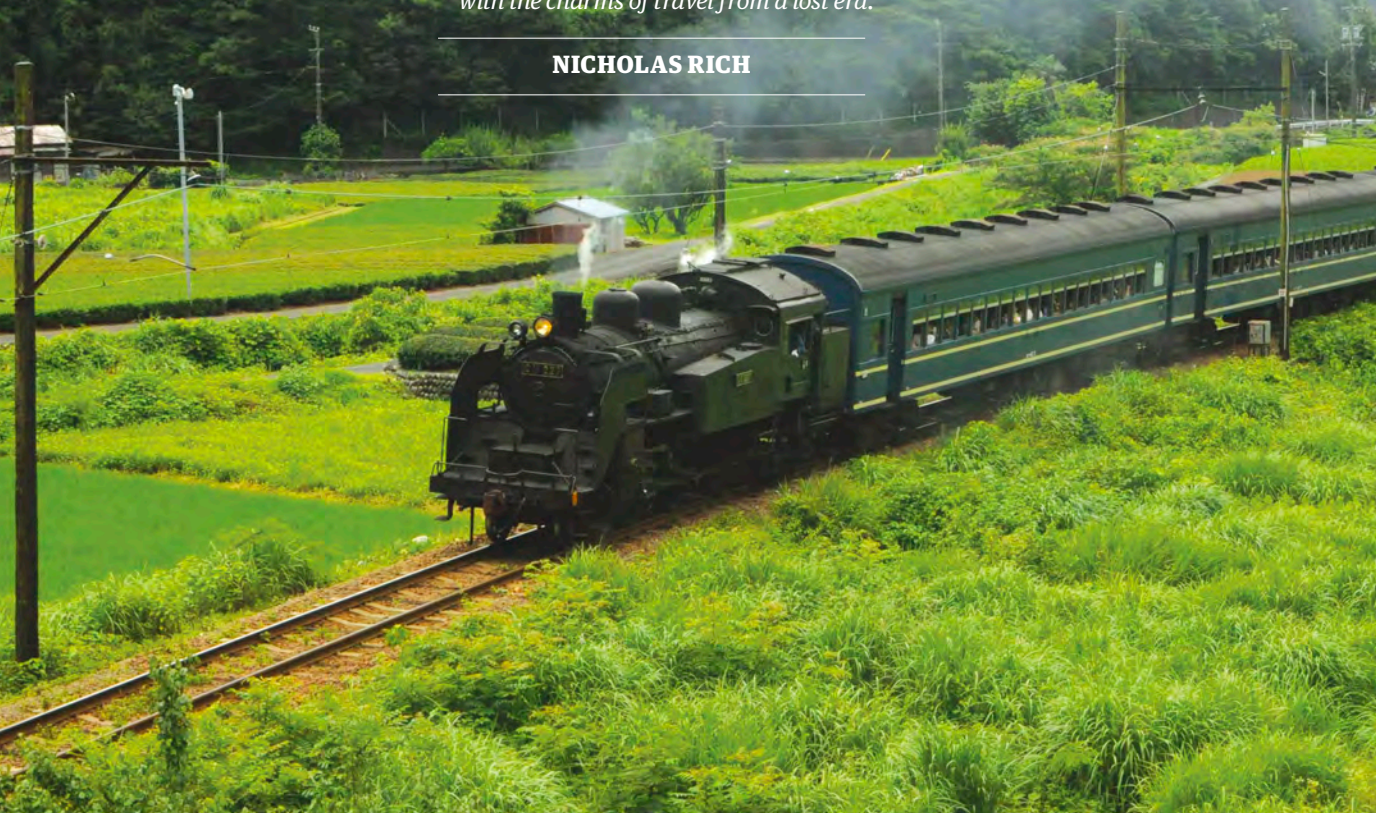


History in Motion

A journey on one of Oigawa Railway's steam locomotives connects people with the charms of travel from a lost era.

