

The Intelligent Traveler

TIPS AND TRICKS TO HELP YOU TRAVEL SMARTER

Edited by SARAH BRUNING

ACCESSIBLE
TRAVEL EDITION

A World of Potential

Certain destinations and experiences have historically been tricky—or even impossible—for people with disabilities or some physical conditions to navigate. But in recent years, there's been a push to make travel more inclusive. Here, our guide to how the shift impacts us all.

Operators like New Zealand-based Makingtrax can make paragliding possible for those in wheelchairs.





▲ A travel advisor can help people with mobility issues track down suitable trails around the world, including this one in Sîcevo, Serbia.

Accessibility Goes Global

Exploring the world with disabilities still isn’t easy, says wheelchair user **MELISSA BLAKE**. But as societies become more inclusive, she finds the travel industry stepping up to do its part.

LAST SUMMER, I headed from my home in Illinois with my mother and sister to New York City to visit a cousin. We’d scored tickets to the Broadway show *Ain’t Too Proud*, and I couldn’t wait to explore Central Park. But in addition to the excitement of seeing the city, a host of questions loomed: Would I be able to navigate the packed Manhattan sidewalks in my wheelchair? What about maneuvering around the city’s notoriously small hotel rooms? Even with good information online and a relative who knew the city intimately, I felt a strong sense of apprehension.

Vacationing with a disability can be complicated. I was born with Freeman-Sheldon Syndrome, a genetic musculoskeletal disorder that’s led to more than 20 corrective surgeries in 15 years and requires the use of an electric wheelchair to get around. And despite being otherwise healthy,

mobility—particularly in unfamiliar places—has always been complex.

I’d heard horror stories about how ill-equipped New York’s subway stations were, so I opted instead to use lift-equipped taxis (to my relief, they were plentiful). And the Broadway theater had accessible seats. While challenges certainly remain, my New York trip offered proof that travel is becoming more inclusive.

The story of the accessible travel movement is one of slow, incremental progress. Several milestone regulations were passed in the late 1980s, such as the Air Carrier Access Act, which implemented aviation requirements and prohibited discriminatory rules, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, which introduced structural and inventory standards for hotels and other lodgings. But it wasn’t until 2008 that baseline rights and protections, such as physical accessibility to

Five Online Resources to Bookmark

ABLETHRIVE

The travel section of this lifestyle site for people with disabilities blends in-depth destination reviews and recommendations with community-sourced travel hacks. To find the most relevant topics, you can filter stories by specific impairments and mobility levels. [ablethrive.com](#).

HANDISCOVER

One of the most thorough sites out there for accessible accommodations, this booking engine has more than 23,000 listings in 50 countries. Users can narrow results by mobility level, plus variables like city size, price, and number of guests. [handiscover.com](#).

ACCESSIBLEGO

A one-stop shop for travelers with disabilities who are looking to book hotels, cruises, transportation, and more, this platform allows you to filter by accessibility needs, including ramped entrances, braille menus, and hearing systems. [accessiblego.com](#).

HAVE DISABILITY, WILL TRAVEL

This podcast spotlights personalities like Neha Arora, the founder of travel company Planet Abled. It’s produced by the Accessible Travel Forum, which has a useful discussion board for people with special needs. [accessibletravelforum.com](#).

AIRBNB

When Airbnb bought accessible vacation listing site Accomable in 2017, the home-sharing behemoth rolled the start-up’s 1,100 listings into its massive database. Airbnb’s search function can now screen for needs like step-free access and wide hallways. [airbnb.com](#). — **MADELINE BILIS**

GETTY IMAGES



◀ The alpine terrain of Slovenia’s Logar Valley can be enjoyed on a wheelchair-friendly path.

activities and locations, were established on a more global scale by the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Now we’re in a cultural moment where innovation, action, and advocacy are spurring real, substantive change. Social media has been a huge force: travelers like me connect more easily than ever on Instagram and other platforms, where hashtags facilitate kinship on macro (#wheelchairlife) and micro levels (#accessibletravel). Consider the fact that the world’s 65-and-over population is expanding at a rapid clip—the UN estimates it will reach 1.5 billion by 2050—and accessibility becomes an issue that will touch every traveler’s life eventually.

