



Japan's Shinkansen bullet train turns 50

1) TOKYO — It was, retired Japanese railway engineer Fumihiko Araki recalls, "like flying in the sky."

2) Zippering cross-country in a super-high speed train has become commonplace in many countries these days, but it was unheard of when Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago.

3) The Shinkansen, as it's called in Japan, gave a boost to train travel in Europe and Asia at a time when the rise of the automobile and the airplane threatened to eclipse it. It also was a symbol of pride for Japan, less than two decades after the end of World War II, and a precursor of the economic "miracle" to come.

4) The Oct. 1, 1964, inauguration ceremony was re-enacted at Tokyo Station on Wednesday at 6 a.m., complete with ribbon cutting. The first bullet train, with its almost cute bulbous round nose, traveled from Tokyo to Osaka in four hours, shaving two and a half hours off the 513-kilometer (319-mile) journey. The latest model, with a space-age-like elongated nose, takes just two hours and 25 minutes.

5) Araki, now 73, drove the Shinkansen briefly in the summer of 1967 as part of his training as a railway operations engineer. Last week, he slipped back in time as he sat in the driver's seat of one of the early model bullet trains at a railway museum outside of Tokyo. He pulled a lever on the control panel, looking straight ahead as he was trained, though all he could see were other museum exhibits.

6) "It was like flying in the sky, it was that kind of feeling," said Araki, the acting director of the museum. "On a clear day, you could see Mount Fuji, and riding atop the railway bridge at Hamanako lake was very pleasant. It felt like you were sailing above the sea."

A CONTROVERSIAL PROJECT

7) Japan started building a high-speed line during World War II, but construction was halted in 1943 as funds ran out. The idea was revived in the 1950s, but many questioned whether undertaking such a costly project, particularly with the expansion of air travel and highways. Criticism turned to pride when construction, financed partly by an \$80 million World Bank loan, was completed in time for the Tokyo Olympics in October 1964.

HOW FAST?

8) The first Shinkansen had a maximum speed of 210 kilometers (130 miles) per hour. The fastest trains previously, in Europe, could reach 160 kph. Today's bullet trains, in Japan and elsewhere, have reached and in some cases exceeded 300 kph (186 mph). By average speed, China has the fastest train in the world, averaging 284 kph on a route between Shijiazhuang and Zhengzhou Dong, according to a biennial World Speed Survey by Railway Gazette.

WHAT'S NEXT

9) Magnetic levitation. Shanghai launched a German-built maglev train in 2004 on a 30-kilometer route between the city and the airport. It can hit 430 kph (267 mph). A Japanese maglev train in development has topped 500 kph (310 mph) in tests. If built, it could reduce the travel time between Tokyo and Osaka to just over one hour. With speed, though, some of the romance is lost. A faster Shinkansen has eliminated its dining car. "The problem is that Japan is such a small country," said Araki, the retired engineer. "If you go too fast, you'll get there in no time. No time to enjoy an onboard meal." 【10/01/Associated Press】

zip ぴゅっと音を立てる、疾走する commonplace: ありふれた bulbous: 球根の shave:(口語)短縮する elongated: 先細形の undertake: 仕事を引き受ける biennial: 2年毎の magnetic levitation: 磁気浮揚

★Ice breaker for active discussion★

1. Describe your first and the most memorable experiences related to Shinkansen.
2. What is your opinion about the fact that no fatal accidents have ever been recorded involving the Shinkansen?
3. What kind of changes Shinkansen bullet train has provided us?
- 4..Shinkansen is getting faster over time. Do you think it will compromise your safety?
5. Shinkansen's dining car has been eliminated and many people who liked to use dining cars miss it. How do you like to spend your time in Shinkansen?
6. Shinkansen is one of the symbols of Japan. Can you name other symbols that Japanese can be proud of?
7. Please make sentences using the ff words: commonplace, eclipse, precursor, inauguration, undertake, zip, biennial, levitate and bullet.