

FOREWORD

By Susan Sygall, Executive Director of Mobility International USA



In my 30 years of international travel, I have found there are few things in life as exhilarating as visiting and exploring another culture. I've been traveling the Rick Steves way since 1973, and being a wheelchair rider has not held me back one bit. I was thrilled to be asked to write this foreword, since my most enriching experiences abroad have often been off the beaten path. As a person with a disability, you are almost guaranteed one thing:

You will never have an ordinary day.

I cherish my memories of traveling in Europe. I spent a month traveling with no plans or reservations throughout Italy, hopping on different trains and staying in both accessible and inaccessible hotels. I spoke to strangers in my makeshift Italian and flew down a hill in my wheelchair in Tuscany—to the surprise of whizzing cars—while inhaling the fragrant smells of the vineyards and cows.

I was welcomed and befriended by strangers. I was also thrown out of restaurants and left in the rain with flat tires in the middle of a big city. I volunteered for a community service project with 15 other folks from across Europe, sleeping on the floor in a sleeping bag and cooking our dinner of simple boiled potatoes while discussing international politics. I skied using adaptive equipment with other disabled people, and I bicycled and camped for several weeks in Holland and France using an adapted bicycle—with my wheelchair (and camping gear) in tow.

Europe is an enchanting place to visit. Where else can you be surrounded by some of the world's most spectacular art and architecture? Where better to dine on fabulous food and experience a slower pace, where sitting for hours at an outdoor café with a cappuccino and rich chocolate dessert is a way of life? I love the excitement of large cities, where you can see an original painting by van Gogh or Chagall. But I'm often drawn to the smaller villages and towns, where pungent cheese and fresh bread from the local bakery, or a picnic lunch surrounded by farmland and snowcapped mountains, make memories that continue to refresh and renew me long after I have returned home to my busy life. This book gives you the detailed information to make those life-changing experiences possible, and perhaps a bit easier.

As more people with disabilities enjoy the *real* Europe, they'll also be drawn to other non-traditional travel. Mobility International USA (www.miusa.org) and our National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) promote international exchange opportunities for people with disabilities, including study, volunteer, teaching, and internships abroad. An opportunity to live and learn alongside European people may significantly increase the value of your trip, and may also make it more affordable. (For more information, see page *TK.)

As more civil rights legislation emerges in Europe and throughout the world, people with disabilities can look forward to a future of greater accessibility wherever we travel. We will undoubtedly be frustrated at times by the lack of access, but it is important that we do not internalize those feelings. Our frustration should be placed on the fact that people with disabilities have not yet achieved our human right to full access. Your travel experiences can become a positive force for changing the world, for fellow travelers as well as the people with disabilities who live in the countries that you explore—who also want access to hotels, restaurants, historical landmarks, theaters, and campgrounds.

I know that you will enjoy this rich, well-researched book, which offers a rare combination of detailed information on accessibility with true local flavor. In the future, when all guidebooks include accessibility information as a standard feature, *Easy Access Europe* will be a welcome supplement.

Whether you travel alone, in a group of friends or family, or with a personal assistant, this book will assist you in exploring your European dreams. It is up to you to choose your own travel style, how much accessibility you require, and the type of experience you want to have. Use this book as a guide, but don't stop yourself from pursuing whatever wild idea you have. Be safe, be smart, have fun—and through your travels, make this world a better place for all people.