



ecute Shinagawa in Tokyo
Photo: Courtesy of JR East

DESTINATION STATION

MOST Japanese railway stations of any size have shops of some description for the convenience of passengers passing through them. Many have so-called *ekinaka* (literally, “in the station”) complexes of shops selling everything from food to clothes, cosmetics and books, as well as restaurants, cafés and bars. The East Japan Railway Company (JR East) is one of the railway companies active in the *ekinaka* business.

JR East is the largest of the seven JR Group companies that were created as a result of the division and privatization of the Japan National Railway (JNR) in 1987. About 17 million people on average use its railway networks throughout the Eastern area of Japan every day. Nearly 70% of JR East’s operating income has come from the railway business after its privatization. However, faced with the challenges of depopulation and an aging population, the company found it necessary to establish a strategy that did not depend entirely on the railway business. JR East announced its medium-term business plan in 2000 based on this realization and cited the “Station Renaissance” program as one pillar in its plan. One of the key phrases of this program is “From a station of passing to a station of gathering.”

“We reconfirmed that railway stations are our most important management resource and aimed to re-establish entire stations with a focus on the *ekinaka* business,” says Keisuke Kako, manager of the Busi-

ness Promotion Division of JR East. “We broke away from the idea that railway stations were just places to pass through and thought that if an attractive shopping area were developed inside a station, people would gather at the station with a sense of purpose.”

Based on this idea, *ecute*, a mall-type shopping center within a ticket gate, opened at Omiya Station in Saitama and at Shinagawa Station in Tokyo in 2005. At these stations, once users get off the trains and go up to the concourse from the platforms by escalator, they see a shopping mall stretched before them where they can enjoy eating and shopping before changing trains or exiting the station. This had a huge impact on station use and JR East was able to significantly exceed its original sales goals from the very first year.

“We paid thorough attention to the details of the interior materials to change the conventional image of railway stations being cold and imposing. We believe that the most significant factor in our success was our ability to completely transform the image of a station by introducing bright lights and a rich line-up of colorful products,” says Kako. “We also brushed up our quick service for the sake of customer convenience. For example, we introduced compact wrapping instead of excessive wrapping and rounded off fractions of prices to eliminate the need for one-yen coins in transactions. In recent years, we have seen a further diversification of needs



ecute Omiya at Omiya Station,
Saitama Prefecture
Photo: Courtesy of JR East

Japan's railway stations are so much more than merely points of departure.

TOSHIO MATSUBARA

and also introduced relaxation spaces, such as massage salons and book cafés.”

There are other malls in ekinaka areas in addition to ecute such as Dila, with shops selling daily commodities. These malls currently operate at twenty-five stations mainly within the Greater Tokyo Metropolitan area. Shops, products and services are tailored to regional features. For example, there is a child nursery school at the ecute Tachikawa in the suburbs of Tokyo where many families with young children live. JR East also actively provides support for child-rearing and had more than 100 child nursery schools within station buildings and under elevated railway tracks in April 2017.

As these examples of child care facilities show, JR East is also carrying out regional revitalization initiatives through its ekinaka business.

“Regional revitalization is also important for the



Children at Tokyo's Kitasenju Station-based nursery school make use of the rooftop playground.
Photo: Courtesy of JR East

JAPAN RAIL CAFE at
Tanjong Pagar Center
in Singapore
Photo: Courtesy of JR East



railway business,” says Kako. “Our company continues to carry out a range of initiatives, such as opening shops that sell local specialties in ekinaka areas and organizing walking events in cooperation with local communities. We have also started to cultivate our own agricultural products, such as brewer’s rice and tomatoes, and sell these agricultural products and processed foods in ekinaka areas.”

JR East is starting to provide services for foreign tourists in ekinaka areas. For example, station restaurant menus are now available in four languages, and pictographs of merchandise have been placed at convenience stores so that customers can see at a glance what the store sells. JR East has also introduced tax-free counters.

In 2016, JR East opened JAPAN RAIL CAFE, its first overseas directly managed shop at the Tanjong Pagar Center, which is connected to Tanjong Pagar Railway Station in the central area of Singapore. The CAFE provides information about tourism in Japan and sells Japanese railway passes as well as Japanese foods and drinks.

“Many foreigners often say they are surprised by the scale of Japan's ekinaka,” says Kako. “We will provide more information about the unique convenience and pleasure of Japanese ekinaka to foreign users.”