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Leisurely Railway Travel over Undiscovered Gems of Shikoku



Yosan Line train on the Seto Inland Sea coastline

Shikoku is the smallest of Japan's four main islands, accounting for five percent of national territory, but it is rich in history, culture, and unspoiled nature. It is also the only main island without a Shinkansen service, but a variety of unique sightseeing trains have been introduced in recent years.

This issue of Japan Tourism Spotlight focuses on railway journeys in Shikoku. Despite the lack of Shinkansen services, the railway network in Shikoku allows tourists to take in the island's varied landscapes — from the coastlines with



beautiful views of the Seto Inland Sea or the Pacific Ocean, to steep mountains and rivers along deep gorges — that might be overlooked on a bullet train trip.

There are various recommended railway courses covering four prefectures — Kagawa, Ehime, Kochi, and Tokushima — over several days. You can take some (or even all) of the island's popular sightseeing trains. Shikoku also offers unique train services, including the world's first dual-mode vehicle (DMV) in commercial operation, open-deck carriages, and torokko trains.

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1. A leisurely circuit of Shikoku: recommended courses

Shikoku boasts a network of unique tourist trains offering a leisurely exploration of its cultural heritage and natural beauty. The Organization for Promotion of Tourism in Shikoku recommends five model courses that either make a full or half circuit of the island, each starting in Matsuyama, Takamatsu, or Tokushima. They feature a variety of routes and attractions, from a three-day trip over Shikoku's major tourist destinations to one allowing history lovers to complete their visits to eight castles in three days, and a tour of Pacific coastlines from Tokushima via Cape Muroto to Kochi, including a chance to ride the DMV.



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Shimonada Station (left) and Iyonada Monogatari train

A particularly recommendable course allows the tourists to board all of the popular “Monogatari” series sightseeing trains over four days. It is a scenic rail journey through historic and natural sites across Shikoku. Starting in Matsuyama, must-visit spots are Matsuyama Castle and Dogo

Onsen Honkan, believed to be Japan's oldest hot spring with a 3,000-year history. The next day, take the sightseeing train Iyonada Monogatari to Iyo-Ozu, then transfer to an express train to Uchiko. You can explore the traditional streets of the Youkaichi-Gokoku area, where preserved Edo-period merchant houses evoke timeless charm.

On the third day, you take a limited express train to Kubokawa, where you change to the sightseeing train Shikoku Tosa Toki no Yoake no Monogatari to Kochi, then travel northward to Awa Ikeda. On the final day, take the Shikoku Mannaka Sennen Monogatari train from Kotohira to Oboke, a ride that will enable you to enjoy a spectacular view of the area's deep gorges from the windows. Then you ride the Ai Yoshinogawa Torokko and other trains to the final destination, Tokushima.

[Recommendations for Traveling around the Shikoku Circuit](#)



Dogo Onsen Honkan (left) and Yakuoji Temple

2. The story behind JR Shikoku's Monogatari trains



Shikoku Mannaka Sennen Monogatari train

The Monogatari series sightseeing trains of Shikoku Railway Co. (JR Shikoku) are story (monogatari)-themed services featuring train cars and interiors designed to reflect the distinctive concept of each train. Operated mostly on weekends and holidays, they are aimed at enabling the guests to taste the diverse scenery and historical/cultural legacy of the respective areas serviced by each train, along with onboard meals of locally sourced ingredients and hospitality of the train staff.



Iyonada Monogatari train

Iyonada Monogatari — introduced in 2014 as JR Shikoku's first full-scale sightseeing train — runs on the western Shikoku coastline, making two round trips a day between Matsuyama and Iyo-Ozu/Yawatahama in Ehime. Each of the total four runs of the train — lasting about two and a half hours — offers lunch or afternoon tea sets of varying menus that suit the different times of day it operates. The train was so designed that passengers can enjoy the stunning views of the Iyo-nada area of the Seto Inland Sea, which vary greatly according to the hour of the day, from the glittering sea to a golden sunset. Each of the train's three cars has different exterior and interior designs in retro-modern styles, and all feature large windows to give passengers an unimpeded view of the scenery. Car No. 3 is reserved (at an extra charge) as a private space for group tourists (up to 8 persons), who will be serviced by an exclusive attendant.



