

The Scene

The Streamliner Named Hikari

by Jack Goldfarb

My wife and I have occasionally been sneered at as unsociable snobs because in our travels we prefer the lesser-peopled places, far from the maddening crowd. This hardly explains why we journeyed to Tokyo, but it does explain why we went in an "off-year," when Japan wasn't hosting Olympic games, Expos or half a dozen international congresses.

After a day or so in downtown Tokyo, shuffling among the multitudes of people, moving elbow to elbow (and using them freely), we learned that actual direction had precious little to do with our neuro-motor impulses. We went whichever way we were pushed.

Here was humanity, most of it anyhow. As far as the eye could see down the length of the Ginza, it was People Unlimited.

We thought that by taking the subway to another part of town, we could escape the crowds. But haplessly trapped underground in a blurred crush of Tetoron-suited men and minied, maxied and kimonoed women, we realized we had stumbled into that ultimate experience—the Tokyo Subway Rush Hour. Packed tighter than tuna and squeezed harder than oranges in our airtight container, we decided

we wanted the fastest possible way out of town.

In Tokyo that means the Tokkaido Superexpress, more popularly known as the *Hikari* "bullet train," the fastest train in the world.

You don't have to wait too long for a Superexpress at Tokyo Central Station. Every twenty minutes one whisks out on its journey along the southern Honshu coastal corridor to the major cities of Japan.

Inside the soft-lighted, tranquilizing interior of our coach, we sank into our plush, reserved seats. For a supplemental fare we could have sat in the de luxe "green coaches." But our "ordinary" coach seemed quite comfortable and elegant enough for the scheduled two hours and 53 minutes' ride to Kyoto.

Precisely to the second, our bullet train was off like a shot, heading for its first stop at Nagoya, 227 miles away. Ripping along at 125 miles an hour, we half-expected the string of sleek coaches to lift off the shining steel rails and arch like a Concorde into the sky.

Arpeggios of chimes sounded through the hushed coaches and bilingual voices briefed the passengers on the journey. The announcements were always much longer in Japanese than in English. I suggested to my wife this was because the Japanese alphabet has over 1,400 characters. Skeptical soul that she is, she preferred to believe they were hiding something from the foreigners.

The honorable, smartly uniformed ticket collector entered our coach, smiled politely, bowed deeply and

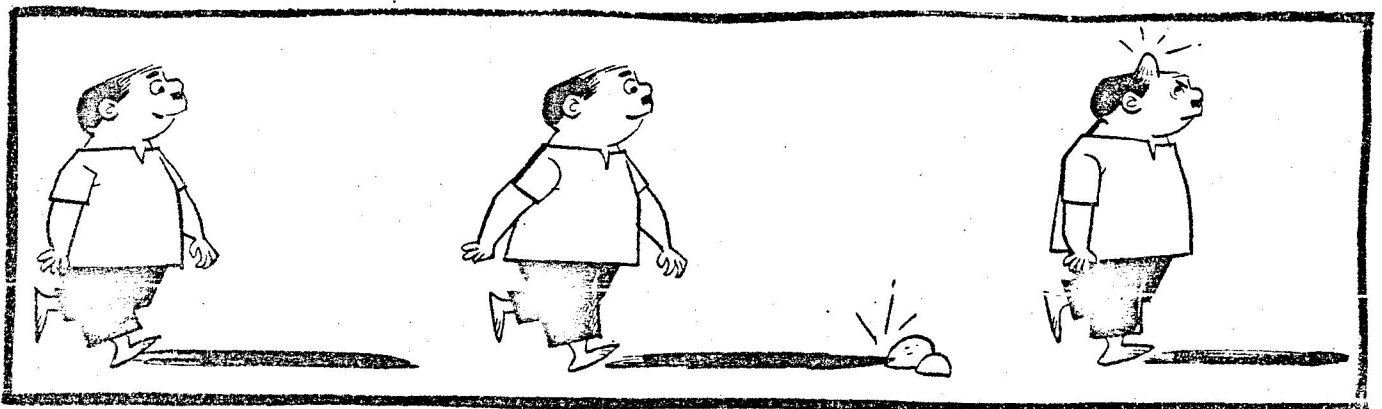
was largely ignored as he went about his task. At the other end of the coach, a man selling box lunches rolled his cart in and was enthusiastically welcomed. The *bento*, or box lunch, sold like beancurd cakes, one of the goodies tucked inside. The little cartons also held shrimps in batter, egg mousse, raw fish, onion slices, seaweed, a pickled cherry, and rice.

