

EXPO 2005 AND TRAINS

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In May I travelled to EXPO in Aichi with a heavy heart. I was going out of necessity rather than desire. Part of the site of this 'environmental' exposition is in Seto, where I used to live. However back then, rather than concrete and steel, the site was hills and trees. Yet, having seen so much work going into the plans, I felt a need to see what the final result was. Furthermore, having studied Japan for some 15 years or so, I have heard much about EXPO 70 and its impact – not just on Japan as a whole, but even on the shinkansen, which gained greatly from the extra passengers. So, I felt I had to visit EXPO 2005 in case its impact is seen as being significant in any way.

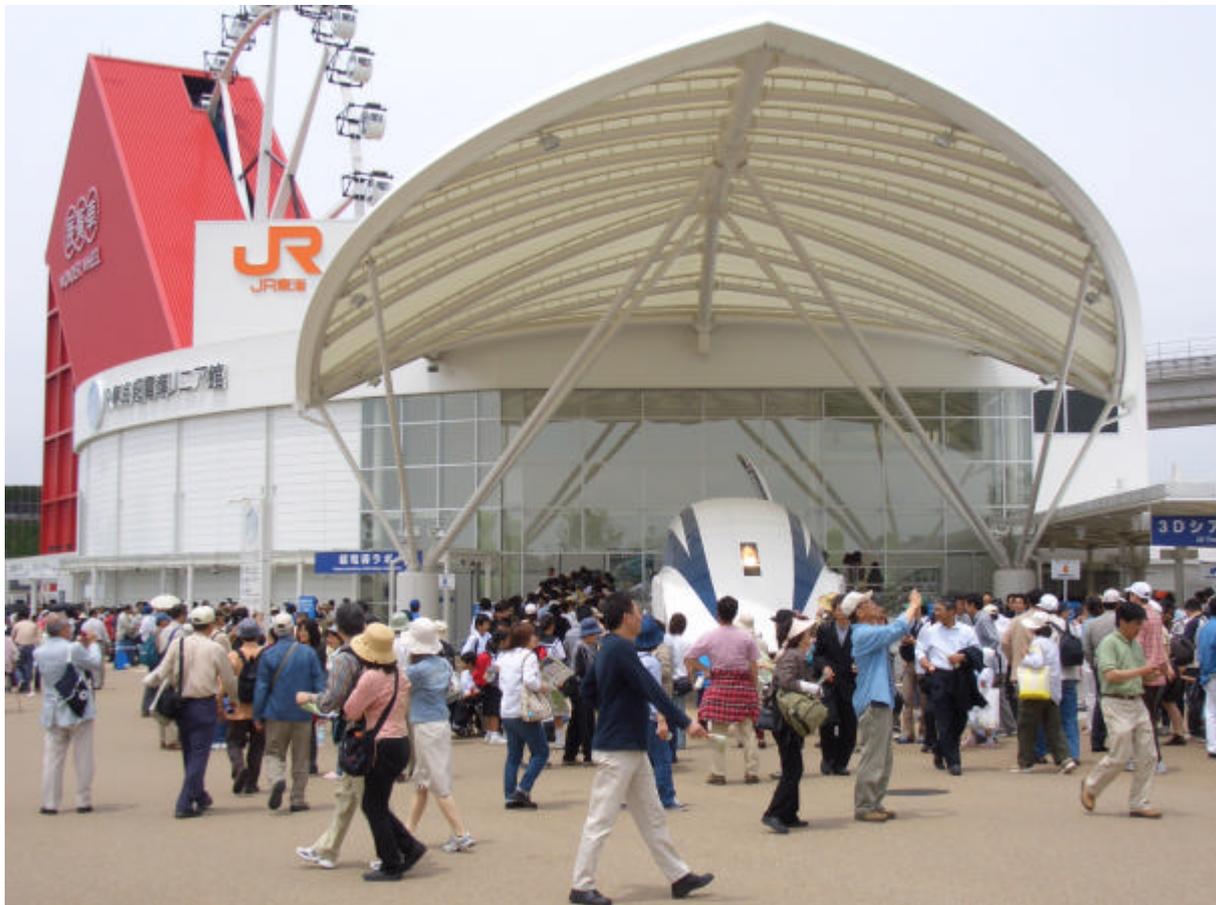
Being Japan, there was an abundance of different ways that I could get to EXPO. The route I took was the shinkansen to Nagoya, followed by a JR Tokai train to Yakusa-Banpaku. This train used the Chuo Line as far as Kozoji, then crossed over to the Aichi Loop Line for the rest of journey (following a change of drivers and conductor). The train itself, at 10 carriages long, had more than enough capacity, but it felt strange being mixed in with commuters on their way to work as the train stopped at local stations in Nagoya. Upon arrival at Yakusa-Banpaku, the scrum began. Many had through tickets that included all three train journeys to get them to the EXPO gate. Being on a JR Pass, I did not. Having paid the extra charge for using the Aichi Loop Line, I then had to get a ticket for the Linimo – magnetic levitation train. I then rejoined the queue to get to through the ticket barrier, to get to the platform to take the train. Even for a Brit, the queuing process was becoming a little tedious! The Linimo itself was comfortable. Despite standing for the short journey – I found it very smooth and far preferable to a standard monorail (having taken the Tama monorail the day before, the difference in speed and ride was quite noticeable).

