

Surfing For

New travel websites are making it easier to determine the accessibility of a hotel, restaurant or attraction during your next trip.



by Jennifer Best

It would seem that making accessible travel plans has never been so easy. With the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)



Jim Parsons, founder of wheelchairjimmy.com, and his wife, Ann-Marie Parsons.

and the internet, travelers should be able to log on to any number of hotel, airline, restaurant or multi-purpose websites and click away, right?

Not quite.

Many hotels tout themselves as accessible, but upon arrival you can sometimes find unworkable bathroom layouts, varying grab-bar placements, ill-placed furniture and challenging bed heights. And if you're looking to venture beyond the ADA boundaries, even the simplest of needs can turn into roadblocks.

Enter a handful of growing websites designed by and for travelers with disabilities, from homegrown wheelchairjimmy.com to handiscover.com, an international Airbnb of sorts for people with varying disabilities.

"People in our community have the same rights as others to be able to search and find accommodations on websites that are modern, easy to use and cover a lot of choices," says Handiscover Founder and CEO Sebastien Archangeaud. "As a family, we always manage to travel, but

Accessibility



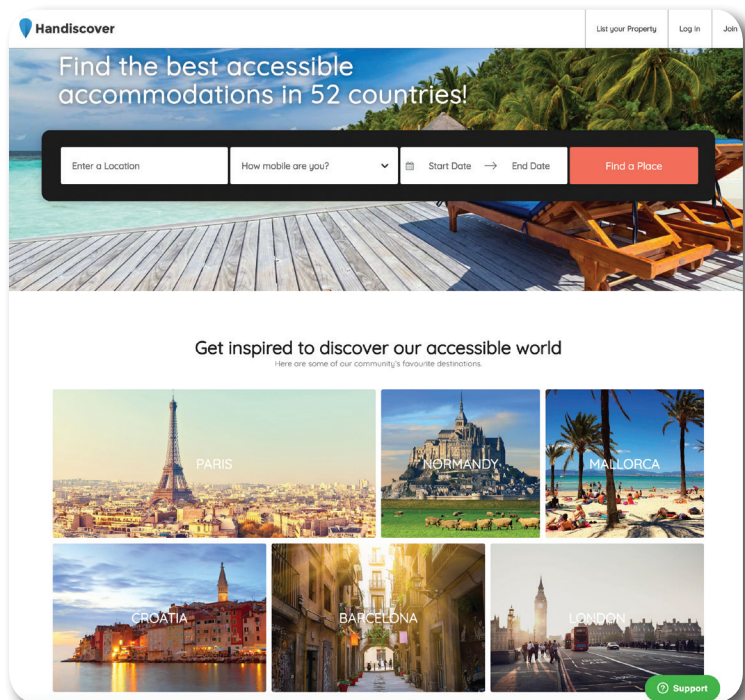
ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH - © GETTY IMAGES / AZZZYA-SHUOSHU - OSTILL - LIUZISHAN - OMERGENC

it has always required weekends and weekends of Googling around and asking specific questions, requesting pictures, the work that we have to do ahead so we don't end up in an 'accessible' accommodation that has a bathroom on an inaccessible third floor."

Lots Of Potential

According to the World Health Organization, 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability. That leaves a lot of potential travelers hanging when it comes to booking accommodations.

"Handiscover enables disabled people to discover the world," Archambeaud says. "On a lot of travel sites, you click on boxes for hair-dryer, toaster, wheelchair access, but in many cases, that box puts you in places where you can enter the door but can't use the restroom. On a worldwide basis, no one can agree what those standards should be, so we decided we'll



Handiscover.com is an accessible travel website.



Wheelchairjimmy.com has accessibility information on 15 major U.S. cities.

put something behind our icons. We don't care about regulations. To have these icons, you need to meet specific standards."

Most of the websites, like Handiscover, are based in Europe, presumably because ADA requirements are meant to meet the mark here in the U.S. Travelers know that's not always the case.

