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Guest Contribution: The challenges of rural infrastructure in Japan and the importance of a driver's license

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by Leon Jordan

Access to basic services and infrastructure development are much discussed issues related to the disparities between high-tech urban cities and rural communities in Japan and to urban-rural migration. I would like to take a closer look at the importance of infrastructure and the availability of public transportation in rural areas such as Awajishima. While the infrastructure in Japan's largest cities is second to none, public transportation in rural areas is often deficient. It is important to understand that infrastructure development has always played an important role in influencing migration patterns by bridging the gap between urban and rural areas, not only in terms of urban-rural migration in Japan. However, in the wake of rapid economic growth in Japan, it has become more difficult for private operators to provide public transportation, especially in rural areas. In addition, improved connectivity through transportation networks is shown to have a strong impact on population distribution in rural areas (Fujisaki, K. et al., 2022).



Many community busses in rural areas run only few times a day
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I have made numerous trips to Awajishima, a rural island with a population of about 125,000 in Hyogo Prefecture. During these trips, I realized how difficult it is to rely solely on public transportation in remote regions and the crucial role a driver's licence plays in navigating Japan's rural landscape. Having been born and raised in Berlin, I never had to rely on a driver's licence because I could always rely on public transportation. Before traveling to Awajishima, I was aware that traversing the island would be more difficult than traveling within larger cities like Tokyo, but I was still surprised. Awajishima is rarely accessible by train, as there are no direct train services to Awajishima, but it is easily accessible by one of the regular boat or ferry services in the far north of the island connecting Awaji to Kobe, or by bus from the south via Naruto. However, once you arrive, the options for getting around are rather limited.



The Naruto Whirlpools one may encounter on a scenic ferry ride from Naruto to Awajishima
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I quickly discovered that getting around without a driver's licence was a bigger hurdle than I first thought. Awajishima is definitely travelable by bicycle and private buses (though they charge very high prices). While I was comfortable with these options to some degree on the island, I still found it difficult to really explore and get around without a driver's licence. Public transportation is infrequent and non-existent during holidays or major festivals, which limited planning trips at those times. At first, these restrictions seemed to apply only to travelers like me, but with Awaji's population steadily declining and aging, I learned firsthand that the elderly in particular have a hard time getting around. Long-term residents also find it difficult to access important services such as health care facilities or even grocery stores. While there is a need to improve public transportation in rural areas of Japan (see Fujisaki, K. et al., 2022), this may be more difficult in the case of Awajishima than in other areas. Many places are accessible only by narrow roads that cannot be traveled by buses. And although I felt that community-based transportation services such as ride-sharing were becoming more common in other rural areas, I could not see such a development in Awajishima. Moreover, the elderly couple I stayed with said that while such a change, or even the development of improved public transportation, would benefit some residents and travelers, they were more concerned about the loss of Awajishima's nature and unique character.



*If you don't have a car in rural Japan, you can rent a bike or wait for the bus
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My travels through Awajishima have not only given me the best experiences I have ever had, but also a deeper understanding of the complicated relationship between urban-rural migration and rural infrastructure. While urban areas are often the focus in discussions about development, we should definitely look at rural areas as well. I also believe that recognizing the importance of infrastructure development, particularly in the form of public transportation, in promoting connectivity and improving the quality of life in rural areas is an essential aspect of understanding urban-rural migration.

References

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