ACCESSIBLE TOURISM: AWHEELCHAIR TRAVELER’S PERSPECTIVE

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Summary

This paper will present issues involving air, sea and ground transportation for wheelchair users, examining the challenges and solutions in transportation.

Key words: accessibility, wheelchair travel, handicapped tourism

Goals

Solutions to wheelchair-travel issues serve all mobility impaired persons. All fall into the realm of the technical; however, meeting these needs goes far beyond the technical. It is hoped that this paper will give handicapped travel experts a picture of the end-user’s needs that is often neglected. It is hoped it will encourage experts to involve wheelchair users and other handicapped individuals in planning of solutions. It is hoped the presentation will deepen the appreciation of persons involved this field of the significant impact their solutions have on people who might otherwise not be able to travel. This impact has clear economic implications, as more handicapped and elderly travelers seek to travel. But it goes far beyond the economics or engineering: It falls in the realm of enriching the lives of the handicapped and their families, providing them the dignity that all human beings seek and deserve.

Discussion

Perhaps the comic-tragic situation in which I found myself when I travelled to China for the first time in the mid-1990s is the best way to introduce the issue of air travel for wheelchair-users.
Upon arrival at Guilin airport for my connecting flight, my guide – probably the only English-speaking guide in the province at the time – had to leave me at the check-in counter. I found myself being rolled along by four airport workers across runways and through a restricted military zone, to my plane, which was parked the far side of the airport. We stopped at the foot of the staircase leading to the plane door and I realized my four escorts were engaged in a very heated argument. I tried to get their attention and explain in pantomime how to carry me up, but they did not even look at me.

The next thing I knew, they suddenly grabbed me, each holding a leg or an arm. Off they ran, up the stairs with my legs up front and my head dangling behind. Believe me, it was not a very happy moment.

Air transportation involves some logistics that must be arranged ahead of time to insure the traveler with disability will be able to fly to his destination. The same logistics are true for both International and domestic flights. We must make sure that the necessary means will be available both at port of departure as well as at port of destination. These means include low counters at information desks, check-in and boarding points. This is not only a matter of the dignity of the traveler, but facilitates communication, which prevents errors that could lead to late takeoff, lost luggage and other mishaps that affect all travelers on a flight, and in our case, lost medication and medical equipment – our worst nightmare.

To make sure that wheelchair travelers reach their flight on time “golf-carts” are needed for slow walkers and the elderly. Accessible restrooms close to the boarding point is another necessity, as are jetways to allow wheelchair users reach the airplane entrance – to avoid the above “Guilin solution.” If jetways are not available, “High-rise” vehicles are the solution.

An aisle-chair – which on-board service staff should be taught how to open and close –are needed to transfer persons who cannot walk to their seats and so they can reach the restroom during the flight. Most IATA-member companies are now equipped in newer, large-body aircraft with at least one accessible restroom.
Companies will not necessarily be persuaded by humanitarian considerations to install accessible restrooms on board, because a proper accessible toilet takes up an extra row of seats. That is why this requirement has to be enforced by law.

Upon arrival at the wheelchair passenger’s destination, wheelchair travelers have exactly the same options as the walking public – trains for short or even longer distances, tour buses, taxis and rental cars – but only if at least a percentage of these conveyances are wheelchair accessible.

Unlike the aircraft, in which a row of seats cannot be removed to lock down a wheelchair, in accessible tour buses or public buses, seats can be removed or folded and this way wheelchairs can accommodated. Such buses, when they are not being used for wheelchair users, can transport walking people in regular seats. In the case of tour buses, the incentive for tie-downs and folding seats is economic – they advertise their accessibility and charge more. In the case of public transportation, once again, no transportation company will make their vehicles accessible unless forced to by law.

Fig. 2: Accessible tour bus in Sweden

Fig. 3: Accessible public bus in Vancouver, Canada.
The accessible aircraft and transportation from the airport, of course, is only the first “step.” Accessible conveyances continue to be key in a wheelchair-user’s enjoyment of a tourist destination. For example at the thrilling landscape destination of the Colombia Ice Field in Canada, the entire fleet of the so-called “monster buses” that take travelers for a ride on the Icefield, are wheelchair accessible by means of lift and wheelchair lockdown.

Fig. 4: “Monster bus” with lift on the Colombia Icefield

Just as wheelchair users can travel on ice, we can travel through the heat of the desert or an African safari, once again, by a specially adapted safari vehicle.

Fig. 5: Safari vehicle with foldable ramp

Fig. 6: Accessible safari truck with lift
Sometimes a ramp allows wheelchair access to an even more unconventional conveyance, an elephant. In that case the ramp (which everyone can use) comes instead of steps to the point where the animal can be mounted. At least two elephant parks in northern Thailand have such a ramp, which has attracted many wheelchair groups and individuals from all over the world.