Shikoku Mannaka Sennen Monogatari train

Shikoku Mannaka Sennen Monogatari, which began operating in 2017, runs on the mountainous route over the central (mannaka) part of Shikoku, allowing passengers to marvel at the views of the steep mountains and deep ravine of the Oboke and Kobokey Gorges along the route. Sennen

(a thousand years) refers to the centuries-old history and culture of the spiritual institutions located in this part of the island, such as Zentsuji Temple and the Kotohira-gu Shrine. The train is intended to provide a modern-day version of an age-old pleasure among Tokushima people: taking a small “yuzan” excursion to nearby mountains and beaches in the springtime, and enjoying bento lunches and beautiful nature. The interior of each of the train’s three cars is designed varyingly in the image of old folk houses, expressive of traditional Japanese lifestyles and the passing of four seasons. The train makes one round-trip a day between Tadotsu Station in Kagawa and Oboke Station in Tokushima, with the Oboke-bound service lasting two and a half hours and the Tadotsu-bound ride three hours.



Shikoku Tosa Toki no Yoake Monogatari train

Shikoku Tosa Toki no Yoake no Monogatari, launched in 2020, is based on the story of Sakamoto Ryoma, a young samurai of the Tosa Domain (in today’s Kochi Prefecture) who left his homeland toward the end of the Edo Period in his quest for a new era and became a driving force behind the Meiji Restoration, which marked the dawn (yoake) of modern Japan. Operating between Kochi and Kubokawa stations (one round-trip a day), the train’s route partially follows the path that Ryoma is believed to have taken when he left Tosa — without the clan’s approval, a serious, life-risking offense in those days — in 1862. The two cars of the train are named “Kurofune,” colored in the image of the Black Ships, and “Sorafune” in the image of a spaceship (to symbolize the new era dreamed by Ryoma), respectively. The two-and-a-half-hour ride each way — through the lush forests of mountain valleys and along the Pacific coastlines of southern Shikoku — offers passengers a dynamically changing landscape.

[Iyonada Monogatari](#)

[Shikoku Mannaka Sennen Monogatari](#)

[Shikoku Tosa Toki no Yoake no Monogatari](#)

The train should not be a “closed box for transport”



Matsuoka Tetsuya, JR Shikoku manager in charge of the design of the Monogatari trains, says the concept of the series was to “make a story” together with the local communities along the lines. “Our target was to incorporate the landscape and culture of Shikoku, as well as the wishes of its people, into the design of the trains, which would then be shared by the passengers. The priority was to put the local element at the forefront. Each of the three trains was designed to reflect the different history and culture of the areas serviced by them,” he says.

Matsuoka, who has a background in construction design, says the basic idea in planning the “Monogatari” series was that a train should never be a “closed box for transport.” From the viewpoint of a construction engineer, he aimed to create a space — like traditional Japanese houses — where the border between indoors and outdoors is left vague. The train’s interior features a wide-open space created by the seats and furnishings arranged so as not to block the passengers’ views and enable them to fully enjoy the scenery during the trip.

For Matsuoka, a train is a “building and restaurant in motion.” It is indeed a special experience for passengers to enjoy the “scenery in motion” and the meals as the train moves on. Therefore, he designed the train’s seats inspired by the kinds of furniture used in cafés and restaurants.



Children wave (left) and local residents gather to welcome the sightseeing trains.

One of the surprises since the launch of the Monogatari trains was that large numbers of residents along the routes came out to greet and wave to the trains, he said, adding that such exchanges between local communities and passengers are the greatest assets gained by the launch of the sightseeing trains.

The Monogatari trains have helped boost local tourism, as people’s interest in areas serviced by the trains has increased. For example, as the impressive image of a bright-colored Iyonada Monogatari train crossing the bridge over the Hiji River in Ehime — with the Ozu Castle in the background — has been widely shared, the number of visitors to the castle is said to have been on the rise, Matsuoka said.



kazukiatuko / PIXTA
Iyonada Monogatari train crossing the Hiji River in Ehime

This year, the Monogatari trains won the Cool Japan Award 2025 (in the inbound tourism segment). Besides strong demand for group tours, the interest of individual travelers from abroad is growing rapidly, not only from East Asia but also other parts of the world, he said. He added that the railway company will consider steps to respond to the needs of passengers from diverse cultures and values, such as offering multilingual services and exploring meal options that cater to international guests.

3. Get aboard: unique trains you can take in Shikoku

Shikoku's wonders aren't just picturesque landscapes, rural charms, and cultural heritage. Its trains are also an experience. From a morphing vehicle that doubles as a bus and a railcar to open-air carriages that allow tourists to take in the island breeze, these trains deliver unique, sensory-driven experiences. Hop on board these trains and enjoy Shikoku while catching glimpses of Japanese engineering and stories that led to these transformative rides.



