

Episode 6 - Transcription

[Music] Welcome back fellow travelers. This is Trouble with Me your in... accessible travel experience podcast.

If you enjoy the show and would like to be a part of it by sharing about your cities or telling us your accessibility horror stories, you can visit us at: troublewithme.com or at TabiFolk, your accessible travel community. And now, without further ado, welcome aboard and get ready to take off.

This is episode 6: trouble in Kyoto. Actually, today it's going to be completely focused on this city. Why is that? Because, well the city deserves it, first of all, and, then, because accessibility wise, if you don't have a bit of information, maybe it can be a bit difficult to navigate it. But with some tips and knowing how to move around, you can actually have an accessible holiday in Kyoto. So we've got the city of the day, we've got today's attraction, that will be Fushimi Inari, one of Kyoto's most special places, and also our accessibility horror story will be in the city. So today's menu may be quite simple, but it will also be quite tasty. Let's begin.

Welcome to Kyoto.

[Music]

The former imperial capital of Japan, Kyoto retains the traditional atmosphere of past eras in geiko neighborhoods, such as Gion, or in the dozens of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines that dress the city. Fantastic place to be in spring during the cherry blossom season or in autumn with it's vibrant foliage colors. By the way, Geiko and Geisha, which is probably the term that most listeners are familiar with, are the same, although in Kyoto they are called Geiko or Maiko.

[Music] We're on board of Kyoto's subway to give our score on Transportation accessibility. We're giving it, 3 out of 5 stars.

Even though the subway is 100 accessible, as there are only two lines, the bus is the main means in the city. Most buses are wheelchair accessible, but boarding them can be difficult in rush hour or near tourist attractions.

Taking buses at the beginning of the line may help solve these issues, but overall moving around the city requires a bit of planning.

By the way, you may have noticed that riding the subway in Japan is quite entertaining, as they are talking all the time on the speakers, they are giving information on what you can find in your next stops, and, also, you may have noticed that on today's episode we've changed the sound for our scores and we are using a different chime. It's a bell of Daitokuji's Temple, which is one of the main Buddhist temples in Kyoto.

Okay, next, Streets accessibility. We are giving it 3.5 stars. Sidewalks and streets are well maintained and there are well made curb cuts nearly everywhere. However there are touristic

areas where streets are steep and can get really crowded. Pedestrian only streets in the geiko district of Gion and accessible walkways along the Kamo river are also a bonus.

Now, Restaurants and Shops: 3 out of 5 stars. Not really good, as less than 50 percent of entrances are wheelchair accessible, but the sheer amount of options compensates a little bit. Let's continue, Hotels and Accommodations. Only 2 out of 5 stars. There are not many accessible options, but there are some and improving. The Toyoko Inn chain is one of them in the budget range hotels. As a tip, don't wait until the last minute to secure your accommodation.

We are in Kurumazaki Jinja, one of Kyoto's shrines, and it's kind as if the crow was asking us: "But are we really going to be able to enjoy Kyoto's old and traditional tourist attractions?"

"Yes", the other crow replies. We are giving them 2.5 stars. The good news is that all main attractions are partially wheelchair accessible and all of them have accessible toilets nearby. The bad news is that most of them have inaccessible areas, due to a combination of gravel of different depths, uneven paths, steep slopes, steps or stairs. For manual wheelchair users we highly recommend having some kind of power assist, be it human or electric. [Music]

And, finally, we are hearing the announcement melody of Kyoto's station for the score on Getting There. 4 out of 5 stars. There's no need to plan in advance for accessible transportation, as all arrivals have accessible options. Being more than one hour away from the nearest international airport is the only downside.

With this we have reached the end of the report. Our overall accessibility score for Kyoto is 3 out of 5 stars. Kyoto may not be the most accessible destination, but it is still accessible enough to enjoy. Don't let the aforementioned issues in tourist attractions stop you, as their beauty and uniqueness highly compensate the potential hassle. Accommodation, for sure, and sometimes transportation within the city also require planning. For details on specific attractions, you can either refer to the full report at troublewithme.com or go to Accessible Japan's website. I wouldn't want to end without giving my special thanks to my friend Yumi for her help with the report on Kyoto and also for all the sounds that she sent me and that we'll be using throughout the whole episode. And now, let's discover a bit more on the accessibility of my favorite tourist attraction in Kyoto, which is Fushimi Inari.