NICHOLAS RICH



OIGAWA Railway, also known as Dai-Tetsu, operates two lines running for sixty-five kilometers in Shizuoka Prefecture. Determined to preserve Japan's steam locomotive (known as SLs in Japan) culture, the company was the first in the nation to bring these trains back onto the tracks.

Japan's first SL came from Great Britain in 1872, and SLs were widely used during the first half of the 1900s. After Japan switched to electric, diesel and other locomotives in the 1950s, however, they largely disappeared from service.

To prevent the loss of an essential part of Japan's train culture, Dai-Tetsu acquired its first SL train in 1976 and returned it to service. Since then, the company has beautifully restored three different types of SL trains and runs them nearly every day on their sightseeing lines.

Oigawa Railway's Kanaya Station is just across the platform from JR Tokaido Line's Kanaya Station, an hour and a half from Tokyo on the JR Tokaido Line. Five minutes on a local train from Kanaya Station, passengers will arrive at Oigawa Railway's main station, Shin-Kanaya Station. With pasteboard tickets in hand, passengers can experience rail travel as it was in an earlier age—a moving memory for train and history fans alike.

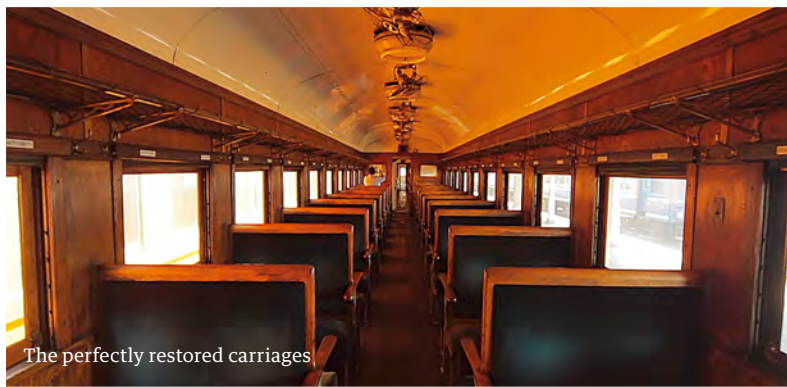
The sight of SLs stopped at the Shin-Kanaya Station platform is quite impressive. After the crew scoops coal into the furnace, a plume of steam and smoke bursts forth, accompanied by that iconic high-pitched whistle. A round trip, incidentally, consumes approximately one ton of water. The passenger cars have a relaxing interior with spacious seating and large windows from which to enjoy scenery or catch the cool breeze.



One of Oigawa Railway's steam locomotives



Take the train to enjoy the natural landscapes of Shizuoka



The perfectly restored carriages




Dream Suspension Bridge spans the Sumata River

Onboard, crew members sell souvenir pictures and SL-themed limited-edition toys and candy, creating a festival-like atmosphere. The conductors, known as “Mr. and Ms. SL,” are very friendly. The railway is also famous for the crew’s harmonica performances and a cappella renditions of various songs. SLs running between Shin-Kanaya Station and Senzu Station on the Oigawa Main Line take on the faces of Thomas the Tank Engine and his friend James, both especially popular with children, during a set period each year.

The scenery is different for each line. The Ikawa Line traverses the steeply undulating mountainous territory between Senzu Station and Ikawa Station, and uses a rack and pinion system to pull the train up the steepest slope of any track in the country. The Oigawa Main Line runs between Kanaya Station and Senzu Station. It passes under a suspension

bridge that spans the Oi River, and runs along the bank of the river over the course of the hour-and-a-half journey. In the summer, the verdant tea fields reflect the sunlight, and almost seem to be shining themselves.

Passengers getting off at Senzu Station can take a bus to nearby Sumata Gorge and enjoy a scenic hike through a forest to see the Dream Suspension Bridge. This 90-meter-long, 8-meter-high span sways over the shining, azure blue waters of the Sumata River, a tributary of the Oi River.

A ride on an Oigawa Railway SL is a romantic and nostalgic experience. Combining retro technology and timeless nature, this train service is an homage to the days of another age, and can truly be considered history in motion. 

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