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New Access in the Old World: Adaptability is Vital to Touring Germany

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Compromise and adaptation are skills required by disabled travelers no matter where they go. Whether we're discussing wheelchair access, braille signage or visual alert systems, no place is going to be arranged quite as comfortably or as efficiently as your home. Still, at least within the United States, there is a standard minimum of access that can more or less be counted on.

When venturing overseas, say to Europe, handicap access is hit or miss; the Old World wasn't built with wheelchairs in mind, and urban renewal is a uniquely American concept. Of course, that is the allure of Europe, strolling down streets that haven't changed in six hundred years, sitting in the same restaurant that Mozart frequented. So how do we reconcile our disabilities and our wanderlust? Compromise and adaptation.



HEALTH/RECREATION

On a fairly recent trip to Germany I found that wheelchair access was both better and worse than I had expected. Having researched and booked my hotels months in advance, I was pretty confident that I would be staying at establishments that could meet my minimal accessibility needs. In three cities, Freiburg, Heidelberg and Munich, a wheelchair accessible hotel room meant nothing more than an absence of stairs at the room's threshold. Even at a Crowne Plaza hotel, there were no grab bars in the bathroom, no lowered switches and nothing that would qualify the room as accessible except for the fact that my chair could enter it. Through a series of questions and a good deal of research I knew this would be the case, but I can imagine the serious trouble this might cause someone who believed they were getting a truly accessible room.

There were, however, some hotel factors I had not anticipated. Elevators are a tricky detail. The hotel I had reserved in Heidelberg had one, but I failed to ask and they failed to mention, that their pre-war lift was barely big enough to accommodate one standing individual with one piece of luggage. There was no way the elevator could accommodate a wheelchair, and I was left scrambling to find another "accessible" hotel nearby.

Another issue is electricity. Trying to be prepared as always, I not only purchased an energy converter but a power booster, so that I could properly charge my wheelchair at night. Still, after just two days, my chair ended up dying on me as I was out sightseeing. With no obvious answer as to why this had happened, I spent the entire next day, stretching my college German well beyond its limits, at a wheelchair repair shop. Prognosis: nothing wrong with my chair, the charger or the converter/booster!

That night, my last at this hotel, I related the day's events to the desk clerk and learned, to my great surprise, that the hotel regularly lowers its power levels after 1:00am to save energy expenses. As a result, my chair was not fully charging, causing it to die mid-day.

Despite these problems, the general direction of my surprise was positive. Although streets and sidewalks are primarily cobbled and without curb cuts, the curbs themselves are rarely a full inch and are easily rolled over with one's casters. Moreover, throughout Germany are huge, pedestrian only

parks and plazas which make rolling along in a chair quite easy. Even many of the restaurants, shops and churches have no more than a single, small step that with some assistance can be overcome. So, while most places are inaccessible by U.S. standards, they are manageable with a little effort and a willingness to adapt to the circumstances.

Granted, you cannot see and do everything you may like, but with enough pre-planning you can figure out what is realistic. I was genuinely thrilled by the sheer amount of castles, cathedrals, shops and even rural towns that I was able to visit.

Getting from place to place is another important factor in your planning. Your first option is to rent a wheelchair accessible van from one of three companies operating in Germany: Wohnmobile fur Behinderte (06227-30457); Grimm-Wohnmobile (06343-7122); Unfallopfer Hilfswerk (0130-851132). This may, however, turn out to be too expensive or more transportation than you need.

In England and Ireland, many wheelchairs can, with assistance, get into a standard black taxi. In Germany, however, most cabs are low end Mercedes, unable to accommodate a wheelchair user in their chair. Some of the larger cities do have wheelchair accessible taxi-vans that can be ordered through dispatch, but these are few and far between.

Increasingly, lift-equipped buses are springing up throughout Germany's metropolitan areas, and in a few cities, Munich being one, the best accessible mode of transportation may be the U-bahn, or German subway. Entry from platform to train is easy, with a minimal gap, and it is only the absence of elevators at some stations which makes the U-bahn iffy in some cities. In Munich, however, the subway is overwhelmingly accessible with numerous stops throughout the area.

As a final option, the plethora of pedestrian areas at city centers diminishes the need to drive, especially if your hotel is centrally located.

If you are heading to Europe, just know that it is much tougher to find truly accessible accommodations and activities, and often you'll have to

compromise, depending on your destination.

The best thing you can do is make a written list of must haves: those accommodations without which it is logistically impossible to take your trip. If you can't get by without grab bars in the bathroom, not a single step in front of your hotel and accessible public transportation, then write that down. Ask specific questions and make absolutely certain that your minimum requirements can be met. With all else, be flexible and tackle obstacles as you face them. Half the fun of your travels can be the unexpected adventures you face as you figure out how to fit your square peg through their round hole.

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