

Recreational Vehicles Make Traveling Easier for People With Disabilities

by Trish Riley



Jay Miller, vice-president of the Florida Amputee Support Team in Tamarac, Florida, has lost all interest in traveling. Miller, who has diabetes and lost a leg to infection 12 years ago, says the expense and his special diet and medication needs are partly why he chooses to stay at home in Fort Lauderdale. But those aren't the only reasons.

"I haven't been anywhere since September 11," he says. "I've known people who've had to take their prostheses off and send them through the x-ray machine. I've known people who had to take their prosthetics apart to prove they weren't security concerns. You can't do that. The alignment's going to get messed up and you won't be walking after that. Custom shoes get checked out, too."

Like so many things that have changed since September 11, international expeditions and air travel have become even more difficult, particularly for people with disabilities.

"When they've asked me to remove my shoes, I just look at them with a great big smile and tell them I can't do that - I'll have to take off the whole leg!" says Carroll Driscoll of Arizona, who lost a leg to cancer in 1988 but refused to give up traveling. "I feel that if you meet ques-

tions or orders with humor and courtesy, you'll be treated accordingly. These people are only doing their jobs."

And they're trying to do them with more sensitivity, says Carol Randall, a multiple sclerosis patient from Colorado who runs a travel resource Web site called Access-Able Travel Source with her husband, Bill. "They've had training now and have tried to develop consistent procedures that make it easier for people with disabilities. You can arrange a private 'pat down,' and they can x-ray your stuff right at the end so you don't lose sight of it. The point is to let you know what needs to be done and what the procedure is so you can be prepared for it." Randall suggests checking the government Web site www.tsatraveltips.us before arriving at the airport to be sure you're prepared.

Driscoll advises disabled air travelers

to take advantage of airport wheelchairs and attendants, who can help ease security issues while helping them conserve energy for the more enjoyable aspects of the trip.

Taking trips can be a great way to take one's mind off our setbacks and limitations. "Traveling is part of the healing process," says Driscoll, who now serves as a consultant to travelers with disabilities. "There are fears ... what if I can't get into the bathroom? What if my leg falls off? You'll just put it back on. You'll manage. More than manage."

But as the sky becomes less crowded, many Americans are taking to the roads, touring scenic byways, national parks and historic villages. Americans with disabilities are no exception. Accessible recreational vehicles (RVs) have become increasingly popular.

"Instead of having to go into a hotel

and ask whether they have a handicapped room, then go and see if my wife can use it, we've got a place that's familiar, that my wife has access to," says Mike Drew, president of the Handicapped Travel Club, who has been living full time in a 36-foot RV for five years with his wife, Carlyn, who is disabled from a stroke. "That's the way most of the handicapped people feel – they're comfortable in their rig. People don't have to be trapped in a house or trapped in an institution someplace just because they have a disability. I think 99 percent of the people who are 'handicapped' can get out and enjoy life more than they do. But it takes a gutsy person."

Gayle Martinelli says the people with disabilities she knows have chosen not to let their disability rule their lives, but to *live* their lives.

"What could be more exciting than traveling and being independent and being able to do all these things – this is a crucial means of therapy," says Martinelli, a certified therapeutic recreational specialist from Michigan. "Accessible camping has become my passion."

Martinelli points to statistical studies indicating that camping in particular can help people with disabilities increase their self-confidence, accept their disability, improve their stress management and their physical and mental health, strengthen family roles and improve their quality of life.

Although options for accessible travel may have been limited in the past, passage of the ADA into law ensures some accessibility. But seasoned travelers say that more important than legal compliance is a cooperative, educated and understanding staff at campgrounds, hotels and attractions. Tourism retailers are discovering a fast-growing market among travelers with special needs, and they're scrambling to accommodate their potential customers.

Meanwhile, new guidelines are being developed to make outdoor facilities more accommodating. Martinelli, a member of the Handicapped Travel Club and its Web mistress, asks that



anyone interested in helping to establish workable criteria for trails, beaches, and picnic and camping areas review the draft guidelines posted at www.access-board.gov and provide input.

"Campgrounds should have accessible campsites, bathrooms, offices and hookups," says Martinelli. "Look for hard-surface cement or asphalt sites, not gravel and especially not sand. And be sure to ask if the hookups are easy to access. They're often off to the side, up a hill, or surrounded by vegetation that creates a problem."

RVs come with all sorts of modifications for those with disabilities, and many manufacturers will customize a vehicle or make changes during the production process to cut down on the expense of making alterations later.

"Some simple modifications include getting a ramp to access the door, making sure the door is wide enough, having wide aisle ways and a bed you can transfer to," says Martinelli. "Some people need to have a transfer system with a Hoyer-type lift that can help them move around the RV."

