

lifestyle

Drinking off the rails on Niigata's sake train

Travel

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The Koshino Shukura train aims to transport passengers — less to a destination than to a state of giddy intoxication.

It's one of Japan's 44 "Joyful Trains" — on-rail experiences themed around a regional specialty. This particular journey is all about *nihonshu* (sake). It ambles through Niigata Prefecture, Japan's largest producer of rice and home to the nation's most exquisite rice wine. Giddy heights are reached, not only by the free-flowing tipple but by the ways this journey captures a magnificent, oft-overlooked side of Japan.

The Koshino Shukura route travels the three biomes that make Niigata *nihonshu* unique: the coastline that receives wintry blasts from Siberia; the mountains that force this moisture high into the clouds; and the inland plains where it falls each long winter as blankets of snow.

This yearly deluge, along with the nutrient-rich rivers that carve up the land to the sea, provide Niigata breweries with a kind of pure, cold water that is essential to making fine *nihonshu*.

On a late June morning, amid oppressive mugginess and a spattering of rain, I board the Koshino Shukura from Naoetsu Station.

Part of the wider city of Joetsu, Naoetsu lies at the mouth of one of Niigata's glacial river valleys. Its port once received gold-laden ships from the mines on Sado Island,

a short ferry ride offshore. Today, Naoetsu is known for seafood, much of which is served onboard either raw, smoked, broiled or grilled.

I take my seat as the Sea of Japan rolls into view. I sit in a raised, grandstand-like arrangement facing enormous windows, a hinged table lowered in front of me. I feel as though I'm in a highchair, a little confined and unable to get up and walk around with a cup of *nihonshu* in my hand — an intentional choice on the part of the designers, I'm sure.

The Koshino Shukura is a retrofitted three-car diesel engine from the 1970s with a seating capacity for 70 people. Around ¥8,000 gets you a seat in the rearmost car, a light meal, a ticket to any station along the 2 ½-hour journey, and a generous array of sake to try along the way.

On cue, a cold, sparkling cup of Nagaoka-based Hakuro's Black Firework *nihonshu* immediately arrives with my meals. The journey has already begun.

The bento-style fare consists of neatly portioned local delicacies — eggplant tempura, mochi, rice mixed with chunks of cod, steamed chicken and broiled salmon accompanied cherry tomatoes in jelly — and a generous pouring of dry, still Uonuma Tamafuumi from Tamagawa Sake Brewery. Koshino Shukura's food, as well as the *nihonshu* it serves onboard, changes every two months.

After the second cup, I find myself mesmerized by the Sea of Japan. The rails just skirt the beach, and the ocean's moody, slate-gray expanse fills the windows. The rain has picked up, blurring the white-caps offshore behind a shifting veil. The car sways gently, though it's hard to tell whether this is caused by the line curving around Mount Yone or the effects of cup No. 2.

The third cup arrives, aged and full of flavor.

An attendant holds the bottle like a sommelier and asks if I'd like to photograph it. It's Hakkaisan, an artisanal vintage from the foothills of its mountainous namesake where the snow falls three meters deep. The attendant's reverent hold of the bottle reminds me that Niigata is the Japanese equivalent of Bordeaux or Tuscany when it comes to *nihonshu*.

The brewing tradition here is ancient, shared by anyone who has a rice crop, which, in Niigata, is almost everyone with farmland. Officially, the prefecture has over 90 licensed *nihonshu* breweries. Stories abound of grandparents homebrewing unspeakably delicious tipples amid the isolated valleys, each loathe to share bottles beyond a few close drinking partners.

Twenty minutes in, the train stops at a scenic, remote station under some cliffs. The occupants mosey out into the horizontal rain to take pictures. I briefly join them before scurrying back into our vessel, a fourth cup from Kaganoi Sake Inc. already waiting for me.

The line leaves the coast, slips through a series of tunnels, and begins carving through an endless expanse of rice paddies. Thankful for the day's deluge, they blanket the horizon on either side of the tracks. Rain



For about ¥8,000, passengers can take in sweeping views of Niigata's countryside — and generous helpings of *nihonshu* (sake) — via expansive windows.

