

## News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 99):

### The Indian Pacific Railway

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Two years ago, when I first assumed my position here, there were a few things that I sincerely hoped I would be able to do during my time in Australia. One of these was to traverse the Australian continent on the famous Indian Pacific railway. Although postponed due to the pandemic, my dream finally became reality at the end of last year. Before my post-holiday buzz wears off, let me report on my experiences.



A grand logo adorns the sparkling silver railway carriage. This heroic symbol features Australia's largest bird of prey, the wedge-tailed eagle.

#### 1. "The Milky Way was beaming down on us"

There was a famous diplomat who I respect greatly by the name of YANAGIYA Kensuke who was Ambassador to Australia in the early 1980s. After his posting to Australia, he was appointed Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, and has become somewhat of a legend in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During my first year in the Ministry, in a strange twist of fate, I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ride alongside then Vice-Minister YANAGIYA in an official vehicle bound for

Haneda Airport. He struck me as a very gracious person, and this encounter remains a special memory for me even now.

36 years later, just prior to my posting to Australia, I had the opportunity to meet the late Ambassador YANAGIYA's son in Karuizawa Town via the introduction of a mutual acquaintance. During that meeting, this man (who is of a similar age to myself) told me the following: "I recommend the Indian Pacific railway. You will never have another opportunity to see the Milky Way so clearly. The stars were beaming down on us."

As soon as I heard these words, I knew deep inside that I had to go.

## 2. The grand scale of the country

In the federation that is Australia, even the railway gauges were different across state and territory borders, meaning at one stage to travel from Sydney on the Pacific Ocean coast to Perth on the Indian Ocean coast required at least five train changes. It was not until 1970 that it became possible to travel directly from coast to coast.



A map of the journey. As you can see, we really did traverse Australia.

(Source: [Indian Pacific official website](#))

The Indian Pacific spans a jaw-dropping 4,352 km. Cutting across the continent via this route is a long convoy of 37 train carriages carrying 225 passengers and 30 staff members. Indeed, this is an act of mass migration! By the way, each car is allotted 3,000 litres of water to use. Perhaps this accounts for the excellent water pressure of the shower!

The train's average speed was 85 km per hour, while its maximum was 115. As I will expand upon later, the itinerary included stops at key points for side tours, and the journey of 3 nights and 4 days followed a relatively slow-paced itinerary.

### 3. Some worries

In actual fact, there was something that secretly played on my mind before we embarked on this journey, which I couldn't share even with my wife. That is, my unease about small spaces. This is not to say that I had a spoiled childhood, but my upbringing in the Tama Hills of southwest Tokyo surrounded by nature (whilst not quite 'chasing after rabbits on the mountain' as the famous Japanese folk song goes) perhaps led to my dislike of confined spaces. Hence, getting inside a submarine – even one of Japan's wondrous *soryu*-class submarines – would be completely out of the question. Bearing in mind the three-night train journey, I decided to lash out and purchase a platinum class ticket – in other words, the class with the most spacious cabins.

Thankfully, we were treated to a luxurious room which included a shower and toilet. Aside from the bathroom, the room itself was perhaps a little under 5 square metres. The room's layout was quite ingenious as during the day this space was converted into seating, and at night staff members made up the two single beds for us to sleep in.





Our guest cabin. We felt the facilities were very well-thought-out.

Previous page: My selfie with one of the staff members who looked after us.

Although I felt some anxiety due to not being able to open the windows for some fresh air, I was saved by the existence of the very spacious dining car and the daily side tours, all of which helped to get me through. There were only 20 guests in platinum class. As we saw each other in the dining car at every meal, we naturally had many pleasant conversations. Many of these were retirees, and I had the impression we might be the youngest ones there.

#### 4. Sleeping and dining on the train

“Did you sleep well?” you might ask. Well, it certainly was different from resting in a quiet bedroom. With the train reaching a speed of 100 km per hour, the carriage does rock a fair bit, and the sound of the train car creaking is par for the course. When we reached Perth and checked into my favorite hotel, I was immediately reassured by the tranquility. I felt three nights on the train was definitely enough time to enjoy the experience.

One happy discovery was the excellent fare provided by the dining car. The menu changed with every meal, and we were free to drink as much Aussie wine as we liked. The portions, quality and service at every meal left us extremely satisfied. We tried with great enjoyment all kinds of unique Australian foods, which included not only kangaroo, but also camel curry with rice.

### 5. The view from the train window

In the two years since I took up my post, I have already travelled to Perth four times on business, the most recent occasion being for the visit of Prime Minister KISHIDA last October. However, as I had only ever crossed the Nullarbor via airplane, I was particularly interested to see the changes in scenery on the way to Perth.

This is partly because, as a younger man studying in the United States, I drove across the continent three times. These experiences were unrivalled in deepening my understanding of the country's terrain, landscapes and natural features – not to mention the history and character of the American people.



Left: The view from the dining car

Right: Our train alongside a beautiful sunset



The route of the Indian Pacific covers four states - New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia – and passes through three major cities - Sydney, Adelaide and Perth. I had the sense that, if one really wanted to get to know Australia, there was no better way to do it.

### 6. Side tours

One superb aspect of our trip was the inclusion of many side tours at various points along our route. For example, when arriving in Adelaide, depending on passengers' preferences, one can choose between bus trips to the Barossa Valley or McLaren Vale for a wonderful sunset dinner while sampling local wines.

On the third and final night of the journey, we were treated to an al fresco meal under a brilliant starry sky at Rawlinna Station in the middle of the Western Australian outback. Even for one such as myself, who has seen many times the starry vista of the icy Shinshu region in winter, this spectacle drew a gasp of astonishment out of me. Every star in the sky, from Jupiter, Mars and Orion to the celebrated Southern Cross, dazzled us with their brilliant light as if each one were competing with the others to announce its presence to the viewers below.

It was at this point that I remembered the recommendation of Ambassador YANAGIYA's son, and my wife and I nodded deeply to each other, agreeing that we were truly glad we came. Unfortunately, my smartphone and photographic skills were utterly useless in capturing the sparkling night sky. Therefore, I suggest that 'seeing is believing' and recommend you go on an Australian rail journey for yourself.



Al fresco dining under the stars. You can use your imagination to fill the night sky this time, but please definitely consider seeing this river of stars with your own eyes!

## 7. In sum

An American travel writer once described the Australian outback as 'intimidating emptiness'. As I gazed out the window at the hundreds of kilometres of landscape without a single human being (or even a kangaroo), I wondered to myself what

would happen if I was stranded out here on my own. It was the same sense of unease that I feel when I catch sight of the vast forests at the foot of Mt Fuji. At any rate, we were out of range and I could not use my phone nor access my emails – as if to demonstrate the powerlessness of man before vast, immeasurable nature.

At the same time, dotting those plains that spread out across the horizon were small pockets of greenery, reminding me that water and life did exist out there. What is more, it brought to mind the coal, iron ore, gas and rare earths that lie beneath the endlessly far-reaching red earth. Considering how these resources have provided immense economic benefits to Australia, as well as economic support to Japanese companies – and, by extension, the daily lives of the Japanese people – I felt the rather mundane nickname ‘the lucky country’ could not even begin to describe these fruitful lands and fertile plains.



The Australian outback stretching out as far as the eye can see. I wonder, what does this scene invoke in you, dear readers?

Just as I will never forget that dazzling, star-studded sky, I believe this journey will forever remain in my memory.

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