

No barriers to wanderlust

Chaperoned tourism services spring up for elderly, disabled people

The Yomiuri Shimbun

Age or infirmity need no longer be hindrances to sightseeing with the advent of travel assistance services.

A nonprofit organization in Tokyo runs seminars giving instruction on how to help elderly or physically disabled people get around, while travel agencies have organized tours targeting disabled people. Although such services come at a price, they have fulfilled the dreams of disabled people who had almost given up hope of traveling.

"Traveling's great," said Katsuaki Kambe, 34, a company employee who uses a wheelchair.

Kambe, a resident of Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, who has cerebral palsy, went on a trip to Aizu-Wakamatsu, Fukushima Prefecture, in August, with an assistant.

Mt. Iimori is where the Byakko-tai (White Tiger Corps)—a group of teenage sons of samurai families in the Aizu clan that fought in the 1868-69 Boshin War—committed mass suicide in the first year of that conflict. During his visit there, Kambe determinedly hauled himself up the 43 steps that lead to the boys' tombs using his hands and elbows.

Kambe's caregiver, Shigetoshi Suzuki, 58, from Hasuda, Saitama Prefecture, carefully maneuvered Kambe down the steps in the wheelchair.

"I felt safe because [Suzuki] is used to assisting people," Kambe said. "I couldn't have made that trip on my own."

Kambe used to take trips at least three times a year, accompanied by his 68-year-old mother. But his mother became ill a year ago, leaving him hesitant to go sightseeing.

Kambe contacted the Japan Travel Vol-



Courtesy of JTVN

Shigetoshi Suzuki, right, pushes Katsuaki Kambe in his wheelchair at JR Koriyama Station in Fukushima Prefecture.

nonprofit organization in Tokyo. Suzuki is one of the volunteer caregivers registered with the organization. Suzuki, a company employee, spent his summer vacation chaperoning Kambe.

Since the organization was inaugurated in 2001, about 150 people have used the service, according to the JTVN.

The JTVN holds seminars to give instruction on assisting elderly and disabled people while traveling. About 500 people

them have registered with the organization as travel volunteers.

Users of the service pay up to ¥19,000 a day to the JTVN, in addition to the travel expenses for the caregiver, to whom the JTVN pays a fee.

Travel agencies have also started offering tours for physically disabled people. SPI Co., a travel company in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, established an incorporated nonprofit organization, Nippon Travelhelpers

Those who pass the association's certificate exam after receiving instruction are dispatched on tours organized by the travel company and receive a fee. It charges a basic daily travel helper's fee of ¥26,250 for a person in need of nursing care.

SPI decided to set up the association in response to laments from older tour participants that "this'll be my last trip"—they assumed their advancing age meant they would no longer be able to travel.

"I think there must be many people who can still enjoy traveling if they get just a little extra help, such as someone carrying their bag," said Chihiro Shinozuka, 48, SPI's administration manager. About 640 people are registered as helpers with the association.

The eldest user of the service was 106 years old.

The association's caregivers also chaperone clients at wedding ceremonies and accompany them on visits to family graves. According to an SPI official, one customer has used the service more than 100 times.

Major travel agency JTB Co. started to offer tours for disabled people in 2002. More than 400 people, including helpers, joined such tours one year, according to a JTB official.

H.I.S. Co., another major tour operator, began offering tours for disabled people in November last year after setting up inquiry counters for them.

"In recent years, people have come to be aware of demand for travel by disabled people and the elderly," said Masashi Kasahara, associate professor at Kogakkan University, who is an expert on barrier-free transport. "Although the cost of such trips is relatively high at the moment, I think it'll fall as more services