

TRIPTIPS

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A little advance work when booking an accessible room will help avoid surprises on your arrival. Just remember it's the hotel's responsibility to meet ADA requirements.

Travel may be exhilarating and life affirming, but it can also be exhausting and stressful for even the most stalwart adventurer. So it's hard to underestimate the importance of having a truly accessible hotel room to relax in at the end of the day. It's now 17 years this January since the ADA standards for new hotels came into effect, but finding a room that meets one's specific needs still remains a challenge.

With a little extra research and a few phone calls you can greatly improve your chances of getting a room that works for you, and also ensure that the accessible room you requested is actually available when you arrive. The good news is that even budget properties in the United States have numerous well-designed rooms, unlike many countries overseas where only five or six-star hotels provide wheelchair access.

If you're planning to visit a major city, check first with the Convention & Visitor's Bureau to see if an access guide is available. Another good resource is the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, which may have their own data on local hotels. These resources can save you a lot of time, although you'll still need to confirm the access information once you've narrowed your search.

CALL THE HOTEL DIRECTLY

Since few hotel chains provide detailed access information online or through their central reservation numbers, it's necessary to call the property directly to inquire about particular features such as roll-in showers. This is also the only way in most cases to ensure that your accessible room is not only "guaranteed," but also "blocked"—i.e., that the specific room is held for your arrival. You should not only ask if they will block the room, but also get written confirmation. Calling to reconfirm a day or two before you travel also can't hurt.

While booking online may not be an option, the Internet is still a great place to compare the different properties at a destination, get phone numbers, and find the best price. When you call ask the hotel to meet the online rate if you can't reserve an accessible room at their Web site and the price they quote is higher.

ADA ROOM FEATURES

One common misconception is that all ADA rooms with mobility features must have roll-in showers. In fact, depending on the property's size, only about 1 percent of a hotel's total rooms must have a roll-in shower, while another 2-4 percent must be accessible with a tub/shower. In addition to wider doors, a 36" path of travel to all elements, and space to turn and maneuver, there should be lowered amenities and controls. Door handles, plumbing controls, latches, and lamp switches should require no tight grasping or twisting. ADA standards also mandate knee clearance and front approach to the sink, a lowered mirror, a raised toilet with grab bars and side transfer space, grab bars in the tub or shower, and a shower spray unit that can be hand-held. The roll-in shower must have level entry and a fold-down bench adjacent to the controls. Visit the U.S. Access Board's Web site (www.access-board.gov) to see the latest ADA guidelines, which are expected to be adopted shortly by the Department of Justice.

ASK FOR WHAT YOU NEED

In reality, few accessible hotel rooms—even in newly constructed properties—meet all these criteria. Toilets often lack side transfer space, the shower bench may be missing or far from the controls, floor space limited, and closet rods not lowered. In addition, because ADA guidelines cover only built-in elements, important issues like bed height or having an open bed frame are not addressed at all. It's not unusual to find beds 26" and above, so if you must have side transfer space at the toilet and a bed no higher than 22" in order to function independently then ask in advance about those specific elements. Some

wheelchair users even request floor plans of the guestroom, or send a photo of the type of transfer bench they require.

Since hotel reservations staff is not likely to know the ADA rooms in detail, you may need to speak instead to the head of housekeeping or engineering as they inspect these rooms on a regular basis. An appeal to the general manager, who has an incentive to keep your business, may also help expedite your search for information.

Public areas can also pose access problems, especially in older properties. Elevators may be too small to accommodate power chairs, or you may find yourself in a game of chutes and ladders as you negotiate all the added ramps. If you're counting on swimming, ask if the pool is on an access route and if there is a pool lift. The latter will soon be required for both hotel pools and spas under the new ADA standards. If you're planning to stay at a beachfront resort, make sure you can actually get to the beach without going down steps. On the other hand, some properties even have a beach wheelchair and boardwalk.

SHUTTLE ACCESS

Hotels that offer free shuttle service to their guests do not have to purchase their own accessible vehicles, but they must provide alternate accessible transportation at no charge. This fact may come as a surprise to them, so you may need to stand up for your rights. Be sure to request accessible transportation several days in advance to allow the property time to locate and reserve through an outside supplier. In some cases the hotel may ask you pay the driver and submit the receipt for reimbursement.

WHEN TROUBLE ARISES

If after all of your careful planning you arrive at your destination and the accessible room is not available, what then? Remain calm, but make clear that this is the hotel's problem and responsibility, not yours. If no other suitable room or suite is available the hotel will likely try to find you a room with similar access features at a nearby property of at least the same quality, and at the same cost to you. Some hotels may "comp" the room for the night to make up for the inconvenience or cover the cost of your transportation. If the front desk staff is unwilling or unable to resolve the situation, ask to speak to a manager.

As places of public accommodation, hotels are covered under Title III of the ADA, which is enforced by the Department of Justice. The DOJ provides technical assistance and publications via a toll-free information line (800-514-0301). It also helps resolve disputes through its cost-free mediation program, which you can read about in this issue's cover story on accessibility in the lodging industry or by visiting www.ada.gov.

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