

TRIPTIPS

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So you've seen Las Vegas and Yellowstone and you're ready to explore the rest of the world. Luckily there are more options for accessible international travel than ever before.

Compared to other nationalities, Americans have historically not been world travelers. But in recent years, thanks to low air fares and the growing popularity of cruising, many more of us are venturing abroad. In its 2005 market study of travelers with disabilities, Open Doors Organization found that 62percent of online respondents had traveled outside the Continental US. Not surprisingly, the most popular destinations were Canada (56percent) and Mexico (52percent), followed by Europe (44percent) and the Caribbean (31percent).

At least since 1961, when Evergreen Travel began offering its "Wings on Wheels Tours" to destinations such as the Great Wall of China, specialized tour operators have made it possible for Americans with disabilities to see the wonders of the world for themselves. These early tours involved a lot of lifting and carrying, some of which is still required today, especially to remote areas such as Machu Picchu or the Amazon. But then, for the more intrepid among us, overcoming obstacles is part of the thrill of travel. As one wheelchair traveler put it, "If I wanted full accessibility, I'd visit a shopping mall."

So, on a scale of one to 10, how adventurous are you? Would you rather laze by the pool with a fruity drink or brave the heat, bugs and tree roots to explore a Mayan ruin? Have you traveled overseas before and managed to cope with some pretty dicey access? Being realistic upfront about not only your preferences but also abilities and needs—as well as those of your travel companion/s—will help you pick the right destination, type of trip and level of assistance. The good news is that there are now more options than ever, even for travelers on a relatively limited budget.

For individuals without much travel experience, a cruise vacation can be a good way to get started. To maximize accessibility pick a newer ship and an itinerary with no (or few) ports of call where one has to tender, i.e., go ashore using small boats. If you need accessible ground transportation, do check in advance if there are tours that can accommodate you or areas to explore near the port. Benefits of cruising include packing and unpacking only once, having medical care close at hand and an accessible environment to relax in between shore visits. Escorted group cruises make things even simpler since the accessible tours and activities are prearranged. Note that a manual chair—as opposed to a power chair or scooter—may be needed for shore excursions. This can easily be rented for delivery to the ship.

The closest equivalent to a cruise is an all-inclusive resort. Destinations in the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America that cater to Americans are now beginning to welcome guests with wheelchairs, including power chairs and scooters. The best way to ensure the property's public areas and guest rooms are accessible is to seek the advice of a specialized tour operator or travel agent who's actually made a site visit. They will also know whether the nearest airport has jetways or boarding lifts—very important if you cannot climb stairs—and if accessible ground transportation is available. Initially geared to the budget-minded, there are now all-inclusive resorts for every price range and lifestyle. Most newer properties offer a variety of restaurants and cuisines, just like the cruise lines.

For those who prefer an active vacation with serious sightseeing but minimal hassle, the escorted group tour is the way to go. It also solves the language problem. This type of vacation is generally more expensive but can be the best option for someone who needs accessible transportation and extra assistance, as well as for destinations where accessibility is limited. Tours currently listed online include Ireland, Scotland, Norway, Italy, Mexico, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, Israel, Egypt, Kenya, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

American tour operators typically work with receptive or inbound operators who provide the accessible vehicles, support staff and English-speaking guides. For destinations where they don't escort tours themselves, the U.S. firm may instead book you into a tour offered by the local company. These accessible inbound operators can often be found on the Web and booked directly, but it's safer to go

through an American agent who knows the supplier and will back you up if a problem arises.

Packaged, or Foreign Independent Travel (FIT), is another option that has become increasingly popular with Americans, with or without disabilities. You travel on your own with just friends or family but rely on arrangements planned and booked by the specialized tour operator or travel agent. Plane, train and boat tickets, meet-and-assist on arrival, guaranteed accessible hotels, rental of lift-equipped vans or cars with hand controls, accessible city tours, personal care attendants and durable medical equipment can all be prearranged. Real-time assistance is also a phone call away should a mishap occur.

Thanks both to the Internet and improved accessibility in many countries, it's now easier than ever for the adventurous traveler with restricted mobility to simply go it alone. Yes, it takes more planning, but it's also fun to track down new resources online. Tips and recommendations from other travelers with disabilities abound on a growing number of Web sites and blogs. Detailed access guides are available for some destinations like the U.K. If you use a manual chair, can transfer and don't need specialized transport, it's of course much easier to plan an inexpensive holiday overseas. Many youth hostels now provide access for wheelchair users but do check in advance for specific details.

However or wherever you decide to travel, don't forget to purchase travel insurance that covers air rescue should a medical emergency arise. Insuring your wheelchair or scooter is also important since airline liability on international flights is the same as for all other luggage and nowhere near replacement value.

Road Resources

Flying Wheels

www.flyingwheelstravel.com

Nautilus Tours & Cruises

www.nautilustours.com

Undiscovered Britain

www.undiscoveredbritain.com

Easy Access Travel

www.easyaccesstravel.com

Global Access News

www.globalaccessnews.com

Access Guide Canada

www.enablelink.org/agc

DisabledGo Access Guides—UK and Ireland

www.disabledgo.info

Accessible Europe

www.accessibleeurope.com

Hostelling International

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