

Living with the Rails
By Jeffrey Zolan

Two cities Kyoto and New Orleans sit along the same latitudinal axis but are separated by thousands of miles of land and sea. Both the country of Japan and the city of New Orleans have rich cultural pasts and use a form of railway to transport residents and tourists alike. Just as the streetcar defines the leisurely, carefree, "New Orleans lifestyle," the high-speed, punctual, Shinkansen, Metro, and JR rail lines help define Japan as a country of orderly, prompt and efficient people.

The Japanese understand the full potential of a nation with access to high-speed rail; giving its residents the ability to access its small, yet diverse countryside in a matter of hours. With my first hand experience it seems Japan is so much farther advanced when it comes to understanding technology and innovation. There is a heightened sense of nationalistic pride in the way the country strives to be at the forefront of not only Asia but the entire world's technological bleeding edge. In Japan I was tremendously impressed with this marvelous transportation system and its ability to communicate, orient, and transport individuals of not only Japanese descent but English speaking visitors as well. As one enters a train station often a large sign will warn you of your options that lie beyond. Although signs are often in Japanese, English subtitles are written below to help visitors from all over the world, navigate their complex, yet not complicated, network of tunnels and platforms. When you find the track you are looking for you are kept informed by electronic signage indicating the estimated time of arrival of the next train. If you thought that was enough prompting, it doesn't stop there: An audible melody will play over the loudspeaker as the train approaches the station notifying those who haven't made it all the way down to the platform to read the signs indicating its arrival. The melody picks up pace until the train doors close and then you are whisked away. It is with my experience of not only riding the trains but also navigating myself through the mega-sized stations that I developed an appreciation for this incredibly efficient infrastructure all just a part of the every day Japanese culture. However in New Orleans my comparable experience with the streetcar is vastly different.

The New Orleans streetcar is basically a multiple hundred-year-old system that has not been updated in many years. It's a relic and an important part of the city of New Orleans' history and culture but does not provide an efficient form of transportation. In my two years living in New Orleans I have learned it can often be faster to walk places than to locate and ride the streetcar. Coming back from Japan, a place where efficiency is embedded in the culture, it becomes very obvious how far the city of New Orleans has fallen behind in terms of rail transportation. Even with its hypermodern Shinkansen bullet train, the

Japanese have not ignored its contrast with traditional Japanese aesthetics. But rather they have embraced it and often use the Shinkansen juxtaposed in images featuring the great sites of Japan in the background of their speeding white blur. In addition to the network of fantastic underground metro rail subways, Tokyo and Kyoto feature above ground networks of JR trains that connect the outskirts of the city with its hectic city center.

However, the streetcar does have one aspect that the trains of Japan have yet to facilitate. Socialization and the ability to create a sense of community is something only the long and slow streetcar ride can facilitate. Riding a Tokyo Metro consists of two mundane activities: using your phone or sleeping. There is rarely any deviation to those two activities. However, when people are packed in together on a streetcar there is always a buzz of excitement because everyone know they are all headed to the same place whether it's a festival in the French Quarter, a parade in Uptown or a game at the Superdome there is a sense of community that makes the slow ride exciting and worth the wait. But when a Metro line in Tokyo is packed to the gills there is a feeling of anxiety and claustrophobia, not excitement and anticipation. A ride on a New Orleans streetcar often means running into a friend you haven't seen in months or listening to someone rant about the Saints. You can guarantee there will be some sort of action no matter what time of day. Although there is no social aspect to riding the trains in Japan, there is most certainly a high level of safety and security.

Japanese people are notorious for being extremely honest and trustworthy. If you were to leave anything what so ever from the littlest Chapstick to a full sized laptop you can be very certain that you will get that item back in a very short amount of time. Sometimes you will be lucky enough to have a kind Japanese person will realize you left something before you do and run after you to make sure you get it back. This high level of service and compassion the Japanese people routinely showed towards foreigners and each other astounded me.

A railway system is more than just a means of transportation; it is a way of life that the Japanese people and the residents of New Orleans have taken to heart and embraced in very different ways. My experience with both brings out the positive and negative aspects of each. Each is suited for the environment that it is built for. But this is not to say one is better than the other. Even though the Japanese infrastructure is a much more elaborate, efficient and costly infrastructure; the New Orleans streetcar has a unique sense of community that is only achieved because of the similar lifestyle of the city in which it resides. The Japanese trade off a vibrant social train for one of the most efficient and widely used network of rails throughout the world.



