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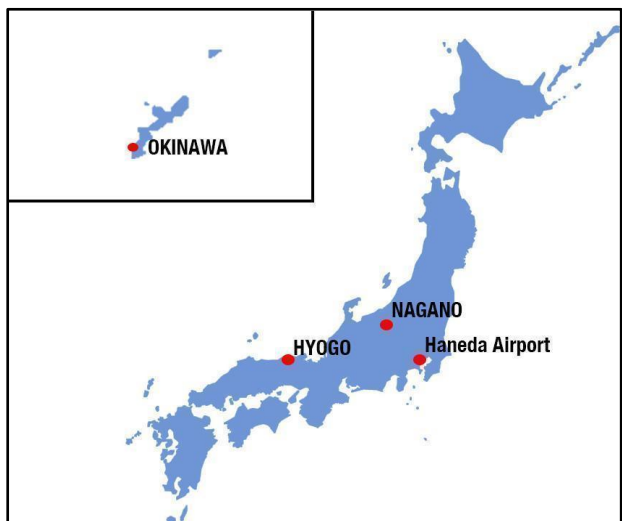
Universal Tourism Initiatives Make Japan Accessible to All



©Togakushi Tourism Association

Universal tourism (UT) is an approach to travel that ensures destinations, products, services, and experiences are inclusive and accessible to everyone, regardless of age, gender, disability, or personal condition. It involves reducing physical and informational barriers and promoting universal design concepts — such as wheelchair ramps and adaptive equipment — to allow all visitors to enjoy with ease and peace of mind.

This issue of Japan Tourism Spotlight focuses on various UT initiatives taken across Japan. The country's inbound tourism industry continues to set records, attracting about 36.9 million tourists in 2024, who spent ¥8.1



trillion, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Tourism has become a key driver of Japan's economy, underscoring the need for policies that cater to the diverse needs of all travelers.

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1. Haneda Airport: Accessible gateway to travel in Japan



(Left) Guide blocks establish clear paths to major areas and information counters at Haneda Airport. Moving walkways allow a companion to walk alongside a wheelchair user. ©Japan Airport Terminal Co., Ltd.

Japan's main international airports are advancing universal design to ensure accessibility for all travelers. This year, Haneda Airport (officially Tokyo International Airport) and New Chitose Airport in Hokkaido came in first and second, respectively, on the World's Best PRM/Accessible Facilities list of the SKYTRAX World Airport Awards. Haneda Airport has won the title for seven consecutive years, reflecting its commitment to blending functionality with human consideration.

Haneda Airport demonstrates universal design in every touchpoint. Integrated guide blocks establish clear paths from entrances, past infrastructure like stairs and elevators, directly to major areas and information counters, enabling independent navigation for the visually impaired. Multilingual signage provides immediate clarity in Japanese, English, Korean, and Chinese, supplemented by universally understood pictograms.

Movement through the terminals is designed for maximum efficiency and security. Elevators integrate voice devices that announce each floor, and most passenger elevators maintain sufficient size to accommodate two electric wheelchairs side by side. Escalators integrate voice-guided safety alerts at transition points. Notably, Terminal 2 features wide moving walkways, which allow a companion to walk alongside a wheelchair user. Visual elements such as green

lines on these walkways clarify operation status and speed, enhancing safety for elderly and low-vision users. Mobility services are offered from stops at Terminal 1 and 2 departure gates, with the autonomous wheelchairs available for free for passengers boarding an aircraft.

Restrooms prioritize privacy and support. All entrances include tactile layout signs, and their doorless designs simplify access when carrying luggage. Multi-functional units offer personal care facilities (including ostomy support) and enhanced space for caregivers.



(Left) Autonomous wheelchair (©Japan Airport Terminal Co. Ltd.), and the multi-functional restroom at Haneda.

The airport's support services are comprehensive. Certified concierges attend to all inquiries. For stress reduction, calm-down and cool-down spaces are located at Terminals 1, 2, and 3 to reduce sensory overload or prevent panic. Information counters offer writing and communication support boards for nonverbal exchanges. A specialized, bookable escort service — via the Haneda app (HANEDA NAVIGATOR) for domestic flights — pairs the traveler with a dedicated guide for a seamless journey from check-in to the gate.