[Music]

As well as my favorite place in Kyoto, Fushimi Inari is an iconic Shinto shrine dedicated to an ancient rice deity with thousands of torii gates -red-orange wooden rectangular archways-forming tunnels that wind up through a forested mountain. Its magical atmosphere, specially in the early hours, where the sounds and colors of nature blend with the gates, will take you back to another era.

[Music] This is the sound of a level crossing near Fushimi Inari. Don't worry because both the station and the crossing are wheelchair accessible.

And, once you get off, you'll feel like in a Ghibli movie, one of those that you get like transported to another world. Unfortunately accessibility is not otherworldly. Actually, there are no accessibility

features for different types of disabilities, except for physical accessibility. So this report will focus on that. Well, first of all, there are many areas in the mountain -remind that the whole Shrine is spread throughout the mountain-, so there are many areas with stairs or steps that make the inner torii tunnels inaccessible to wheelchair users. Nevertheless, as nearby train stations are accessible and with the recently added elevator that takes you from the main shrine hall area to the beginning of the tunnels, visiting Fushimi Inari is feasible, as accessibility has improved. Unfortunately, said elevator only works from 9am to 3pm and the best hours to visit to avoid crowds are either earlier in the morning or later in the afternoon or in winter season altogether. In fact, there are alternative routes without the elevator, although with some shallow steps or steep slopes that some wheelchair users may or may not be able to sort through. Besides said elevator and some ramps in place, as mentioned, there are no other accessibility features.

For all this, while walking in the shrine late in summer, we are giving Fushimi Inari a total accessibility score of 2.5 out of 5 stars. By the way, we forgot to mention that admission is free and also, if you plan to visit, we highly recommend checking our maps in the full report, available at troublewithme.com or at TabiFolk, to see photos of the potential barriers and know the best routes beforehand, as, despite the accessibility issues, we think that Fushimi Inari and its unique torii tunnels are a must in Kyoto and, altogether, in Japan.

Again, my thanks go this time to Josh for his photos and for his fact checking of the full report. With this, now it's time for our awaited accessibility horror story. Again, it is me having some travel related complications. [Music]

It was a sunny spring day in the outskirts of Kyoto. A couple of friends and I had spent the morning visiting temples and fighting gravel and slopes along the way with my wheelchair and were replenishing our energy at a kaiten sushi, one of those restaurants where sushi plates go around on a conveyor belt. We would be finishing our day relaxing at a small onsen, a public bath with hot spring water, in Arashiyama, about 6km away, so, once our stomachs were full, we went to the nearest bus station. I was really looking forward to it, as it was to be my second onsen experience in Japan. Mineral water at 42 degrees, bliss for my achy bones and, even more, after a day of exercising in partially accessible tourist attractions.

Anyway, we waited for the bus a few minutes and, as it approached, I waved at the driver. Usually, in Kyoto, once the bus stops, the driver gets off the bus and deploys a manual ramp for wheelchair users to board. Things went wrong in the blink of an eye. This time, as the doors opened, I realized that the bus was packed and the driver didn't get off. My friends got on and fought their way to the front. I was left waiting on the sidewalk without knowing what was going on inside and hoping that the doors wouldn't just shut off with me outside. After a few tenseful seconds, one of my friends appeared on the rear door telling me that the driver wouldn't let me in, as the bus was too crowded. Apparently, all the following buses would also be full, so I wouldn't be able to ride those either.

Maybe it's just me, but before stranding someone on a wheelchair in the middle of nowhere, knowing that buses for the next couple of hours would be full, me, as a driver, I would ask some passengers to get off, make some room for the wheelchair and, then, let them back on redistributed once the wheelchair is settled. But maybe that's just me.

