

Upgrading *Seishun 18kippu* to Japan Rail Pass

Balázs Ács

Exploring Japan by rail is an unforgettable experience. The scenery is beautiful, the technical attractions, bridges, and tunnels are amazing, and people are kind. Trains are fast, clean, and punctual. Travelling is not just simply fun, Japan is heaven on earth for a railfan.

There are many discounted tickets for 'rail and walk' tourists, combining tickets to 'get there' and to 'get around'. But there are two rail passes that are available nationwide and they are essential for people who want to see the whole country: the *Seishun18kippu* (*juhachi-kippu*) and the Japan Rail Pass. Both were introduced decades ago to boost domestic tourism, which they do very well. Without these tickets I would not have made as many domestic sightseeing trips as I did. And I know many others who have done the same.

The *18kippu* is a very reasonably priced (¥11,500) railway coupon that is only sold for use during school holidays: from mid-December to mid-January, from March to mid-April, and from mid-July to mid-September. Although designed for students, anyone can buy it. The ticket allows unlimited travel on the network of railway operators in the JR group of companies for 5 (not necessarily consecutive) days and/or 5 persons. However, it is only valid on slower (local and rapid) trains. So it cannot be used on shinkansen, and limited-express trains. It has some related tickets too, like the Hokkaido and Higashinihon Pass designed for exploring Hokkaido using similar rules to the *18kippu*, but allowing travel on an express night train through the Seikan Tunnel, but not on other limited expresses.

Conversely, the Japan Rail Pass offers almost complete freedom. Holders can use almost all trains on lines of operators in the JR group for 1, 2, or 3 weeks at prices of ¥28,300, ¥45,100, or ¥57,700 yen, respectively. There are special prices for first class (Green Car) and for kids, and most of the JR companies issue regional versions valid for their area with similar but slightly different rules. However, there is one strict rule for all Japan Rail Passes—they are only for tourists with tourist visas (and a few others in very special circumstances).

Having lived in Japan for 7 years, I used to be a permanent resident, and was ineligible for a Japan Rail Pass. So I used the *18kippu* instead, which took more time,

but I did not mind it at all. As a student, I was rich in time but short of money, so the *18kippu* was perfect. I am a fan of rural railways where few express trains run, so I did not mind that my ticket was not valid for express service. To get to the most distant rural rail lines required long trips by local trains. But I have to confess that once when travelling for 20 hours straight on local trains, I dreamed about the day, when I could return to Japan as a 'temporary visitor' and would be eligible for The Pass. I promised myself that if I ever had the chance I would use it all day and all night to enjoy the luxury of Japanese express trains. It took 3 years to get back to Japan to make my dream come true, but it finally happened!

But first, a few words about my many, long *18kippu* trips. As a beginner, I made 1-day round trips near Tokyo and Osaka. Near Tokyo, visiting the Boso peninsula with some swimming in the sea, making a trip around Mt Fuji, or visiting the cute railway museum in Yokokawa after hiking down from Karuizawa through the Usui Pass, were all interesting journeys. The Ikawa–Oigawa Line can be reached in a day, and is a must for any railfan. Even riding the famous Tadami Line from Niigata to Fukushima Prefecture is a perfect 1-day trip, and if one takes the first train, there is the chance for a short stopover at Doai Station in the middle of a 15-km



Rapid *Kazekko Aizu-Tadami* in Tadami station — this extra train gives some access to this remote area. (Author)



Iwaizumi Station — on least frequently served Iwaizumi Line of JR East network
(Author)



'Super Azusa' limited express passing local train on Chuo Line
— 18kippu users on the left, JRPass users on the right train
(Author)



JR West diesel car at Izumo-Sakane Station on Kisuki Line with two
switchbacks — a railfan's paradise
(Author)



Minakami Station on Jyo-etsu Line — change here for
infrequent trains to Niigata
(Author)

tunnel, with 400 steps to climb to see the sunshine or winter snow country. When using *18kippu*, it is essential to wake up very early to catch the first train and to return by the last train, so one can travel even 1000 km in a day.

As an intermediate *18kippu* user, after I had travelled all the lines that could be reached within 1 day, I took the *Moonlight* rapid trains. These trains depart a few minutes before midnight and passengers wake up 500 km away next morning. These are rapid trains, so the *18kippu* is valid but seat reservations are compulsory. Reservations are available 30 days before departure, but many are fully booked 20 minutes after the start of the reservation period, so I had to plan trips carefully and queue at the *midorino madoguchi* reservation office on time to book a seat.

I mostly used the *Moonlight Nagara* from Tokyo to Ogaki (a few stops after Nagoya) and back, and the *Moonlight Echigo* between Shinjuku and Niigata. These trains ran daily during my time in Japan, but from 2009 they became seasonal, designed basically for *18kippu* users. (I feel sad about this cutback, because I rode the *Moonlight Nagara* many times on a basic ticket when the *18kippu* was not available. I loved this train's atmosphere, especially because it was uncrowded out of season.)