Wheelchair users’ perspective on the world and of other people is kept artificially low – circumscribed by their confinement to their chair. The chance to sit high up to get an “elephant’s-eye” view of the world and experience the thrill of the wild gives wheelchair users a new sense of freedom and equality that can greatly improve morale. Wheelchair users will actively seek out similar experiences, such as horseback-riding and camel riding, as a form of adventure travel.
While horseback riding also requires a mounting platform, camel-riding does not, because the camel comes down to the client.

![Camel-back wheelchair user in the Israeli desert](image1)

![Horseback wheelchair user in Israel. Hippotherapy is very popular for therapy and leisure time activity.](image2)

Trains, like the TGV and similar lines in most of Europe, Japan and Korea are wheelchair accessible. For wheelchair-users, they can compete for convenience with short-haul flights, obviating the need for early arrival to airports, navigation of airports and being transferred from the wheelchair to the airplane seat.

![Accessible touring train to the Alaskan gold fields. Note the wheelchair lift at the end.](image3)

Trains are also a means of reaching popular tourist sites. For example, the train in Alaska, which looks old-fashioned and takes visitors through the pass taken by gold-miners in the old days, are modern and wheelchair accessible by means of a lift and restrooms.

Sailing is an appealing method of transport and tourism for everyone, but particularly for wheelchair-users for several reasons. One reason is convenience, as it may include both elements of touristic travel as well as accommodation, i.e., it brings one to the various sites without the need to pack and unpack every few days. That is a convenience for all travelers, but for
wheelchair-users, who travel with much medical equipment and medication, an accessible ship could mean the possibility of visiting many more sights, with economic implications for both the cruise line and the destinations.

For wheelchair-users, who are deprived of the pleasure of long walks, treks or hikes, travel on the water – by raft, canal boat or cruise ship – can be a means of adding spice to a trip, and attract them for repeat visits to a destination.

Even a simple bamboo raft can turn into a satisfying means of enjoying a river trip and requires no more than a path or a small pier for access.

Fig. 12: Thai wheelchair users and companions on a day trip on the Mae Tang River, Chaing Mai Province, Thailand

In Britain, canal boats ply the renewed waterways built during the height of the industrial revolution there. These boats function very much the way motor-homes do on the road. The traveler lives on board and moves along in the countryside from one dock to another.

Fig. 13: Accessible canal boat, Ring Canal, England

Fig. 14: Canal boat interior
The British Lord Nelson is a tall ship that can carry eight wheelchairs, and caters to the sight-and hearing-impaired as well. It is equipped so that persons of all types of disabilities will be able to take part in operating the ship and even the crow’s nest is wheelchair accessible, by means of ropes and pulleys.

In Thailand’s famous Pang Nga Bay some of the boats that ferry tourists have a wide enough lower deck for up to 12 wheelchairs and are boarded by a simple wooden ramp. Wheelchair-users congregate on the lower deck and their companions can take to the upper deck. Once reaching the “Tongs” Hollow islands, wheelchair users are transferred to inflatable rubber canoes as seen in this picture.

Fig. 15: The Lord Nelson: bottom left, wheelchair user at the prow; bottom right, wheelchair user ascending to the crow’s nest

Fig.16: Tour boat that can take wheelchairs, Pang Nga Bay, Thailand
International sporting events have been a boon to wheelchair travelers in enhancing accessibility at tourist sites. For years I visited Greece, but visiting the Acropolis remained a distant dream. Then, when Athens hosted the Paralympic games, it finally became a reality. The Olympic Committee told the organizers – who initially asked to host only the Olympics but not the Paralympics – that it was going to have to be a package deal. And so it was that in time for the games, Athens had an accessible light-train system and underground, accessible public buses, and – an accessible Acropolis.

**Fig. 17:** Stage 1. Chair lift to the lift

**Fig. 18:** Stage 2. Elevator lift, to the Acropolis

**Fig. 19:** Touring the Acropolis

**Conclusions**

Making travel accessible to wheelchair-users, and to the elderly, who in many countries are considered legally handicapped, makes sense on two levels. The first level involves economics. In an age when travel has become accessible to the masses, and those masses include wheelchair-users, accessibility takes on new meaning and new urgency if tourism vendors are to increase their market share and income.

The second level is no less urgent for citizens of our world. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the first human rights treaty of the twenty-first century was entered into force in 2008. Like other human rights issues and environmental issues, it opened new doors in terms of bringing handicapped people into the mainstream. Making travel
accessible is only one element of the challenge to meet the moral obligation to this convention in whatever way our skills and professions allow us to do this.

The Italian poet Cesare Pavese wrote of travel: “Nothing is yours except the essential things – air, sleep, dreams, the sea, the sky – all things tending towards the eternal or what we imagine of it.” Perhaps it is the poets make us long to travel. We depend on the engineers of travel to make those dreams come true for everyone.