



Minobu Line : Ashigawa Station & Kai-ueno Station

Spirited Away

[Victor Balsan]

Today's journey took me to the Minobu Line, a JR line that runs from Kofu Station in Yamanashi Prefecture to Fuji Station in Shizuoka Prefecture, connecting the JR Chūō Main Line with the Tōkaidō Main Line.

I first decided to stop at Ashigawa, where the beautiful Uwato Shrine is located.

Uwato Shrine is also called Misaki Myoujin, or Ichikawa Monju. Ever since the Heian Period (794-1185), it has been devoted to the deity of scholarship.

Legend has it that in the first year of the Eiho Era (1081-1084), Emperor Shirakawa had become sick, and the medical treatment administered by his doctors was not effective. His physical state gradually turned critical, and it was during this time that Ichikawa's Shinto priest, reputed for his divination skills, proceeded to the capital. He prayed for the emperor, who then immediately recovered from his illness. Since then, Ichikawa's mansion was recognized as divine territory, and a portrait of the bodhisattva Manjusri -*Monju* in Japanese- was donated by Emperor Shirakawa.

Beside the main torii gate, there is an engraved stone which displays the words "*Ichikawa Monju - Uwato Shrine.*" A few meters from the main entrance, you can find another small gate made of stone. This torii used to be the main entrance, and is said to be from the Kamakura Period (1185-1333). Building constructions have been recorded since 1181, but the current buildings are from the year 1695. Although some repairs had been made to the roof of the main shrine in 1818, no major construction projects have been undertaken since then.

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The atmosphere of Uwato Shrine is quiet, surrounded by huge trees, autumn leaves still lying on the ground, and the shining light of the early winter sun making its way through the branches.

After paying homage to the deity of knowledge, I walked around the main shrine, which is composed of two parts: the inner sanctuary and the hall of worship. Looking closely, it seemed to me that this humble shrine had a kind of peaceful, invisible strength that could heal a visitor's spirit.

For those interested in visiting, two major festivals take place at Uwato Shrine: the Ichi no Tori festival on the first Sunday of February, and the Gyoki festival on the first Sunday of April.



My next stop was Kai-ueno. Near this station were two main attractions at walking distance: the *Otsuka kofun* located 30 minutes away, and the *Kabuki Bunka Koen* at less than 10 minutes walking distance.

Numerous *kofun*, ancient tombs constructed between the early 3rd and 7th centuries, have been found in Yamanashi's Sone-Kyuryou Hills, along the various types of burial mounds in the Otsuka District. Interesting artifacts have been excavated from these burial sites, such as harnesses, armllets decorated with bells, straight swords, mirrors, armor, and pottery. One artifact is particularly impressive: an ancient mirror decorated with gods and animals dating from the year 238, and is probably one of the oldest objects of the Kofun Period ever discovered.



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All these objects are displayed at the Kabuki Bunka Koen, along with other relics from the Jomon Period, which stretches from about 14,000 BC. to 400 BC. Many explanations concerning the history of the area are also offered. On top of the building, whose architecture reflects that of a Japanese traditional castle, you can see a beautiful panoramic view of the region and the Yatsugatake volcanic group, with the Mount Aka rising at 2,899 meters (9,511 ft).



In the same Kabuki Bunka Koen you will find an art museum which presents the history of kabuki in the region and the Ichikawa Danjuro dynasty of Kabuki actors. I particularly appreciated studying this dynastic history, looking at the portraits of all the Danjuros, from Danjuro the first to Danjuro XII.

In one of the rooms, a 3D film presenting the region's various tourist attractions was also shown. It was the first time in my life to put on 3D glasses in order to watch a cultural program, and it was truly fascinating! Although this program was in Japanese, a free guide is present to help you explore the museum, offering English explanations.

So here ends my journey on the Minobu Line! All I can say is that I had a great day and really enjoyed myself. So if you have the chance to visit Yamanashi, just catch the first train and go discover all the wonderful places that the prefecture has to offer.

This is Victor Balsan, live from Yamanashi!

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