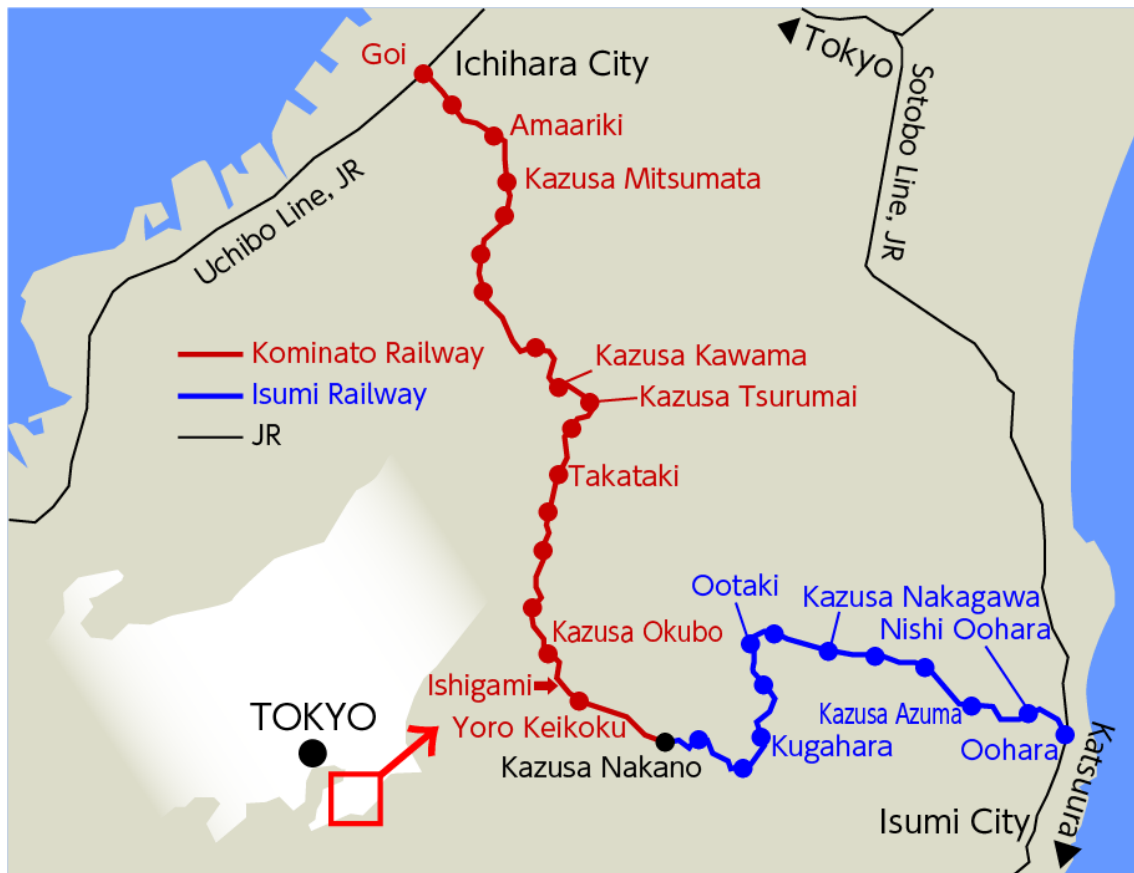


Colorful Springtime Along the Kominato and Isumi Railway Lines



Video: <https://youtu.be/zWAZidEQnjw>



Kominato Railway

The Kominato Railway is a 39.1 km single-track line starting at Goi Station in the city of Ichihara in Chiba Prefecture. Although previously it was operated by Kujukuri Railway, which managed lines on the Boso Peninsula, today it is operated by Kominato Railway Co., Ltd. Construction of the line to provide a means of transport for the people of Boso began in 1923, and the full line opened in 1928. The original idea was to have the final station in the vicinity of Awa-Kominato Station on the Pacific side of the peninsula. However, the Kihara Line of the Japanese National Railways (JNR), as it was then known (it is now called the Isumi Railway), was due to run as far as Kazusa-Nakano, and there were financial difficulties to boot, so further construction beyond Kazusa-Nakano Station was abandoned.

The Kominato Railway has 18 stations, almost all of which are unmanned. Kazusa-Nakano Station, the final stop, is managed jointly with Isumi Railway Co., Ltd. The rolling stock consists of old model KiHa 200 Series carriages, and the line is nonelectrified and single track. So even though the Kominato Railway is located in the metropolitan region, the station buildings and trains on the line exude a nostalgic atmosphere, making it popular among not only railfans but general sightseers as well. Chiba Prefecture has selected the Kominato Railway and scenery along the route as one of the “Chiba Cultural Assets” sites.

