

# World's first bullet train, made in Japan, turns 50

October 1 2014, by Emily Wang

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In this Sept. 24, 2014 photo, a Shinkansen bullet train arrives at Tokyo Station in Tokyo. Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014.(AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

It was, retired Japanese railway engineer Fumihiro Araki recalls, "like flying in the sky."

Zippering cross-country in a super-high-speed train has become commonplace in many countries these days, but it was unheard of when

Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday.

The Shinkansen, as it's called in Japan, gave a boost to train travel in Europe and Asia at a time when the rise of the automobile and the airplane threatened to eclipse it. It also was a symbol of pride for Japan, less than two decades after the end of World War II, and a precursor of the economic "miracle" to come.

The Oct. 1, 1964, inauguration ceremony was re-enacted at Tokyo Station on Wednesday at 6 a.m., complete with ribbon cutting. The first bullet train, with its almost cute bulbous round nose, traveled from Tokyo to Osaka in four hours, shaving two and a half hours off the 513-kilometer (319-mile) journey. The latest model, with a space-age-like elongated nose, takes just two hours and 25 minutes.

Araki, now 73, drove the Shinkansen briefly in the summer of 1967 as part of his training as a railway operations engineer. Last week, he slipped back in time as he sat in the driver's seat of one of the early model [bullet trains](#) at a railway museum outside of Tokyo. He pulled a lever on the control panel, looking straight ahead as he was trained, though all he could see were other museum exhibits.

"It was like flying in the sky, it was that kind of feeling," said Araki, the acting director of the museum. "On a clear day, you could see Mount Fuji, and riding atop the railway bridge at Hamanako lake was very pleasant. It felt like you were sailing above the sea."

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In this Dec. 21, 1964 photo, Japan's Shinkansen, a high speed train, passes by Tokyo's Nichigeki Theater in Yurakucho district shortly after leaving Tokyo Station in Tokyo. Zipping cross-country in a super-high speed train has become commonplace in many countries these days, but it was unheard of when Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Kyodo News) JAPAN OUT, MANDATORY CREDIT

## A CONTROVERSIAL PROJECT

Japan started building a high-speed line during World War II, but construction was halted in 1943 as funds ran out. The idea was revived in the 1950s, but many questioned undertaking such a costly project, particularly with the expansion of air travel and highways. Criticism turned to pride when construction, financed partly by an \$80 million World Bank loan, was completed in time for the Tokyo Olympics in

October 1964.

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## HOW FAST?

The first Shinkansen had a maximum speed of 210 kilometers (130 miles) per hour. The fastest trains previously, in Europe, could reach 160 kph. Today's bullet trains, in Japan and elsewhere, have reached and in some cases exceeded 300 kph (186 mph). By average speed, China has the fastest train in the world, averaging 284 kph on a route between Shijiazhuang and Zhengzhou Dong, according to a biennial World Speed Survey by Railway Gazette.

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In this Oct. 1, 1964 photo, a ceremony is held to mark the launch of Japan's Shinkansen, a high speed train, between Tokyo and Osaka, at Tokyo Station in Tokyo. Zipping cross-country in a super-high speed train has become commonplace in many countries these days, but it was unheard of when Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Kyodo News) JAPAN OUT, MANDATORY CREDIT

## EUROPE, ASIA, BUT NOT THE U.S.

The Shinkansen renewed interest in high-speed rail elsewhere, notably in Europe. France and Spain are among the leaders in Europe, and Turkey last year became the ninth country to operate a train at an average speed of 200 kph, according to Railway Gazette. South Korea and Taiwan also operate high-speed systems in Asia. The United States is an exception, though there are proposals to build lines in California and Texas. The fastest train in the U.S., Amtrak's Acela Express, averages 169 kph (105 mph) on a short stretch between Baltimore and Wilmington, Delaware, the speed survey says.

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In this June 21, 1978 file photo, Japan's high-speed train called Shinkansen, right, leaves Tokyo Station with two other Shinkansen trains, top right, are at the terminal ready to go while commuter trains, left, head into the station. Zipping cross-country in a super-high speed train has become commonplace in many countries these days, but it was unheard of when Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Fie)

## WHAT'S NEXT

Magnetic levitation. Shanghai launched a German-built maglev train in 2004 on a 30-kilometer route between the city and the airport. It can hit 430 kph (267 mph). A Japanese [maglev train](#) in development has topped



500 kph (310 mph) in tests. If built, it could reduce the travel time between Tokyo and Osaka to just over one hour. With speed, though, some of the romance is lost. A faster Shinkansen has eliminated its dining car. "The problem is that Japan is such a small country," said Araki, the retired engineer. "If you go too fast, you'll get there in no time. No time to enjoy an onboard meal."



In this Oct. 1982 file, Japan's Shinkansen, high speed train, travels past Mount Fuji, crossing over the Fuji River, west of Tokyo. Zipping cross-country in a super-high speed train has become commonplace in many countries these days, but it was unheard of when Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Fie)



A ceremony is held to mark the 50th anniversary of the launch of Japan's bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka, at Tokyo Station in Tokyo Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. Zippering cross-country in a super-high speed train has become commonplace in many countries these days, but it was unheard of when Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday. (AP Photo/Kyodo News) JAPAN OUT, MANDATORY CREDIT





In this Sept. 24, 2014 photo, passengers get into the Shinkansen bullet train at Tokyo station in Tokyo. Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 1964. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



In this Sept. 24, 2014 photo, a Shinkansen bullet train heads for Tokyo Station on the Tokaido Main Line in Tokyo. Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



In this Sept. 24, 2014 photo, a Shinkansen bullet train runs by Yurakucho Station after leaving Tokyo Station on the Tokaido Main Line in Tokyo. Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



In this Sept. 24, 2014 photo, a Shinkansen bullet train heads for Tokyo Station near Shimbashi Station on the Tokaido Main Line in Tokyo. Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)





In this Sept. 24, 2014 photo, workers bow to a passenger after cleaning in front of a Shinkansen bullet train at Tokyo station in Tokyo. Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



In this Sept. 25, 2014 photo, Railway Museum Deputy Director Fumihiro Araki poses in the operation room of Shinkansen type 0, the first model of the bullet train that launched between Tokyo and Osaka, western Japan, on Oct. 1 in 1964, at The Railway Museum in Omiya, near Tokyo. Japan launched its bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka 50 years ago Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

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