

ACCESSIBILITY RESOURCES AND TIPS



European countries, at various speeds, are doing what they can to open their doors and make their cobbled streets negotiable for more visitors. It's smart to do some advance groundwork. Here are useful resources to help you plan ahead. The tips come from a variety of sources, including Susan Sygall, the Executive Director of Mobility International USA (MIUSA) and writer of this book's Foreword; the National Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Exchange (run by MIUSA); and my readers.

For more advice on the ups and downs of Europe via walker or wheelchair, visit the Graffiti Wall at www.ricksteves.com.

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

Organizations

These organizations can help you plan an accessible, enjoyable journey.

Mobility International USA (MIUSA) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to empower people with disabilities around the world through international exchange and international development to achieve their human rights. MIUSA periodically sponsors international exchange programs for people with disabilities. They also sell helpful resources, such as the book *Survival Strategies for Going Abroad: A Guide*

for *People with Disabilities*, in which more than 20 experienced travelers with disabilities share stories, tips, and resources related to participating in international programs. This easy-to-use guide addresses the disability-related aspects of participating in international exchange programs, including choosing a program, applying, preparing to travel, adjusting to life in a new country, and returning home (www.miusa.org, tel./TTY 541/343-1284, info@miusa.org).

The **National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE)** provides information about work, study, volunteer, and research opportunities abroad for people with disabilities. The NCDE offers many resources, including a Peer-to-Peer Network connecting people with disabilities who have been abroad with those planning to go abroad; an online database with information about exchanges and disability organizations worldwide; the free publication *Preparing for an International Career: Pathways for People with Disabilities*; Web resources for parents and youth; and the free journal *A World Awaits You*, with tips and stories about a wide range of exchange opportunities. NCDE is a project sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. State Department and administered by MIUSA (same contact as above; www.miusa.org/ncde).

Access-Able Travel Source sponsors a useful Web site (www.access-able.com) that has access information and resources for travelers with disabilities, and offers a free e-mail newsletter. They have information about guidebooks, accessible transportation, wheelchair travel, scooter rental, disabled-travel forums, accessible transportation, and more (P.O. Box 1796, Wheat Ridge, CO 80034, tel. 303/232-2979, carol@access-able.com, Bill and Carol Randall).

The **Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality (SATH)**, an educational nonprofit membership organization, publishes a travel magazine (*Open World*) and offers travel advice (\$45 membership, \$30 for students and seniors, includes magazine; \$13 for magazine subscription only; tel. 212/447-7284, fax 212/725-8253, www.sath.org, info@sath.org).

Several organizations specialize in **health** issues: The **International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IAMAT)** provides a directory of English-speaking doctors in 500 cities in 120 countries who charge affordable, standardized fees for medical visits (membership free but donation requested, 417 Center Street, Lewiston, NY 14092, tel. 716/754-4883, www.iamat.org, info@iamat.org). The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** maintain health-related information online, including travel preparation and health information for travel worldwide (www.cdc.gov/travel). **PersonalMD.com** provides

information on a wide variety of health topics. The main feature is the PersonalMD Emergency Card, a free service that allows users to enter their medical information into a secure database that can be accessed anywhere in the world via the Internet, in case of an emergency. **Shoreland's Travel Health Online** offers health tips, a planning guide, and country information (www.tripprep.com).

Susan Sygall, the Executive Director of Mobility International USA, suggests the following: "I always get information about disability groups where I am going. They have the best access information, and many times they will become your new traveling partners and friends. Remember that you are part of a global family of disabled people. It can also be helpful to contact tourism offices and local transit providers before you travel. Some even include information about accessibility for people with disabilities on their Web sites." (See the appendix for a list of tourist information offices and their Web sites.)

Web Sites

In addition to the organizations listed above, you can find helpful resources and links pages on the Web sites for **Emerging Horizons** (www.emerginghorizons.com), **Gimp on the Go** (www.gimponthego.com), **Disabled Peoples' International** (www.dpi.org), and **MossRehab ResourceNet** (www.mossresourcenet.org/travel.htm). **AARP's** Web site features articles written for seniors and slow walkers (www.aarp.org/destinations). **Access Abroad** is a good resource for students with disabilities planning to study abroad (www.umabroad.umn.edu/access). **Wheelchair Accessible Europe** lists hotels throughout Europe offering accessible rooms (www.wheelchairaccessibleeurope.com).

GETTING THERE

Here are some resources and tips for getting to Europe, whether on your own or with a tour.