Between 2013 and 2015, more than 26 million adults with disabilities traveled globally for pleasure or business, taking 73 million trips, according to research from the nonprofit Open Doors Organization (ODO). “The industry is waking up to the fact that travelers with disabilities represent a very significant market,” says ODO executive director Eric Lipp.

Airports around the world are also stepping up to better accommodate challenges both visible and invisible. In 2016, Atlanta’s Hartsfield–Jackson International Airport partnered with Delta Airlines to open a multisensory waiting room with bubbling-water tubes, tactile activity panels, and other features designed to create a stress-alleviating space for passengers on the autism spectrum. As part of a U.K.-wide initiative, London’s

Gatwick and Heathrow airports have introduced green “sunflower” lanyards to help staff recognize and better support travelers who have dementia, anxiety, and other conditions that aren’t readily apparent to the naked eye.

Finding a Happy Multi-Gen Medium

Three T+L A-List family-travel specialists share tips for making senior relatives feel included.

BY **SIOBHAN REID**

For all its rewards, traveling with the whole family can involve complex logistics. Beyond juggling individual interests, there’s the added layer of accounting for any health issues or mobility problems that older members may be facing. With multigenerational trips on the rise, advisors have become adept at helping clients navigate tricky dynamics. “You often get too



many cooks in the kitchen,” says **Kimberly Wilson Wetty** ([kimberlyww@vwti.com](#)), whose specialties include the Caribbean and cruising. “We can advocate for everyone’s needs and plan activities that appeal to all, while picking the right guides and arranging wheelchairs and audio supplements,” she explains.

Cruises are a slam-dunk, says **Julie Danziger** ([julie@embarkbeyond.com](#)), who’s a pro at creating adventure itineraries. To keep youngsters happy, she says, take voyages to more outdoorsy destinations such as Alaska: “Grandparents can enjoy the scenery from the deck while the kids partake in onshore activities like dogsled tours.”

Villas are another great option, according to Europe and Africa expert **Julia B. Pirrung** ([julia@jetsetworldtravel.com](#)). Groups can consider ease of access (for example, the number of floors or stairs) when choosing which rentals make the most sense, and a private chef can take care of multiple dietary requests. An added benefit, Pirrung says, is the price: “Generally, buying out a villa for 10-plus people is going to be more affordable than renting out five or more hotel rooms.”

In for the Thrill

Surprising as it may seem, adventure-tour operators are some of the most pioneering companies in the accessible-travel space.

BY ANDREA BARTZ

ADVENTURE-TRAVEL ENTERPRISES seem to share a certain can-do spirit. This guiding ethos is why many of them are quite literally blazing new trails to make adrenaline-revving pursuits more inclusive. Because these companies already focus on safety and working within participants' physical parameters, staffers know how to break down activities or certain types of terrain for travelers requiring assistive mobility equipment. Much of the success stems from creative problem-solving, according to Jezza Williams, director of New Zealand-based outfitter Makingtrax, who's also a tetraplegic with a C5 spinal injury. "We had a 13-year-old boy with a neurodegenerative condition who wanted to climb to Mount Cook's Mueller Hut—which is at just above 7,000 feet—so we built a custom harness using a backpack and unicycle seat." Read on for ways other specialists are opening up the great outdoors.

▼
From left:
Rafting the
Buller River in
New Zealand;
handiskiing in
Savoie, France.



SNORKELING IN THE GALÁPAGOS

Dignity Travel, a luxury tour company that specializes in travel for people with physical disabilities, plans an annual expedition through Ecuador and the Galápagos. Trained escorts and personal-care nurses can be arranged to support sea kayaking and snorkeling. *dignitytravel.biz*; 15-day itinerary from \$9,837.

WILDLIFE SPOTTING IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Endeavour Safaris designs trips to some of the best reserves in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. Both lodge-based and riverboat journeys include wheelchair-friendly accommodations and jeeps, plus easy access to medical facilities. *endeavour-safaris.com*; seven-day Botswana itinerary from \$3,600.