This assistive standard flows naturally into Japan's broader travel network, linking Haneda Airport to points nationwide. Railways form the country's transportation backbone, with major stations of JR and other operators incorporating barrier-free features. These include platform elevators, escalators, tactile paving, and readily accessible restrooms. Station staff escort wheelchair users and assist with boarding and alighting. To ensure compatibility and a smooth experience, passengers using wheelchairs need to confirm their chair size (up to 120 cm long/high and 70 cm wide) and plan for early arrival to facilitate the escort process. For long-haul travel, the Shinkansen system continues to expand its dedicated wheelchair spaces.



A station clerk prepares to help a wheelchair user onto a train (left), and a JPN TAXI driver carries a passenger in a wheelchair into the vehicle. ©Keikyu/©The Tokyo Hire-Taxi Association

For urban transit, the box-shaped JPN TAXI, built with a universal design exclusively for use as taxicabs, is a convenient, accessible option in metropolitan areas. These taxis are equipped with wide, sliding doors and a wheelchair ramp, allowing for smooth boarding and alighting from the side of the vehicle. This enables direct, easy transfers from Haneda-linked lines to city destinations. The use of these vehicles has increased substantially in big metropolitan areas, with JPN TAXI accounting for 72 percent of the vehicles run by taxi companies in Tokyo this year, according to data reported by the industry association.

[Haneda Airport: Information on Universal Facilities](#)

[Haneda Airport: Customers who Require Special Assistance](#)

[JR East: Accessibility](#)

2. Hyogo towns invite everyone to restorative hot springs



Visitors in wheelchairs enjoy strolling the streets of Kinosaki Onsen (left) and Yumura Onsen.

In 2023, Hyogo Prefecture implemented a local ordinance to promote universal tourism, certifying hotels and ryokans pushing efforts at making their facilities accessible to all, while introducing a program to train “UT concierges” capable of helping tourists and advising travel businesses.

It has also certified several model UT programs within the prefecture. Its renowned hot spring towns, Kinosaki Onsen and Yumura Onsen, are among them, where efforts to ensure inclusivity allow everyone to immerse themselves in the restorative warm waters and serene landscapes. These destinations prioritize barrier-free access, making communal bath hopping and strolls welcoming for wheelchair users, families, the elderly, and those with disabilities. From ramps and handrails to thoughtful services like caregiver assistance, Hyogo has invested in creating harmonious environments that blend natural beauty with practical accessibility.

Kinosaki Onsen, a historic gem with over 1,300 years of tradition, embodies the concept of the entire area as one large ryokan, inviting all visitors to explore its seven public communal baths (soto-yu) while dressed in yukata. Universal features are evident throughout the map-guided layout, with slopes (ramps) available at all major spas. Wheelchair rentals are offered at select baths, and caregiver entry is permitted across facilities. At Yanagi-yu, one of the communal baths, wheelchair users can enjoy the footbath without dismounting.

Public amenities include accessible restrooms with ostomate facilities, diaper-changing tables, and nursing rooms scattered along paths. [Kinosaki Universal Map](#) shows where key facilities like electric wheelchair charging stations and elevators are across town. Additional touches like AED devices underscore a commitment to safety and comfort for all.

Yumura Onsen, a town integrated with its historical, steaming hot spring source, makes universal tourism a core goal. Efforts focus on creating accessible spaces, with barrier-free footbaths and hot water facilities usable directly from wheelchairs. Bathing areas offer wheelchair-friendly access to washing zones.

Accommodations exemplify thoughtful design: Asanoya features spacious rooms with universal layouts. Five rooms are equipped with visual doorbells for hearing-impaired guests. Oyado Kotobuki offers wheelchair-maneuverable dining areas with ample space around irori (sunken hearth) tables, handrails in public baths, written communication support, and rooms ideal for multi-generational families. Kasenkyo Izutsuya provides spacious guestrooms, handrails, gentle ramps, electric reclining beds for easy access, and a wheelchair-accessible elevator. (*Each facility accepts reservations from guests requiring assistance on the premise that they will be accompanied by caregivers.)