Air Travel

The **U.S. Department of Transportation's** "New Horizons" guide provides information for air travelers with disabilities, including navigating security, getting on and off aircraft, and handling seating assignments (available online at <http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/publications/horizons.htm>).

Thanks to the National Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Exchange, run by Mobility International USA (www.miusa.org), for the following

helpful information:

Though many transatlantic air carriers try to accommodate disabled travelers, airline policies are inconsistent. They change often and can vary from company to company and terminal to terminal.

Regardless of the inconsistencies, be aware that the Air Carrier Access Act of 1986 prohibits airlines from discriminating on the basis of disability (see www.faa.gov/acr/dat.htm). Airlines can no longer require that passengers with disabilities travel with attendants, carry medical certificates, or agree to assume liability for the damage of mobility equipment.

Be Assertive: If you have a disability, traveling by plane can be an exercise in relinquishing control. You temporarily surrender autonomy in exchange for necessary assistance and compliance with policies. Be flexible and ready to deal with frustrating situations.

It is important to know the policies of an airline before arriving at the airport. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for a passenger with a disability to be assured over the phone that his or her needs can be accommodated, only to find that employees at the gate have a different understanding of policies and procedures. Be assertive about your needs and insist upon the services necessary to complete a flight.

If you feel you've been discriminated against because of your disability, document your experience. Complaints should first go to an airline's Complaint Resolution Officer (CRO) on-site. Later, try the airline's community relations department. If these approaches are not successful, file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Transportation's Aviation Consumer Protection Division (tel. 202/366-2220, <http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov>, airconsumer@ost.dot.gov) or the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (voice telephone & TTY: 800-466-4232, www.dredf.org).

You can also call a toll-free hotline at 800-778-4838 or TTY 800-455-9880, seven days a week (answered 7:00–23:00 EST), run by the U.S. Department of Transportation. They can provide immediate and pre-travel assistance in resolving disability-related air-travel problems by suggesting and facilitating alternative solutions for you and the airline.

Choosing an Airline: Organizations that advocate for disabled air travelers are reluctant to recommend a specific air company, because even the “good” ones are inconsistent. Having a positive air travel experience depends to a great extent on the needs of the individual, the departure and destination cities, and the particular staff on duty.

Air carriers abroad have significantly different policies regarding people with disabilities than U.S. air carriers. Some European airlines

have excellent reputations for being very helpful to customers with disabilities. Other companies may have virtually no experience with disabled passengers.

Some foreign airlines may require a doctor's certificate for all independent air travel. Other foreign airlines may require that a person with a disability travel with a personal assistant. Advance research and comparison-shopping are crucial to having a successful trip.

Fortunately, the European Commission recently drafted legislation—that will go into effect in 2006—to force airlines to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

Planning Ahead: Whenever possible, plan and book flights well in advance. It is important to inform the travel agent and airline representative of the following information:

- Your type of disability and equipment aids used for locomotion, such as a cane, crutches, manual wheelchair, or electric wheelchair.
- Your special dietary requirements or need for assistance at meals (airline personnel are not required to help with eating, but should assist with preparing to eat).
- Whether another person will accompany you.

It is essential to call the airline directly to make sure all disability-related needs will be met. Always ask for the name and position of each airline employee and record this information with the time, day, and content of the call. It can be helpful to work with an airline special-services representative who can assist with facilitating arrangements.

Think carefully about flight length. You may find long flights uncomfortable if you can't use cramped airline toilets. Shorter connecting flights can be a good alternative. It's a good idea to schedule at least two hours between flights in case of delays or boarding and de-boarding problems—especially if you want your wheelchair, scooter, or other mobility equipment delivered to the gate at each stop (see below). Be sure your wheelchair is marked with your name and contact information, including those parts that can become separated.

Most airplanes lack accessible bathrooms. Either work out alternative systems for dealing with this issue (such as limiting fluids immediately before a flight) or book flights on planes with accessible bathrooms.

At the Airport: On the day of departure, consider arriving at least an hour earlier than the normal flight check-in time.

You'll probably need local accessible transportation for going to or from airports. Many major transportation companies, like airport shuttles, offer accessible vans with advance reservations.

If you don't own a wheelchair, but need to use one at the airport,

request a wheelchair and assistance from the airline. On the plane, canes or crutches can be kept under the seat, provided that the equipment does not block the aisles.

If you can't walk onto the plane, you'll be transported to your seat on an aisle chair (a narrow chair on wheels) by airline personnel. Be prepared to instruct the staff on the best transfer method and to assist with the boarding process.

