

Welcome to the Izu Peninsula!

Four Young Women Take on the Challenge of Becoming Train Drivers

The Izukyu Corporation's Resort 21 trains run from Atami to Izukyu Shimoda, along the eastern coastline of the Izu peninsula. This peninsula is Japan's answer to the French Riviera, with some of the country's most picturesque beaches and mountain ranges. The wealthy build summer houses here while the not-so-affluent tour as sight-seers. The Showa emperor (Hirohito), who was interested in marine biology, was very fond of Izu's warm climate and coast. He built a summer residence here, where he spent a few weeks every year.

Only 53 minutes from Tokyo by Shinkansen, Atami is the gateway to Izu, and is well known for its hot-spring resorts. Ito, another popular hot spring resort south of Atami, has beaches ideal for swimming and surfing. As you approach Shimoda on the southern tip of the Izu peninsula, the white sand beaches interspersed among pine forests become more and more numerous. Shimoda was one of the first ports to allow entry to foreign ships when Japan ended its period of isolation from the West. The first American consulate was built here.

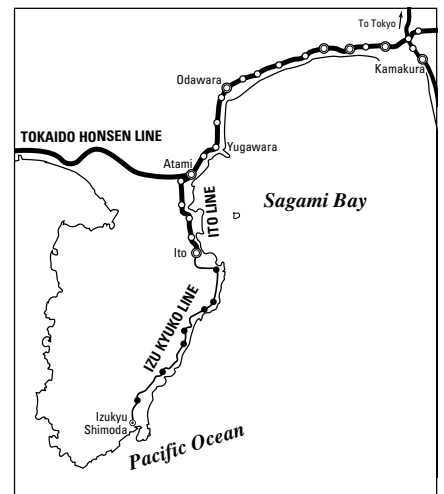
Shimoda-bound Resort 21 trains are

staffed by JR crew from Atami to Ito. At Ito Station the line changes from the JR Ito Line to the Izukyu Line, and women passenger attendants board the train, dressed in smart uniforms. As women's voices are heard making the announcements, a lighter atmosphere pervades the trains.

Most passengers on Resort 21 are holidaymakers, and so the trains are provided with various amenities for them. On the ocean side are 3-passenger boomerang-shaped seats, allowing a full view of the ocean and coastline.

The leading car of Resort 21 trains is an observation car with a large windshield in front. There is no partition between the driver's cabin and the passenger seats. From the stair-shaped passenger seats, passengers can enjoy a panoramic view of the scenery. Passengers can also see the driver easily, and this time the person sitting in the driver's seat is a young woman, Keiko Ohta.

Ohta became the first woman EMU driver in Japan. Except during World War II, when most of the men were called away to service, there have never been any women train drivers on



Japan's railways. Ohta started driving trains in June 1995, and now she makes two round trips daily between Ito and Shimoda.

Izukyu's rail operation started in 1961, on a 45.7-km, 16-station route from Ito to Shimoda. In March 1993 there were 384 employees working directly on the railway, 42 of whom were drivers. When Izukyu started operating Resort 21 in 1986, the company decided to institute female passenger



■ Keiko Ohta at the controls of the Resort 21



■ Midori Mori (right) and Keiko Ohta in front of Resort 21



■ Keiko Ohta, Japan's first woman EMU driver

attendants and have women take over jobs previously handled by men. The company's vision was ultimately to hire female train drivers, a job which was the exclusive domain of men.

Ohta joined Izukyu in April 1994, after graduating from a women's college. She had enjoyed travel since childhood, and joined Izukyu because she wanted to work in the travel industry. In mid-April, after a training period, she was offered the chance to become a train driver. A literature major in college, with almost no knowledge of trains, Ohta was at first ambivalent about the proposal. However, those around her urged her to take the chance to become Japan's first woman EMU driver, and ultimately the desire to test her potential grew within her.