My next mode of transport, having finally got into EXPO, was a gondola from the main site to the Seto site. It was nice to be able to see the city where I lived... at least for a while... as part way through the journey the windows automatically misted over. This was quite an unnerving experience since it was quite windy that day. Finally Seto and the Seto part of the EXPO site reappeared. The reason for the misting over was apparently to protect the privacy of those living in houses near the route of the gondola. However, these houses are considerably further away from the gondola than many homes are away from railway lines in Japan, so I'm left wondering whether the real reason was show off the technology of misting windows rather than protecting anyone's privacy.

Inside EXPO the main focus of interest for railway enthusiasts – and seemingly for a large percentage of non-railways enthusiasts too – was the JR Tokai Pavilion. This pavilion was concerned with one thing only – the Linear Shinkansen. The Pavilion and display was separated into four parts. First, the MLX01-1 Linear Shinkansen was proudly on display outside the Pavilion, and provided the backdrop to many group photographs. It was also possible to go inside – although all this largely did was to confirm that the linear shinkansen would appear to be the result of what happens if you cross a shinkansen with a plane! The main part of the Pavilion was a 3D film about the Linear Shinkansen. Before seeing the 3D film, another film was shown (while you queued to get into the main auditorium) about the importance of the Linear Shinkansen. What I found interesting about this film is that it appeared to show a change in stance in terms of the main selling point of the Linear Shinkansen. I found this particularly interesting as the point it made was the same as that I had just concluded in my book - rather than being needed due to the need to connect Tokyo and Osaka in an hour, or the need to have a backup in case of a major earthquake, the Linear Shinkansen was promoted as being the third revolution in world railways (after the initial development and the development of the shinkansen) and that its construction would bring new confidence to the Japanese people and consequently the Japanese economy. The 3D film itself was impressive and the goggles certainly helped give the impression that you could reach out and touch

the train. The third part of the Pavilion was a display of how the technology works – including scaled down models using the technology itself. The final part of the Pavilion was a small shop selling a variety of models, T-shirts, etc. – and seemed to be doing brisk business after each performance of the 3D film ended (both of the exits from the main parts of the Pavilion led straight to the shop!).

Rather than take any of the alternatives, I returned to Nagoya by the way I came. It was no less crowded and chaotic and hardly left one with a feeling that EXPO was well organized and planned. But at least I can say that I have been to EXPO. Was it worth visiting? I guess so. EXPO 2005 will not be remembered like EXPO 70 – it is likely to only attract about 25% of the number of visitors, for starters. But it provided an opportunity for Japan – and to some degree the rest of the world (though clearly some countries are better at this than others (Britain take note!)) – to show off what they have to offer. The JR Tokai Pavilion could be done at the Yamanashi Test Centre, where there would be the added bonus of seeing the real trains in action... but how many people would go there just for that? Probably just the enthusiasts. EXPO was an opportunity for the case to be sold to a wider audience – whether it, and EXPO, achieved its goals, only time will tell.



The popular JR Tokai Pavilion at EXPO 2005

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