



Smooth, Safe, and Straightforward

Navigating Tokyo's Train System with Ease

By Julian Ryall

Every day, an astonishing number of passengers travel by train in the Greater Tokyo Area. The subway and above-ground railway system have a great many lines, with well over 2,705 kilometers of operational track and 1,510 stations.

But don't let the numbers intimidate or overwhelm you, because just as much effort has gone into ensuring that everyone who uses the system gets from place A to place B with as little muss or fuss as possible.

Trust me on this one; I am a Londoner by birth and have negotiated mass transit rail systems in New York,

Paris, Seoul, and countless other far-flung cities around the world, and I can assure you that nothing comes close to Tokyo for efficiency, organization, modernity, punctuality, and the ability to ensure that visiting foreigners get to their destinations. And that's even before I get to the politeness of the staff or the cleanliness of trains and stations.

For anyone who has not had the opportunity to experience train travel Tokyo style, let me take you on a little journey to give you a taste of what you have been missing. We will go from the modern and frenetic Roppongi district to the more traditional streets of Asakusa, with a swift change at Daimon Station.

At virtually the very center of the Tokyo megalopolis

is Roppongi, a district of bars and restaurants, hotels, shops, and nightlife. The platform for the Toei Oedo Line lies a full 42 meters beneath these streets—making Roppongi the deepest subway station in Tokyo. The cleanliness of the facilities is equally impressive; not a spot of graffiti in sight and the public restrooms clearly receive frequent and vigorous attention from cleaning crews.

Navigating the station is also made easy by clear signs—in English, Korean, and Chinese, as well as Japanese—intuitive maps and a system of color coding for each of the lines. That all helps to make our progress to the ticket gates of the Toei Oedo Line smooth and swift.

The line is operated by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Transportation and commenced full operations in December 2000. The line runs for 40.7 kilometers, between the stations of Hikarigaoka and Tochomae, and had to be built to avoid existing underground utilities and other subway lines. Nearly 910,000 people use the line every day, making it one of the busiest lines in Tokyo.

The traveler's journey could not be easier. Passengers have the option to buy a ticket from machines that operate in English and Japanese or use a PASMO prepaid card that is simply passed over the reader at the ticket gate.

So, with ticket safely in hand, we descend the escalator to the platform, which is spotlessly clean and brightly lit. Information on signs is provided in several languages, and a helpful electronic board indicates how long we have to wait until the next train. It is usually just a couple of minutes.

As the train approaches, an announcement tells travelers to stay behind the white line on the platform. Yellow textured floor tiles called tactile paving warn the visually impaired that they are approaching the platform's edge.

The doors open widely, enabling passengers to embark and disembark quickly. Station staff are on hand with a folding ramp for anyone in a wheelchair to permit them to roll smoothly into the railway car.

Right on time, the doors close, and we are swiftly in motion. More electronic signs above the doors announce the next station and how long it will take to get there. Small television screens show a series of sound-free advertisements and information, such as news and weather. An announcement tells passengers on which side of the train the doors will open at the next station. Most impressively, the train halts at precisely the spot on the platform marked for passengers to line up to board.



Scenes of Roppongi Station, Toei Oedo Line

Travelers come and go as we stop at stations along the way, heading for intersecting subway lines or their destination.

Arriving at Daimon—a station that is reminiscent of a museum thanks to its buffed stone walls and spotlights—we ride two short escalators up to the Toei Asakusa Line, which is also operated by Tokyo's Bureau of Transportation. Once again, the cars on this line are clean, brightly lit, and comfortable. Certain sections in each car are reserved for the elderly, the infirm, pregnant women, or those traveling with small children.

The nine stations until we arrive at Asakusa flash by, punctuated only by announcements and the gentle sound of train doors opening and closing. We emerge at Asakusa—through the ticket gate, with a slight bow and a smile from the attendant—and our journey is done.

Smooth, safe, and straightforward from start to finish. It is almost a shame to arrive at my destination. But I console myself with the thought that I will probably have to take the train again tomorrow.

Julian Ryall is the Japan correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* and writes for other publications around the world.