The number of passengers on the Kominato Railway has been declining year by year. Sometimes, depending on the place and weather conditions, there might be more people gathered along the line to take photos than there are passengers riding in the train. In 2015 Kominato Railway Co., Ltd. commenced operation of the Boso Satoyama Torocco sightseeing train, but it has been suspended due to the impact of the novel coronavirus outbreak in the spring of 2020. The line also suffered damage from a typhoon that hit the Boso Peninsula in 2019. Services on part of the line had to be stopped, although as of March 2020 it was fully operating again.

Kazusa-Mitsumata Station

Video: https://youtu.be/nkBcx2R_BZQ



Kazusa-Mitsumata Station is an unmanned station standing at the corner of a residential district; a daily average of 100–180 passengers board and alight from trains here. The beeline section from Amaariki Station on the Goi side is most impressive. Paddies and fields stretch out along the way, no doubt enabling passengers to enjoy seasonal scenery. The cityscape of Ichihara sprawls in the distance.



Kazusa-Kawama Station

Video: <https://youtu.be/Qu-aXT74A5I>



Kazusa-Kawama Station is a small station that suddenly appears in the midst of paddies and fields. There are no houses to be seen in the vicinity, just the railway line, roads, and a small station building with a waiting room of about 10 sq. m offering shelter from the wind and rain. Delightfully, the line here also runs as straight as an arrow.



Kazusa-Tsurumai Station

Video: <https://youtu.be/RbCr3RVUt-g>



Kazusa-Tsurumai Station has been selected as one of the best 100 railway stations in the Kanto region and is listed as a tangible cultural property of the state. The elegant station building is now unmanned, but its atmosphere is enough to make one imagine how bustling it must have been in the past. About 300 m down from Kazusa-Tsurumai Station, I discovered a place where the track is surrounded by rapeseed flowers. The train slowly passes by this spot. The fresh greenery, the yellow rapeseed blossoms, and the train's slightly somber orange create a peaceful, local atmosphere.



Kazusa-Tsurumai Station building



Kazusa-Tsurumai Station platform

Takataki Station

Video: https://youtu.be/bmy_KOL4DZg



Takataki Station is listed as a tangible cultural property of the state as well. Here also, about 400 m down the line, there is a large cluster of magnificent rapeseed flowers blossoming by the side of Takataki Lake. Beyond the bright yellow carpet, a cherry tree can be seen too. When I took this video, the cherry tree was not quite in full bloom, but nevertheless the contrast with the yellow rapeseed blossoms was splendid---a really good picture of colorful springtime.



Kazusa-Okubo Station

Video: <https://youtu.be/z61M5gbzTek>



Kazusa-Okubo Station is another unmanned station. There is no waiting room here, so the roofed part of the platform also serves as a shelter. This section of the railway was closed due to damage caused by the typhoon that swept across Boso Peninsula in 2019, but services are operating normally now. By the station there is another cluster of rapeseed flowers, with cherry trees overlooking them. After stopping for about 30 seconds, the train sounded its horn, slowly left the station, and went on its way, the spring sunshine flooding its whole body.



Ishigami Rapeseed Field

Video: https://youtu.be/J-Z2dDa_uQg



Just in front of Yorokeikoku Station there is the Ishigami Rapeseed Field. Rapeseed flowers have been planted over a wide area, and when they blossom, the scene is unbelievably beautiful. This spot is very well-known among railfans. When the time approaches for a train to pass, many people set up their tripods and get their cameras ready. Apparently these rapeseed flowers were planted here by local volunteers on land that had become idle due to the aging of the farmers. A nearby company provided a large car park free of charge, which railfans make use of. Surprised by the commotion, a passing driver stopped and asked me, “Is there some kind of event going on today?” “At this time of the year, I guess it’s always like this on fine days,” I replied, making him even more surprised. Looking down at the rapeseed field from the side of the road, he saw the many people with their cameras, and at last he seemed to understand what all the fuss was about.



Railfan photographers

Isumi Railway

Construction of the railway was approved in 1925 following strong requests from local residents, and the JNR Kihara Line began operating in 1930. In 1987 the JNR was privatized, and East Japan Railway Co., Ltd. (JR East) took over. Then in 1988 the line was transferred to a local third-sector firm, Isumi Railway Co., Ltd. Local governments along the line are the main shareholders of this company, the head office of which is at Otaki Station, almost midway along the line.

