

GOING TO KARUIZAWA

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One of my most vivid and enjoyable memories from my childhood was going to Karuizawa for the summer by train. We would take the short local line to Oyama, which veered off from the main line to Tokyo two stations on, at Tomobe.

There we would transfer to another short line which took us across to Takasaki, a major station on the main line from Tokyo to Karuizawa and Nagano. It was there that heavier freight engines would be used for the steeper climb up towards the mountains.

The first two local lines had short, slow trains, and the connections were not too reliable. They skirted, to the west, the lower part of the foothills of the Japanese Alps. There were a lot of small towns, stations and upland farms and woodlands. It was not the fastest part of the journey, but much faster than going nearly to Tokyo to make connection with the main line to Nagano.

I remember one time, at one of the connecting stations when there was some time before our next train, Father took Donald and me out of the station, to a small shop which was serving shaved ice. Mother was concerned, as water sources might be questionable, but it was hot, and the flavored shaved ice really tasted good.

When we got to Takasaki, our track was the furthest over, so we had to carry our bags up and a long way over to the main line track, right at the station. If the connection was tight, we would be concerned as to whether our train had arrived or not, as it was only there five minutes to change engines.

Once we found seats and had our bags stowed on the overhead racks, Father and I had a tradition to get off and go to the front of the train to watch the coupling of the new engine. As I remember, Donald and Mother would be concerned that we might miss the train by indulging in this ritual, but we really enjoyed it. There was always time to make it back.

The trip up from Takasaki was beautiful. I loved to sit on the left side of the train, so I could look down on the river which soon appeared well below. There were upland fields, and on the far side much of the mountainside was wooded.

There was only one station in the long distance between Takasaki and Yokogawa, which was for passing on this one-track line. This was Isobe, and since the track was so steep, the up train would arrive first and back into the station, which was set on a gentle slope across the side of the mountain to the right. Soon the down train would come flying by with a loud whistle to us, and we would then be free to continue. There were two tracks on either side of the platform for use if needed.

During this wait, some of the passengers would get off and stroll on the platform until they heard the down train coming. Also, a vendor was on the platform selling the local specialty, Isobei Sembei.

Yokogawa was at the mouth of a narrow, steep sided valley, as the mountains rose up ahead. To the left, below the station, was a small roundhouse and turntable. There was one of the original German cog rail electric engines on display, as well as a powerhouse and facilities for the slightly larger engines now in use. Although Japan built its own locomotives and rolling stock, I believe that these also were German, as this was the country's only cog rail line. It was electrified, as there were a series of twenty tunnels on most of the upper part of the line. There was also another powerhouse on the upper end, as you came out of the last tunnel onto the Karuizawa plain.

Three of the engines would be attached to the lower end of the train, and usually there would only be a conductor on the front car, to inform the engineer of the track ahead. If possible, I would love to sit on the left window of the first car. Occasionally there were times with a heavier train, when a fourth engine would be added to the front.

It is my personal opinion that the hour-long, slow trip up this pass measured up to any experience you might have in a short rail journey in the Swiss Alps. The first part was climbing through meadows and then, as it got steeper, the train slowed to hook up to the cogs with a slight jolt. The first two or three tunnels had some space between them, and we were not near the edge of the gorge. The electricity was picked up from a side rail on one side or the other of the track, rather than overhead.

By the time we came out of tunnel thirteen, there was a short stretch of level track and a passing station. It was called Kuma-no-Taira or The Flat Space of the Bear. There was no platform, but side-by-side tracks. On each end there were three tunnel openings, the middle was the through line, and the ones on each side dead-end tunnels. If a train was too long for the siding, it could be pulled ahead and then backed into the siding, to clear the main line for the oncoming train. This was particularly true for freight trains, as this was the main line for freight trains to and from the Nagano highlands. The side tunnels had to be particularly long for them.

In the center on the cliff side there was a small house, where the Stationmaster lived. From this vantage point, you could look down the gorge and see the unpaved highway, a hundred or more feet below, that went up the mountain to Karuizawa. It was a favorite summer outing for a small group to ride their bicycles down the lengthy highway to this station, eat a leisurely lunch, and catch the next train back up to Karuizawa. The Stationmaster would sell tickets and put the bikes in the baggage car.

The last stretch of tunnels up from Kuma-no-Taira was the very special part of the trip. This stretch may have been somewhat shorter than the lower half from Yokogawa, as the up train was usually the one doing the waiting. When emerging from most of the tunnels on this upper section, you went directly onto bridges, as many of the gorges were deep. The bridge after the next tunnel was longer, with a curve to the left, and if you looked down, the highway, which was now much lower, circled under the bridge and back out. After the next tunnel opening, the

highway could no longer be seen, as it circled much farther to the west to make the gentler grade up to Karuizawa.

The most moving experience was the time I was going to Karuizawa when the weather was rainy. As I emerged from a tunnel on this upper part, we had also risen from the low-lying clouds. I saw a row of rounded mountains floating over the mist, and I've never seen a sight that reminded me more of an ancient Chinese painting.

The last tunnel was also the longest. You could feel it make a long curve to the left, and halfway through this curve, the tunnel must have come very close to the edge of the cliff. There was a series of five or six arched openings, about the height of a worker standing on the tracks. Through these openings I'd catch swift glimpses of the gorge below. As we exited the last tunnel, number twenty, the cog gears on the engines clicked off, as we had popped out onto the Karuizawa plain. We had arrived.

There was another power plant right after the tunnel, matching the one at the lower end next to the roundhouse. At the time, this stretch was the only electrified section. Just before the short distance to the station, the road crossed on its way down the mountain.

Over the top of the brick arch to the entrances of each tunnel, there was a small, square plaque with the number of each tunnel. One of the unique gifts of Karuizawa was "Tunnel Sembei," a box of flat, round, sweet sembei, each with the number of a different tunnel on it.

I heard that later they were working on a newer line, with only two very long tunnels, but with a slightly gentler grade. This would let them dispense with cog rails and have a much faster trip.

At this time there had been a bad accident at Kuma-no-Taira, which killed thirty or more construction workers. There had been a period of very heavy rains, which caused a massive landslide covering one of the tracks. In working with a large crew to rescue workers and restore service as soon as possible, there was a second, larger landslide, which even carried away the Stationmaster's house. I believe the line was never restored.

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