If you have your own manual wheelchair, you'll generally be allowed to use it until you reach the door of the airplane. Your wheelchair will then be stowed with luggage in the baggage compartment or placed in an onboard storage space. Insist that your wheelchair be brought to the *gate* upon landing, rather than to the baggage claim area. Request this arrangement between flights and at the final destination.

More Air Travel Tips

My readers offer these suggestions for people with limited mobility traveling by air:

“If possible, speak to the ramp/baggage personnel who will be loading your chair (especially important for power chairs). Let them know how to take it out of gear, how to push it, and anything else of importance. Be sure you know what kind of battery you have. If your battery is a sealed, gel-cell type, it will have to be disconnected from your chair and boxed up—and you generally won't get help at the other end to put it back together. If your chair has removable leg rests, armrests, and the like, bring a separate bag to hold them. Ask the baggage handlers about the size of the opening to the baggage compartment and make any adjustments necessary to your chair yourself, such as reclining a high backrest.”

“Power chairs and scooters can easily be damaged on airplanes. Having damage-proof packaging for your scooter or wheelchair can provide big relief.”

“When making ticket reservations, request a bulkhead aisle seat, and take a plane that is nonstop.”

“If you wear a catheter leg bag onto a plane, make sure it is connected tight and TAPED. Otherwise you will have a big wet mess (I learned this one from experience).”

“Know your rights. Demand (politely at first) your rights. Know that every U.S.-based airline is obligated to follow the laws as set forth in the ACAA (Air Carrier Access Act). If you run into a problem, ask immediately for the Complaints Resolution Officer. Every U.S.-based airline is required to have a CRO on duty, and they have the authority to make sure your rights are respected.”

“Make sure to inform the airline you have a disability. I used to not do so, until one time a flight attendant noticed and, in a firm but friendly way, counseled me not to board an airplane without making my disability known to the crew. As she put it: Otherwise, in case of an emergency, ‘We’re going to be asking ourselves, why is he not running?’ Remember that we as disabled travelers have a responsibility to inform others about our situation.”

“A word of caution about European ‘no-frills’ airlines: While mainstream airlines employ their own customer-service assistants to help wheelchair passengers from check-in to boarding, no-frills airlines use a pool of people employed by the airport for a variety of duties. If you’re flying a no-frills airline and you have asked for wheelchair assistance, you are not by any means guaranteed to receive that service. As a wheelchair passenger flying no-frills, it’s a good idea to check in as early as possible, since smaller airports (the kind cheap airlines fly out of) often use old mobile steps to board the aircraft or require passengers to take a bus to the aircraft. Both methods obviously have implications for wheelchair passengers, who may need to be carried.”

Tours

If you’d rather not go it alone, you’ll find a selection of groups that run accessible tours to Europe, including **Accessible Journeys** (wheelchair trips to Britain, France, and Holland, 35 West Sellers Avenue, Ridley Park, PA 19078, tel. 800-846-4537, www.disabilitytravel.com, sales@disabilitytravel.com), **Flying Wheels Travel** (escorted tours to Great Britain and France, plus custom itineraries, P.O. Box 382, Owatonna, MN 55060, tel. 507/451-5005, www.flyingwheelstravel.com, thq@ll.net), and **Nautilus Tours and Cruises** (tours to France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, plus cruises to other destinations, 22567 Ventura Boulevard, Woodland Hills, CA 91364, tel. outside California 800-797-6004, in California 818/591-3159, www.nautilustours.com).

Access/Abilities offers information and custom searches on accessible-travel opportunities (tel. 415/388-3250). **Accessible Europe** is a collection of European travel agents and tour operators who specialize in disabled travel (www.accessibleeurope.com). **Accessible City Breaks**, based in Britain, runs trips to all the cities covered in this book and has a Web site with travel tips and some destination information (www.accessiblecitybreaks.co.uk).

In Case of Discrimination: Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, if you feel you have been discriminated against (such as not being allowed on a U.S. tour company's tour of Europe), contact the U.S. Department of Justice ADA Information Line at 800-514-0301 or the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund at voice telephone & TTY: 800-466-4232 (www.dredf.org).

ON THE ROAD

These resources and tips will help keep your on-the-road experiences smooth and fun.

Accommodations

A growing number of hotels have elevators and rooms with accessible bathrooms. But hotels aren't your only option.

Hostelling International provides a guide to hostels around the world that indicates which hostels are accessible. Fortunately, most newly built hostels are accessible (tel. 202/783-6161, www.hiayh.org).

The Sweden-based **Independent Living Institute's** Accessible Vacation Home Exchange Web site can put you in touch with disabled Europeans looking to swap homes or help you find an assistant overseas (www.independentliving.org).

