RUNNING THROUGH THE AUTUMN LEAVES

The Kurobe Gorge Railway rolls through approximately twenty kilometers of grand natural settings, offering breathtaking seasonal views. Its busiest season comes in autumn, when visitors ride the line to enjoy its sweeping panoramas of fall leaves.

NICKNAMED the “Torokko Electric Railway,” the Kurobe Gorge Railway is a popular scenic line that runs 20.1 kilometers along the Kurobe River in Toyama Prefecture, from Unazuki Station to Keyakidaira Station. Except for the railway’s closure during the winter season from December 1 to mid-April, it runs nineteen times daily on its busiest days, allowing passengers to enjoy splendid seasonal views. Leaf-spotting from the train is particularly spectacular, and the Hokuriku Shinkansen bullet train’s opening this year has been a boon for the railway, leading to a surge in passengers from both Japan and abroad. Ryota Kawai of the Kurobe Gorge Railway Co., Ltd. spoke about the railway’s appeal.

The Kurobe Gorge Railway, Kawai explains, is inextricably connected to the development of an electrical power source along the Kurobe River. Japan Electric Power System launched the line in 1923—calling it the Kurobe Industrial Railway—to transport the materials and laborers needed to construct the region’s power stations. In 1937, after reaching Keyakidaira, the line began carrying general passengers in response to demands from tourists wanting to tour the secluded Kurobe Gorge.

“I understand that at the time a disclaimer was printed on the passenger permits stating that ‘passenger safety is not guaranteed,’ ” Kawai reports. “In 1953, Kansai Electric Power obtained permission through the Local Railways Act to
operate a formal passenger service; after that, in 1971, the service spun off from Kansai Electric Power to become the Kurobe Gorge Railway.”

The narrow-gauge railway runs on a compact track, with rails of about half the weight of those used for bullet trains. During busy hours in peak season, the line takes over 400 passengers per train on an 80-minute, one-way trip through 41 tunnels and over 21 bridges.

“There are so many scenic spots along the route that I can’t possibly rank them,” Kawai says, “but from late October to mid-November, when the autumn leaves are at their peak, you might be able to see five different tiers of color at Mount Sannabiki near Tsurigane Station. The blue of the river running beneath the landscape, the yellows and reds of the trees above, the purple of the leaves that have already fallen, and the white of the snow cover at the mountain’s peak all create a miracle of nature that’s visible for only a very brief period of time.

“This region experiences dramatic temperature extremes, and being a gorge, the hours of daylight Kurobe receives are very few,” he continues. “It’s thought that these natural conditions might be what makes the colors of the autumn leaves so spectacular.”

A few years ago, the maps for the Kurobe Gorge Railway were updated with illustrations and printed in multiple languages: Japanese, English, Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean. An audio guide narrated by actress Shigeru Muroi, who is from the Kurobe Gorge area, highlights points of interest along the route, ensuring that passengers won’t miss photo opportunities. Station attendants, conductors and engineers all embody the soul of Japanese omotenashi hospitality, greeting the line’s passengers upon arrival and departure. This custom is well known—and warmly received—among passengers.

“The thing we hear most often from those who ride the Torokko Electric Railway is that the route’s natural beauty is the main attraction, but we’re also delighted to hear that many people are thrilled by the hospitality they receive,” Kawai notes. “The launch of the Hokuriku Shinkansen has facilitated access from the Kanto region, including Tokyo and its environs, so we want to expand our PR initiatives at home and abroad to draw in even more visitors.”

Riding the Torokko Electric Railway offers not only a scenic tour of the autumn leaves but a host of unexpected highlights as well: the clear rivers that run through deep valleys; the vivid colors of the reservoirs; the riverbeds where hot springs gush up from beneath; the stones stacked next to the open-air hot springs close by; and much more. Observe carefully, and you can spot Japanese serow and bears on the other shore of the river. Troops of monkeys are even said to appear frequently. The healing qualities of nature’s bounty, headlined by the splendor of the autumn leaves, come to the fore—a charm of the leafy season that the Kurobe Gorge Railway provides in full.