

AbilityTrip:

A travel guide for the physically challenged

Everyone deserves a relaxing vacation; the travel resources at AbilityTrip help those with special needs explore the world stress free.

By: Julie Vaughan

A vacation should be everything but stressful, however for the physically challenged finding the right accommodations to suit their needs can be incredibly difficult and frustrating.

Darren and Faith Brehm of Chicago know this first hand. Once a perfectly healthy couple, things changed dramatically after a roll over accident in 1993 left them seriously injured. Darren's high-level spinal cord injury resulted in quadriplegia. Still, the couple has yet to let it change their lifestyle. The two adventure seekers continue to travel the globe.

Darren quickly realized just how difficult it is to travel without a fully abled body. The Brehm's faced challenges in travel, from locating accurate wheel chair accessible accommodations, such as hotel and transportation, to finding accessible activities to enjoy. The two struggled to find a reputable resource to count on for this specialized travel information.

In 2008, AbilityTrip was established to bridge the gap in available travel resources for the physically challenged. Shortly after the beginning, Melissa Hayes joined the team. Each has a passion for travel and helping others. The combination is why they are dedicated to Ability Trip's mission.

The web site, www.ability-trip.com, is a centralized resource for accessible travel. AbilityTrip creates an online community for disabled travelers to learn from each other's positive and negative experiences and guide others in the right direction. As the web site says, "AbilityTrip was created



(From left to right) Melissa Hayes, Darren Brehm and Faith Brehm combine their passion for helping others and traveling through AbilityTrip.
Photo Submitted by AbilityTrip

in hopes of making knowledge on accessible travel easy to find and up to date for every destination around the world for all types of physically challenged."

The organization goes beyond finding the hottest restaurants and latest tourist attractions around the globe. It offers valid information on which transportation services, hotel accommodations, etc. is actually accessible to all, manageable activities and where to find emergency or medical assistance, especially when in a foreign country.

Accessibility for the physically challenged affects more people than one might think. Whether you personally have a disability or are traveling with an elderly par-

ent, disabled spouse or child, etc, accessibility can make or break a vacation. People with visual or hearing impairments, wheelchair/scooter use, seniors with mobility issues, etc. can benefit from planning ahead with travels to ensure a positive experience. In a recent report, American Medical News says, "More than 40 million Americans, about one in seven, are now disabled. That number is likely to increase significantly in the next 30 years as the population of baby boomers ages, since age itself is a major risk factor for disability."

Darren tells people "My disability is a part of who I am, and it might constrain some of the things I can do physically, but it does not define who I am... When I travel,

there are many times when I don't even feel like I have a physical disability. I would remind the parents of the children to do everything they can to plan vacations that are positive and welcoming – by doing the research up front you can make most obstacles disappear."

The Brehm's have learned about poor planning. Darren explains just how one small detail could change travel plans for the day. "We traveled to Portugal in 2007, it was certainly an adventure. Lacking the proper resources to research the trip, we got very lucky along the way. There were several moments that could have ended badly. For example, we took the high-speed train to Faro, only to find it runs each way once a day. Our return trip was booked on an older train and my wheelchair could not fit. We had to wait the entire day and very hot weather without air-conditioning for the high-speed train to return. Another time, we rented a wheelchair accessible van, only to find that it was a hatchback car that we could not fit. It was a wonderful trip and we saw a lot of the country, but it illustrated the dangers of poor planning."

The ultimate purpose for the organization is to provide a primary resource for accessible travel all over the world. However, between three people, it would be impossible to explore every inch of the world. And that is where the community aspect comes to play.

About 50 percent of the website's content is user generated. AbilityTrip encourages people to fill out the destination accessibility documentation form, which can

be downloaded from the site. The form asks questions centering on accessible public transportation, ramps or elevator access, etc. Receiving about five to ten plus forms a month, further content is developed. Currently, AbilityTrip receives approximately 400 sessions or 1,200 pages views per day. Members have been grateful and willing to share their stories. The organization plans to develop a larger community portion to support the members, as Ability trip grows to be a primary resource.

Members sign up for free and can receive the monthly email newsletter. Each newsletter profiles a destination including unique information for individuals with physical challenges, as well as various travel tips and stories submitted by members. Once becoming a member, you gain the ability to share your travel knowledge through online posts. AbilityTrip also offers a phrase book of common accessible terms in a variety of languages and a packing checklist can help prevent various problematic situations from occurring.

Responses to the organization have been overwhelmingly positive says, Hayes. One commenter says, "What a great website I stumbled on. We have an 8-year-old that is in a wheelchair, and we, too, do not want to hold her or us back. We now want to hit a Caribbean beach. We will continue to check your site. Thanks for this, it is great!"

As a young organization, they have endless room to grow in the travel industry. "We also see opportunities to expand into partnerships with travel agents to book travel, organize trips for our membership base – currently we do not book trips, but rather provide information," says Hayes.

From extensive traveling, the three-member team has learned U.S. attractions are significantly more accessible, although it is not perfect. Basic ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) laws require it; though, historic locations in the U.S. are not required to comply unless they conduct renovations.

Outside the U.S. it is a mixed bag. Europe is challenging due to its age – historic locations are often not accessible. Developing countries are challenging as they lack the proper standards for accessibility and the finances to support infrastructure upgrades.

While every traveler hopes for a safe and smooth journey, Ability-Trip tackles the small issues that can turn into big obstacles of traveling with a disability. Like talking to a good friend, AbilityTrip has a conversational, down to earth tone in relaying trustworthy information.

For more information on Ability-Trip, visit www.abilitytrip.com. ■



Darren Brehm travels to Cambridge, UK during the 2010 summer.
Photo Submitted by AbilityTrip

Travel Tips

1. When booking an accessible hotel, be clear when stating your needs (e.g. room with accessible roll in shower, etc.)
2. When calling for an accessible cab, state your needs clearly, as people sometimes don't understand that a motorized wheelchair cannot fit into a vehicle's trunk.
3. Know the local lingo – an elevator in the U.S. might be called a "lift" elsewhere in the world.
4. Always ask lots of questions to verify your needs will be met, and offer extra information about your situation.
5. On your next trip afar, don't be afraid to experience the local culture by sensibly sampling the local food, talking with the locals, and learning new customs. It is a great way to learn something new and break down barriers.
6. Individuals who have recently sustained a life altering injury or disease are often reluctant to travel because they think they're no longer able to do so. Traveling can be a very relaxing activity planned right and good for one's psyche and overall health. Anyone can travel, even if it's just within one's own state or locale.
7. Always carry a surge protector for all your electrical equipment. No matter how accessible a room is, it never has enough outlets. Most people with disabilities need to carry additional equipment that requires charging overnight.
8. Be prepared for layovers or canceled flights by keeping essential medications and or medical supplies packed in your carry-on.
9. Have instructions on how to handle your wheel chair laminated and hung on your chair before the flight. Include your cell phone number.
10. When you're traveling, always provide family members or friends with your itinerary.

Travel Tips Compiled from AbilityTrip's monthly newsletters