The three months from June until the written exam in September were a time of intense study for Ohta, for whom the railway driving regulations, train structures and functions, and driving theory she studied were all completely new. She even dreamt about trains during that time. In September, she passed the exam with flying colours, and after passing the practical exam, was issued a licence in December.

When Ohta started driving trains, her all-male co-workers at first kept their distance. Now, however, they have grown to accept women drivers as a fact of life. Ohta approaches the job with a firm attitude, "Just because I'm a woman, I can't be any less responsible. If I do my job well, I'm sure I'll be accepted," she says. Ohta is advancing steadily in her job. In July 1995, she drove a special express train containing imperial family members Prince Akishinomiya and his family who were visiting the Suzaki imperial residence in Shimoda.

At first Ohta would get frustrated

and depressed if things didn't go well for her, but now she has managed to gain the self-confidence to do her job as well as her co-workers. Ohta now drives with the pride of a fully-qualified driver, and wants to improve her driving skills by "borrowing them" from other drivers.

Following Ohta, three new women drivers obtained licences in December 1995. They are Midori Mori, Miho Tsuchiya and Emi Kato, who joined Izukyu in April 1995. Currently these women are preparing to start full-time driving in July 1996, and are undergoing practical proficiency training under the supervision of senior drivers.

Midori Mori had no idea she would become a driver before she joined Izukyu. As a student she went to school by bus, never rode trains, and knew nothing about them. She heard about the chance for women to become train drivers and decided that this was a chance to attempt something almost no-one else had done. What will really make her glad she became a train driver, she says, is when little girls look at her and say, "I can be a train driver too."

Since being a train driver requires intense concentration and judgment, both Ohta and Mori like to pursue hobbies and unwind on their days off. Ohta enjoys looking at paintings. She is especially interested in the brightly coloured seascapes of Christian R. Lassen, and has travelled far and wide to see exhibitions of his work. Mori has played the piano since she was a child and enjoys playing to relieve stress.

Since the Izukyu Line runs through JR lines, five train types run on it. All these train types require different braking methods with different amounts of force. Brake application also depends on the number of cars, weather, and number of passengers, and it was a long and difficult time for Ohta until she could gauge braking correctly by herself. Since many of the passengers are children and the elderly, Ohta pays particular attention to how she applies the brakes. There are also many small level crossings without barriers, and she has been given some surprises from farmers crossing ahead of the train. Ohta now realises that being a train driver isn't all glamour. Her current objective

is to provide a safe ride and as smooth a ride as she can for her passengers. Now is a difficult time for Ohta, who is still just starting out. "I want to make an all-out effort to learn the skills and create my own driving style," she says.

Japan's employment laws in general prohibit women from working from 10 pm to 5 am. Women train drivers therefore cannot work night shifts, so Izukyu is considering increasing the number of female train drivers to create a special working system for them. As the first woman train driver, Ohta wants to create an atmosphere that will encourage the other women drivers. "I want the workplace to be one where we can all discuss things openly, not as senior and junior employees, but as drivers together. I'd like to create a firm foundation for this kind of atmosphere," she says. She is supportive of up-and-coming drivers. "It's tough becoming a driver, but I hope everyone will keep trying no matter how many times they think they've hit a brick wall." Mori has a lot of confidence in Ohta, "It's reassuring to have a senior co-worker I can talk to about anything. I want to follow in her footsteps as quickly as I can."

To passengers using the Izukyu Line, Mori says, "I want people to feel that I'm not just driving the train, but I'm driving it for them." Ohta adds, "I hope everyone can relax and enjoy the scenery through the windows. You can see the sea and in some seasons there are lots of flowers. I'll try to drive as slowly as possible for my passengers when the train is running on a very scenic stretch." Japan's first women train drivers have added a large attraction to the Izukyu Line, but the never-ending challenges these women face are still ongoing. ■



■ Japan's 'next generation' of women EMU drivers (Izukyu Corporation)