

# The Aizu Railway : Connecting the City with Nature and History

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*The Aizu Railway is a vital means of transportation for residents of the Aizu area in Fukushima Prefecture, but it offers much more than that, running direct routes between Aizuwakamatsu City in Fukushima and Asakusa in Tokyo as well as fun tourist services such as the Oza Toro View train and Topsy Train.*



**T**HE Aizu Railway—a joint public-private venture funded by Fukushima Prefecture, seventeen local municipalities in the Aizu region, and various corporate bodies and individuals—operates the 57.4-kilometer route between Nishi-Wakamatsu Station and Aizu-Kogen-Ozeguchi Station in Fukushima Prefecture. Thanks to a track-sharing arrangement with the Yamanote Railway and Tobu Railway, you can also travel between Aizu and two famous sightseeing spots—Nikko in Tochigi Prefecture and Asakusa in Tokyo—without switching trains. Rising by five hundred meters during the run between Nishi-Wakamatsu and Aizu-Kogen-Ozeguchi, the ride delights passengers with stunning views that change with the seasons as the train traverses urban areas, countryside and mountains.

One notable characteristic of the Aizu Railway is the unusual nature of many of its stations. For example, the stationmaster at Ashinomaki-Onsen Station happens to be a cat called Love, whose duties include greeting arriving trains from a bench on the

platform and making rounds outside the station. Love and his colleague Peach (the facility manager cat) have many fans.

Yunokami-Onsen Station is a rare example of a station with a traditional thatched roof. The station's refined appearance makes it a worthy spot to begin a visit to historic Ouchi-juku, a former lodging town with rows of pretty thatched roof residences. There are many more sites worth a visit, such as nearby Tono-Hetsuri, a cliff formed through a process of erosion and weathering over a million years and dotted with oddly-shaped rocks.

To enjoy the Aizu Railway's charms to the fullest, however, you should book a ride on the Oza Toro View train. Oza Toro is a combination of two Japanese words, *ozashiki* (a tatami room for entertaining guests) and *torokko* or cargo train. This special two-car train has a car with observation and *ozashiki* seats, and another with *torokko* seats. The observation seats are higher up than usual train seats and recline, so you can appreciate the scenery in a totally relaxed state of body and mind. The *ozashiki* tatami seats have a



- 1 This is the third Okawa Bridge, one of Aizu Railway's many picturesque views. This iron bridge spans the Aga River between Ashinomaki-Onsen Station and Yunokami-Onsen Station.
- 2 Ouchi-juku is about ten minutes from Yunokami-Onsen Station by car. This former lodging town has rows of residences with traditional thatched roofs.
- 3 To-no-Hetsuri is a designated Natural Monument of Japan. It also features a wooden bridge leading to a temple enshrining a statue of the deity Kokuzo Bosatsu, which is closing during winter.
- 4 The special *ozashiki* seats of the Oza Toro View train feature a recessed floor which turn into heaters called *kotatsu* in winter. Warm and comfy, it's the perfect place to curl up for a nap.
- 5 Many people visit Ashinomaki-Onsen Station for a chance to meet Love, the stationmaster seen here resting on a bench

recessed floor under a table, which in winter are turned into *kotatsu*—traditional heated tables with a cover on top and a heater underneath to keep you toasty warm and cozy.

The *torokko* carriage is open-air from spring to fall, allowing you to experience the full glory of Aizu's clear air and beautiful nature up close. You can choose from these three seat types when booking.

As a tourist train, the Oza Toro View makes short stops to show off the views en route (except in winter, when it merely slows down). There are three iron bridges, two between Ashinomaki-Onsen-Minami Station and Yunokami-Onsen Station and another one between Yunokami-Onsen and To-no-Hetsuri Station. From the bridges you'll have magnificent views of Wakasato Lake, Fukasawa Valley and the Aga River.

The "Tunnel Theater" is another fun and unusual service. Inside the three tunnels between Ashinomaki-Onsen Station and Yunokami-Onsen Station, a projector attached to the train displays

animations on the tunnel walls, ensuring that small children can enjoy the ride without being scared of the darkness and rumbling sounds.

"We're always thinking of new ways to entertain our passengers," says Koji Watanabe, sales section manager of Aizu Railway's General Affairs and Planning Department. "While the Aizu Railway offers easy access to and from Tokyo, the number of people living along the line was declining, so we introduced the tourist train to boost the number of passengers and introduce them to the region's charms. We're thrilled that it has become so popular.

"We also have tourist trains for different seasons such as the Topsy Train, with all-you-can-drink sake service in winter, and the Beer Train, with all-you-can-drink beer in summer," Watanabe adds. "The flower-viewing Ohanami Train in spring is also popular. We would love to have many people travel with us."

The Aizu Railway clearly operates with a spirit of fun and hospitality as it connects the city, nature and history of Aizu. 