

The Second Tokyo Paralympic: Making Japan a Friendly Place for the Disabled

Delayed but not discouraged, scores of athletes with disabilities from the U.S. and around the world have been training to compete in the Second Tokyo Paralympic Games, originally slated for 2020 and now set for Aug. 24 – Sept. 5, 2021 in Tokyo, Chiba and Shizuoka. To welcome Paralympic athletes, Japan has been working to make venues, accommodations and attractions barrier-free and accessible to those with disabilities.

Accessibility in Japan has improved a lot since the First Tokyo Paralympic Games in 1964, which was only the second Paralympic Games in history. These days, universal design has been broadly implemented in Japan. Easy-access transportation such as non-step buses and roll-on train platforms are widely available. Likewise, modern barrier-free facilities that can be navigated by wheelchairs and have multipurpose toilets and wide elevators with lowered buttons are increasingly commonplace.



Multipurpose restrooms

People with disabilities have strong advocates in Japan’s national parliament. In 2019, two lawmakers with severe physical disabilities won elections to the House of Councillors, bringing greater recognition to the need for greater accessibility.

However, there remain challenges, especially outside of major metropolitan areas like Tokyo. Some narrow streets don’t have dedicated sidewalks and many older buildings may have a traditional “genkan” step at the entrance where one removes shoes, not to mention narrow corridors that aren’t wheelchair friendly. As in any place, it is a good idea to call ahead about a facility’s accessibility before traveling to it.

Japan has done its due diligence regarding this key concern. According to a survey conducted by the Japan Tourism Agency, foreigners with disabilities tend to think of tourism in terms of “going to places where they want to go” rather than “going to places that are barrier-free,” and also tend to think about how they can manage to get to places with barriers. Japan has taken those concerns into consideration as it prepares for the Paralympic Games.

To that end, Japan has followed the lead established by the U.S., the foremost proponent supporting sports for the disabled. This is largely due to the laws that have been in effect in the U.S. since around 2000 to protect the human rights of people with disabilities and to support their social activities. Comparatively, Japan only enacted its Disability Discrimination Act in 2016, which means the country has had to catch up with the standard set by the U.S.

Adopting a barrier-free mindset

Japan has used the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games as an opportunity to increase opportunities for people with disabilities to play an active role in society through the promotion of “barrier-free minds” where everyone respects each other’s personality and individuality and supports one another.

Moreover, the country established a Universal Design 2020 committee, chaired by the minister for the Tokyo Games, to implement barrier-free design throughout Tokyo with a view to nationwide expansion. With input from organizations focused on the needs of people with disabilities, the committee implemented a “Universal Design 2020 Action Plan” to work on promoting “barrier-free minds” and make the city more accessible, a place that Japan can proudly show to the entire world.

Barrier-free minds means that all people with various mental and physical characteristics and ways of thinking can communicate and support each other in order to deepen understanding of each other. In brief, barrier-free minds understand that it is society’s responsibility to remove social barriers for people with disabilities; ensure that discrimination against people with disabilities (and their families) is not tolerated, and develop the ability to communicate with others who have different conditions from their own and to be able to imagine and empathize with the challenges and pains that everyone faces.



Roll-on train platform

As for improvements on the ground, Japan has implemented barrier-free accessibility at and around the Tokyo Games’ competition venues and public transportation, based on the Tokyo 2020 Accessibility Guidelines. Moreover, the government has also looked to establish barrier-free areas in tourist spots and urban complexes (e.g. large train stations, underground shopping malls, public restrooms, etc.).

Progress has been made. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is working with its municipal partners to ensure smoother [access](#) to venues at the Tokyo Games for attendees who use wheelchairs and other individuals requiring special consideration. In addition, visitors will be able to enjoy a variety of barrier-free sports-related tourist attractions during their stay in Japan—from wheelchair paragliding and standup paddleboarding for the hearing challenged to wheelchair waterfall meditation.

From wheels to wings

It seems everyone—regardless of physical ability—dreams of flying. Well, the dream is achievable in Japan with wheelchair paragliding.

In paragliding, the pilot sits in a harness or lies supine in a cocoon-like ‘speed bag’ suspended below a fabric wing. Wing shape is maintained by the suspension lines, the pressure of air entering vents in the front of the wing, and the aerodynamic forces of the air flowing over the outside. In wheelchair paragliding, the wheelchair user is usually accompanied by an experienced pilot to assure safety.

