

Shinkansen

Some people ride trains to travel. In March, I traveled 5,000 miles to ride on trains. I hitched a ride, so to speak, with my husband, Rod Diridon, on a California state delegation to study Japan's high-speed rail system. Japan's railway is one model for a 220-mile-per-hour bullet train between San Francisco and Los Angeles, to be built if voters approve it next year.

We rode the Shinkansen, the Japanese bullet trains, from Tokyo north to the Kaminoyama hot springs resort, back to Tokyo, then south to Nagoya and Kyoto. We saw wonderful sights including snow monkeys running across the tracks in the northern mountains, the outrageous fashions of Tokyo's Shinjuku district and a few of the 2,000 shrines and temples of Kyoto.

But in this case, the journey was at least as important as the destinations. The Japanese were the first to build a bullet train, for the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. Since then, Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, Britain, Taiwan, South Korea and China have followed suit. The Japanese continue to improve their technology, and are now on the 14th generation of bullet trains. The trains glide along as if on a cushion of air, so smoothly that my hand was perfectly steady as I wrote postcards along the way.

As a regular (and enthusiastic) rider of the Baby Bullet train from San Jose to San Francisco, and occasionally of Amtrak, I had to chuckle at the differences between trains in the United States and in Japan. The Shinkansen was on time, to the second (officially, its average arrival time is within six seconds of schedule). When we ride Amtrak to the Dunsmuir station near our second home at the foot of Mt. Shasta, the delays are typically from three to five hours.

A stewardess cruises the aisles of the Shinkansen, offering hot towels. Snack carts come along next, offering drinks and our most unique Japanese culinary adventure, a complete noodle dish that mysteriously cooks itself when one pokes a hole in a plastic barrier over a bottom compartment under the food. A soothing, recorded voice updates riders in Japanese and English on arrivals and departures from stations on the route, as discreet digital displays in each car reiterate the information. This is a bit of a contrast to the conductors on the Baby Bullet, who scold riders to keep our feet off the seats, instruct us to refrain from "personal grooming," list the prohibited activities in detail ("plucking, clipping, painting") and tell us that the use of cell phones on the train is prohibited (it is not).

"Thank you for riding Shinkansen" is part of the message to riders on each leg of the journey in Japan, a sentiment I rarely hear on Caltrain. Quite aside from the 185 mph speed that makes intercity travel quick and efficient, the calm and passenger-friendly atmosphere of the Shinkansen makes it apparent why train ridership is so much higher in Japan than in the United States.

What is most unique about their system, as our Japanese government hosts showed us, is how it is organized and financed. At the same time the United States and Britain privatized our railroads in the 1980s, the Japanese did the same, splitting Japan Railways, by region, into several publicly traded companies. Each of these companies has developed related businesses – hotels, restaurants and shopping centers – in and around their major train stations. So while our Amtrak racks up billions in deficits, the consortium of Japan Railway companies operates at a profit,



Photo by Gloria Duffy

The Shinkansen arrives on time.

subsidizing the rail service and rewarding stockholders. This system has also fostered "smart growth." With population concentrated around the rail centers, 20 percent of Japan's land is urban while the other 80 percent remains mountain wilderness or farmland.

The Kyoto train station exemplifies this station-focused development. The train terminal and a shopping mall occupy the bottom level. Above that is a huge atrium, surrounded by a luxury hotel, a "cube" with a couple dozen restaurants and a high-rise department store.

In 1998, Congress established 11 corridors in the United States for development of high-speed rail. A \$9.9 billion bond issue was scheduled for California's ballot last year, to fund initial construction of the nation's first high-speed rail line. Fearing that in a shaky economy the state's voters would reject the measure, Governor Schwarzenegger and the state Legislature have delayed the vote until November of 2006.

Japan's system overcomes the barrier that often prevents mass transit from being built in the U.S., namely, how to find funding. If built smart like Japan's, high-speed rail can pay back initial public funding, then be self-financing and indeed, make a profit.

High-speed rail in California would strengthen our economy by speeding business travel between our two economic centers, the Bay Area and the Los Angeles Basin. That's great. But all I ask is to be able to step on a train in downtown San Francisco or San Jose, go to LA for lunch and a museum visit and to be home by dinnertime. I'm looking forward to that . . . in about 10 years. Ω