[Kinosaki Onsen \(PDF\)](#)

[Yumura Onsen \(PDF\)](#)

3. UT Shinshu-style: Inclusive adventures in Nagano



Dual ski (left) and HIPPO ©fujimikogen_resort

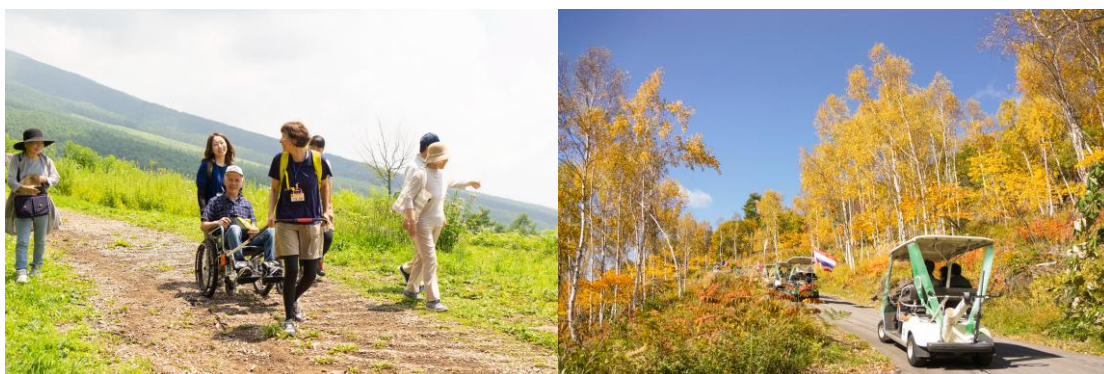
Lying in the heart of Honshu, Nagano is a mountain paradise known as the “Roof of Japan,” surrounded by 3,000-meter-class peaks of the northern, central, and southern Japanese Alps. Nestled inside its alpine peaks and valleys are pristine rivers and forests, and historical sites — breathtaking vistas for those who brave the mountainous conditions. With many of its popular tourist destinations located at altitudes above 1,000 meters, every journey is a literal ascending experience.

Aware that its mountain blessings may also become its barrier, the prefecture introduced “Shinshu Universal Tourism.” Named after Shinshu, the traditional name for Nagano, it was launched to give equal opportunity to all visitors. To achieve this, barrier-free access in transportation, accommodations, and other facilities was set up in 10 key regions. Thoughtful services like outdoor wheelchairs and guides create a memorable, shared adventure. The goal is to allow safe, smooth, comfortable, and inclusive travel experiences, especially for those with reduced mobility, sensory impairments, or other special needs. The following two sites embody this inclusive approach.

[Shinshu Universal Tourism \(in Japanese\)](#)

Fujimi Kogen Resort: Enjoying outdoors at “Universal Field”

In the Yatsugatake highlands lies Fujimi Kogen Resort. At 1,300 meters high, the resort offers sweeping vistas of the southern and northern Alps, as well as Mt. Fuji, from the “Sozo-no-Mori” viewing point. But what shines brightest at Fujimi Kogen isn’t just the sunny sky, but also the universal tourism it practices.



