

meet

MIZUKI

Dreaming of a Barrier-Free Japan

On a regular day in Japan, two-year-old Mizuki was at the park playing while her mother protectively watched on. Little did her mother know it would be the last time she would see her daughter run or even walk again. Mizuki went to bed after her fun afternoon in the park and fell into a very deep sleep. After failing to wake her daughter after numerous attempts, Mizuki was rushed to hospital. It was soon discovered that a virus had taken hold of Mizuki. The virus had entered her spinal cord and caused irreparable damage.

Still to this day, Mizuki has not received a complete diagnosis. After many tests and various rehabilitation sessions, there is only slight movement in Mizuki's right leg. Mizuki received her first wheelchair at age seven. Growing up in Japan with a disability is very different to Australia. In a candid interview with *The Advocate* magazine, Mizuki shares some of her experiences.

In Japan, 'barrier-free' is a term that represents the country's move to make the urban environment and transportation systems barrier-free for everybody. According to *The Japan Times*, it has been well over a decade since a transport law was enacted and now more than 93 percent of major train stations are accessible.

Japan has a population of approximately 126 million people, and six percent of the population has a disability (around 7.5 million). The current number of people with a physical disability is around 3 million. The entire population of Japan lives in a space that is approximately 1/20th the size of Australia or slightly larger than the state of Victoria.

Due to these space restrictions, it is standard that most buildings in Japan are built on multiple levels. This includes apartments, businesses, shops and schools. It is commonplace for a primary school to have classrooms on four, five or even six levels. This is in contrast to the typical Australian school which is usually a one-level building sprawling over large grounds with covered walkways joining different classroom blocks.

Mizuki's family was faced with the challenge of overcoming accessibility issues when it came time for Mizuki to attend primary school. The local school was on multiple levels and, as is typical in Japanese schools, there was no elevator. It was gently suggested that Mizuki attend one of



the government-run schools for children with a disability. The outcomes for graduates of these schools are not ideal with more than half of the graduates falling into welfare-like employment and meagre wages making it impossible to live independently. Mizuki's family was determined that their child would receive the best education available, and set out to overcome the issue. Their solution was to buy a wheelchair for every level of the building and place it at the top of the stairs. The school agreed to this idea on the condition that Mizuki could get herself, unaided by fellow students, up or down each flight of stairs when it was time to change classrooms.

Mizuki's determination paid off and she successfully attended and graduated from the public schooling system in Japan.

"I can say I have been lucky because growing up I have had an amazing support network. I have some very supportive family and friends," says Mizuki.

During high school, Mizuki travelled as an exchange student to Australia where she stayed with a host family for a homestay experience. This was her first overseas trip.

"I felt like it was the first time I was really free. I was treated as a regular person. I went to the local high school and everyone was so kind and accepting of me."



MOON RIDER 7

WWW.MOONRIDER7.COM

According to Mizuki, past attitudes towards disability in Japan are changing but are still not the same as in countries like Australia or America. The perceptions of disability in relation to society and social interaction are still far removed from the experiences that Mizuki had when traveling to Australia.

"In Japan, I get frustrated when I go to use an accessible bathroom and they are all taken. I wait outside only to find a person who doesn't have a disability has been using it. This happens all the time. There isn't the same consideration. The same situation often happens with the elevators at the train station. Often I wait in line to use an elevator while people who could easily take the stairs are standing in front of me."

After graduating high school in Japan, Mizuki decided she would like to live and study in another country. She was hoping to come back to Australia, however, her school had a relationship with the University of Wisconsin, and she headed over to the States. With English as her second language, Mizuki graduated from the university while working part-time and studying.

Mizuki is currently in charge of public relations for a large clothing company in Tokyo. According to Mizuki, the law in Japan is that large companies (more than 5,000 employees) must hire two people with a disability or pay a penalty to the government. Mizuki's workplace is accessible and although she has only been there since last year, she is loving her role.

"I also volunteer for a disability magazine in Japan, similar to The Advocate magazine, called Coco Life. I want people to know anything is possible if you are determined."

Mizuki has been writing about her adventures and day-to-day life through her blog called Moon Rider 7. Moon Rider is a term Mizuki uses to describe a wheelchair user.

You can follow her journey at www.moonrider7.com.



Mizuki agreed to be our cover model for this issue of The Advocate.