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streaks sideways along the windows. I fall into a fifth cup, chilled Daiginjo-shu, Shukura's exclusive *nihonshu* brewed in collaboration with the century-old Kimino Shuzou Brewery.

Shigeki Tanaka didn't know how many cups deep he was (he'd been ordering from the *a la carte* menu) when the foreigner claiming to be a reporter attempted a conversation with him and his friends. The four of them were from the Kansai region; this was his second trip on the Koshino Shukura, and he had organized the session to celebrate one of their birthdays.

Tanaka liked the train chiefly for its atmosphere and range of *nihonshu*. He says the price isn't so bad when you consider the dining car offers brews you can't easily find elsewhere.

Before long, the train nears the town of Nagaoka — my last stop. Nagaoka straddles the Shinano River amid Niigata's rice-growing heartland. The town has long been the granary of Japan's west. Its unmatched rice yields were a blessing and a curse over the centuries; a source of great wealth and a target for opportunistic warlords.

From here, the Koshino Shukura switches lines to travel south into Niigata's mountainous interior before coming to a final stop at the ski resort-adjacent town of Tokamachi.

Sake lovers might do well to end their journey in Nagaoka as I did. No more than 50 meters from the platform is the Pons-hukan Sake Museum. This library of over 111 varieties of *nihonshu* dispenses bottles and cans from vending machines for as little as ¥500. It's a popular destination among locals and tourists alike, offering private sake tastings and information on the region's history of sake brewing.

No matter where you end up, there's simply no better way to see, feel and taste Niigata than cruising through its wild back-country amid the heady glow of the prefecture's finest sake.

I step onto the platform and into Nagaoka carrying two neatly wrapped bottles of Koshino Shukura-branded sake, given for free as a parting gift. Happily unsteady on my feet, I feel blithely ready for the next journey — which almost certainly includes some vending machines and a hangover.

Clockwise from top: A trip through Niigata Prefecture on the Koshino Shukura train is as much about the journey as the destination; Shigeki Tanaka (back right) and his friends traveled from the Kansai region for his second trip on the Koshino Shukura; the route of the Koshino Shukura takes you through both dramatic coastline and lush farmland.

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Getting a seat

The Koshino Shukura is popular, and seats are often booked out weeks in advance, but some sober planning will get you on board.

There are two ticket options: One includes meals and will seat you in the rear of the train, while the other excludes meals and will seat you in the front. With the latter package, you're able to purchase a *la carte* meals, snacks and tasting trays at a counter in the middle carriage.

Two other sake trains operate in Niigata offering the same experience to different destinations. Yuzawa Shukura travels from Joetsu to the inland resort town of Echigo-Yuzawa, while the Ryoto Shukura travels all the way north to Niigata City.

Each journey is covered by the JR Pass and links with Shinkansen stations in Joetsu Myoko, Echigo-Yuzawa, Nagaoka and Niigata.

Is space the final frontier of extreme travel insurance?

Travel

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The deaths of five people on a tour to see the Titanic shipwreck last month have put the risks of extreme travel into focus. But despite the dangers, travel to out-there locations such as the South Pole, remote mountaintops, shark-infested waters and space is growing.

Adventure tourism is expected to bring in more than \$1 trillion (about ¥143 trillion) of revenue globally by 2030, up from an expected \$316.6 billion (about ¥45 trillion) in 2022, according to market research firm Grand View Research. And as interest grows, so, too, will the number of search and rescue missions, says Mikki Hastings, president of the National Association for Search and Rescue.

"Whether it's space or Everest, every per-

son deserves to be found," she says.

Businesses aiming to mitigate the danger and potential costs of extreme travel are starting to rise. Some offer rescue and medical evacuation from remote locations. Others are working out new types of insurance policies for pursuits like space travel. Traditional travel insurance won't swoop in with paramedics, even though it typically covers the cost of an emergency. Dan Richards, the CEO of Global Rescue, says he wanted to fill that gap when he founded the emergency travel management company in 2004. For a \$360 (about ¥51,000) annual fee, it provides members with evacuation services. Upgrades, including one that promises "military special operations veterans" will retrieve you from dangerous locations like war zones, can raise the fee to about \$1,800 (about ¥258,000). Medjet, a medical evacuation service, sells annual memberships, and AirMed International, SkyMed and others offer emergency extractions.

