

Kyushu Choo Choo

If time is short, you can whip between Kumamoto and Kagoshima in southern Kyushu in about one hour on Japan's newest Shinkansen line. For a more scenic and memorable experience, board the retrofitted Isaburo-Shinpei for a journey that harks back to the days when travel between the two cities was an adventure. Your trip will take you over mountain passes, through tunnels built almost a century ago, and on switchbacks made for steam locomotives – with the additional pleasure of splendid views.

But what I like about the ride is the comradeship it inspires. Instead of passengers buried in their books or fast asleep, there's a palpable excitement in the air, with strangers talking to strangers and people constantly moving from one side of the cabin to the other to take in the passing views.

Launched by Kyushu Railway in conjunction with the opening of its new Shinkansen line in 2004, the Isaburo-Shinpei sightseeing train travels a small section of the old Hisatsu Line connecting Kumamoto and Kagoshima. Constructed in the early 1900s, it was considered a great engineering feat at the time, rising 1,749ft (530m) above sea level and including a loop, two switchbacks and 20 tunnels along its length, such as the formidable 6,917ft (2,096m) Yatake tunnel. Although a coastal route would have been easier, fear of enemy attacks after wars fought with China and Russia prompted officials to choose the more difficult, less vulnerable mountainous terrain. A number of people died in its construction, especially during the painstaking tunnel digging. After the Hisatsu Line's completion in 1909, memorials to those who had lost their lives were placed at each entrance to the Yatake tunnel, one by Shinpei Goto (who had served as president of the Manchuria Railway Co. from 1906 to 1908) and the other by Isaburo Yamagata (who later served as governor of Kwantung province). In the decades that followed, steam locomotives hauled



A one-hour journey tunnels back through history and scenic spots of old.

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passengers and freight over the mountainous route, bringing commerce and excitement to the small towns they served along the way.

Today, the Isaburo-Shinpei, with its classic black or red cars, polished wooden seats, and attention to small details, right down to wicker wastebaskets, is a ride of nostalgia for retirees, a dream come true for train buffs and an easy lesson in history for children. Traveling 22 miles (35km) in a little over an hour, accompanied by a conductor who gives commentary on important facts and figures along the way, the train makes several stops on its journey, including scenic overpasses and old wooden train stations, now abandoned and empty. At Yatake Station, the highest elevation of the route, a steam locomotive sits retired in a shed.

Those who would rather ride a steam train than look at one can do so by boarding the Aso Boy, another southern Kyushu scenic train. This 1922 steam locomotive runs from Kumamoto to Miyaji on weekends and holidays throughout the spring and fall.

Details, details ...

The Isaburo-Shinpei travels between Hitoyoshi and Yoshimatsu twice a day in both directions, with the one-way fare costing ¥720. Additional seasonal surcharges range from ¥300 to ¥500. Hitoyoshi is 90 minutes by train from Kumamoto; Yoshimatsu is 100 minutes by train from Kagoshima.

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Erratum: Dazaifu was misspelled in the February edition of this column.