

Views from the Tokaido Shinkansen

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For some, a journey along the Tokaido Shinkansen is a once in a lifetime experience, while for others it is at least a fairly regular part of life and being in Japan. In *Bullet-In 51 and 52*, Oliver Mayer and Martin Guest described different ways of travelling between Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka, with particular emphasis on avoiding the Tokaido Shinkansen. While the shinkansen is clearly the fastest and most convenient way of travelling between these cities, it is sometimes criticized by frequent travellers and train enthusiasts as being a rather “antiseptic” experience more akin to air travel.

Yet, for first-time visitors to Japan a journey along the line is as much a part of the obligatory itinerary as seeing Mount Fuji, the temples and shrines of Kyoto and experiencing the hustle and bustle of Tokyo. However, when Fuji can be seen from the shinkansen is a question many tourists ask other passengers and on-board staff. This article therefore attempts to describe some of the well-known and lesser-known points of interest that travellers might wish to look out for when travelling from Tokyo to Osaka by shinkansen.

Throughout the article, left-hand and right-hand sides refer to facing the direction of travel when travelling from Tokyo to Shin-Osaka. On the Tokaido Shinkansen, “A” seats are on the left-hand (seaward) side of the train, while “E” (“D” in Green cars) seats are on the right-hand (landward) side of the train. Station names are given as pointers to the stage of the journey the text is referring to, rather than necessarily indicating what can be seen at that particular station.

Tokyo

On the platform near Carriage 8 between platforms 16 & 17 and between platforms 18 & 19 you will find a star indicating the 0 km mark of the Tokaido Shinkansen.



There is a memorial plaque to Shinji Sogo at western end of platforms 18/19. Sogo was the JNR president responsible for developing the shinkansen concept.



As you leave Tokyo, you should get a glimpse of the Diet and the Imperial Palace. You then get a view of Tokyo Tower.

Shinagawa

Shinagawa station opened in 2003 to help increase capacity of the Tokaido Shinkansen. The station building also contains the headquarters of JR Tokai that operate the line.

Just before arriving at Shinagawa station, you get a glimpse of Shinagawa carriage sidings and Tamachi locomotive depot, which services the electric locos used on the overnight “blue train” services.

Shin-Yokohama

If you are quick you should just be able to get a glimpse of Yokohama Stadium – which hosted the 2002 World Cup Final.

After another 20km or so, on a good day, you will also be able to see Mt. Tanzawa on the right.

After crossing the Sagami river, the track uses the original test track that was used while the shinkansen was being developed. This location was chosen due to its relative closeness to the RTRI facility in Kunitachi, the lack of housing (at that time) near the track and the variation in topography that the line would traverse. The end of the test track is as at the next major river (Sakawa river). A commemorative stone is just about visible on the left-hand-side in the Kamonomiya maintenance yard shortly before arriving at Odawara station.

Keep an eye out in this area – particularly on the right hand side – for the large advertising boards. These can be seen for much of the length of the route, but are most numerous in this area – soon to be the longest stretch of the line without a station. These boards are about 4 m by 8 m in size and it costs about ¥600,000 per year to use one.

Also before arriving at Odawara, you will see some coloured houses on a hillside on the right hand side. These were built in the 1980s and designed to be clearly visible from the shinkansen.



Odawara

On the left hand side you can see Odawara castle.



Soon after leaving Odawara you pass through some tunnels. In between some of these look out for the impressive red Hakonezaka Bridge (Tokaido Line) and views to the sea (Sagami Bay).

Atami

Coming in to Atami you will see a number of hotels that serve this popular *onsen* (hot spring) resort on the left hand side and Atami castle (that was apparently going to be the setting for Blofeld's base in James Bond's *You Only Live Twice*, until the switch to Mt Aso was made) in the distance.

Atami is the boundary between JR East and JR Tokai on the conventional lines.



After leaving Atami station, the line soon enters the Shin-Tanna Tunnel – the longest on Tokaido Shinkansen at 7,958m. Construction started in 1942 as part of the original Bullet Train project intended to link Tokyo with Beijing in China (see Christopher Hood's article in Bullet-in 43). Near the tunnel (but out of sight when you come out) is a small hamlet called

Shinkansen, due to the number of people that lived there when the tunnel was being constructed.