As time was pressing and my not-cause-trouble me took over (for my friends, the rest of the passengers and, of course, the kind driver), I told them that I'd find a way and to meet directly at Arashiyama. In a heartbeat, I found myself alone indeed in the middle of nowhere, as actually, everyone was able to get on the bus, but me. Without my friends around, the air felt a bit more chill. I checked at my wheelchair's battery and 6 extra kilometers was a no go, so, despite streets in Japan being mostly accessible, I had to discard my first idea of navigating said distance on my wheelchair. Also, most probably, that would have taken way longer than the bus and I was still not giving up on enjoying my well deserved onsen bath in time. Had I been too hasty sending my friends away?

Another option, but I didn't really consider it, would have been a taxi. First, I didn't have the phone of any accessible taxi companies and my Japanese was not good enough to search online. Second, from past experiences, regular taxis didn't usually stop for wheelchairs. And third, it would have been too expensive anyway for my budget, so, I had to move on to a budding plan C: Google Maps.

I remembered from a previous time in Arashiyama that there was some kind of train or tramway station. A quick map search confirmed it. I didn't know if it was accessible or not (at the time, accessibility information on stations in Google Maps was not as common as today), but either way I'd somehow find a way. A second search told, me that I was one and a half kilometers away from the nearest tram stop and that, to get to Arashiyama, there was a transfer, which I usually try to avoid, but I didn't have much leeway on options. Did I?

The general direction was to the South and West. I put off the phone and off I went. I'd look at the map again once I felt I was closer, as wheeling and looking at your cellphone at the same time on a manual wheelchair is quite complicated.

Cruising at top speed along sidewalk-less side streets of residential areas in Kyoto, I passed by cherry trees in full bloom ready for the beginning of the school course in April. What a sight, even when being on a rush. Actually, I was quite enjoying it... that was up until the steps at the tramway stop. 4, to be exact, to get to the platform, not a soul in sight and an 18kg wheelchair. I'm 30, by the way, and not much taller than the thing itself, so yeah.

Anyway, there wasn't much thinking to do, I got off the wheelchair, removed the power-assist engine and pushed it over one step at a time. The good thing of there not being anyone around, is that noone would come running and steal my wheelchair as I left it 4 steps away from me. Truth is I had done that plenty of times while visiting temples in Japan, dusting off my crutches and leaving my wheelchair at the entrance, so I was quite safe either way (disclaimer, don't do that in other countries). Next, I positioned myself a couple of steps above the wheelchair and pulled on it backwards, while tilting it to try to lift its front wheels at the same time, so that they wouldn't get stuck. I failed the maneuver. Tried again. Failed again. Tried again. Exhaustion. Tried again. One, two, three, four steps. At last. The tram came. Another smaller step to board it and a few minutes to rest before the transfer came.

I dreaded it. Surprisingly, though, aside from the steps to get on and off, there were ramps to change platforms and even a paved path to cross the railroad. 45 minutes after our sudden

departure, I reunited with my friends at Arashiyama station. As planned, we spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing at the onsen, but that's another story... [Music]

[Music] We have reached the end of the story and gotten to our tip of the day.

Today, actually, it's quite simple. It's to have a plan B for transportation. You never know what's going to happen and, when you depend on accessibility features, well, broken automated lifts or ramps, elevators out of order, taxi refusals, crowded buses... are quite common, unfortunately. So, if you can, you should have a plan B or, at least, know the accessible transportation options available in a city and have the phones for accessible taxis in hand, if any.

That's it, that simple, it just takes a bit of time, a bit of research, but, at least, you'll be more at ease if anything happens. Okay, that's it for today. As a heads up for our next episode, we are going to travel to San Francisco. And, as always, remember fellow travelers, if you want to be part of the podcast, you can send your stories, your accessibility reviews... and contact us at troublewithme.com, where you will also find all the accessibility reviews and full reports. Now, let's move on and say goodbye with our sounds of the world.

[Music]

As it's our Kyoto special, we'll be staying in the city.

First, we are next to the river of Kamo, hearing some cars, faint birds and the flow of water.

Now, we'll move on to hear some steps on a boardwalk of Tojin temple and our crows, of course.

With this friendly sound, we say goodbye, have a nice day and see you next time, fellow travelers.