



n the U.S. alone, 61 million adults, or 26% of the population, live with a disability, according to the CDC. And as baby boomers — the second-largest generation alive — continue to age, that number will grow substantially.

When it comes to travel, that group is no different than the rest of the population: They want to get out and go. And far too often, hotels, airplanes, ships and destinations come up short in being able to adequately accommodate their needs.

But the travel industry is taking steps, some small and some bold, to make itself more inclusive to people with mobility, hearing and vision limitations as well as autism and other disabilities.

In this two-part series, Travel Weekly looked at some of the ways travel companies are attempting to be more inclusive while also confronting their limitations.

## **The market**

According to a recent report from MMGY Global, “Portrait of Travelers with Disabilities: Mobility and Accessibility,” approximately 12.5 million disabled people traveled in 2018-19. Factoring in the growth of baby boomers expected to acquire a disability as they age, MMGY estimates that number to nearly triple to 33.4 million by 2028. Travelers with mobility disabilities spend \$58.2 billion per year on travel, MMGY found, and take leisure trips with nearly the same frequency as those without mobility issues.

But disabled travelers experience a range of issues and roadblocks at nearly every stage of their journeys. Lodging and transportation accessibility are cited as the two biggest barriers to travel for people with mobility issues, MMGY found, with nearly all (96%) of more than 2,700 respondents of the survey (those who either have a disability and use a mobility aid or their caretaker) saying they have faced an accommodation problem while traveling, experienced flight problems (86%) or have had in-market transportation problems (79%).

Laurent Roffe and Mitch Gross, co-founders of accessible travel consultancy Accessio, say that while demand for accessible travel is increasing, the supply of products ready for travelers isn't keeping pace. The good news, they say, is that there is a strong appetite to make travel easier for disabled travelers, and that is largely because the segment is financially attractive.

“There is really a need to improve the experience for so many people out there, but there also is this huge overlooked commercial opportunity,” Gross said. “And that’s important, because social initiatives that don’t have a good financial grounding don’t last. They can’t. They end up being flavor of the week.”



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Accessio’s research indicates that more than 20% of travelers have some kind of accessibility requirement and that they are big spenders: Travelers with accessibility needs are more likely than those without to stay in four-plus-star hotels and fly in premium economy, business and first classes. It’s a “classic business school definition of an attractive segment,” Gross said.

And it’s a segment that is traveling more than it used to. The MMGY report found that, compared with 2015, disabled travelers are on the move more frequently now and spent 68% more money than they had before. Looking at air travel data, MMGY called 2017 a “breakthrough year” as requests for wheelchair assistance skyrocketed 30% from the year prior.

But it is also that first part of a journey, the flight, where many problems arise.

## **Flying while disabled**

Numerous shortcomings hamper safety and convenience for persons with disabilities, both in airports and on airplanes. But on some fronts, at least, there are green shoots of improvement.

A 2021 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office cited complex terminal layouts and long distances between gates as barriers within airports for people with mobility challenges. Inconsistent disability training across airport and airline groundworker staff was another problem area as are gate change and flight announcements that are inaccessible to deaf or blind travelers.

On the plane, wheelchair access is a primary concern, said Claire Stanley, public policy analyst for the National Disability Rights Network. Flyers aren't able to travel in their own chair and instead must endure being transferred to a narrow airline chair to be wheeled from the gate, before transferring into their aircraft seat. Meanwhile, their personal chairs must be checked, where they are at risk of being damaged.





WheelChairTravel.org founder John Morris, seen here on a KLM flight, says wheelchair users should have the option to use their own chairs on flights. (Courtesy of John Morris)

In addition, for flights on narrowbody planes, lavatories are often inaccessible, leading disabled travelers to sometimes book cross-country itineraries with a plane change rather than flying direct in order to have bathroom access.

“Sometimes travelers will dehydrate themselves so they don’t have to use the lavatory,” Stanley added.



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Paige Mazzoni, CEO of Canine Companions, said that a new challenge for some travelers with disabilities is greater scrutiny of service dogs since airlines banned emotional support animals in 2021

Those bans don't relate to qualified service dogs, said Mazzoni, but inadequately trained airline staff sometimes turn away service animals at the gate. That happens more frequently on connecting itineraries, such as codeshares involving multiple airlines or when flyers are rebooked due to a flight change or cancellation.

After just a couple of such cases during her first three years heading Canine Companions, Mazzoni said she's heard of about 15 this year. Incidents like those speak to what Mazzoni says is the biggest shortcoming for airports, airlines and TSA regarding travelers with disabilities: poor or inadequate training.

"That's the low-hanging fruit," she said, referencing solutions.

That lack of training is not ubiquitous, Mazzoni said. She cited Alaska Airlines as an example of a carrier that works diligently at disability training and making themselves available to disability advocates.

"They are really thoughtful about the process. They actually have people with disabilities who work with this and us, so they really get it," she said. Stanley, who is blind, said that blind travelers are often frustrated at airports, where they might be made to wait for assistance in getting to or between gates and are sometimes inappropriately required by workers to use wheelchair assistance.