Mishima

Thanks to the shinkansen, Mishima has now become a commuter town – with many *Kodama* leaving there early each morning. JR Tokai has a training centre here. There is a sizable depot here also – with one line (left hand side) that must give the driver a view as if driving off into the air when it is used. This depot is home to the prototype 300 series set J1, which is often just visible inside the sheds in between its present duties as a high-speed test train.

On a good day, you should now be able to see Mt Fuji on the right hand side. On a clear day, it is visible from around Odawara, but the best views are shortly before passing Shin-Fuji station (it is also visible from certain points on the platforms of Shin-Yokohama and Kakegawa stations if you are lucky). Having said this, personal experience suggests that catching a glimpse of Mt Fuji from the train is not always as easy as one might surmise from all the posters and photos one sees in books and guides. Clear winter days offer the finest views, especially in the morning. By around late May, most of the snow on the mountain has melted leaving a dark shadowy form that merges into the haze (much created by the paper mills in the area).



Shin-Fuji

After passing Shin-Fuji, you cross the Fuji river – using the longest bridge on the Tokaido Shinkansen (1,373 m). This marks the boundary between 50 Hz (to the East as Tokyo Electric imported its technology from Germany) and 60 Hz to the West (as Osaka Electric © Christopher P. Hood & Dave Fossett, 2005.

imported its technology from the US) electricity currents. The Tokaido Shinkansen uses 60 Hz throughout.

Shizuoka

Even frequent riders of the Tokaido Shinkansen may not be familiar with what is sometimes known as *Shiawase no Fujisan* (Good Luck Fuji), a point at which Mt Fuji is visible from the left-hand side of the train (coincidentally there is also only one point on the original Tokaido road where Mt Fuji is visible on the left hand side when traveling towards Osaka). On a clear day, look back through the window a minute or so after passing Shizuoka station. It is only visible for about 30 seconds, so you need to be quick.

At Nihonzaka, the Shinkansen, conventional line, local road and expressway squeeze near each other to pass under the mountain which reaches all the way to the sea. See Hiroshi Naito's article in Bullet-in 45 about this tunnel.

After crossing the Oi river, you start to see more tea fields, for which Shizuoka is famous.



On the left hand side you may catch a glimpse of Shizuoka Airport. Shizuoka Prefectural Government would like to have a shinkansen station for the airport (which is partly above one of the tunnels of the Tokaido Shinkansen), but indications are that this is unlikely to happen.



Kakegawa

On the right hand side you will be able to see Kakegawa castle. There are many new factories in this area – many of which have glass fronts. If you are near the front or back of the train, you can sometimes get an interesting photograph of its reflection.



On the left hand side is Kakegawa Stadium – used during the World Cup (where England played Brazil ☹)



One bizarre sight to keep an eye for on the left hand side is some dinosaurs. Since they don't move much, it is safe to assume they are models rather than any of Godzilla's long lost relations.



Hamamatsu

Soon after leaving Hamamatsu you will see a spur on the right hand side leading off to JR Tokai's Hamamatsu Works. Down this spur is the only point where Tokaido shinkansen trains cross a level crossing.

You will see many small ponds in this area. Traditionally used for farming eels, as these can be more cheaply imported from elsewhere, many have either been developed on or are actually been used for farming turtles now.

You then come to Lake Hamana. Originally this was a fresh-water lake, but the small spit of land that separated it from the sea was destroyed during a storm and was never rebuilt. On the left you can see a large *torii* (Shinto gate). Just as you leave the lake, on the right, you can see the local speed boat racing stadia. Speed boat racing is one of the few forms of legalized gambling in Japan.

Toyohashi

On the left hand side you can see Mikawa Bay, formed by the Chita Peninsula to the West (where the Chubu International Airport is located) and Atsumi Peninsula to the East, which bend round towards each other. There have been plans to have a shinkansen track run along the Atsumi Peninsula across to Ise and on to Shikoku and then Kyushu – but this is never likely to materialize.

Mikawa-Anjo

The last of the post-privatization stations to be built on the Tokaido Shinkansen. You are now deep in to Toyota territory – which accounts for much of the local economy. Although you may not see the Toyota name much from the train, many of the factories you can see are of affiliated companies.

As you come in to Nagoya, you pass through an area where there were many disputes between locals and JNR about the noise pollution (and other problems) created by the shinkansen. Eventually legal case was sorted out, but it could have led to a significant drop in the operating speed here.

Just before arriving at Nagoya station, look out for the large space created by the triangle of the shinkansen, conventional lines and an expressway. This land used to a freight yard. Its use today seems to vary from year to year – often being the site of a temporary car park or funfair.

