

IGDF Congress Japan 2026 written by Nichola Prince

Journey of Discovery, Connection and Shared Purpose

In May, Peter and I travelled to Yokohama in Japan for the International Guide Dog Conference. Japan is a country of contrasts. Ancient traditions sit alongside cutting-edge technology, peaceful parks contrast with the energy of huge cities, and quiet moments can be found within some of the busiest places on earth.

The conference was just one part of the journey. Before and after the event, we each travelled independently through Japan, in our own personal vacation time, experiencing different parts of this fascinating country before coming together in Yokohama. Between us, we experienced traditional Japan, the vibrant modernity of Tokyo, the country's excellent transport system, wonderful food, spectacular scenery and, perhaps most importantly, the warmth and hospitality of the people we met.

A country of contrasts

I spent longer in Tokyo. It is vast, vibrant and constantly moving, yet it also contains beautiful parks and peaceful spaces where it is possible to escape the intensity of the city. One of my favourite experiences was visiting a food market. The sights, smells and variety of food on offer created an unforgettable sensory experience. Japan's food culture was one of the highlights of the trip, and I was fortunate enough to try Wagyu beef among many other delicious dishes.

Peter travelled to Kyoto, experiencing a different side of Japan and its traditional culture. Together, our experiences gave us a fascinating insight into the contrast between the country's historic traditions and its modern, forward-looking cities. We each were fortunate enough to have some wonderful views of Mount Fuji. Japan's most famous mountain is notoriously shy, often hiding behind clouds and mist, so seeing it clearly felt like a special privilege.

Travelling between these different experiences was an adventure in itself. Japan's transport system is remarkably efficient, and travelling on the bullet trains was a particular highlight. The Shinkansen made it possible to move quickly between destinations while still enjoying the changing scenery outside the window. The efficiency and organisation of the transport system were impressive, especially when navigating the scale and complexity of Japan's cities.

Everywhere we went, we encountered people who were friendly, welcoming and helpful. Despite the language and cultural differences, we consistently felt welcomed, and the kindness of the people we met became one of the lasting impressions of the trip.

Coming together in Yokohama

Our separate journeys brought us together in Yokohama, where the IGDF conference took place over four days in a large conference centre overlooking the harbour. The International Guide Dog Federation brings together 100 member organisations across 36 countries worldwide and is held bi-annually always in different country. The conference therefore provided a unique opportunity to meet people from across the international guide dog community and to share experiences, ideas and challenges.

The programme included panel discussions and presentations delivered by employees from member organisations, as well as doctors, scientists and researchers working in areas relevant to the guide dog sector. The subjects discussed reflected both the opportunities and challenges facing the sector. There was a particular emphasis on artificial intelligence, as well as breeding, alongside research into other areas of guide dog work.

These topics highlighted the importance of continuing to look towards the future. The guide dog sector has a long history of knowledge and experience, but it must also continue to evolve. New technology, scientific research and developments in breeding all have the potential to influence how guide dog organisations work in the years ahead.

However, although the presentations were fascinating, it was the conversations that stayed with me most. A shared purpose. One of the most powerful things about meeting colleagues from around the world was recognising how much we have in common. The countries and environments in which we work may be very different. Organisations face different challenges, work within different regulatory systems and serve communities with different needs. Yet, beneath those differences, there is a shared purpose.

We are all working towards the same fundamental goal: improving the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired through the work of guide dogs. That common purpose created an immediate connection between people who, in some cases, had never met before. Conversations with colleagues from different countries often revealed that, although the details may vary, many of the challenges we face are remarkably similar.

There was a real sense of enthusiasm and motivation among the people attending the conference. It was inspiring to spend time with so many colleagues who are passionate about their work and committed to improving the quality of the services they provide.

The IGDF network is global in scale, but the connections made within it are personal. The conference demonstrated how valuable it is to share knowledge and experience internationally. No organisation works in isolation, and there is always something to learn from the approaches taken by others.

Sharing the Swiss experience

I was also fortunate to contribute directly to the conference by giving a presentation alongside Roberto and Miki from the Fondazione romanda per cani guida per ciechi, based in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland.

Our presentation focused on the standardisation process for Swiss guide dog schools. Switzerland is one of only a small number of countries to have formal pass-or-fail examinations for instructors, guide dogs and clients. These assessments play an important role in maintaining quality and standards.

The approach recognises that the success of a guide dog partnership depends on all three elements working together effectively. Instructors must meet the required standards, dogs must be appropriately trained and prepared, and clients must also demonstrate the skills necessary to work successfully with their guide dog.

Sharing this process with an international audience was a valuable opportunity to explain the work being done in Switzerland and to contribute to the wider discussion about quality assurance and standardisation within the guide dog sector. It was also a reminder that international conferences are not simply about travelling somewhere to listen and learn. They are equally about sharing our own experiences and contributing to the collective knowledge of the sector.

Seeing guide dog work from a different perspective

One of the highlights of the trip was the opportunity for both Peter and me to visit separate guide dog schools in Japan. I visited Fuji Harness, located at the foot of Mount Fuji. We were shown the kennel facilities and client training facilities, giving me the opportunity to see how guide dog work is approached in a different country and cultural environment.

One of the most memorable parts of the visit was trying the Japanese guide dog harness. The harness is different from the type I am familiar with. Instead of the client holding a traditional handle attached to

the harness, the Japanese system uses a pole attached to the harness. This allows the handler to follow the dog's movement while minimising interference with the dog's travel.

I was impressed by the design and had never seen anything quite like it before. It was, however, noticeably heavier than the harnesses I am used to. Experiences such as this demonstrate the value of international exchange. The purpose of guide dog work remains the same, but there can be different ways of achieving that purpose. Visiting organisations in other countries encourages us to look at familiar things from a different perspective and consider whether there are ideas that could inform our own work.

More than a conference

Looking back, it would be difficult to choose one single highlight from the trip. There was the excitement of travelling on the bullet trains, the energy of Tokyo, the peacefulness of the parks, the wonderful food markets and the opportunity to try Wagyu beef. There were views of Mount Fuji, visits to guide dog schools and the experience of travelling through a country that was both completely unfamiliar and incredibly welcoming.

There was also the conference itself: the presentations, the discussions about AI, breeding and research, and the opportunity to contribute to the conversation about the Swiss standardisation process. But the most memorable part of the trip was connecting with colleagues who are enthusiastic and motivated about our work.

That was perhaps the strongest reminder of the importance of the IGDF. Despite the distance between our countries and the differences in our organisations, there is a strong sense of shared purpose within the international guide dog community. Japan provided the setting for an unforgettable journey, but it was the people who gave the trip its greatest meaning.

From the traditional streets of Kyoto to the bright lights of Tokyo, from the harbour in Yokohama to the foot of Mount Fuji, the trip offered a remarkable combination of personal discovery and professional learning.

I returned home with new experiences, new ideas and a renewed appreciation for the international community of people working to improve the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired. Japan may be thousands of kilometres from Switzerland, but the conference demonstrated that distance does not have to separate us. In the guide dog community, shared values, shared challenges and a shared commitment to quality can connect people across the world.