

Fuji Kyuko and Tourism in Mt Fuji Area

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The 26.6-km Fuji Kyuko Line is the closest railway to Mt Fuji (Japan's highest mountain at 3776 m) and connects Otsuki Station on JR East's Chuo Line about 70 km from Tokyo with Kawaguchiko Station in Fujikawaguchiko, a lakeside town at the base of Mt Fuji.

Otsuki Station is 358 m above sea level (asl), and the line terminus at Kawaguchiko Station is 857 m asl, giving a difference in elevation of about 500 m. As a result, this mountain line has a maximum grade of 40% and the tightest curve radius is 160 m. It takes about 1 hour to travel all 18 stations on the line.

The line celebrated 80 years of operations this year and is an important transport link for the trackside communities. It also carries many tourists, centring on people climbing Mt Fuji. Active development of the tourism business started around 1955 with railway, bus, and other transportation. The northern base of Mt Fuji is a lava plain that has been developed by opening tourist projects, such as a skating rink and the Fuji-Q Highland Amusement Park. As operations grew, Fuji Kyuko's tourism business also expanded both to the northern base of Mt Fuji as well as the southern flank in Yamanashi and Shizuoka prefectures, and outwards to Atami, Fukushima, and other areas.

The line serves as a means of holiday transport to the northern base of Mt Fuji where holidaymakers can get in touch with local nature and culture. The area is home to the Fuji Five Lakes—each with unique features and a wonderful view of the volcano—ice and wind caves, as well as historic shrines. Today, there are many regional flower festivals as well as flower-themed attractions. Fuji cherry trees (*Prunus serrulata*) and azaleas (*Ericaceae* spp.) blossom in spring around the foothills and the ground is carpeted in pink mosses near Lake Motosu. The Kawaguchiko Herb Festival is held at Lake Kawaguchi when the lavender blossoms in June. The Hydrangea and Autumn Leaves festivals attract many visitors too.

The almost perfect stratovolcano shape of Mt Fuji brings many climbers from Japan and abroad in summer. The railway is also used by students visiting Fuji Kyuko's Fuji-Q Highland Amusement Park. Due to these diverse tourism markets, the line has passengers through spring, summer, and autumn, but even so, passenger levels are declining

over the longer term.

One reason explaining the gradual drop in ridership is the Chuo Expressway running parallel to the line, and the easy access from the Kawaguchiko Exit. Highway buses also operate on the expressway and there has been a clear modal shift from rail to bus due to lower bus fares and more convenient timetables. In other words, cars are the first choice of visitors to Mt Fuji and the Fuji Five Lakes area, followed by highway buses, and rail as a last resort.

The current economic situation with flat-rate expressway tolls of ¥1000 at weekends, proposals to make expressways free in the near future, and convenient electronic toll collection, are driving further declines in rail transport. The situation has been made worse by the credit crunch following the Lehman collapse in 2008. Rail usage had been growing in part due to the high cost of petrol, but the number of winter tourists suddenly dropped between 15% and 20% year-on-year, causing very bad results for FY2008.

To celebrate the line's 80th anniversary this year, work has started on conversion to a sightseeing railway. To boost passenger levels, historic trackside sites and destinations have been rediscovered and promoted in conjunction with operators and businesses in the JR group of companies. However, the economic recession and rising usage of expressways has widened the value gap between road and rail. Fare increases and fewer services exacerbate the falling ridership levels too.

As a result, the line's management realized that people would have to be persuaded to ride the line purely for tourism objectives in its own right, otherwise the business would fail because the line cannot compete with other transport modes just as a transport provider. The line had the *Fujisan* limited express train coupled with a panorama observation car decorated with Mt Fuji, the *Thomas Land Train* designed inside and out with Thomas the Tank Engine characters from the Thomas Land Amusement Park at Fuji-Q Highland, as well as other trains. However, although these trains are popular with children coming just to ride them, adults making up most passengers will not ride these theme trains as their sole journey objective.