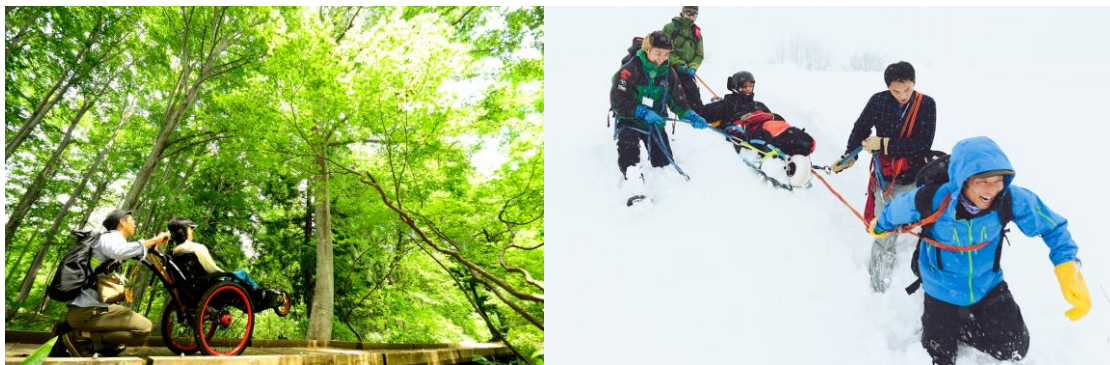
JINRIKI attachments being used to pull a person in a wheelchair (left) and “Sky cart” ©fujimikogen_resort

Fujimi Kogen Resort's "Universal Field" concept seeks to allow children, the elderly, and people with disabilities alike to enjoy the mountainous ambience with comfort and ease. The resort aims to provide inclusivity, safety, and support through its barrier-free services. The most visible is the "Sky cart," a self-driving vehicle that can take up to four people to the summit in just 25 minutes. The other is HIPPO, an outdoor wheelchair with big tires, reclining seats, and extendable footrests so the rider, along with the caregiver, can move on rugged paths (seven HIPPOs available). Other barrier-free features are JINRIKI attachments for pulling wheelchairs; dual skis with a seat that allow people with walking disabilities to enjoy the snow with family and friends (guided by a professional instructor); and wood chips-laden promenades to ease the stress of walking.

[Fujimi town official tourism website](#)

Nabekura Highlands House: Forest Bathing in Iiyama, even in wheelchairs

Up north in the Nabekura region in Iiyama, visitors can find a quiet retreat, the Nabekura Highlands House, or "Mori no Ie." Surrounded by beech trees at an altitude of 500 meters, this forest haven is an example of universal tourism in practice. It actively promotes "forest bathing" to people, whether or not they have disabilities, because the house will help them do it.



People with walking difficulties enjoy outdoor activities throughout the year at Nabekura Highland.

For its barrier-free forest bathing service, two UFCs (universal field concierges) and one IOI (inclusive outdoor activity instructor) will safely guide people with disabilities through the forest while riding a special wheelchair. The forest comes to life especially during autumn, but the place is just as beautiful all year round. The winter season brings a special charm, as it's a chance for mobility-impaired people to do snow-covered forest treks with guides.

[Nabekura Kogen Mori no Ie](#)

4. Enjoying marine activities in UT pioneer Okinawa



A guest is assisted by an instructor in exploring the depths of an Okinawa beach. ©Honu Honu Divers

Okinawa is Japan's southernmost prefecture that seems so far from Tokyo — yet has never been more accessible. In 2007, Okinawa Prefecture announced the “Tourism Barrier-Free Declaration,” the first Universal Tourism initiative in Japan and a groundbreaking step toward inclusivity. The goal is to be a sustainable tourist destination where everyone can “participate without hesitation.” This reflects Okinawa's local value of “yuimaaru,” or the spirit of community and mutual aid.

Okinawa invested in barrier-free infrastructure, such as wheelchair-friendly attractions and a specialized tourist information center (Barrier-Free Tour Center) at Naha Airport, where wheelchairs and mobility scooters are available for visitors with such needs. The Universal Tourism Portal Site offers information like barrier-free maps, videos of stress-free trips, and transportation details. But the initiative goes beyond physical and informational barriers — it aims to remove social barriers as well, creating an environment where everyone feels welcomed. From inclusive beaches to water activities like diving and snorkeling, Okinawa is redefining what it means to travel freely and equally in Japan.