©Asa Coast Railway
Asa Coast Railway's DMV on the rail track

Asa Coast Railway's DMV: Transforming rural transportation

Is it a bus? Is it a train? It is both! The DMV is the centerpiece of Shikoku's railway reinvention: a minibus converted into a railcar. It was launched in 2021 as the world's first operational dual-mode vehicle. It is operated by Asa Coast Railway, servicing Shikoku's southeastern coastlines between Tokushima and Kochi prefectures.

The idea for Asa Coast's DMV "bus-train" ride is simple: a Toyota Coaster minibus was customized to switch wheels. For rail mode, the steel wheels are lowered by a hydraulic system, which also lifts the vehicle to raise the rubber road tires. The process is reversed to get it back to road mode. This takes only 15 seconds, which is enough to excite the passengers and onlookers. The mode switch happens at Awa-Kainan and Kannoura stations.

There are three active DMVs, each with a maximum capacity of 21 passengers. The DMV operates round-trip, traveling a total of 15 kilometers to connect the Awa-Kainan Bunkamura and Shishikui Onsen terminals — including the 10-km section between Awa Kainan and Kannoura stations on rail. On weekends and holidays, one round-trip a day (in the bus mode) to Cape Muroto becomes available.

DMV as an answer to problems confronting the struggling local railway



©Asa Coast Railway

When the decision to invest ¥1.6 billion in DMVs was made, Asa Coast Railway was struggling with ever-declining passenger revenue, as its area of service suffered from depopulation and falling birthrates. At the same time, the area needed public transportation to support its aging population. The DMV, which was then under development by JR Hokkaido, became Asa Coast Railway's answer to these challenges, said Ohtani Naoyoshi, executive director of the company.

The lightweight DMVs are more fuel efficient and cause less damage to the rail system, which reduces the maintenance costs and improves the operator's financial conditions.

The world's first DMV in operation became a tourist attraction in itself, increasing passenger revenue for the company. About 85 percent of DMV passengers ride it for tourism and the unique experience, Ohtani said, based on a survey conducted during a Golden Week holiday period. The passenger interest in DMV also promoted the use of other public transportation in the area, which fueled the whole local tourism, he said.

The DMV's other advantage is its resilience in case of disasters, Ohtani noted. The dual-mode vehicle can run on the road even when the rail tracks are damaged, or keep running on elevated rail tracks if the roads are flooded during a possible tsunami.

[DMV \(Dual-mode Vehicle\)](#)

Tosa Kuroshio Railway's open-deck cars: Breezy ride through the island

Moving to Kochi, tourists will find a train ride that is literally a breath of fresh air. Tosa Kuroshio Railway's trains run on the eastern coastal side of the prefecture, connecting Gomen and Nahari terminals (21 stops for about 42.7 kilometers). Two special cars have open-window decks that allow tourists to admire the full view of the Pacific. Since the trains run mostly on elevated tracks close to the coastline, passengers are said to feel as if they were aboard a luxury cruise liner. These regular trains operate daily, requiring no reservation for seats.

[Shikoku Tourism: Gomen-Nahari Line](#)



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Shiman Torokko (left) and Tosa Kuroshio Railway's open-air carriage

Trolley Trains: Open-window rides through rivers and bridges

The island has two more similar open-air offerings: the Shiman Torokko and Anpanman Torokko. The former is a vivid yellow special trolley that runs along the Yodo line, connecting the stations of JR Kubokawa (Kochi) and JR Uwajima (Ehime). This reservation-only, guided-tour trolley has a windowless car that provides a wide view of the Shimanto River, as well as the mountain landscape and rural towns.

The colorful Seto-Hashi Anpanman Torokko train, named after and designed with images from the popular animation "Soreike! Anpanman," adds a family-sized flair to the open-air experience. There are six Anpanman trains in service, but the open-window car runs along the

Seto-Ohashi Line. It is the only one in this unique train group that crosses the Seto Inland Sea via the Seto-Ohashi Bridge, allowing kids and kids-at-heart to enjoy the charming seaside views. The train's interior is designed in the image of woods, with wooden benches and Anpanman wall decorations. Passengers can also look at the rail on the ground through the floor window.

[Anpanman Torokko Seto-Ohashi site](#)

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