The Isumi Railway, which covers a total distance of 26.8 km, has 14 stations, almost all of which are unmanned. The rolling stock, such as the Isumi 300 Series, is relatively new, although the company also operates various other projects. At weekends, for example, it runs the Restaurant KiHa gourmet train using old model KiHa 28 carriages.

Otaki, where the company's head office is located, flourished as a castle town in the past. The lord of Otaki Castle was Honda Tadakatsu (1548–1610), a well-known figure in Japanese history who was one of the so-called four paladins serving the ruling Tokugawa clan. Maybe for that reason, there are many old but solid buildings in Otaki, and the townscape has a somewhat dignified atmosphere. Like the Kominato Railway, the Isumi Railway is nonelectrified and single track, and its stations are mostly modest and unmanned. Its popularity lies in its rich local color.

Kugahara Station

Video: <https://youtu.be/DcpvkA1TMjY>



In 2009 Saniku Gakuin College, which has its headquarters in the local town of Otaki, acquired naming rights, so the name of the college is attached to the station name. It is a small, unmanned station with only a platform and roof for shelter from the wind and rain. A little way from the station there is a place with several cherry trees. The train passes these trees as it departs. It is a picture of a serene local railway line.



Kazusa-Nakagawa Station

Video: https://youtu.be/M_Td_Om-iKI



Kazusa-Nakagawa Station is the second stop from Otaki Station. About 500 m beyond the station, the railway enters a rural area, and the line runs along an embankment right in the middle. This also is an extremely well-known spot among railway buffs. In the middle of the embankment there is a simple crossing with no alarm, but if you go below the embankment and hold your camera at a low angle, you can get a picture of just the rapeseed blossoms on the embankment and the sky above. The blue sky with its beautiful white clouds, the cluster of rapeseed blossoms, and the single-carriage train passing. Nothing else. Apparently the carriages on the Isumi Railway's Isumi-go trains are painted yellow after the color of the rapeseed blossoms alongside the line. It is a perfectly balanced picture.



Kazusa-Azuma Station

Video: https://youtu.be/3y_IAni9mSE



Since the Isumi Railway starts from Ohara Station on the ocean side, inbound trains indicate those heading in the direction of Ohara Station. There are a relatively large number of cherry trees in the vicinity of Kazusa-Azuma Station, the fifth stop from Otaki Station, so it is possible to enjoy the dazzling contest between cherry and rapeseed blossoms. On the outbound side of Kazusa-Azuma Station, the track, which goes past paddy fields, is lined for about 100 m with cherry trees on one side and rapeseed flowers on the other. This is another popular spot among railfans. Passing between the cherry and rapeseed blossoms, the train appears to have a rather happy expression.



Video: <https://youtu.be/GQfu6Yil-c>



In the inbound direction from Kazusa-Azuma Station, I found some cherry trees by the side of a paddy field. The train slows down as it passes. Maybe the kind driver wants the passengers to enjoy the cherry blossoms too.



Nishi-Ohara Station

Video: https://youtu.be/4DGUjW5_oCo



About 300 m down the track from Nishi-Ohara Station, which is the first stop from Ohara Station, the railway's starting point, I came across a watery rural area. The mirror-like surface of the water is beautiful. Again, a cluster of rapeseed flowers grows

by the line here, adding vibrancy to the vicinity.



Videography Postscript

I visited Kominato Railway and Isumi Railway on a fine day in early spring. Both lines are brimming with an air of peaceful countryside, and the trains, which operate just once an hour, have very much become part of the landscape. They make one realize that railways are not just a means of transportation. These trains have carried local people and sightseers to their destinations every day for nearly a century now. No doubt there have been many hardships along the way that we just cannot imagine. Even in this region, people are leading their lives vigorously.

Walking by the railways in search of good spots to take videos, I came across many places that you would not find if moving around by car. Just going farther along roads led me to places where the scenery changes significantly. On the Isumi Railway, which runs by the Isumi River, just crossing a bridge opened up a whole new world. I was able to capture many images of the colorful springtime along these lines, surrounded by cherry and rapeseed blossoms. Seeing the many railfans who unfailingly appeared wherever I went, I was amazed by how popular these railways are. The Boso Peninsula can be easily reached from Tokyo. When the weather gets even warmer, no doubt the scenery will display its beauty in a different way.

Photos and text: Arata Matsumoto, Sharata and Advise, Inc. (<http://sharata.info/>)
(Sharata supplies 4K videos of outstanding scenery in Japan so that as many people as possible can enjoy it.)