



Discover Japan by Train

If you think a Japanese train is late the chances are, it's your watch that is wrong... Japan Specialist Ben Colbridge explains how visiting some of Japan's many highlights is easier than you might imagine.



Ryoanji Temple, Kyoto



Tokyo skyline at night



Fushimi-Inari, Kyoto



Crow Castle, Matsumoto



Sunset at Miyajima



Yudanaka monkey

Japan should be a difficult place to get around. Three quarters of the terrain is forest or mountain, with the majority of the population packed into the flatlands in between. Internal flights can be expensive and inconvenient but luckily there's an easy alternative. The world-class bullet train (shinkansen) network stretches over 1,500 miles from the northernmost tip of the main island of Honshu to the southernmost tip of Kyushu and easily links the major city centres and attractions.

The shinkansen is merely one small, albeit beautifully crafted, part of an extensive rail network that winds between mountains, along Japan's beautiful coast and connects picturesque villages with the outside world. Japan's reliable train network is the perfect way to explore this intensely fascinating country. From Tokyo, trains head off in all directions but east. After some time exploring the big city, the best way to experience your journey further afield is to travel west to Yudanaka in the Japanese Alps: this will take you through some of the most beautiful landscapes in the country.

The first part of the journey is by shinkansen to Nagano along a branch of the main north-south bullet train line that was built for the 1998 Winter Olympics. Travelling 140 miles at speeds of up to 160mph the journey is breathtaking, with tantalising glimpses of the stunning scenery caught in the fleeting seconds between one tunnel and the next. From Nagano a smaller, local train reaches Yudanaka, home to Japan's famous bathing monkeys. Accommodation here is in traditional ryokan, each with its own natural onsen (hot spring bath). Snow dusts the mountains for much of the year, adding to the tranquil

alpine atmosphere and enticing the snow monkeys to warm up in the open-air hot pools.

Two nights in Yudanaka is time enough to explore the area and the pleasant artisan town of Obuse, where the artist Hokusai (made famous by his Wave painting) lived and worked in later life. Local trains lead on through the mountains to link small villages and in three hours reach the small city of Matsumoto, deep in the Japanese Alps and home to one of Japan's most impressive castles. A night here will give you time to visit the Edo-period fortifications and explore the traditional old streets of the city's merchant district, Nakamachi.

From Matsumoto the train continues to Kyoto, the country's former capital and cultural heart. The name alone conjures up images of beautifully created and immaculately maintained Zen gardens as well as the icon of traditional Japan, the Geisha. You could spend an entire trip to Japan in Kyoto alone, exploring the abundant gardens, temples and shrines: three nights here is really the minimum.

Back on the shinkansen, the 250-mile journey to Hiroshima takes an effortless two and a half hours. As you glide down the southern coast of Honshu the train stops at a select few cities: trains run frequently so it is easy to break your journey with stops at the beautiful castle of Himeji or the famed Kouraku-en garden in Okayama.

Though obviously modern, Hiroshima has developed into one of Japan's most pleasant and friendly cities, rebuilt on the banks of several converging rivers. The Peace Park and A-bomb Dome are the most obvious sights, but a short train-ride and ferry crossing reaches the island of Miyajima just off the coast. The

iconic 'floating' shrine gate at the entrance to Miyajima's Itsukushima temple is one of Japan's most photographed highlights, and if you want to experience it without hordes of Japanese tourists it is possible to stay on the island overnight.

Though you're now almost 560 miles from Tokyo, fast trains mean the journey back will take just four hours.

Trains in Japan are an effortless way of getting around the country. Almost all signs are now doubled up with Japanese and English, there are no check-in times and stations are invariably just where

you need them, in the centre of town. The shinkansen is an exciting, efficient and economical alternative to flying. In 2007 the average delay on the shinkansen was less than 10 seconds. In Japan, if you think your train is late it might be time to buy a new watch.

Ben Colbridge
Japan Specialist

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FACT FILE

A two week trip to Japan including a 14 day Japan Rail Pass and return flights starts from £2,700 per person. For further details please contact our Japan specialists on 01993 838 210.

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