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OPINION

Everywhere in the world loves train travel. Why doesn't Australia?



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Travel is not supposed to be fun. That is, the actual act of travel, the getting from A to B. People rarely relish that experience. Ten hours on a plane, great. A long-distance bus ride, awesome.

These are just things you go through in order to enjoy the good stuff.

And yet here I am standing on a platform in Tokyo, dutifully queued up between the yellow lines painted on the concrete floor, and I cannot wait for what is about to happen.



Riding on a Japanese bullet train is one of the truly great pleasures of travel. ISTOCK

Pretty soon, with a whoosh of air, a shinkansen will arrive. The long, graceful nose of a Japanese bullet train will glide by, followed by all those clean, spacious carriages.

We will soon shuffle on board those carriages and deposit our belongings on the shelves above, and then sit down in comfortable seats, ready for the journey to begin. As the train eases out of the station I will be able to pull down my tray table and arrange my snacks: a pork katsu sandwich, a small bun filled with Japanese-style curry, and a cold Yebisu beer.

By then the outskirts of Tokyo will be whipping past the window, and before long we will be out into the countryside, blasting south, Mount Fuji looming up to the right, towns and cities a mere flash and a rumble of wheels on tracks.

‘The rest of the world is leaving us far behind.’

Japanese shinkansen: surely one of the world’s great travel experiences. Something you really look forward to. And not exactly an anomaly, because pretty much all of the world’s most enjoyable travel experiences – that is, the actual acts of moving from one place to another – are aboard trains.

The Trans-Siberian is a great experience. Any train trip in Switzerland is incredible. Any train trip in India is mind-boggling. The high-speed railway in Morocco is great fun. Any journey on rails through Spain, Italy, France or Germany will be memorable.

Everything about these train trips makes sense. You get that warm, fuzzy feeling from travelling overland on mass transport instead of burning up jet fuel. You get to see the sights, to understand the way countries are connected, to see with your own eyes as one culture, one landscape, one people, becomes another. Train travel is social. It's cost-effective. It's comfortable.

For all of those reasons, train travel is the best. And everyone seems to understand that, too. Everyone, that is, except Australia.

Prepare yourself. I'm about to slip into my swimwear, hold my nose and dive straight into the deep end here. Any time you talk about train travel in Australia, things get kind of wild. People have strong opinions. And none of those opinions seem to lead us anywhere.

But still, I'm going to vent some frustration. Why, oh why, has Australia not invested more in rail? I'm talking high-speed rail. Rail that can be used efficiently for long-distance travel, and even long-distance commuting. At a time when many of us would like to cut down our flights and spend more time at ground level, in Australia it just isn't an option.

And yes, no doubt people will point out our relatively small population base, though I would point out that the air route between Sydney and Melbourne is the [fifth busiest in the world](#), with more than 8 million travellers making their way between the cities each year. That's topped only by domestic routes in South Korea, Japan and Vietnam.

The need is there. The money is there too (or, it probably was before we dropped almost double [Elon Musk's net worth on submarines](#)). The expertise is there – or at least, it's accessible.

The only thing that isn't there is true desire, which is what drives people like me so crazy. Why wouldn't you want to travel by rail? Why wouldn't you want to spend [four hours](#) on a train from central Sydney to central Melbourne, rather than faff around getting to and from airports, going through security queues, waiting around for boarding, etcetera etcetera, all of which will take you about four hours anyway?

Sydney and Canberra should be linked by high-speed rail too. Right now, it takes more than four hours to do a train trip that takes three in a car, one in a plane. Sydney and Newcastle should be linked by high-speed rail. Melbourne and its own airport should absolutely be linked by at least normal-speed rail.

The rest of the world is leaving us far behind. Europe is moving quickly towards high-speed train travel, in some cases even [banning flights on routes that are serviced by trains](#). China is developing [a heap of high-speed rail lines](#). Japan continues to invest heavily in its network.

But Australia? The NSW government spent \$100 million developing plans for high-speed rail between Sydney and Newcastle, and recently just [scrapped the whole project](#). Victoria's modest Melbourne airport train project has been [hit by more delays](#), and probably won't run until well into the 2030s.

There's no love here for trains as genuine long-distance transport.

As a result, train travel in Australia isn't fun – certainly not in the way it is on that shinkansen in Japan. But surely it could be.



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