



# TRAIN SPOTTERS' paradise

For a long time, Japanese railway fanatics were hesitant to admit to their passion, for fear of being branded as seriously geeky. But recent years have seen a boom in the publication of rail-related travel guides, maps, trivia books and photo collections. Magazines increasingly print special features on trains, and *manga* starring railway-obsessed heroines have become bestsellers. Young or old, male or female, trainspotters no longer need to conceal their enthusiasm.

In such a fertile environment it is no surprise that visitors are flocking to the Railway Museum in Omiya, situated in Saitama Prefecture, just outside

Tokyo. Since opening in October 2007 the museum has welcomed 2.4 million visitors. The history zone at the heart of the facility contains 36 real locomotives and carriages dating back to the early days of Japanese rail in the Meiji period (1868–1912) and features historical scenes including reconstructions of stations from days gone by.

At opening time visitors rush to book time on the D51 steam locomotive simulator (500 yen per session) and the miniature operating train, which runs along a 300-meter track (200 yen per ride). The D51 simulator, in particular, offers a true-to-life train driving experience with a full array of valves and





**FACING:** Railway diorama set out on a huge 25 x 8 meter relief model.

**ABOVE:** The museum's history zone is the place to see real locomotives and carriages that tell the story of Japan's railways.

**BELOW:** Featuring a genuine steam train driver's cab, the D51 simulator offers an exciting ride.

brakes. The simulator uses a genuine driver's cab that faithfully recreates all the vibrations and gauge movements of the real thing. Retired engine drivers who visit the museum are impressed by its faithfulness to reality, which takes them right back to the heyday of steam. The museum also has shinkansen and commuter-train simulators.

"The majority of our visitors are first-timers, while between 20 to 30 percent are repeat customers," says Deputy Curator Masayuki Sawato. "Our overseas visitors, the bulk of whom are from China and Korea, greatly appreciate our multilingual signage in English, Chinese and Korean."



PHOTOS: SATOSHI KAWAI