



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



Hotels are upping their game, too. In 2017, Beaches Resorts became the first such company in the world to be designated as a Certified Autism Center, with at least 80 percent of the staff at its three properties trained to work with autistic guests.

Travel has always had the potential to build empathy by bridging cultural and geographic divides. Now it's building even greater understanding by addressing the personal challenges that travelers with disabilities deal with every day. As the world gets smaller, let's strive toward a future in which we can all move around freely—and nowhere is deemed off-limits. 🌍

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."