

Accessibility Horror Story

Personal information

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Your horror story

We are in the middle of the Japanese Alps, in the town of Tsumago, a small village frozen in time, nearly kept as in between the 17th and the 19th centuries. This was a weekend trip to visit some post-towns along the route that connected Tokyo and Kyoto at the time.

After a night spent in Nakatsugawa, a small city at the door of the Alps, I took an accessible bus to Magome, my first stop. Before going, I had checked for potential accessibility issues and I was ready for some challenges. The first one, the main street of Magome, a really steep slope, paved with uneven stone, although with a one meter wide tiled path at the center. My power-assist device handled the slope along the path on its way up, but I thought that I'd better find another way down, as the slope might be too steep for my hands to break. My power assist only pushes forward, so I have to handle steering, breaking and going downhill. Anyway, after a nice climb I reached the top. There my power assist behaved odd for a few moments, I restarted it and it got fixed. I gave it no more thought and continued.

Then, I took another bus, this one was not accessible. Luckily, the bus driver gave me a hand with the wheelchair and I managed to climb the stairs on my own and sat on a regular seat, while holding the chair in place as we hit the windy road. We got to Tsumago and there I spent a day to remember. Instead of staying on the main streets, I wandered around enjoying the warmth of the sun, the sound of the trees and the freshness of the air. Again, I noticed that the assistive device was behaving odd and I thought that it may have been due to the lifting on and off the bus (not the first time that it had happened). I stopped on a back street, next to the river and fixed the joint that attaches the device to the wheelchair. I don't usually enjoy doing handy work, but the place, the atmosphere were just mesmerizing and I could have stayed there till the sun went down. Nevertheless, the way back would take some time and there was a bus to catch. I went back to the main streets and had lunch at a noodle restaurant. Good stuff. After lunch, though, my wheelchair stopped working, at all.

I restarted it, once, twice, thrice, many times. I started breathing and looking at my surroundings, realizing that I was really far from home. I started pushing, towards the bus stop, despite my arms not being ready for it. In my case, the power-assist is not just an assist, but it's actually "the" power. Now it was just dead weight. About 50 meters flat and the rest downhill, I got to the bus, got a hand from the driver and climbed the stairs again, although way slower this time, as my joints were feeling really achy. As the bus rode off, my head started racing. Rather than worried about the current situation, which was already pretty complicated, I worried about the future, meaning how would I be able to keep living in Japan without being able to move around, how would I go to the grocery store or, even more, how would I go to my language school, as I could not miss more than 10 days without losing my visa and the ability to keep living in the country along with it.

We got to Magome. I couldn't face the steep street to go back to the other bus, so I took the road surrounding the village. Still downhill, actually the only way that I could manage without my power assist, but milder. On the way down, I was really hailing for every single curb cut that allowed me to cross smaller streets and keep on the sidewalk. After a 20 minute descent and a never-ending 50 meter flat terrain, I reached the bus stop.

After getting to Nakatsugawa, there was still the 200 meters to the hotel, it took me 30 minutes; the 100 meters slightly uphill way to the convenience store to get dinner, 30 minutes more, and then the way back, though that was just 5 minutes, downhill, remember. Finally, I took some painkillers and I slept.

The next day I had to visit more post-towns, but I called it quits. I did the return trip to Osaka, another odyssey, 30 more minutes painfully wheeling to the Nakatsugawa station, a transfer in Nagoya and another to the subway in Osaka, more than one kilometer in total, though friendly station staff members pushed me all the way and literally saved my ass and my arms, and the final flat stretch to my apartment.

So, how did it all end? During my stay in Japan I had made some friends at a local association for people with disabilities. I called them and, after explaining them my problem, one gracefully lent me his older power wheelchair. He was also one meter tall, so the fit was nearly perfect, otherwise it would have been another nightmare. In a week time, I managed to get a spare part from my power assist company. The issue was not with the device, but with the connection to it. In the meantime, I learned some cool tricks with the power wheelchair that I later applied to my power-assist driving skills, but, anyway, that's another story...