

“Resort Shirakami” Trains on the Gonō Line

The Gonō Line is a 147-kilometer railway that runs from Higashi-Noshiro Station in Akita Prefecture to Kawabe Station in Aomori Prefecture. Most of the route hugs the shore of the Sea of Japan, giving close views of the rocky coastline on one side and the richly forested peaks of the Shirakami Sanchi World Natural Heritage Site on the other. Special “Resort Shirakami” trains that run on the Gonō Line are equipped with large windows and numerous other special features designed to transform simple transportation into a multi-faceted regional travel experience.

There are three kinds of Resort Shirakami trains: the green “Buna,” named for the Japanese beech tree that is the heart of the Shirakami Sanchi ecosystem; the blue “Aoike,” named for a stunning azure pond near Jūniko Station; and the red-striped “Kumagera,” named for the black woodpecker, a red-crested species found in the region.

Each train has three cars with spacious coach seating and one car with box seats. Each compartment of box seats has a central table, and the seats can be extended into a flat configuration where passengers can remove their shoes and stretch out their legs. The train interiors are paneled with local woods such as Japanese cedar from Akita. There is also an observation lounge where live performances are held and local crafts are sometimes exhibited.

Performances include live music played on the *shamisen* (a traditional stringed instrument), storytelling in a local dialect, and traditional puppet shows from Aomori. Buna trains have a bar area serving regional sake. Each train’s offerings are different, and details can be found on the JR East website.

The trains run at a leisurely pace, allowing passengers time to absorb the scenery; they slow down even further at picturesque spots, giving opportunities for photographs. Among the many points of interest on the route is the port city of Noshiro, a nationally famous high school basketball powerhouse whose team has won the national championship more than 55 times. There is a basketball hoop on the platform at Noshiro Station, and passengers can win a souvenir if they make a basket.

Stations in the town of Happō offer the most direct access to the ancient beech forests of the Shirakami Sanchi mountains, where visitors can hike and bathe in hot springs. Two stops north of Happō’s Akitashirakami Station lies Jūniko Station, where 33 lakes and ponds nestled in the hills were created by a 1704 earthquake. Aoike, literally “blue pond,” is the most spectacular of these, with a vivid blue color that turns to dark navy in cloudy weather. Walking trails of varying lengths start near the pond. Buses run from the station to the pond area, but the road is closed between late November and March.

All seats on Resort Shirakami trains are reservation-only and can be booked in English through the Ekinet website. “A” seats in coach and all box seats have ocean views regardless of the direction of travel. Free Wi-Fi is available, and all trains are non-smoking.