Candy Harrington's new book, *There Is Room at the Inn: Inns and B&Bs for Wheelers and Slow Walkers* provides helpful advice on finding accessible accommodations without sacrificing charm.

Here are some more tips about accommodations from my readers:

"I strongly suggest that you confirm all 'accessible' rooms by phone prior to booking. It is worth it to do this and make absolutely sure that there are no unhappy surprises when you show up!"

"Do your research. The Internet is a wonderful resource, but be sure you talk to people on the phone or by e-mail to ask specific questions, especially about accommodations. Get dimensions of doorways and

elevators especially. Elevators in Europe tend to be quite small, which can really be a problem if you are in a power chair. Ask, ask, ask.”

“Always plan a minimum of two nights at a destination. This cuts down on the physical hassle of moving from place to place, and gives you a chance to rest on alternate days. Be sure that the hotel is accessible by giving them all your specific requirements (door widths included) before you reserve.”

“The most difficult part of planning a trip is being sure that the hotels have both an elevator and a room available with a step-in or roll-in shower. (We e-mail each hotel directly to confirm their ability to meet our specific needs and to request that they save the room we need.) I carry a small rolled-up rubber shower mat in case the shower is slippery.”

Parking

Parking spaces reserved for people with disabilities are commonly available throughout Europe. If you have a permit to use these spaces in the U.S., it is also valid in Europe. For more information on parking in Europe, see www.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/parking.htm.

Wheelchairs

Some museums (listed in this book) offer free loaner wheelchairs for mobility-impaired visitors. Be prepared to leave a photo ID as a deposit.

Here are some tips for Europe-bound wheelchair users:

“Electric wheelchairs must be recharged every one to two days, depending on use. Compare the voltage requirements (120V in the United States and 220V in Europe) and be sure you have the proper voltage transformer and type of adapter plug: three flat prongs for Britain, two round prongs for the Continent.” (*From NCDE*)

“Repairs for electric or ‘power’ wheelchairs are more expensive than for manual wheelchairs. Electric-wheelchair parts may be difficult to find when traveling abroad. Assembling an emergency kit of basic tools and frequently broken, hard-to-get parts for power wheelchair users is a smart idea.” (*From NCDE*)

“I use a lightweight manual wheelchair with pop-off tires. I take a backpack that fits on the back of my chair and store my daypack

underneath my chair in a net bag. Since I usually travel alone, if I can't carry it myself, I don't take it. I keep a bungee cord with me for the times I can't get my chair into a car and need to strap it in the trunk or when I need to secure it on a train." *(From Susan Sygall)*

"If the weather turns poor and you're traveling with a power chair or scooter, get a poncho that covers the occupant and the batteries to stay dry." *(From a reader)*

"Bring information about your wheelchair equipment and repair shop with you. Find out if the manufacturers sell equipment in Europe and get their contact information." *(From a reader)*

"Low-slung backs are great when the wheelchair users push on their own. In cases where they may need assistance, it would be great to be able to attach some higher handles for assistants to use as pushing and leverage points." *(From NCDE)*

"When traveling anywhere with rough terrain or cobblestones, I would highly recommend using Frog Legs shock absorbers on the front of your chair (www.froglegsinc.com), and also use the larger front wheels. The Frog Legs help prevent you from getting stuck in holes and will 'jump' obstacles that can stop you dead in your tracks with regular front wheels and stems. My daughter uses Frogs Legs and we have climbed the Rockies and the hills of Tuscany and have never gotten stuck, nor have I ever dumped her or flipped her and her chair forward." *(From a reader)*

"If using a wheelchair, it is important to measure the outside width of the wheels because some of the doors, elevators, and London cabs are not as wide as ours here in the U.S." *(From a reader)*

"We often discovered that doorways into restaurants or funiculars were too narrow, but, upon looking again, we found that there were second narrow doors next to the main door that can open up if unlocked, therefore creating a wider entrance." *(From NCDE)*

"When using a wheelchair and traveling outside the major cities by car, don't be afraid to drive around a lot to find the accessible entrances and parking areas before you park the car. Otherwise you

may find yourself wheeling down busy streets dodging potholes to get to the accessible entrance.” *(From a reader)*

Restrooms

“Bathrooms are often a hassle, so I have learned to use creative ways to transfer into narrow spaces. To be blatantly honest, when there are no accessible bathrooms in sight I have found ways to pee discreetly just about anywhere (outside the Eiffel Tower or on a glacier in a national park). Bring along an extra pair of pants and a great sense of humor.” *(From Susan Sygall)*