Ability-equipped RVs have become a big business in recent years, according to Roger Lumming at Winnebago. "We probably have increased our business over the last year by 57 percent," he says.

"One of the biggest benefits that able-bodied people wouldn't realize," says Martinelli, "is that people with disabilities can take their accessibility with them in a modified RV."

RVs can be expensive, though. Palm RV in Fort Lauderdale has a used unit for sale. The 27-foot Itasca Sunova, made by Winnebago in 2002, offers a wheelchair lift, electric sofa bed, wide aisles with tie-downs, shower seat and accessible toilet for \$66,900. The vehicle, part of a rental fleet, has 19,500 miles. Manager Richard Demmers says he is one of very few dealers who offer ability-equipped RVs for rent, and Martinelli agrees.

"There is a tremendous need for accessible rentals," Martinelli says. "Folks would like to try this out before they make the investment."

Demmers rents the Sunova for a negotiable \$245/day, and he has added a new, larger vehicle to his fleet with similar accessibility. Also on his lot is a 40-foot Winnebago coach being sold by race-car champion Darrell Gwynn, who lost an arm and was partially paralyzed in an accident in 1990. The Ultimate Advantage is offered at \$250,000.

To help disabled travelers find exactly the sort of fun they're looking for, authors Deborah Van Brunt and Michelle Stigleman have put together a book,

Wheelchairs on the Go: Accessible Fun in Florida (2002, Access Guide Publishing), based on the experiences of Michelle and her husband, Mike, a quadriplegic since a high-school sporting accident. Florida residents, the Stigleman's enjoy traveling, and have been pleased to find accessibility in the neatest of places. They'll help you locate beaches, like Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park on the Gulf Coast in Naples, where eagles roost and beach wheelchairs are provided, or the Audubon Society's Corkscrew Swamp nearby, the world's largest standing cypress forest, with 2.25 miles of boardwalk that pass through natural bird habitats in several different ecosystems. Egrets, alligators and otters make their home there, and even bears and occasional panthers pass through. Wheelchairs are provided so disabled visitors can enjoy the scents, sounds and cool, shaded breezes, too.

Campers can enjoy Collier-Seminole State Park off the Tamiami Trail east of Naples, with paved, extra-wide sites and accessible showers and restrooms. A flat ferry boat takes guests on a river tour through the mangroves bordering the Ten Thousand Islands, a last vestige of native Florida. Well-behaved pets are even welcome on the boat. Those who prefer the luxury lifestyle may find the Inn on Fifth (www.naplesinn.com) in the heart of downtown Old Naples more inviting. Five rooms have been deemed accessible, one with a roll-in shower. While there, perhaps a massage would be in order?

Or maybe you'd rather go biking, horseback riding, parasailing or scuba diving? *Wheelchairs on the Go* has located the equipment in Florida and gives a wealth of information on what to expect and what's required for those with varying disabilities.

"Getting out and having FUN is critical to rehabilitation," says Van Brunt. "That 'I can' attitude is important for everybody. But for folks who must rise above an impairment of some sort, it can be the difference between existence in a cocoon and tackling the wide world. For some it can be a lifesaver or at least life extending."

Handicapped Travel Club members post campground accessibility information online as they visit them, and Access-Able Travel Source provides a worldwide database of hotels, attractions, and transportation, medical and other accessible resources. The Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality (SATH) is an education and advocacy organization that provides additional resources and links to make traveling a very real possibility for those with special accommodation needs.

"Traveling is very empowering," says Randall. "Being able to continue to do that makes you feel in control of your life, like you're a worthwhile human being."

Carroll Driscoll, whose fascinating travel experiences provide staunch entertainment for the unenlightened, agrees. She once watched in horror as her prosthesis, sweaty in a humid cavern, slipped off her leg and rolled down the ramp toward a mud puddle during a tour. Fortunately, someone caught it, and today the tour guide reminds those with prostheses to make sure their limbs are attached securely before descending into the muggy

depths. "After all," she says. "Once I faced cancer, what can scare me?"

TRAVEL RESOURCES

Wheelchairs on the Go: Accessible Fun in Florida

The 424-page paperback is available for \$24.95 online at www.wheelchairsonthego.com

Access-Able Travel Source

Phone: 303/232-2979
www.access-able.com

Travelin' Talk Network

www.travelintalk.net

Handicapped Travel Club, Inc.

Network of disabled campers who meet annually for a rally and connect as they travel around the country. Members log campground accessibility information for club use and provide a quarterly newsletter and resource information.
www.handicappedtravelclub.com

SATH (Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality)

Phone: 212/447-7284
www.sath.org

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