

# Accessibility Horror Story

## Personal information

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- **Your accessibility needs or how are you related to accessibility:** Manual wheelchair user with a SmartDrive power-assist device.

## Your horror story

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...