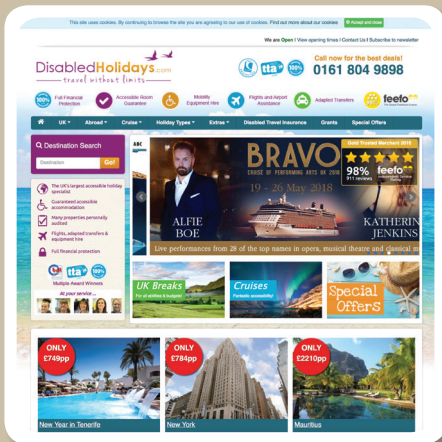
"Thirty percent of restaurants are still not accessible," says Jim Parsons, founder of wheelchairjimmy.com. "We have the ADA, but you go back to old cities like Philadelphia or Chicago or New York City, a lot of those restaurants are grandfathered in. They're up a flight or down a flight (of stairs).

Part of the purpose of the website is that you don't have to show up to a restaurant only to find there are two steps up to get in."

Travel Resources

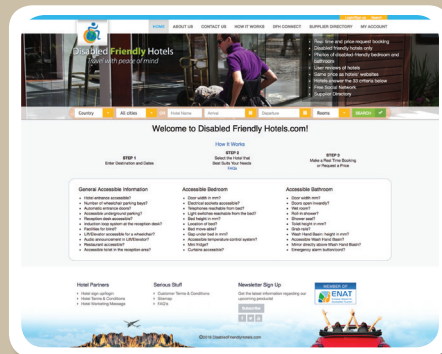
Besides wheelchairjimmy.com and handiscover.com, these are just a few of the other websites that offer great information for travelers with disabilities.

COURTESY OF DISABLEDHOLIDAYS.COM



Disabledholidays.com: This United Kingdom-based travel site guarantees accessible rooms, offers mobility equipment rentals, flight and airport assistance and adapted transportation. You can search by country, region or select a specific city, but there's no map view. The site includes additional information about traveling with various disabilities from attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder to impaired hearing.

COURTESY OF DISABLEDFRIENDLYHOTELS.COM



Disabledfriendlyhotels.com: A website focused on hotels in a limited number of cities in France, Ireland, the Philippines, South Africa and the United Kingdom. You'll find lots of information on each property, including parking spots available, door widths, bath accessibility, but there are no prices listed.

COURTESY OF ACCESSIBLEPACKAGEHOLIDAYS.COM



Accessiblepackageholidays.com: Provides accessible travel packages to Cambodia, Portugal, Thailand and Vietnam.



The Washington-based entrepreneur traveled to 40 countries on five continents during his five-decade career, all in his wheelchair. After retirement, he began posting video reviews of accommodations and restaurants in his favorite cities.

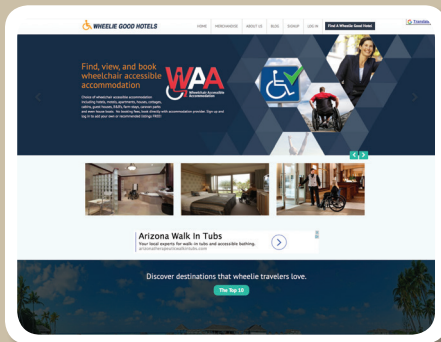
“Everyone has a different disability,” Parsons says. “A guy in a manual chair versus a guy in a power chair are going to have different experiences. A person who can take a few steps is going to have a very different experience than I would.”

Going More In-Depth

Now 400 review videos strong, wheelchair jimmy.com looks at 15 major U.S. cities, including Orlando, Fla., Boston and Savannah, Ga., and provides detailed coverage of the Pacific Northwest. It also touches on travel in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and New Zealand.

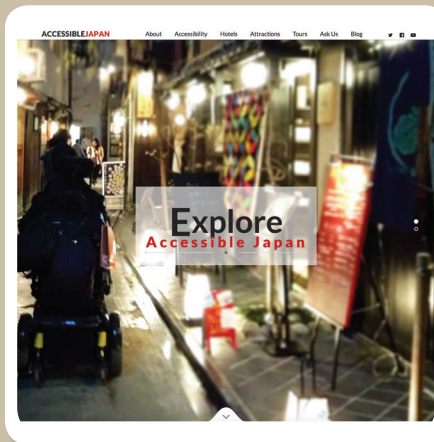
“Even in the U.S., the greatest challenge is going from any airport to the hotel. Even if they have wheelchair-accessible taxis, you typically have to wait 15 to 30 minutes. I’m