There are some other special moonlight services during the busiest days of the *18kippu* periods too. Most operate with special rolling stock, so not only did these trains take me far away, but I could also feast my eyes on them along with many other fellow railfans.

Combining night trains and youth hostels helped me explore the very remotest areas of Japan. My favourite bases were in Miyako, Akita, and Hiroshima. Finally, I visited every prefecture, and rode on almost every line operated by a JR company from Wakkanai in Hokkaido to Kagoshima in Kyushu. I made many sidetrips on private lines too.

So there was not much new left when I returned to Japan on a business trip and could use a Japan Rail Pass up and down the archipelago. I decided to return to my old haunts and enjoy how close they are by express. *18kippu* users measure distance not in kilometers, but in hours or even days. We know that Tokyo to Osaka takes 9 hours, and a whole day to Fukuoka. However, the same journeys using a Pass are only 3 and 6 hours, respectively. (They could be as little as 2.5 and 5 hours on the *Nozomi* shinkansen, but the Pass is not valid for this fastest shinkansen. The Pass holders I met did not understand the point of this restriction, especially because all direct trains are *Nozomi* between Tokyo and Hiroshima—which is a very typical ride for tourists—so Pass holders must change between two *Hikari* trains in Osaka.)

When using the Pass, I experienced something similar to what Japan enjoyed after the opening of the shinkansen. Rides that used to take a day could be done in few hours. Akita was a long one-night trip plus a whole morning with *18kippu*. However, by the Pass it took only one morning. I knew that with *18kippu*, I could take the 21:00 train from Osaka and be in Tokyo by *Moonlight Nagara* at 05:00 next morning. On the shinkansen I could sleep in my own bed in Tokyo (or even in Tsukuba) that night, even if I was still in Osaka at 21:00. The country became smaller, tourist spots became closer, and everything became faster.

The trips have changed too since I upgraded to the Pass. As a *18kippu* user I had to take 5 or 6-minute stopovers to let express trains pass my local train. I liked these breaks, because I could take pictures of these speeding trains. However, as a Pass user, I saw myself overtaking waiting local trains and could not take any photos.

As an *18kippu* user, I saw the fast shinkansen from the more or less parallel old line, but as a Pass holder, I saw local trains running on conventional lines being overtaken, and it brought back good memories of local trains and rural lines, too.

I remember the many high school students in the local trains, some of them sitting on the floor in their uniform, boys and girls always separately. I remember the sleeping university students around me, who were either on a school excursion, or returning home to their families (or boyfriend or girlfriend) during the school break, taking this cheapest way of travelling instead of flying or riding the shinkansen. I remember my fellow railfans, too, who also wanted to do the 'kanjo', or travel on all lines in Japan. They were professional *18kippu* users, with mp3 players attached to the train window, expensive cameras with huge lenses, and reading the fat edition of the all-Japan timetable. I remember how fast they ran when changing trains at Minakami to get the best seats for the scenic part of the old Joetsu Line. I remember the cute and kind elderly ladies who rode only

a few stations on local lines, from the middle of nowhere to the centre of nowhere. They wore many layers of clothes even during the hot summer. I remember the old guy who got on at Atami with a bottle of whisky in his hand that was finished by Shizuoka and who finally had to be pulled off the train at Hamamatsu. I remember the group of cute old ladies and gentlemen—all *18kippu* users—in hats from Niigata who wanted to visit the shrines in Nara.

When I travelled by Japan Rail Pass on expresses, I no longer saw my companions. I saw completely different people, mostly businessmen, 'salarymen' in suits, rushing to a meeting or back to their office. I saw wealthy old couples or small groups of middle-aged ladies, dressed elegantly and heading to an *onsen* hot spring. I saw Japan from another perspective.

I have to confess that I prefer travelling on rural lines. It is more romantic, more hidden, more 'mine'. The shinkansen is a fantastic invention, but it is just mass transport, not like rural lines, which are like family. The shinkansen is too fast to enjoy rural Japan, the hills, the forests, the bridges, the rice paddies, and the farmers working in them. So on the last days of my Japan Rail Pass, I just travelled again on my favourite rural lines from 5 and 10 years before. Not much had changed; the cars and the atmosphere were the same. However, there were fewer passengers than years ago—probably because it was not *18kippu* season.

I hope that when I next get back to Japan, I will still have a chance to see my friends, those cute, curvy rail lines among the mountains, and their passengers. ■



Balázs Ács

Mr. Ács studied economics in Hungary, and International Relations in Japan, and got his Masters of Public Policy in the field of Urban Planning from the University of Tsukuba in 2005. He was a member of the Urban Transportation Laboratory. He took part in the trainee programme of JR East in 2000. He now works for the Hungarian Institute for Transport Sciences, where he is in charge of authorizing bus and rail timetables in central Hungary. In addition, he is currently writing a blog about Japanese railways in Hungarian.