

Accessibility Horror Story

Personal information

- **Name:** Joan
- **City and country:** Barcelona, Spain
- **Social media handles:** @joan_pahisa (Twitter, Instagram), @joanp (TabiFolk)
- **Your accessibility needs or how are you related to accessibility:** Manual wheelchair user with a SmartDrive power-assist device.

Your horror story

The first month in Japan, I had been feeling quite lonely. The cold, grey days of January didn't help it much either. However, after the first few weeks, someone was finally coming to visit me. I was really looking forward to it, as we'd be sightseeing Kyoto together and I'd start moving around the country instead of focusing so much in my studies. Unforeseen circumstances, though, turned it into a bittersweet reunion.

I went to pick him up at the airport early in the morning. I wheeled to the train station, I asked for a slope to board it and got to Kansai's International Airport. His plane had just landed, so I had plenty time to go to the toilet. In Japan, there are nice and clean accessible restrooms at most transportation facilities, shopping malls, public buildings and the likes.

Anyway, I pushed the button to open the automatic door and entered the spaceship-like compartment, white and indeed clean, with different types of sinks and gadgets for people with different kinds of needs. I rode off the wheelchair and got ready to climb the toilet. That's right, climb. When you're one meter tall, you have to climb to most places. I put my knuckles on the inner lid (I mentioned the cleanliness of the place, right? Otherwise, going to the toilet is a no go...), put my weight on them and, just as I was lifting myself from the ground, my right index finger slipped and kept sliding, while the rest of the hand stayed in place. I stopped the motion, rose my hand and tried to open it. My finger, instead of forward, was pointing to the left and downwards. Dislocation.

A few years earlier, I had the same problem and I was able to put it myself into place, so I stayed calm and started the maneuver. For the next five minutes, I kept pulling and pulling on it. With each unsuccessful attempt, as the pain rose and the joint cooled, I started checking the clock. I applied hot water to loosen it and pulled again. After ten more minutes, no luck. The skin felt tight and the joint was swollen and stuck. I gave up and managed to go back to the arrivals area with my bum finger, as my visit was coming out the gates. As he approached to hug, I showed him my hand. It was even more of an emotional hug.

Despite the long flight, he suggested going to a hospital, but I didn't know of any, so I decided to go to school. They'd be able to help me there and I didn't want to spoil my attendance rate, essential for keeping my student visa. I couldn't even write, but I stayed in class for four hours.

After class, they sent me to the nearest clinic. When my turn arrived, I tried to explain the situation to the doctor. Previous experiences with emergency medical care in my country, didn't make me hopeful. Most doctors usually freaked out when they saw my bones. This time around, despite my efforts in my poor Japanese, the doctor insisted that I had dislodged my finger while putting it between the wheels of my wheelchair. "Climbing" a toilet didn't seem like a plausible explanation. Whatever the cause, in the end, they took me to the X-ray room. The place was dark, crowded with piles of cardboard boxes and barely any space to move around. It seemed like it hadn't been used in ages. The X-ray machine was more than a meter high and, apparently, it couldn't go any lower. The doctor looked at me nervously. I suggested taking it with my hand up. Not ideal, but better than nothing. He took a couple in this odd position, glanced at them and, in the same room, without any table to rest my hand on or local anesthesia to numb the pain, he started pulling on my finger. Once, twice, thrice, harder and harder. After a few minutes, a couple of shy tears sprang to my eyes, but I didn't complain. He kept going. His hair was unkempt, his forehead sweaty and his face was red. After 15 more minutes, that felt like an eternity, finally, he gave up. He suggested that I go to a specialized hand clinic the next morning, gave me the address and apologized profusely. I went back to my apartment and spent a miserable night.

The next morning, I was already developing a technique to use my wheelchair limiting the use of my right hand. In such a way, I went to the Namba Hand Center and, as I got in, things looked better from the get go. The entrance already had an air of professionalism to it. There, they took two proper X-rays and transferred me to an operating room. They injected some anesthesia and, soon after, the doctor came. She started similar pulling maneuvers moving my finger as if it were rubber, but, despite that, I didn't feel any pain. However, after a few minutes of trying, results were still the same. My hopes sank. The doctor, concerned, told me that I'd have to undergo surgery. Surgery, in a foreign country, with barely speaking the language, without being able to move for days. No hand, no wheelchair. That would mean the end of my stay in Japan, as well as lots of other potential issues. Pleading, I asked her to try once more.

She did. Once, twice, thrice... and crack. It was the most relieving crack I've ever felt in my life. The finger was back into place. The next day, we were visiting Kyoto and staying at a traditional hotel. I was not missing it. With a splint binding my index to the middle finger and a wheelchair driving technique that kept developing despite the pain and rain, we had some new adventures on the former imperial capital. But that's another story...