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FEATURES: New Frontiers in Passenger Rail
Heritage Railways (part 3)

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Passengers pass through JR East's
automatic fare collection gates
using Suica non-contact IC cards.
(JR East)

Editorial

Toward a seamless urban railway network

Unlike Europe, Japan's urban railway network has been characterized by the existence of a large number of operators and ticket barriers to control passengers changing from the lines of one railway company to those of another. Each operator firmly maintains its own rules and fares, and although single interline tickets are issued, passengers are forced to pay different fare rates when they change. This rigid system has created a secure financial basis for each company (Japanese urban railway operators receive no public service subsidies) but it has hindered smooth movement of passengers in two ways. Ticket barriers often block the flow of passengers in crowded stations at peak hours, and, because of different fares between railway companies, passengers sometimes choose more crowded and even longer routes to avoid higher charges.

The introduction of the Suica IC card by JR East is at least partly easing the physical crowding at ticket barriers. If other rail operators follow suit, the easing effect will be enhanced and even passengers' reluctance to use different operators might yield to Suica's convenience. However, other additional solutions should be sought through more integrated fares and more coordinated timetables between different operators.

T. SUGA

Contents

Features

New Frontiers in Passenger Rail

Smart Segments For Urban Public Transportation:

An International Survey of Practices Pierre Laconte	4
State-of-the-Art Automated Ticketing Jorge M. Rebelo	12
Introduction and Future Development of Suica Non-contact IC Card Ticketing System Akio Shiibashi	20
Aiming for Passenger Interoperability Takahiko Ogino	28

Heritage Railways (part 3)

The Role of Umbrella Organizations in the Development of Heritage Railways

David Morgan	35
Sustainability of Heritage Railways: An Economic Approach John A. Tillman	38
Whose Heritage Railway is It?—A Study of Volunteer Motivation Geoff Goddin	46

Another Perspective

Japan Diary Musa Abd. Rahman	50
------------------------------------	----

Railway Operators in Japan 6

Western Part of Greater Tokyo Makoto Aoki	52
---	----

Topics	64
--------------	----

Photostory: IT Impact on Transport Services	2 & 67
---	--------