

RV travel for the Physically Challenged

Physical challenges don't have to stop RV traveling?

by Alice Zyetz

Since 1990, we have all become more familiar with results of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA): the little blue logo for close-in parking spaces, the accessible toilet stalls, the sloping curbs. As campers, we have seen certain campsites dedicated to the disabled and some sightseeing trails marked as accessible. But in my experience, until we ourselves experience some disabling circumstance, or we take the time to talk with someone who is physically challenged, we don't begin to appreciate the challenges and strengths of the lifestyle, particularly when traveling.

This article addresses three audiences:

- Those who are physically challenged and would like to travel more but don't know what is already available
- Those who are older and currently in good health but dread the day they might have to hang up their keys
- Those who are able-bodied and want to know how to help without offending anyone

My thanks to **Merle Young** of the *Handicapped Travel Club* (<http://www.handicappedtravelclub.com/>) for providing a wealth of information and insights on this issue. You'll find a lot of information there and below.

How to Find a Modified RV

For those traveling in RVs, one of the biggest challenges is to find a rig that will accommodate a specific disability. Many companies will make conversions, depending on what modifications people need. Some manufacturers will build to individual specifications or change a floor plan to make a unit accessible.

The needs differ so much that it would be impossible to build an accessible RV that would work for everyone. Some units just need an assist bar at the door, others need a wheelchair lift, some furniture removed, or dinettes shortened for a wheelchair to access a rear bath. Some require a track system in the ceiling to move the individual from the front to the rear. For more information on companies that customize recreational vehicles, see [rv-info.net](http://www.rv-info.net/rvspecialty.html) (<http://www.rv-info.net/rvspecialty.html>) and [GoRving](http://gorving.com/compare-rvs/specialty-rvs/rvs-for-the-disabled) (<http://gorving.com/compare-rvs/specialty-rvs/rvs-for-the-disabled>).

If you are considering the RV lifestyle on a limited basis or full time, a visit to a Handicapped Travel Club national rally, or even a mini rally, will allow you to see many units that have been converted or specially built to meet your needs. If possible, attend a national rally. No other place offers the opportunity to see so many units with such varied modifications. Many knowledgeable individuals will be on hand to offer suggestions and assistance. In addition, there are often several units for sale on the club's website that have various adaptations already completed.

Where to Travel

Another challenge is finding places to travel that have accessible sites. Most campgrounds now provide sites for disabled campers. In my brief experience in a wheelchair this year, I discovered that despite all good intentions, some details are always overlooked. For example, although the spaces are flat and wide enough to accommodate a unit and a lift, the utilities may be surrounded with railroad ties or crushed rock, or the office is not accessible for check-in. On the plus side, people are most gracious about lending a hand when needed.

Since 1990, there is a greater awareness of the need for access to the beautiful sites in our country. This month when my husband and I visited Olympic National Park, we went to the Visitor's Center as usual to find out where to go. The ranger recommended a beautiful waterfall that required a half-mile hike to get to it. "I can't walk that far," I said, the disappointment showing on my face. "No problem," she said, and guided us to another waterfall that was easily accessible from the parking area.

I learned a valuable lesson that day: Even though accessible places may not be clearly marked in the written material, speak to the rangers or campground hosts to find out what may be available.

Fortunately, more books are being written about accessible places to travel:

- **PassPorter's Walt Disney World for Your Special Needs: The Take-Along Travel Guide and Planner! (Passporter Walt Disney World)** by Deb Wills and Debra Martin Koma
- **Wheelchairs On The Go: Accessible Fun in Florida**, by Michelle Stigleman
- **Barrier-Free Travel: A Nuts and Bolts Guide for Wheelers and Slow Walkers, Second Edition**, by Candy Harrington
- **Access for Disabled Americans - A Guide for The Wheelchair Traveler (Disabled Travel Series)**, by Patricia Smither
- **Walks in Welcoming Places: Walks in the Northeast for the Not So Young and the Disabled**, by Marina Harrison
- **The RVing Accessible Group**, which advises RV parks about making their parks accessible, has a page with accessible RV parks in 11 states. Check RVingAccessibility.org. They welcome your feedback.

Medical Rates

Sometimes RV parks will provide special rates if RVers need medical treatment. When Nancy Kieffer's husband was temporarily disabled while traveling, she discovered that the local KOA campground charged them only \$9 a night while her husband was undergoing physical therapy as a result of his accident.

Nancy says, "I would advise any RVer who needs medical treatment to call all the RV parks in the area and find out if any offer medical rates.

And if the RVer needs hospital treatment, then I would suggest the RVer contact Hospital Admissions and find out if the hospital has any relationships with RV parks where the RVer can stay at a discounted rate while he or she is undergoing treatment." Some hospitals also allow RV parking and may provide hookup sites.

Advice for the Able-Bodied

Many people are reluctant to offer assistance for fear of offending the disabled RVer. Merle Young says, "Most handicapped individuals will do a chore themselves rather than ask someone for assistance; however, if someone offers, they gladly accept their help. I think that when an RVer sees someone who is handicapped, just greet them and ask if there is anything they can do to assist. My biggest problem is with the awning. I can do it, but it is difficult. A little assistance is always appreciated."

Handicapped Travel Club

The Handicapped Travel Club, Inc.(HTC) was formed in 1973 to encourage RV traveling for people with a wide range of disabilities. The club currently has more than 250 active members, publishes a newsletter, holds local get-togethers, and sponsors an annual rally as well as an occasional regional rally.

Check out the group's resource information and links for a comprehensive view of the lifestyle including lists of companies that modify rigs, listings of used rigs for sale, traveling suggestions, and general support so the disabled traveler is never alone out there. I highly recommend this excellent club, whose fee is \$12 to join and \$8 a year thereafter. It's probably one of the best bargains in the RV world for the support and friendship they offer.

More Web Resources

- **Travelin' Talk Network:** An international network providing assistance to travelers with disabilities
- **Access-Able Travel Source:** Information on accessible attractions and HTC-identified accessible RV parks.
- **Newmar** is now producing a motorhome that is wheelchair accessible as an option. See the **Newmar Canyon Star**. (Added 4/2013)

This article originally appeared at RoadTripAmerica.com, September 2004. Updated 2013.