I have always wanted to visit more places and meet more people. I am very lucky to have the chance to do so lately. I have also noticed an interesting fact, which is that a Moon Rider (wheelchair user) is very attention-grabbing in a crowd. I believe you can understand it if you are a moon rider, too.

I have met too many people to memorise all their faces and names but I am sure it is a lot easier for them to remember me.

Last week, I was taking a walk in my neighbourhood with Jeff (my partner). There was a person who called out my name on an intersection. I was very impressed. I have not seen this person in two years and I have only met her twice. Being able to meet many different people is a very lucky thing to me.

I am sorry that I might not be able to recall all the names of those who I encountered in my life but if you do remember me and if you see me on the street, please feel free to talk to me. I will be happy to talk to you!



Recently I have been going home by wheelchair and not taking the subway from work. It is about 4.3km and takes about one hour to get home.

At first I started wheelchairs home for my health, but I found other good points.

One of them is that I can see the area I haven't visited and people living there. I take the subway to go to my office everyday, so I only know the areas near where I work/live.

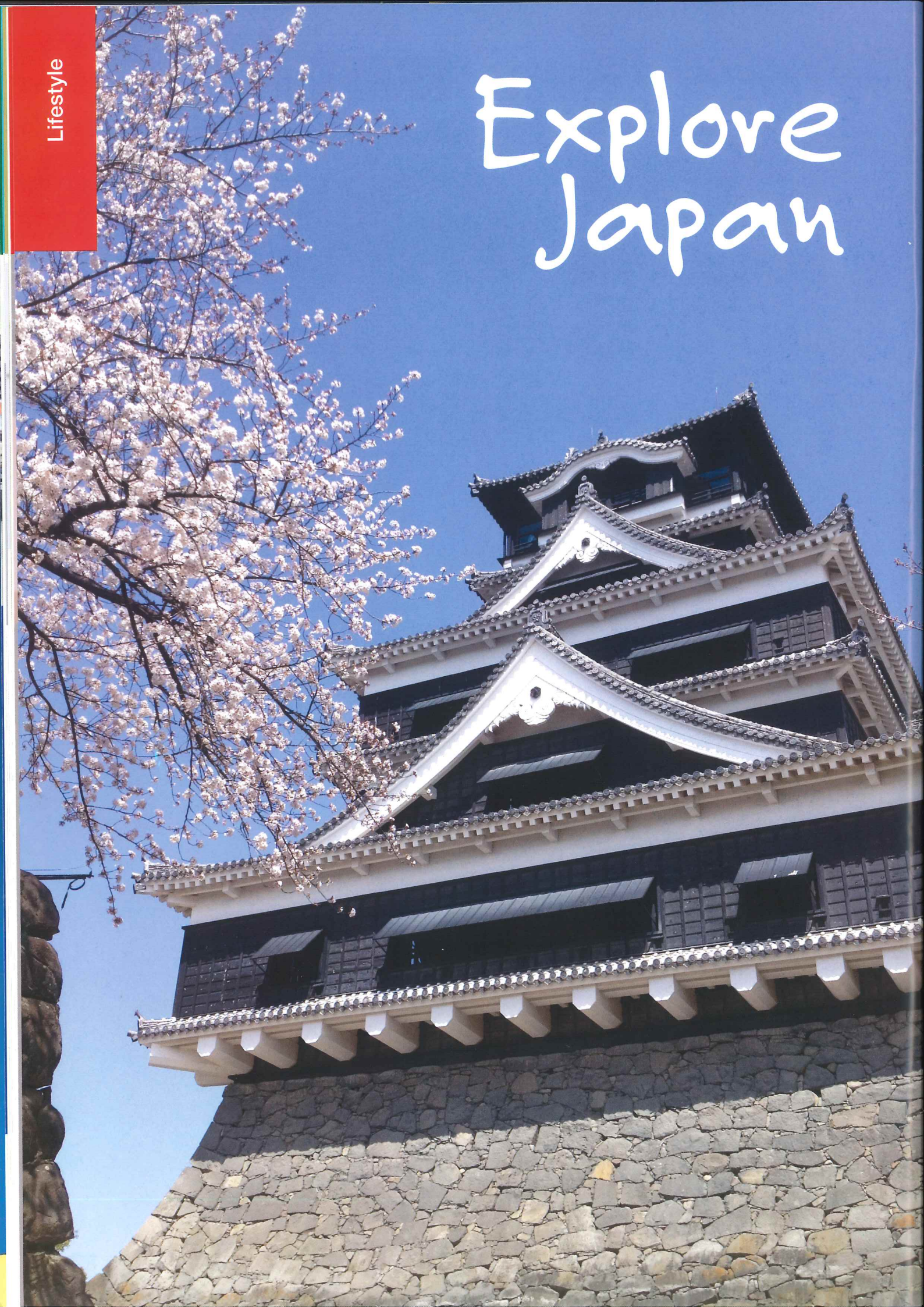


Although Japan has a discount ticket for people with a disability (it's still expensive though!), I wonder why most of the screens have the wheelchair seat in the first row, just in front of the screen. Although it should be space-wise, isn't it hard even for non-Moon Riders to watch a movie in the first row seat? Many people don't choose the first row seat, right?

Also, when I book the ticket online, it is hard to tell from the seat map which exit is wheelchair accessible and whether the aisle is stairs or a ramp. I usually use a regular seat to watch a movie, so if the aisle is a ramp, I want to pick the best position to sit. If the aisle is stairs, I don't want to go up or down but still want to choose a seat in the upper rows.

I want architects in Japan to build more convenient movie theaters by considering the Moon Rider guest and asking an opinion from them.

Explore Japan



Japan Accessible Tourism Center

The Japan Accessible Tourism Center (JATC) is a non-profit organisation that provides accessibility information in multiple languages, serving as a gateway for foreign tourists to explore Japan. JATC can also assist by making arrangements for carers, transport, accommodation and offering travel tips. This is a free service run by volunteers. The president of the organisation, Hideto Kijima, who sustained a spinal cord injury while playing high school rugby in Japan, is an avid traveller who has visited more than 100 countries. Mr Kijima is passionate about accessible travel to Japan. His organisation has put together a comprehensive, honest review of accessibility in Japan. Below is a sample of some of the travel information you can find through the website www.japan-accessible.com. You can also find some handy printout point conversation cards. All images and information courtesy of JATC.