COURTESY OF WHEELIEGOODHOTELS.COM



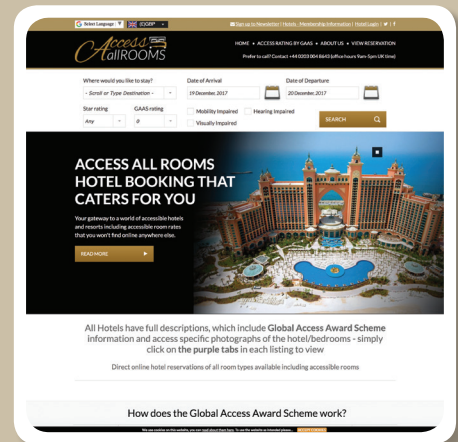
Wheeliegoodhotels.com: This website has listings for more than 3,500 wheelchair-accessible accommodations, including hotels, motels, apartments, houses, cottages, cabins, guest houses, bed and breakfasts, farm stays, caravan parks and house boats in more than 60 countries. There are no fees, and you book directly with the accommodation provider. The site encourages users to deal directly with their selected accommodation provider to ensure the facility meets their specific requirements.

COURTESY OF ACCESSIBLE-JAPAN.COM



Accessible-japan.com: As the name would imply, this website is dedicated to Japan with limited information on amenities. According to the site, Japan has no accessibility guidelines, so the site notes whether accommodations have a roll-in shower or if benches are provided outside bathtubs.

COURTESY OF ACCESSALLROOMS.COM



Accessallrooms.com: Another website in the United Kingdom that’s sortable by a Global Access Award Scheme rating. It features listings for major international cities and few in the United States.



not doing that in bad weather. That's something to work on," Parsons says.

Wheelchairjimmy.com also offers sortable QuickView Guides to each community, providing easy access to hotel and restaurant reviews based on the Wheelchair Jimmy Accessibility Ratings (WJAR).

His reviews go beyond ADA requirements to address some of his personal favorite features and pet peeves. To receive a four- or five-star rating, hotels must offer adjoining restaurants and bars.

"After a day of travel and checking in and transferring in and out of the chair, it's a hassle to have to transfer back into a vehicle to find a restaurant," Parsons says.

Under his rating system, no hotel or restaurant that requires wheelchair guests to ask for accessibility assistance can receive a rating above two stars. Those situations include facilities that offer low-quality hydraulic lift elevators or freight elevators which require a special key and third-party operation; require travelers to call ahead to unlock a front entrance or install a temporary ramp; or require wheelchair users to go through the facility kitchen or use employee hallways and/or restrooms for accessibility.

"The goal is always, from day one, to improve the lifestyle and travel for people with disabilities, especially those in wheelchairs," Parsons says.

Handiscover also has come up with its own standardized rating system so guests know what they'll find upon arrival. Each search begins with three mobility options, ranging from over-

coming a single, one-inch step up to 15 steps maximum. Each listed site must include photos of potential accessibility barriers from building entries to toilet seats and showers.

"The U.S. has (the) ADA, which is kind of the rule. Then in Europe, every country has its own," Archambeaud says. "For the vacation rental industry or travel industry in general, they don't really know how to handle that. They have a little box that says 'disabled access' or 'wheelchair friendly,' but there's no definition behind that."

Handiscover standardizes symbols in an effort to make selecting a facility based on personal desires and needs as easy as finding a hotel with a pool. The site is funded through commissions on bookings made through the site, but no facility can pay to be on the site or pay for icons. The site has grown to include nearly 50,000 facilities with no plans on slowing down.

"It's not good enough to have three places in Paris or New York. We want to have hundreds of options wherever we are," Archambeaud says. "Our ultimate goal is to be the leading platform for travel for people with special needs."

Handiscover expanded into the United States last year and is looking to move on to Asia and beyond.

"If you want to travel, then don't let the wheelchair hold you back," Parsons says. "So many people just sit at home. Maybe they don't have the mobility, don't know what challenges they'll face. I've really wanted to encourage people to see the world. It's a fun place. People are really, really helpful. People are willing to help make it work. Get out and have fun in life." ■

Wheelchairjimmy.com's QuickView Guides rank the accessibility of restaurants and hotels in various cities.



COURTESY OF WHEELCHAIRJIMMY.COM