

Trundling Through a Mountain Gorge and Valleys

Running through a valley next to the Watarase River, the Watarase Keikoku Railway is a nature theater on rails that offers great panoramic views from retro trolley trains which leisurely chug through the countryside.

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A journey on the Watarase Keikoku Railway starts at Kiryu Station in Gunma Prefecture. Getting to Kiryu Station from Tokyo Station takes around two hours via bullet train and the local train line. Weaving along the Watarase River valley—from which it takes part of its name—the 44-kilometer-long line runs from Kiryu Station to Mato Station in Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture. During the leisurely ninety-minute ride you can see a variety of lovely scenery. The trolley train is

particularly delightful, with the windows opening directly onto dynamic views of the beautiful gorge, passing through tunnels of greenery and past seasonal flowers while enjoying the refreshing breeze.

The Watarase Keikoku Railway currently operates two types of sightseeing trains. The Torokko Watarase Keikoku train runs on weekends and national holidays from April to November, with a diesel locomotive pulling four train cars, including trolley cars and regular cars. The nostalgic clackety-clack sound of the wheels really suits the many retro-style train stations along the route.

The other train is the Torokko Washi train, which has windows so visitors can enjoy rides in the winter too. It started operating in 2014 and runs on most weekends and national holidays throughout the year. It has a train driver's seat for kids and displays destination information in English, features not found in the Torokko Watarase Keikoku train. Both trolley



The train makes its way leisurely through the scenic Watarase Gorge



trains have a conductor explaining the sights (in Japanese only), and they also sell box lunches as well as merchandise featuring Watetsu no Wasshi, the railway's mascot.

There are many unique train stations where you may want to step off for a closer look. For example, four stations away from Kiryu Station (the second Torokko Wasshi train stop) is Omama Station. The station is a wooden building with a retro look. The next station, where the Torokko train unfortunately does not stop, is Kamikanbai Station. Built in 1912, the building looks like it has been frozen in time since the 1920s, and both the station building and platform are National Registered Tangible Cultural Properties. Two more stations down via the regular train is Mizunuma Station, which has a hot spring in the building. Soak in the outdoor hot spring bath while gazing at the gorge for a true only-in-Japan experience.



On board you can buy souvenirs featuring the railway's mascot, Watetsu no Wasshi



Even going through tunnels is fun, thanks to the illuminations on the train's ceiling



Kamikanbai Station's platform and building are both National Registered Tangible Cultural Properties

Eleven stations from Kiryu Station on the regular train is Godo Station. Located in a valley, the station building is constructed of wood, and there is a restaurant inside an old train car where you can enjoy a meal as if you were on board in a dining car. Before reaching neighboring Sori Station, you'll go through a 5,242-meter tunnel, the longest one on the railway. During the ten minutes inside the tunnel, the trolley train projects an illumination show for passengers. While the tunnel is dark like outer space, after reaching the end you will return to the nostalgic landscape of the Watarase River and small towns.

As you gaze out of the window—or step off and watch the retro railway cars weave through the landscape—you'll get a wonderful sense of connection between the train and the dramatic local scenery. This may well be one of the most enjoyable ways of experiencing the beautiful gorge while also getting a taste of the Japan of yesteryear. **1**