To try wheelchair paragliding, travel north of Tokyo to the city of Nanyo (about three-and-a-half hours by train) to the [Yamagata Barrier-Free Sightseeing Tour Center](#), which has a variety of paragliders, including those specially designed for people with disabilities. This is the only flight area in Japan that allows wheelchair users to experience paragliding flights. In 2015, the center’s founder, Mr. Kenichi Kato, was the first person with Muscular Dystrophy in Japan to make a solo flight in a paraglider using motor-controlled steering.

Although paragliding usually requires running during takeoff and landing, the specialized paragliding wheelchair allows people who have difficulty running to enjoy the flight. Before taking off, one should understand that paragliding inherently involves great danger (including death and serious injury). While the staff at the tour center always does their best to ensure the safety, they cannot guarantee absolute safety from all hazards. Moreover, prior to wheelchair paragliding, one should consult family and doctor about the risks in advance and request them to fill out a consent form and medical certificate. On the day of the flight, adjustments will be made according to the participants’ physical condition.

What’SUP?

Thanks to surging interest in outdoor recreational activities, stand-up paddle boarding (or SUP) is growing in popularity in Japan and around the world.

Born in the surfing mecca of Hawaii, SUP boarders stand while using a long paddle to propel themselves through the water. Moreover, it’s a sport that can be easily picked up by the hearing challenged.

A great place to try SUP is at [Verde Odai Tourism](#) in Mie Prefecture (about 3.5 hours south of Tokyo) on the Miya River, one of the cleanest waterways in Japan. SUP-ing on the gentle, emerald-hued Miya, taking in the clear water and lush landscape, can be as leisurely or as sporty as one wants it to be. That’s the beauty of SUP.

SUP offers several benefits (regardless of disability). It gets you on your feet, helps with balance, reduces stress levels, exercises the entire body, is a low-impact workout, boosts cardiovascular health and enables an optimal environment for meditation by heightening awareness and encouraging a “flow” state of mind.

Verde Odai Tourism also offers cycling, hiking and kayaking adventures.

Barrier-free Zen

Contrary to popular belief, waterfall meditation doesn't mean sitting on dry ground, meditating to soothing sounds of a waterfall. Actually, waterfall meditation requires the participant to get under the freezing cold cascade and remain there for the duration. Also known as "takigyo", it is an ascetic practice whose purpose is to purify and strengthen one's mind, body and soul.

In general, meditation, also known as zazen or mindfulness training, has been widely adopted by athletes of all stripes. Eleven-time NBA champion coach Phil Jackson pioneered its use in professional sports in the 1990s. Many athletes practice meditation, such as basketball player LeBron James, volleyballer Misty May-Treanor and marathon runner Deena Kastor. The U.S. Olympic swimming team has encouraged its athletes to use the Mindfulness app to help them focus on competition.

Now, para athletes and other wheelchair users can experience the rush of "[barrier-free takigyo](#)" at [Fudo waterfall](#) in the town of Nakanoto in Ishikawa Prefecture, about four hours by train from Tokyo. There, a parking lot for people with disabilities is available close to the waterfall, and polyester mats are laid out like a carpet right under the waterfall to make it easier for wheelchairs to roll up. Ishikawa Barrier-Free Center also rent wheelchairs that are relatively easy to move around, even on rocky terrains. Furthermore, for those who never want to get wet, super water-repellent shiroshozoku outfits are available.

The Paralympic Movement

The Paralympic Games is widely regarded the pinnacle sporting event that showcases the abilities of people with disabilities while also serving as a platform for disability rights through ensuring integration, equality of opportunity, and accessibility of the built environment.

The Paralympic Movement offers sport opportunities for athletes with physical, vision and/or intellectual impairments that have at least one of the following 10 eligible impairments: impaired muscle power, impaired passive range of movement, limb deficiency, leg length difference, short stature, muscle tension, uncoordinated movement, involuntary movements, vision impairment and intellectual impairment.

The promotion of physical fitness, disability rights, and social integration through sports is transforming the lives of those who participate and stimulates the expansion of opportunities available to the next generation of athletes with disabilities.

