

The Trains of Niigata

Story and photos by Nicholas Klar

I must make a confession to begin this story. I love the train system in Japan. They are clean, punctual and you can get just about anywhere on them - or at least a substantial part of the way. Throughout Japan, and particularly in places like Niigata Prefecture, you can find old single lines that wind up over the mountains bearing ancient railcars made in the 1950's and 1960's. In most other countries these lines would've closed down years ago in a fit of government rationalization or handed over to dedicated volunteers to run tourist trains. After Japan Railways (JR) was flogged off years ago some lines were indeed shut down but the majority still fortunately exist. I think I can safely state here too that Japanese people are also in love with their train system, as epitomized by the tear-jerker movie 'Poppoya', starring the legendary Ken Takakura, and the veritable legions of train *otaku* (geeks).

To the traveler in Japan the rail system is often a mystery to be unraveled, and so it was with me as I stared up at the timetables in Itoigawa *eki* (station) one mid-afternoon. At least they used roman numerals. In some small stations they still use the old Chinese number characters. That was to be the case that afternoon when I was to get stuck somewhere outside of Niitsu whilst waiting for a train to transport me onward to Aizu Wakamatsu near Mount Bandai. Having little else to do, I spent what seemed like a few hours deciphering the timetable written in Chinese characters.

Itoigawa is near the southern most point of Niigata Prefecture. Given the higher transport costs when traveling in Japan, one should always keep an eye out for special discounted rail fares. On this particular journey I was taking advantage of the *free kippu*, on which one can travel anywhere on local trains for one day in Niigata for ¥1,300 or two days for ¥2,500. Niigata is a huge rural prefecture and it would be impossible to cover all of the lines in one day by local train. On a recent journey back to the prefecture of my JET placement I intended do a round train trip up through the mountains that would take in some parts of Nagano and Fukushima Prefectures for a small additional cost.



After checking my timetables I headed north with the intention of completing the trip all in one day. A couple of hours in, through my misreading of the timetable, I missed a connection by three minutes at Miyauchi. I stood outside the station getting a coffee from the vending machine and watched as my train rumbled off into the distance.

Consulting the timetables again I thought I might be able to loop around in the other direction and set off toward Niitsu. Another four hours on, a connecting train I expected didn't even turn up and left me waiting a further two hours in the previously mentioned small wayside station. Still, the journey on the old twin car train (with no a/c!) from Niitsu had been amazingly scenic and would be regarded as a 'tourist train' ride in most other countries.

Eventually nearing dusk I came to Kitakata in Fukushima-ken. I had decided to get off there and inspect the multitude of old *ura* (warehouse) in the town, plus the nearby Kumano *jinja* (shrine). Kitakata is also famous throughout Japan for its *ramen* noodles - but I didn't find that out till afterwards. The last bus had left for the shrine by the time I arrived so after a short walk around town I decided to head out to it by foot.

Darkness quickly set in by the time I had walked the seven or so kilometers there. Not being able to see much, I had to now decide what my next plan of action would be. It seemed illogical to retrace my steps so I thought I'd try hoofing it to Aizubange instead, about twelve kilometers away, and see what I could find what I could there. Drizzle, narrow roads, strange noises from roadside bushes (not dissimilar from the growl of a bear anxious to attack unwitting passerby's), along with a '7km to Aizubange' sign discouraged me from this thought after about two hours of walking.

Fortunately I was able to hitch a lift after about twenty minutes and the kind English-speaking driver dropped me off in Aizubange. To my initial disappointment I found that the town had just finished celebrating its yearly *matsuri* (festival). As I walked down the brightly lit up main street festooned with streamers and lanterns I stumbled past a cluster of old men still celebrating on a corner. Catching sight of me they insisted I sit down then set about forcing me to consume copious amounts of Japanese *sake*. Not too difficult a job I guess after the day I had just had.



By midnight I decided that accommodation was not needed as sleep would hardly be a problem and, excusing myself from my new found friends, stumbled down to the *eki* where I slept until 5.00am on the waiting room bench. To my surprise at around 5.30am it seemed half the town was up and about to help clean up from the previous night's festivities. Finally at 6am I was able to board the train that I had set out to travel on over eighteen hours prior.

From Aizubange it was excellent connections to Koide, Muikamachi, Naoetsu, and finally to Omi, which is the town to next Itoigawa – my original point of departure. I had lucked out. That night was their annual *hanabi* (fireworks) on the beach! The local *taiko*-drumming group was also going to be playing. So instead of an early night I forced myself, by now dirty and smelly, to stay late. There was also another fireworks display happening up the coast around Nou-machi at the same time so there was much speculation amongst the crowd about which towns was the best. After a tiring last journey northwards I was finally late back into my digs in Takada around midnight. What a long weekend! But sometimes adversity brings forth greater enjoyment - and maybe a tale or two...

If you're a train buff or just wanting to see some great scenery, then you'll love places like Niigata and the other rural parts of Japan. If you're coming in on a short stay and intend to do a little extra sightseeing make sure to pick yourself up a Japan Rail Pass (www.japanrail.com) before you come. The *free kippu* tickets can be purchased at all manned *eki* in Niigata Prefecture.

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ALT - Omi-machi (now Itoigawa-shi), Niigata-ken: 1995-1997

Currently History Senior at the International School of Penang, Malaysia

Website: <http://klarbooks.com>