

A Streetcar Named Nostalgia

The Toden Arakawa Line provides a glimpse into Tokyo's past.

One of the first things that many visitors to Tokyo often notice is the striking contrast between the very old and the very new. The city's oldest temple sits near the base of its tallest and most modern tower, and people in traditional dress can often be seen passing the gleaming luxury shops in Ginza. But what many may not know is that there is also a section of Tokyo that seems frozen in a simpler era, where time moves more slowly.

The first streetcars began operating in Tokyo around the turn of the 20th century, when electricity replaced horses as the means of powering the transportation system. At one point the network of trams was incredibly extensive, covering most of the main areas of the city. They remained the primary mode of transport in the city for over 50 years, when they were phased out between the late 1960s and early 1970s. The increase in automobile traffic meant there was no longer space for them on the roads, and they were replaced by buses and trains.

Today, only one section of the former far-reaching Toden network, the network operated by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, remains. The Toden Arakawa Line, nicknamed the Tokyo Sakura Tram due to its route that passes several spots where sakura (cherry) blossoms can be viewed in the spring, operates in the north of Tokyo over the 12.2 kilometers between the charming downtown neighborhood of Minowabashi and the student town of Waseda. Riding it feels like you are going back in time about 60 years: the single-car tram rattles between stations with short platforms, some of which are new wooden structures

replicating the stations from a century ago.

Most days, the Arakawa Line is used mainly by area locals going about their daily business. But it is also popular with tourists and train aficionados, especially on the weekends. Certain sections and stops along the way give even more of a glimpse into Tokyo's past. At Minowabashi there is an old shopping arcade filled with a wide variety of shops specializing in fruit and vegetables, meat, flowers, miso, and even shoes. It has a friendly, small-town vibe and a 1950s style feeling to it.

Toward the middle of the line is Arakawa Shakomae Station, located next to the depot where cars are cleaned and serviced. Here at Toden Memorial Square you can also see some of the former rolling stock. On weekends when the depot exhibition space is open, you can even go inside the cars, where photographs from decades ago and dioramas show the streetcars in their heyday.

Other attractions along the line, in addition to sights famous for cherry blossoms and the beds of roses that are cared for by the local residents, include the beautiful Oji Inari Shrine, dedicated to the fox deity, the rich greenery of Asukayama Park, and Zoshigaya Kishimojindo Temple where the goddess of healthy and safe child-bearing and child rearing is enshrined. Riding from one end to the other takes about one hour, but it is worth spending a leisurely afternoon getting off and on along the way. Not only will you visit some interesting and unusual sights, you will also be able to get a sense of what Tokyo was like in another lifetime.

The Tokyo Sakura Tram passing by cherry blossoms in full bloom in spring.