

The Gravy Train

I like nothing better in my free time in Tokyo than sitting in the roof top garden that faces Yurakucho station, with a hot can of Royal Milk Tea in my hand, and watch the Shinkansen go by. It is hard to believe these engineering marvels may be even older than no I am but they still manage to retain a modern look with elegance and even beauty (more than can be said for me).

The British and the Japanese share a love of trains and although Britain may never have developed anything quite as awe inspiring as the Nozomi, our railway history has helped to shape the UK as it is today and still offers visitors a way to see Britain's most beautiful places which is, if not the quickest, then certainly the most romantic and memorable.

Starting in London, the capital's most famous stations are worth a visit in themselves. St Pancras station is famed for it's single span roof which was the largest in the world at the time of opening. A statue of the poet (and former British Council employee) John Betjeman can be seen staring at it. Under the enormous Kings Cross station is rumoured to be buried the body of Queen Boudica who led an uprising against the Roman invasion (her ghost still haunts the platforms apparently) and of course Harry Potter fanatics will not need reminding that the station served as the start point for his fantastical adventures - a sign for platform 9¾ has been erected along with a shopping trolley disappearing into the wall. Movie fans might also be interested in Liverpool St, visited by Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible or Corrou station on the West Highland line, featured in the cult film Trainspotting.

Deciding on Britain's best rail journeys would spark prolonged debate but it would have to include the `Deerstalker` or Caledonian Sleeper which takes you from London to the North of Scotland (from `smog to bog`) in a leisurely 13 hours or so through some of the loveliest scenery Britain has to offer. Indeed the West Highland Line was recently voted the world's most scenic rail journey by readers of Wanderlust magazine beating off 400 other lines in the process.

Also worth mentioning is the London to Brighton run, Britain's first ever holiday line and made famous, or infamous perhaps, for `dirty weekends` where adulterous couples would ride down to `London on the coast` for some illicit romance in one of the many inexpensive boarding houses and hotels. Traditionalists will also implore you to experience one of Britain's surviving steam train services such as the Keithley and Worth Valley railway in Yorkshire.

Not surprisingly given our love of trains, a number of related terms and expressions have entered the language. Train enthusiasts are sometimes referred to as `anoraks` which is a slightly cheeky expression and refers to the kind of hooded coat often worn by people who like to hang around on train platforms noting down engine numbers.

Other expressions include 'on track' which we use the first to describe a project which is going well:

' Things are on track and we should finish by Christmas`

Alternatively, if things are not going well or are out of control we say `off the rails`:

' He went off the rails after he lost his job.`

We also have the lovely expression `(to ride) the gravy train` which means to enjoy an easy job with lots of perks.

This expression is often used (angrily) for politicians and is very popular in the UK at the moment:

`All those government ministers are just riding the gravy train! They do nothing and claim a fortune in expenses!`

So on your next visit to the UK please consider `letting the train take the strain` as a British Rail advertisement advised us many years ago. You might need a little more time but the experience (and the added legroom) should make it well worth it.

But with winter fast approaching, don't forget your anorak.

Written by Philip Patrick
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