PARAGLIDING IN NEW ZEALAND

The nonprofit Makingtrax offers a gamut of accessible options, from the extreme (skydiving, bungee jumping, paragliding) to the more low-key (stargazing, horseback riding). The paragliding excursions take participants soaring over the countryside around Christchurch. *traxtravel.co.nz*; nine-day itinerary from \$2,445.

HIKING AND RAFTING IN MONTANA

Wilderness Inquiry offers adaptable excursions in the U.S. and all over the world, from Uganda and Iceland to Belize. Their Glacier National Park outing incorporates rafting on the Flathead River and trails that are wheelchair-friendly. *wildernessinquiry.org*; six-day Montana itinerary from \$1,795.

SKIING IN THE FRENCH ALPS

U.K.-based Disabled Holidays takes skiers of all levels to four- and five-star resorts in France's Val Thorens, the highest ski area in Europe. In addition to securing lift passes, it can organize private instructors for the whole group and adaptive equipment (such as sit skis). *disabledholidays.com*; six-day Alps itinerary from \$2,200.



FROM LEFT: DYLAN GEE © EXTREME KID PRODUCTIONS/COURTESY OF MAKINGTRAX; HEWITS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Making Travel Autism-Friendly

Uncertain environments and changes to routines mean vacations can pose unique challenges for ASD families.

SAMANTHA MCNESBY shares her proven strategies.

AS A TRAVEL WRITER, I get paid to jet around the world with my husband and two kids. Since both of our girls have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Jeff and I have had to devise tricks to keep our travels seamless and worry-free. Our oldest, 16-year-old Sarah, is known to lose her possessions and become easily disoriented in unfamiliar places. Meanwhile Olivia, seven, is prone to making sudden dashes from the group when she feels overwhelmed. Air travel is especially rife with challenges: managing sensory overload in a crowded airport, getting through security checkpoints, dealing with anxiety attacks in the confined space of an airplane. The following survival strategies, which I've implemented over the years, can help ASD families anticipate some of these hiccups and focus on the fun that lies ahead.



Requests for wheelchairs at airports grew 30 percent from 2016 to 2017, according to research from the International Air Transport Association.



Families of kids on the spectrum can practice airport trips through *Autism Speaks*.

1 START THE CONVERSATION EARLY.

Travel-related TV programs can help your child anticipate some of the social situations that may arise at the airport or in other foreign environments. If your child has a favorite show, find a travel-centric episode that depicts these scenarios in a positive light. Two of our family's favorite programs are *Little Einsteins*, in which the characters travel to destinations like India and Australia, and *Wild Kratts*, a show about animal habitats around the globe. I'll also use learning tools like "social stories"—written or pictorial cues that help ASD individuals plan for potentially anxiety-inducing moments—to help break down travel processes into easy-to-follow steps.

2 BRING COMFORTS FROM HOME.

Whether you're staying in a hotel, an Airbnb, or a rented villa, the new environment will

have sights, sounds, textures, and even scents that are unfamiliar and potentially alarming. Pack (or ship ahead) some favorite items from home to make the room more comfortable. For Sarah, I'll bring stuffed animals and plenty of books, while for Olivia, a picky eater, I'll carry her favorite foods.

3 FORMULATE A BACKUP PLAN.

Since kids with autism are more likely to wander, contact and identification details are essential. Add them to your child's backpack or the insides of their collars and waistbands, listing your name, phone number, and other important notes, like allergies or strong aversions.

4 SCHEDULE A TEST RUN.

One tool to help familiarize ASD kids with airports is the Wings for Autism program run by the **Arc** (thearc.org),

a nonprofit for individuals with developmental and intellectual challenges. Held several times a year at Boston's Logan International, as well as other airports across the nation, the dry runs usually include a visit to a terminal, a tour of a plane, and practice with screening and boarding. Advocacy organization Autism Speaks arranges similar events.

5 GET THE RIGHT GEAR.

Headphones, sensory toys, and other assistive devices can help combat mental and emotional overload. These devices either help burn off energy that could otherwise be expressed physically—say by jumping or stomping—or help block out stimuli before they become overwhelming. For Olivia, I'll pack a Kindle, a coloring book and crayons, and, if we're traveling by car, a weighted blanket to calm her nerves.