CASTLE 城



Traditionally made from wood, these old and historical buildings are unable to be modified given their age and fragile nature. However, some castles such as Osaka Castle (pictured) have had lifts installed making them accessible. Other accessible castles worth a visit include Nagoya Castle and Shuri Castle.

PAVEMENT 歩道



Japanese roads are narrow, even in areas with heavy traffic. In urban cities many people ride their bicycles on the footpath as there are no dedicated cycling lanes. The roads in Japan are also built higher than street level due to the heavy rain. This sloping of the road can make it easy to lose balance. The edge of the pavement is sloped to reduce the step. There are usually yellow, textured blocks at each crossing for people who are visually impaired.

TOILET トイレ



There are plenty of clean public toilets in Japan, including spacious and well-equipped multi-purpose toilets that are wheelchair accessible. Accessible toilets are widely used by everybody including elderly people and parents with prams. Some are located in the regular toilet space, but many are separate. You can find these toilets everywhere, so do not worry and enjoy your trip.

CHERRY BLOSSOM 桜



Spring is the best season to visit Japan and view the cherry blossoms. The season is only 10-14 days long. The end of March and early April is the season for Tokyo, Kyoto and other popular destinations. Cherry blossom season is a very much-loved season in Japan and it is tradition to get together with friends and co-workers and eat your lunch under the cherry blossoms. You will discover there are no limitations to viewing as cherry blossoms will be everywhere.

TRAIN 電車



The Japanese railway system is a well-established network which can take you to almost anywhere you want to go. Nearly all stations are accessible with ramps, escalators and elevators. Most train car floors and platforms are at the same level. Unfortunately some express trains do not have enough wheelchair space. Tokyo metropolitan area can get extremely crowded during peak hours and it can be too dangerous to move around in a wheelchair during these peak times.

EATING 食事



Restaurants in the cities may have steps at the door or be small and narrow inside. Traditional country restaurants may have tatami mats on the floor are not accessible due to the mats' fragile nature. Larger and more popular restaurants are usually more accessible with ramps and accessible toilets. It is really dependant on where you are but there are usually many options. A good restaurant will also cater to most dietary restrictions so feel free to ask.

SHOPPING 買い物



It is a legal requirement for buildings in downtown areas and large shopping malls to be accessible. Sometimes you have to search for access which may be in the form of an elevator or ramp. Smaller shops may have stairs only and be in very narrow spaces. If you focus on the major shopping areas you should find you can comfortably access most areas, even smaller, individual shops.