



Disabled Travel

With some advance planning, you can go anywhere

(This article was contributed by Adam Lloyd, a 30-year-old quadriplegic who has traveled extensively.)

For the fifty million Americans living with disabilities, physical impairments need no longer hinder their ability to travel. Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, most of the barriers to disabled travelers have come down in the U.S., and attitudes and conditions abroad have improved as well.

Yet while this brave new world of disabled travel is governed by federal standards for accessibility, government regulations ensure that travel accommodations for the disabled are generally acceptable—but rarely ideal. Travelers with special needs should not expect to duplicate the ease of home while they're on the road. But that doesn't mean there aren't ways to make travel for the disabled a little easier.

As any seasoned traveler will tell you, research and planning are critical to a successful trip. Check out resources on the Internet and consult travel books written for the

disabled. Another option is to plan your trip through a travel agency that specializes in disabled travel. First-time travelers may want to opt for a trip to places like Disney World, Las Vegas, New York, or even a cruise to the Caribbean. Well-visited places are likely to offer the most resources for those with special needs.

Once you've decided where to go, the next trick is getting there. Today, traveling by plane with a disability is much like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. But if you bring along the right tools and have enough determination, you can make the pieces fit. Each airline has its own policies, but often employees don't know the basics. To fly successfully, make your needs clear. If you show up at the airport assuming airline personnel will know what to do with you and your equipment, you'll have problems.

Purchase your ticket in person so the ticket agent can see your situation and enter your status into the computer. If you can, fly non-stop—changing planes can be a hassle for the mobility or visually impaired. Finally, request a bulkhead seat, which provides extra room if you need to be transferred from the aisle chair, a wheelchair designed for narrow plane aisles.

On the day of your trip, arrive at the airport early. If you're flying with a wheelchair or scooter, make sure your chair gets a "gate tag," which lets the crew know to bring your wheelchair to the gate as soon as the plane lands. You may also want to bring some tools along in your carry-on luggage. Nothing is more unsettling than finding your "wheels" dismantled when you land.

At the departure gate, inform the agent you need assistance

transferring from your wheelchair to an aisle chair to board the plane. If you're in an electric wheelchair, it's a good idea to disconnect and remove any battery wires that might be visible to the ground crew. Electrical connections can be suspect, and ground crews have been known to rip them out before putting the chair into the cargo hold.

As for the flight itself, you'll be the first to board the plane and the last to disembark. Check with the head flight attendant to confirm that your chair got aboard. Upon arrival, insist that your chair be waiting for you at the gate before you transfer into the tiny and uncomfortable aisle chair.

Suitable accommodations are another concern. Determine what your needs are and make a point of calling several hotels in advance. Look for hotels located near attractions you want to see. Major hotels like Marriott or Hyatt are good choices since they have handicapped rooms equipped with wider doorways and wheelchair-accessible bathrooms. Don't forget to ask about the accessibility of restaurants, pool and other facilities.

If you use a hospital bed, it's a good idea to arrange beforehand to rent one from a medical supply house in the city you're visiting. With advance notice, most hotels will remove furniture from your

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DISABLED TRAVEL

Web Sites

- Access-Able:
www.access-able.com
- Society for the Advancement of Travel for the Handicapped:
www.sath.org
- Emerging Horizons, an accessible travel newsletter:
www.candy-charles.com/Horizons

TRAVEL BOOKS

For the Disabled

- *Travel for the Disabled: A Handbook of Travel Resources and 500 World Wide Access Guides*, by Helen Hecker
- *Wheelchair Around the World*, by Patrick D. Simpson

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room to accommodate the bed.

To explore your vacation destination, it's best to be within walking distance of activities and attractions. If driving is involved, you'll find that most major cities have a number of accessible taxis. Often, the scarcity of accessible cabs requires a lengthy wait, so call ahead. Once you get a cab, be sure to ask the driver for a card so you can contact him or her directly in

the future. If you'd prefer to drive yourself, there are two nationwide wheelchair van rental companies: Accessible Vans of America (888-282-8267) and Wheelchair Getaways (800-642-2042). Both require advance notice.

As with everything else, it's up to you to make sure that the sites you want to visit can accommodate you. Don't just ask if they're accessible. Get specifics. Inquire about the number of stairs, if

menus are available in braille, and if tours of museums and historical attractions are offered for the hearing impaired.

Travel is for everyone—those with special needs included. Know what you need and want from a trip and plan accordingly. Don't be hesitant about asking specific questions. That way you'll be assured of having a great time. And remember: The more you travel, the easier it gets. ■