Nagoya

Nagoya is changing. JR Tokai's Central Towers heralded a new era for the station and surrounding area. Keep an eye for more tall buildings to appear in coming years.

Gifu-Hashima

When originally planned, some felt it was more due to political influence than railway need. This suspicion has continued in part thanks to the location of a statue to the politician, Ono Banboku, just outside the station (right hand side). There was no railway connection to Gifu city when the station first opened. Now it is seemingly a busy area, due to the location of the Tomei Expressway, with factories (keep an eye out for Sanyo's large Solar Arc on the right hand side just before the station), apartment blocks and love hotels. In the distance on a hill you may just be able to spot Gifu castle on the right hand side.

As you pass over the rivers in the area you may catch a glimpse of some cormorants. Further up the river these have traditionally be used for fishing – the bird catching the fish, which is then taken from the bird's mouth by the owner.

Soon the line passes Sekigahara – site of Japan's most famous battle, which, in 1600, effectively united Japan as a single country. It is also this area where snow used to cause problems for the Tokaido Shinkansen until countermeasures were put in place. On the right hand side you can see Mt Ibuki, which even has ski slopes on it.

Maibara

Maibara, located in the town of Maibara, is the boundary between JR Tokai and JR West on the conventional lines.

Soon after passing the station on the left hand side you can see RTRI's large wind tunnel facility. This is also home to three preserved former experimental shinkansen cars: JR Tokai's "300X" class 955, JR East's "STAR21" class 952, and JR West's "WIN350" 500-900 series. These three experimental trains have all held the Japanese rail speed rail at one time, and the Japanese speed record of 443 km/h set by the 300X in 1996 remains unbroken – unless one counts the speed record of 581 km/h held by the MLX maglev train.



After a short time, if you look hard on the right hand side you should be able to spot Hikone castle, with Lake Biwa (Japan's largest lake) behind it.

On the left hand side keep an eye out for the small, but picturesque mountain commonly known as Omi-Fuji (Omi being the traditional name of the area, the Fuji part is obvious).

This is also the area where the 300X set its speed record.

Currently this stretch is the longest without a station, but one is planned (probably to be called Biwako-Ritto) at the point where the shinkansen line crosses over the Kusatsu line.

Just as you come into Kyoto on the right hand side and back against the hillside you should be able to make out Kiyomizu-dera, one of the city's main attractions.

Kyoto

Anyone familiar with *Star Trek* will probably get a shiver when they see the Kyoto station building – particularly from the inside. The Borg have landed! Although large and impressive in many ways, there are still many who feel it has no place being in Kyoto, noted for not having many tall structures.



Soon after you leave Kyoto station you can see the Umekoji works and may catch a glimpse of the steam locomotives on display there.

After a few minutes, the Hankyu line will appear on the right hand side. When the Tokaido Shinkansen was being built here it was necessary to reconstruct the Hankyu line. As a consequence, with the former being completed first, Hankyu trains ran on the shinkansen line for a time while the latter line was constructed.

As you approach Osaka, you should be able to see the EXPO'70 commemorative park on the right hand side. At about the same time you will pass Osaka shinkansen depot (look out for a concrete structure passing over the track – this incomplete cross-over was to be a link to the nearby freight yard had there been freight shinkansen). Here, you may see JR West trains such as the *Hikari Rail Star* sets, and also the Doctor Yellow set – if you are lucky.

As you come in to Shin-Osaka you will see planes coming in to Osaka Itami Airport.

Games to play

In addition to the sights mentioned above, there are many more to look out for. For example, there are other major football stadia (at least two) that can be seen, a number of breweries (at least four), and keep an eye out for rail enthusiasts taking pictures of the shinkansen (tends to be at specific lineside sights – to be discussed in a future article). For those of you that travel quite regularly – i.e. every year or so – keep an eye out for landmarks that change. For example, the number of Ferris wheels visible from the shinkansen tends to vary, new constructions works (e.g. will the stilts near the foot of Mt Fuji – that even appeared in *Lost in Translation* – ever see the expressway they are designed to hold be completed?). For those of you who travel even more regularly than that, why not observe what other passengers are doing and try to see if there are differences depending on where people get on, the time of day travelled, etc. How about counting the number of conventional trains you see from the window? There are probably others... time on the shinkansen should never be dull!

Published as 'Views from the Tokaido', *Japanese Railway Society Bullet-In* (July-September 2005) (2005) 23-28.