

Accessibility in Japan

Josh Grisdale knows a lot about the pros and cons of access, having faced most of his life from a wheelchair.

by **Matthew Hernon**



If you want to know how to get around in Tokyo, just ask Josh Grisdale, he has vast experience.

According to Josh Grisdale, “Japan is far more accessible than people would expect,” and that is something he is trying to get across with his website, Accessible Japan. A Canadian-born, Japanese citizen with quadriplegic cerebral palsy, Grisdale has been using a wheelchair since he was young, but it has never put him off traveling around the world. He first visited Japan in 2000 and immediately fell in love with the place. Since moving to Tokyo in 2007, he has wanted to give something back to the country and felt the best way to do that was to show just how accessible a nation it is.

“I think people have this image of capsule hotels, narrow streets, and passengers being pushed on to trains.

They are, therefore, sometimes put off coming,” says Grisdale. “My experiences, on the other hand, have generally been very positive. Between 2000 and 2006 I visited on four occasions and each time I felt it had become more accessible, especially in terms of transportation. I was seeing things that I had never seen anywhere else. At stations, there would be a staff member with a ramp to help you get on the train, and then somebody else waiting for you when you reached the destination. Also, the tactile paving to aid visually impaired people (invented by Seiichi Miyake in 1965), can be seen all over the place.”

Residing in Edogawa Ward in eastern Tokyo, a delightful area full of parks, waterways, and narrow streets, Grisdale says he has few problems getting around. He initially started blogging about his experiences here, and then in 2015, went a step further, creating the Accessible Japan website. “It is a passion project for me,” he says. “I was getting many questions on my blog about medicine, renting wheelchairs, guide dogs, all kinds

of things. Many of these issues I did not necessarily know about in great detail, so I had to do my own investigating. The natural progression seemed to be to make the website. The information is very important. As a person with a disability, I know how nerve-wracking it can be to go abroad without knowing what you are getting yourself into.”

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s Accessible Tourism Promotion Project is constantly attempting to improve accessibility in the city so people with disabilities and the elderly can comfortably move around easily. The project is steadily underway: as well as establishing symposiums for tourism-related industries, local businesses, and citizens, there is now a portal site for tourists from inside and outside the country. The Accessible Japan website is a good place to see some of the progress that is being made. It features general information about things like transportation and how to find accessible restaurants and restrooms, as well as useful Japanese phrases for getting around. There is also a forum, a blog, and a database of accessible hotels.

“Communication is one of the biggest challenges when it comes to accessibility in Japan, particularly regarding tourists,” opines Grisdale. “Sometimes there will be hotels with accessible rooms, however, when you go on their English site there will be nothing written about it or sometimes things get lost in translation. A bit of extra information here and there can make the difference between someone coming here or not. I received a message from an Australian family with a daughter in a wheelchair who loved anime and really wanted to visit Japan. They said they were encouraged to come because of what they read on my website. I was delighted to hear that, but my mission is to make things even bigger so more people can visit this wonderful country.”

For Grisdale, it is about more than just aiding people with disabilities as he feels accessible tourism benefits all kinds of groups and individuals. “Most of the inquiries on the website are about acquiring wheelchairs for elderly relatives,” he says. “Accessible tourism can help those who are older as well as parents with young children and people who have been injured. When tourist companies start realizing that, and the potential economic impact it could have, I think they will start promoting it more. With the Tokyo 2020 Games coming up, it is the perfect time for Japan to show how accessible it is.”