Surrounded by lunch-munchers, we went off in search of the Buffet Car for more substantial food. In the corridor, we passed an impatient queue waiting to use the public phone while a lady in a pink kimono chatted away with someone in a distant city. Maybe she was not overly concerned with time, but the time-conscious Japan National Railways attaches a special importance to punctuality. JNR also claims that its *Hikari* is the safest train on earth, safeguarded by automatic controls that slow down and halt the train in the event of storms, earthquakes or "excessive speed."

In the Buffet Car, under the bobbing needle of a wall speedometer hovering at 210 kilometers per hour (130.2 mph), we sat facing the panorama whizzing past our picture window. Gray winter clouds and a thick shroud of smoke sagged low over the unbroken procession of towns, industrial plants and patches of farms.

A waitress handed us an English menu offering hamburgers and beef stew. Between us we ordered both these Yankee specials and coffee.

We had long since breezed past Yokohama, and were eagerly watch-





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ing for Mount Fuji on the horizon. Somewhere between the second and third sips of our coffee, the majestic, snow-capped peak of Fuji suddenly emerged through the haze for one breath-stopping moment... and was gone.

Just after that, the train slowed sharply, spilling coffee all over our drip-drys, and sending piles of cups and dishes clattering to the floor. Storms and quakes aside, we were little impressed with the modern engineering that hadn't yet solved the problem of steadying a cup of coffee in a railway diner.

Between Nagoya and Kyoto we ran into the elements. Near the town of Gifu a fierce flurry of snow came down over the mountains and began swathing the countryside.

The *Hikari* came to a dead stop. Nature put up a good fight, but after a prolonged round of spasmodic starts and stops, Technology got the lead out of the Bullet again. But we had lost precious time.

The chimes rang out through the coaches, and a spate of announcements, all in Japanese, presumably gave information about the delay. I looked across to a young girl who had been folding boxfuls of paper squares all the way down from Tokyo in a quiet orgy of *origami*. She calmly pursued her paper bends and folds. We asked her what the announcements said, but neither she nor anyone else around us spoke English.

On the last stretch before Kyoto, the wayworn Superexpress took a bath. For miles on end, batteries of waterspouts at spaced intervals along the tracks fired barrages of water to wash down the train. Despite the double windows I ducked nervously at each salvo. In the end I was so drenched with sweat that I too had to go and wash up.

Sparkling clean, the *Hikari* purred into Kyoto Station—more than an hour late. It was an awkward moment. I was glad we were at the rear of the train, sparing us the sight of the embarrassed engineer, who I imagined might be contemplating hara-kiri.

A jolly porter appeared and took hold of our luggage. He spoke no English, but he was trying to convey some message to us. Something about our tickets.

We followed him through the vast terminal to a hotel across the street. The hotel desk clerk bowed his welcome, and listened attentively as the porter explained something to him. The clerk relayed the message to us in English. Would we please take our ticket stubs back to the Japan National Railways office? There was to be a refund on our fare. Since our Superexpress had not performed according to schedule—it was a matter of honor—we would get back the difference between what we paid and the normal fare on a slower train. The refund would be about half our fare.

"Most honorable *Hikari*!" I said, tipping the porter generously.

"Excellent idea for airlines too!" said my wife.