But some airports have stepped up their efforts by offering free access to the Aira navigation app, which provides personal wayfinding assistance to the visually impaired via their smartphone camera.

One such airport is Phoenix Sky Harbor, which in June began offering free Aira access across the airport property under a five-year, \$50,000 contract.

"We are always looking to add to our accessibility functionality," said Sky Harbor spokeswoman Tamra Ingersoll. "This was just a natural step."

Help could be in the offing on the wheelchair front, as well. This summer, DOT secretary Pete Buttigieg pledged to work toward requiring airlines to

allow passengers to fly in their own wheelchairs. But, he noted, such a change will take time.

## **Accommodating accommodations**

U.S. hotels have long been required to meet baseline accessibility standards under the Americans with Disabilities Act, but some hospitality players are moving beyond minimum compliance in order to create more inclusive environments.

The Schoolhouse Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., opened this past June in a former school and bills itself as the “world’s first fully accessible boutique hotel.”

The brainchild of nonprofit group the Disability Opportunity Fund, the hotel’s goals were twofold: fulfill the fund’s mission to service the disability market in the U.S. and help boost the local, nascent tourism economy.





A common area at the Schoolhouse Hotel, a West Virginia property that is the brainchild of the nonprofit Disability Opportunity Fund. (Courtesy of The Schoolhouse Hotel)

As part of the property's development process, the Disability Opportunity Fund gathered input from travelers with disabilities early on.

"We sat via Zoom with our architects and several people with various disabilities and just listened to them talk about what they love about traveling, what makes it hard and what could be better," said Genny Freiman, a Disability Opportunity Fund project manager. "We tried to put as much of that feedback into the building as we could."

All 30 guestrooms and all public areas across the Schoolhouse Hotel feature an extensive list of amenities designed to accommodate guests with disabilities. Guestrooms feature minimal furniture to reduce obstructions. To address sensory processing issues, the property blends cool and calming colors with limited graphic decor. Near the hotel's entrance, a designated area with synthetic grass provides service animals a convenient spot to relieve themselves. Additionally, staff and guests can access Jeenie, an interpretation app that can connect to a live American Sign Language interpreter on demand.

At the Schoolhouse Hotel's restaurant, dining tables are higher than standard to better accommodate those in wheelchairs, and the property's three-sided bar is also uniquely designed, with one side at regular height and the other two lower, allowing guests in wheelchairs direct, roll-up bar access. On the two lower sides of the bar, the floor behind the bar is also lower, putting bartenders at eye level with customers in wheelchairs.

That the Schoolhouse Hotel is fully accessible isn't something the average hotel guest might notice upon first glance, however. "We didn't want it to scream [Americans with Disabilities Act] accessibility, because unfortunately, yes, there is a stigma around getting put in the ADA room with the grab bars and other things that may not be pretty," said Freiman.

While the Disability Opportunity Fund doesn't have plans to open additional hotels, Freiman hopes the Schoolhouse Hotel will serve as "a showcase" for accessible hospitality.

"We want other companies and brands to see that there are small changes that can go a very long way," she said. "And we'd like to see brands with more resources than we have replicate this concept."

When it comes to resources, few in the hotel industry have more at their disposal than Marriott International. At a mid-August media event at Marriott's Bethesda, Md., headquarters, CEO Tony Capuano told attendees that the company had recently invited some Bonvoy members with disabilities to visit Marriott's model rooms and provide feedback and suggestions.

"We were really trying to reimagine the ADA rules," said Capuano.

"Instead of saying, 'Let's make sure we have the bare minimum number of ADA rooms with the bare minimum legal requirements,' we ask what do our [guests with disabilities] really want?"

One particular highlight, Capuano recalled, was a suggestion, made by a blind Bonvoy member, to add Braille to a hotel room's thermostat, adding that it was a change that could "virtually cost nothing."

Outside the U.S., Ani Private Resorts, which operates private, all-inclusive properties in the Dominican Republic, Anguilla, Thailand and Sri Lanka, has focused on wheelchair accessibility since its inception in 2010. That's primarily because Ani's founder, Tim Reynolds, is himself in a wheelchair, which he began using after a serious car accident in 2000.







A villa pool at the Ani Anguilla with a wheelchair-accessible path on the left.  
(Courtesy of Ani Private Resorts)

Ani resorts, which are booked by groups on a buy-out basis, have accommodations with plenty of space and open floor plans, wheelchair-friendly pathways and ramps and many pools outfitted with pool lifts. Any Ani space that isn't fully accessible by default can be made so with modifications, such as added ramps.

“Because we always have to think about what’s going to make it easy for our owner to come and experience our resorts, the design is always thought about through his eyes,” said Ani chief marketing officer Henny Frazer.

Ani’s high level of accessibility has bolstered the brand’s popularity not just among those who use wheelchairs but also with older family members. “We have a lot of a multigenerational families coming to stay with us,” Frazer said. “Often that might include a very generous grandparent who’s actually paying for the group but who might not be as strong on their feet anymore. So as a result [of being so accessible], we’re also very suitable for people of all ages.”

*Jamie Biesiada contributed to this report.*

**In the Oct. 3 issue: Cruises’, tour operators’ and destinations’ takes on accessibility.**