“There are plenty of accessible restrooms in Paris and London. The restrooms are usually locked with entrance limited to people who really need them. At the Eiffel Tower, there is an elevator to the restroom, which is below ground. You must ask the matron, who will then ‘beam you down.’ WCs in Europe tend to be smaller than those in the United States (probably because we tend to have more girth in general), so if you use a chair larger than 29 inches total width, you may want to bring a smaller one for your trip. Cambered wheels usually make the difference.” *(From a reader)*

“When you are out and about and find an accessible toilet, use it! (Or, in other words: Go when you can, not when you have to.) Some ‘modernized’ tourist facilities offer adapted toilets, but off the beaten path they are rare.” *(From a reader)*

Overcoming Challenges

For anyone, challenges are a part of travel. Here are some pointers on traveling well.

“If a museum lacks elevators for visitors, be sure to ask about freight elevators. Almost all have them somewhere, and that can be your ticket to seeing a world-class treasure.” *(From Susan Sygall)*

“Bring non-disabled friends. Having more helping hands with you if you need a quick lift up a curb, or if you have trouble handling your luggage, is always good. Also, when things go wrong, having a support group cuts down on panic and increases the number of ideas for solving problems.” *(From a reader)*

“Consider making your first trip to a country where you know someone. Visiting friends is great, and having a local to check things out for you before you come is very helpful. They also know you and know the local sources of help if you get in trouble.” *(From a reader)*

“Don’t confuse being flexible and having a positive attitude with settling for less than your rights. I expect equal access and constantly let people know about the possibility of providing access through ramps or other modifications. When I believe my rights have been violated, I do whatever is necessary to remedy the situation, so the next traveler, or disabled people in that country, won’t have the same frustrations.” *(From Susan Sygall)*

“Bring a camera with a zoom lens. It allows you to ‘get closer’ to things without physically moving (and you don’t necessarily have to take a picture of everything you look at).” *(From a reader)*

“Note that Europeans, who walk more than the average American, have a different concept of ‘not far.’ We were once given directions to a hotel that was ‘only three streets away.’ Yes, but the streets were about three kilometers apart—a long walk for my parents! You may want to ask, ‘How many minutes to walk?’ instead of, ‘How many blocks?’ (Or just take a cab if there’s any doubt at all.)” *(From a reader)*

“If you get in trouble or need supplies, ask for help. Being shy is a real liability in traveling to a foreign place. Most people are very friendly and helpful. If someone isn’t, shrug it off and keep asking. In many cases, you will not need to ask people will jump to your aid.” *(From a reader)*

“Asking for help and smiling a lot gets you all kinds of assistance. The staff at the Belgian railway were wonderful. At one point, two employees helped us change trains, carried luggage, took us to hidden freight elevators, and insisted on staying with us until we were safely on the second train. When we tried to tip them after they spent nearly 30 minutes helping us and waiting with us, they refused to accept the tip and insisted it was their job to make our trip pleasant. When we arrived at our destination, we discovered that they had called ahead and had a wheelchair and another smiling attendant waiting at the exit of our rail car!” *(From a reader)*

“Choose your travel wardrobe carefully and fit it into one small piece of luggage. People will be more likely to help you cheerfully if there isn’t a lot of hauling involved. (My daughter says, ‘Gee, Mom, you meet all the cute, athletic young guys.’ But I bet they wouldn’t be so helpful if I had a mountain of luggage!)” *(From a reader)*

“Plan short days with time for breaks, and be satisfied with seeing what you can and not regretting what you can’t get to. I found that because we moved more slowly, I experienced things that I had missed on earlier trips. Smell the roses, talk with the children, smell the bakeries, and so on.” *(From a reader)*

“Be cheerful about your limitations. Sitting in the garden while your companions tour a steep-staired medieval castle is not all bad. You might actually meet and chat with some of the locals.” *(From a reader)*

“Keep in mind that accessibility can mean different things in different countries. In some countries, people rely more on human support systems than on physical or technological solutions. People may tell you their building is accessible because they’re willing to lift you and your wheelchair over the steps at the entryway. Be open to trying new ways of doing things, but also ask questions to make sure you are comfortable with the access provided.” *(From Susan Sygall)*

“I always try to learn some of the language of the country I’m in, because it cuts through the barriers when people stare at you (and they will), and also comes in handy when you need assistance in going up a curb or a flight of steps. Don’t accept other people’s notions of what is possible—I have climbed Masada in Israel and made it to the top of the Acropolis in Greece.” *(From Susan Sygall)*