With companies such as Blue Origin and Virgin Galactic selling tickets for trips, the market for space tourism is expected to grow to about \$3 billion (about ¥430 billion) by 2030, according to estimates from UBS. The space travel insurance market is still small, but Lloyd's of London, which insures space businesses, began underwriting space travel insurance in 2021, and last year the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency and Mitsui Sumitomo Insurance said they would jointly develop space insurance offerings.

Taxpayers will end up footing the bill for some rescues. The cost of search and rescue typically falls on state and local agencies, Hastings says. About a half-dozen states have laws that allow agencies to charge a rescue recipient, though few do, and there is no cost to those rescued by the federal park services, for example. Last year, lawmakers from Hawaii and Utah introduced legislation to allocate federal funds to help states pay for search and

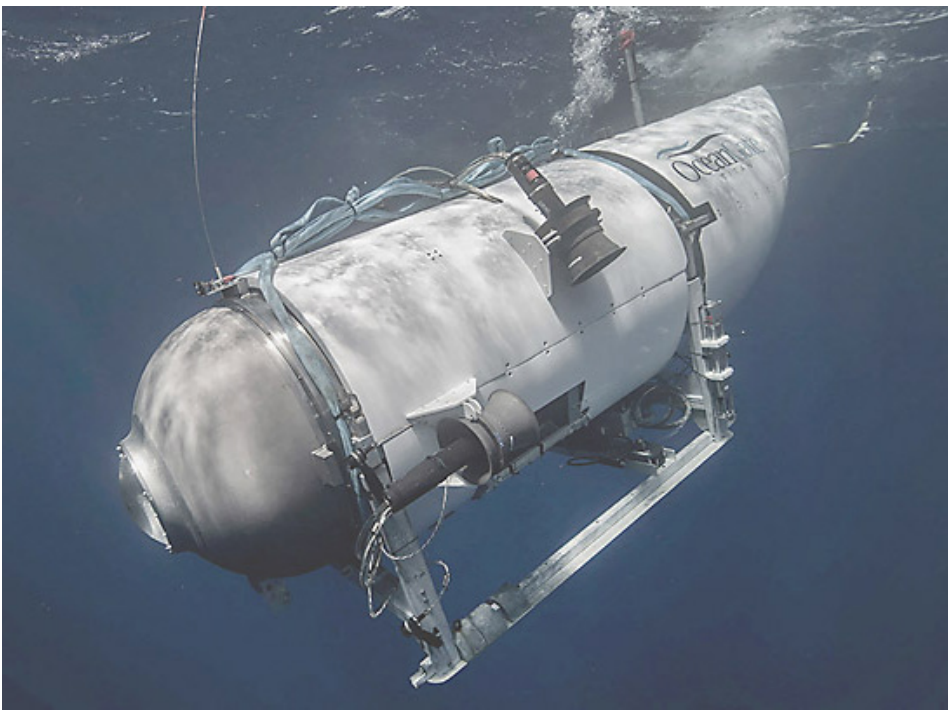
rescue operations, a burden that the drafters said disproportionately fell on less populous places, but the bill failed to gain traction.

The search for OceanGate submersible last week most likely cost millions of dollars. The Coast Guard, which led the rescue effort, has jurisdiction over search and rescue in navigable waters in the United States and beyond.

"But that's just the definition of their mission," Hastings says. "We don't encourage charging for search and rescue because we want people to seek help regardless of socioeconomic status."

Richards says a client of Global Rescue withdrew from the Titan trip because of safety concerns. His team would work with international rescuers, but the company does not have the requisite deep sea capabilities. The same goes for orbital excursions: "If there's an emergency in space, no one will be able to necessarily reach people."

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In the wake of the OceanGate submersible incident, companies offering insurance plans for extreme travel are entering the spotlight. OCEANGATE EXPEDITIONS VIA REUTERS