

Short Introduction to Sagano Scenic Railway

Kazuhiko Hasegawa

Sagano Scenic Railway is a subsidiary of West Japan Railway Company (JR West) operating the 7.3-km Sagano Line, which is a tourist tram line between Umahori and Saga stations in Kyoto. The company was established in 1990 to use San'in main line's Saga-Umahori section which was abandoned in 1989, after the opening of double-track shortcut. Since opening in 1991, this small railway has achieved success as a sightseeing line running nine daily services in each direction, from 1 March to 29 December. This article describes the company history from the

President's perspective.

'No doubt the company will go under in 3 years.' is what people around me were saying when I was dispatched temporarily from JR West to become President of Sagano Scenic Railway.

Although I was going to be president, I was being sent to a company expected to fail. I felt that my working life was over and reflected on what my career until then had meant. However, I consoled myself with the thought that it was a temporary assignment, so I would be able to return to JR



Sagano Scenic Railway's Class DE 10 diesel locomotive with company nameplate

(Sagano Scenic Railway)

West in 3 years, even if the company went under. I am sure the eight people under me who would be going along too felt the same way. It was a case of having to bear it for 3 years.

When we actually arrived at Sagano, the sleepers were rotting, the rails were rusty, the weeds were taller than a person, and there was rubbish everywhere. We were speechless. It seemed doubtful that a profitable sightseeing train business could be run, but we had instructions to start active preparations in the autumn of 1990 and to open for business in April 1991, so there was no time to dwell on our problems. Everyone went to work clearing the way, collecting the rubbish, and repairing the track. At the same time, we had to carry out marketing to attract customers.

Even after opening, there was no money to hire people. So not only was I company president, I was also the stationmaster at Arashiyama Station one day and at Kameoka Station the next! I was so busy selling tickets, guiding passengers, making arrangements for tour groups, and managing problems that I had no time off for months. Seeing me working like that, the staff attitude changed to one of 'we just have to get on with it.'

However, we were all soon getting immeasurable pleasure each time we heard a passenger say how enjoyable the ride had been and we decided it would be better to do something to make passengers happy rather than just sit around waiting for the inevitable predicted business failure in 3 years.

One key idea was that we wanted this heritage railway to offer something to the local community, so we started planting trees. It came from my liking for trees and greenery, but the project really started when I came across the saying of the Chinese sage Guan Zhong (BC725 to 645): 'Plant a tree on the mountain if you want to enjoy something 10 years in the future.' There was abundant nature along the line, but only oak trees remained. The pine, cherry, and maple trees had all died. I thought of the happiness we would bring to passengers by restoring the forest to a vibrant ecosystem where visitors could enjoy birdsong and see foxes and deer.

The changing leaves in autumn along the line are really beautiful and the cheers that erupt when passengers see individually illuminated trees bring me great joy.

Our employees have got together to come up with wonderful and novel ideas to make the 7.3-km, 30-minute ride a lasting memory. Even if they aren't good singers, the conductors sing and laugh with passengers. Employees greet passengers in costume at Halloween and some even dress as Santa Claus and ride the train at Christmas. Others perform table magic for passengers waiting in the coffee shop for the next train.

These and other efforts prove that the concept of providing hospitality has been thoroughly taken on board by employees and such efforts are reflected in the



Sagano Scenic Railway's Trokkey mascot (Sagano Scenic Railway)

business figures.

At its opening, the company was expected to need 16 years to eliminate accumulated debts of approximately ¥300 million by carrying 230,000 passengers annually and raising fares each year. However the number of passengers has increased year by year, achieving a record 958,000 in fiscal 2007 and the debts will be paid down 11 years earlier than expected.

Today, tourism is big business for Japan and I hope the Sagano Scenic Railway will continue contributing to building Japan's tourism industry and remain popular with both Japanese and foreign tourists. ■



Kazuhiko Hasegawa

Mr Hasegawa is the President of Sagano Scenic Railway. He joined Japanese National Railways in 1971 and moved on to JR West in 1987. He became the President of SSR in 1991 and left the position in 1998. He returned to the post in 2000.