To solve this marketing dilemma, a new sightseeing service called the *Mt Fuji Climbing Train* debuted in August



Fuji Kyuko passengers enjoy spectacular views of Mt Fuji

(Fuji Kyuko)

2009, incorporating designs from famous industrial designer Eiji Mitooka. The two-car trainset was given this name because it runs on a mountain line climbing 500 m between the two termini. To make best use of the spectacular views, the side facing Mt Fuji has observation counters with various sofa and side bench seats. Extensive use of wood in Japan's most luxurious mountain climbing train gives a unique feeling never experienced on a train before. The exterior livery is a powerful rust red colour from the era when the line first opened, and the interior of one carriage nicknamed *Red Fuji* is a colour-coordinated harmony of browns for floor, walls, and ceiling, giving a feeling of dignified luxury. There is a library corner where passengers can read books on Mt Fuji, as well as paired observation seats and wheelchair spaces. The other carriage nicknamed *Blue Fuji* has a bright image using plain wood. It has bench seats and displays

local specialties in a showcase. In addition to the normal crew, attendants in each carriage provide services to passengers, including commentary on passing scenery, sales of souvenirs, etc.

Although still in the early days, a few sightseeing buses have started incorporating *Mt Fuji Climbing Train* services into their schedules and the line is managing to start a full transition to tourism. The trackside boasts a host of beautiful nature spots and is great for studying Japanese history and culture as well as experiencing the excitement of Mt Fuji from a train window.

In addition to the line improvements, the attractions of regional tourism and need for tourist infrastructure must be promoted through cooperation with the local community. The railway can also be the regional gateway and if the line and station are well known, passengers will probably use them



Fuji Kyuko's Series 1000 EMU running with Mt Fuji in background

(Fuji Kyuko)

as their starting point when considering how to get around, bringing business spinoffs for others besides the railway.

Currently, Fuji Kyuko is working with the Fujiyoshida Chamber of Commerce to revitalize the shopping street in the Shimoyoshida area of Fujiyoshida City from where Mt Fuji is easy to see. This year, Shimoyoshida Station was updated to a retro-and-modern station similar to the *Mt Fuji Climbing Train*. However, the station alone is just one point in the entire tourist infrastructure. To grow, the local government, community residents, and others must have a single shared clear business vision. Although Fujiyoshida City is at the base of Mt Fuji, it is still a quiet country town and a central key player is needed to go forward as one—Fuji Kyuko seeks to be this bridge to the community.

Tsuru University in historic Tsuru City at the heart of the Fuji Kyuko Line has students from across Japan and the university and railway are working together to renovate the station building, produce pamphlets about trackside areas of special interest, and run eco-tours. Educational programmes at the university focus on historic areas and museums, helping invigorate trackside communities and

Fuji Kyuko ridership levels. Tsuru City government is also working with the company on spreading information, and has established walking courses based on its history as the only spring-fed castle town on the line. In other words, industry, academia, and government are all cooperating in efforts to raise awareness of the entire region as well as the attractiveness of the line to tourism using the train.

Mt Fuji is on the provisional list for inclusion in the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list, and the local and national governments are leading activities to promote registration. At the same time, the community is uniting to form a tourism zone, and working to encourage overnight tourist stays. The Mt Fuji and Fuji Five Lakes area was certified by the Japan Tourism Agency in FY2008 as a tourism zone, and the six local municipalities of Fujiyoshida City, Fuji Kawaguchiko Town, Nishi-Katsura Town, Yamanakako Village, Oshino Village, and Nurusawa Village, along with Yamanashi Prefecture and tourism operators such as Fuji Kyuko have joined the initiative. Together, they are educating tourism operators, developing immersion programmes, developing locally oriented travel products,



Front of renovated Shimoyoshida Station

(Fuji Kyuko)

building transportation infrastructure, and creating the means for spreading information.

Instead of pursuing individual interests, it is important for the government, private sector, groups, and individuals to work at building and sharing a common vision to attract tourists. This year, Fuji Kyuko, tour bus operators and others issued 3-day joint travel passes and ran the *Fuji Five Lakes Momiji Liner Bus* on a limited basis, connecting Lake Yamanaka and Lake Motosu across a broad area.

As Japan's society becomes more aged, more senior citizens seem likely to shift to public transport, so enhancing feeder connections to destinations will play a major role in the success of tourist areas. Hakone is a good example of such a tourist area; it has well-established secondary transport in place, including different routes with trains, cable cars, ropeways, excursion boats, and buses. As a result, it has a high number of tourists year-round.

This needs considering for the Mt Fuji area too. The relationship between the Fuji Kyuko Line and tourism is close but the number of passengers will not increase by simply being a local railway with just tourist attractions. And even if

the railway can successfully transform into a sightseeing the line, there will be a limit to the increase if the tourist area is unattractive. In summary, the region and railway must share a common goal while promoting their own visions. ■

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