[Okinawa Prefecture Universal Tourism Portal Site](#)

[For All Visitors: Visit Okinawa Japan](#)

Everyone's equal under the sun: Azama Sun Sun Universal Beach



Mobi Chairs and other equipment to help wheelchair users enjoy beach activities

Okinawa's universal tourism shines at the sunny Azama Sun Sun Beach, a designated “universal beach” in southern Okinawa. The most popular equipment is Mobi Chairs, which are special chairs that allow wheelchair users to enjoy beach activities safely and comfortably by assisting their movement in water (rental needs reservation). To move along sandy beaches, special Mobi mats are installed along beach edges — Azama Sun Sun is the only beach in Japan to have them permanently. Other inclusive policies include wheelchair-accessible changing rooms and parking lots.

[Azama Sun Sun Beach \(in Japanese\)](#)

Deep dive into barrier-free diving and snorkeling activities

Okinawa is famed for its crystal-clear blue waters and rich marine biodiversity. For an intimate encounter with the island’s submarine wonders, Ocean Gate dive resort offers barrier-free diving and snorkeling to all, including people with disabilities. Certified instructors from JBDA (Japan Barrier-free Diving Association) assist guests when they explore the depths. The resort believes that the weightlessness underwater helps in rehabilitation and improving metabolism. Courses range from introductory courses to full scuba diving packages. The people from Honu Honu Divers resort offer fun diving sessions with full English-language support. They adjust their programs to suit guests’ physical conditions. Likewise, they believe the underwater experience creates wonders for the body, freeing those with physical limitations from their bodies, even for a moment underwater. These barrier-free underwater activities foster social connections and creativity, turning the ocean into a shared cultural canvas.

[Ocean Gate: Barrier-free Diving and Snorkeling](#)

[Honu Honu Divers \(barrier-free page in Japanese\)](#)

Realizing accessible Japan — one barrier at a time

For many people, Japan is an attractive travel destination. Yet for many travelers — especially people with disabilities and physical limitations — Japan’s wonders remain elusive because of accessibility issues. Josh Grisdale, a wheelchair user, advocate, and founder of Accessible Japan, turned this frustration into action. His mission: promote universal tourism in Japan.

For Gridale, universal tourism is not just about removing physical obstacles and providing facilities like ramps and elevators. “Accessibility is about removing barriers, not just physical ones, but also informational, social, and emotional,” he said. “Informational” refers to providing clear details online and offline and ensuring communication is available in multiple languages.



This is the reason for his website, Accessible Japan. “As a wheelchair user, I realized that while Japan is a wonderful and welcoming country, information in English about accessibility was hard to find.”

Accessible Japan was created in 2015 to fill that gap. It is an online platform where people with disabilities can find accessibility information about Japan’s destinations, hotels, and transportation. Over time, it evolved from an information database into a promoter of inclusive tourism in Japan, actively empowering people to explore with confidence.

Empowerment and inclusivity. That’s what social and emotional accessibility mean for Gridale. It’s about building a culture of respect and understanding. “It’s how people feel when visiting a place — if they feel welcomed, respected, and understood. Physical access is important, but true inclusion comes from attitude and empathy,” he explained.

For Gridale, universal tourism in Japan is still not “universal.” This is true in rural areas. According to him, some popular destinations have achieved progress, like the Ise-Shima area in Mie. The prefecture has the Ise-Shima Barrier-Free Tour Center, which provides support through local knowledge, transportation arrangements, and specialized staff (at Ise Jingu steps). But many others still face challenges like limited accessible public transportation, English-language information, and staff with experience assisting people with disabilities.

Now a Japanese citizen, Gridale came from Canada almost two decades ago — a long time to experience the disparities in accessibility facilities. So he channeled his experience into advocacy. He wants to see a Japan where accessibility is normalized, where people with disabilities are involved in decision-making. For him, communicating information about universal tourism is a must.

In addition to his website, he gives lectures, attends workshops, and delivers presentations to government officials, tourism professionals, and students. While not actively a participant in policymaking, he also partners with local authorities and businesses on consulting and training.

“By showing that accessibility benefits everyone — including seniors, families, and foreign visitors — we can shift the conversation from ‘special support’ to ‘good hospitality.’” He hopes that one day universal tourism will be so normalized in Japan “that specialized websites like Accessible Japan may no longer be necessary — and that would be the greatest success of all.”

[Accessible Japan](#)

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