onto the train. I will never, never, never get used to having knuckles in my back. And it doesn't help to know that The Knucklers are often disguised as sweet little old ladies— dear hearts who have learned that knuckling gives them maximum pushing effect with minimum energy expended. My heart has hardened against The Knucklers. I hope they go to a special place in the afterlife.

If you ride the same lines regularly, you learn how to minimize your discomfort. Train platforms have marking lines, and train drivers try to stop according to those markers each time. You learn quickly, for example, that if you get on the Yamanote Line at the north end of the Takadanobaba station platform near a certain utility pole, you will be just at the edge of the staircase you want to descend when you get off the train at Ebisu. That puts you onto the steps before everyone else, so you avoid the pushing and shoving which is going on behind you as the other passengers approach the staircase. You also learn, for example, that the Marunouchi Line heading west will unload on the left side at Yotsuya and the right side at Shinjuku— so you can place yourself near the correct side of the train when you board, making it easier to get off. If you want to read and know the train is going to be packed, you move into the aisle and stand in front of the people who are sitting down. The “air space” above those people's heads is available for holding a magazine or book, and sometimes a newspaper.

If you ride the train in the evening, beware the red faces: they identify the drinkers. The Japanese flush quickly with only a little alcohol, and those who drink lots of *sake* before eating their dinner are not going to keep their dinner. There isn't a train in Tokyo that makes it back to the shed after the evening's run without vomit splattered on its floor someplace. Vomiting is pretty common in Japan, and you really don't want to be pressed up against the guy when he throws it all up. It's just too messy.

If you ride rush hour trains very often, you will learn to take a very detached view of your body. You might conceive of your body as a suspended physical entity which will not resume life until it gets off the train. You'll want to keep your mind, of course, for reading and thinking— but nothing pleasant is going to happen to your body, so forget it. You'll do best to concentrate on being a sack of potatoes. “I am a sack of potatoes, I am a sack of potatoes, I am a sack of potatoes” you intone to yourself and you'll be all right. It is more poetic and Oriental to think of oneself as a willow reed, and some days you may wish you were a ton of bricks.

The important point is that a sack of potatoes is not offended when it is kicked or shoved, and a willow reed will sway when the crowd sways. If you can successfully think of yourself in the third person as inanimate matter, then the rush hour won't bother you at all.

As you become a veteran rider, you will become so accustomed to living on trains that you might begin eating, drinking, and shaving there. Eating is the easiest. For the last year I have regularly downed my dinner on the Keihin-Tohoku Line on Monday and Thursday evenings, and the Chuo Line on Wednesday evenings. Sandwiches, boiled eggs, fruit and nuts are easy to carry and consume even when trains are fairly crowded. Some people will stare, of course, but probably because they are hungry. Drinking is a lot harder. If it is a carton of milk, for example, you have to be careful that a sudden lurch of the train doesn't deposit half the contents all over you and your neighbors. It's best to drink while the train is stopped at a station, taking a few gulps and waiting until the next stop for a few more. Shaving with a battery-powered shaver is easy enough, but I have found it very difficult to get anyone to hold my mirror for me.

Putting your three ten-yen coins into the JNR ticket machine will, in the end, give you more than a visual festival, sociological insights, contact sports, and a home away from home. As you sit there viewing the panoply of life, you might achieve some kind of enlightenment. I think I had my own *satori* a few days ago, when a swarthy Japanese woman of maybe 35 came over to me on the Chuo Line and began speaking to me in English.

“Hello, where you from?”

“Uh... I'm from Hawaii.”

“You know Captain Cook?”

“Uh... well, not personally. He was... uh... before my time.”

“He died there. The— what do you say?— the natives, they...”

“Hmm. That's right, he was killed by the natives. It was all a great misunderstanding.”

At this point she took the book out of my hands, an English textbook for beginning students, and thumbed through it knowingly. At the back of the book there were



the words and music for “London Bridge Is Falling Down,” which she began singing out loud, right there on the train, enjoying herself very much.

“Who’s the ‘my fair lady’ at the— you see here, at the end of each line?” I didn’t know, exactly, so she gave the book back to me, looking very disappointed.

“Do you think...” she began. “Do you think that... after a body, after a dead body is burned, do you think that there is anything left, except the— what do you say?— the ashes?”

I was still pondering that when she abruptly said good-bye and got off the train at Koenji.

I don’t have an answer to her question. Actually, what I want to know is this: when you’ve taken that Last Local Express to the end of the line, do you transfer and board the Great Locomotive in the Sky? And can you do it for the same 30 yen?