

NOT SO SECRET AGENTS TO HELP YOU PLAN YOUR NEXT ACCESSIBLE TRIP

BY LILLY LONGSHORE

I have searched high and low over the years for accurate information on wheelchair accessible worldwide travel destinations. I finally hit the accessible travel jackpot when I came across three travel agencies that provide services specialized for wheelchair users. They are all great options if you are looking for help booking your next trip. To help you choose who is best for you, I asked the founders of each service some basic questions.

JOHN SAGE, SAGE TRAVELING

Sage Traveling's John Sage, a T4 para, has visited well over 140 cities in Europe since his 2001 injury. In 2008, frustrated with not being able to find accurate information about accessibility on the internet, he decided there had to be a better way to plan a wheelchair accessible European trip. Drawing from his first-hand experiences as a wheelchair user and adding to them with numerous calls to hotels and tourist sites, he launched Sage Traveling in 2009.

New Mobility: Tell us more about how you started your traveling agency.

John Sage: After I got hurt in college I thought my hobby of traveling to Europe was off the table. As a disabled person, I put a huge amount of effort into planning my trips, sorting through out-of-date and inaccurate online information ... so I started a how-to website on accessible travel. When I transformed it into a trip planning website in 2009, my business took off.

NM: Why use your travel service?

JS: We provide reliable, first-hand accessibility information and are one of the only global travel agencies that plan trips, cruises, and excursions for disabled travelers. I personally go to each destination to research and gather reliable accessibility information — I'm the guinea pig. I measure and take thousands of photographs, visit a bunch of hotel rooms and restaurants, and evaluate and modify tour routes to get a good feel for each des-



John Sage helps travelers like George Hedger (above) get the most out of their European trips.

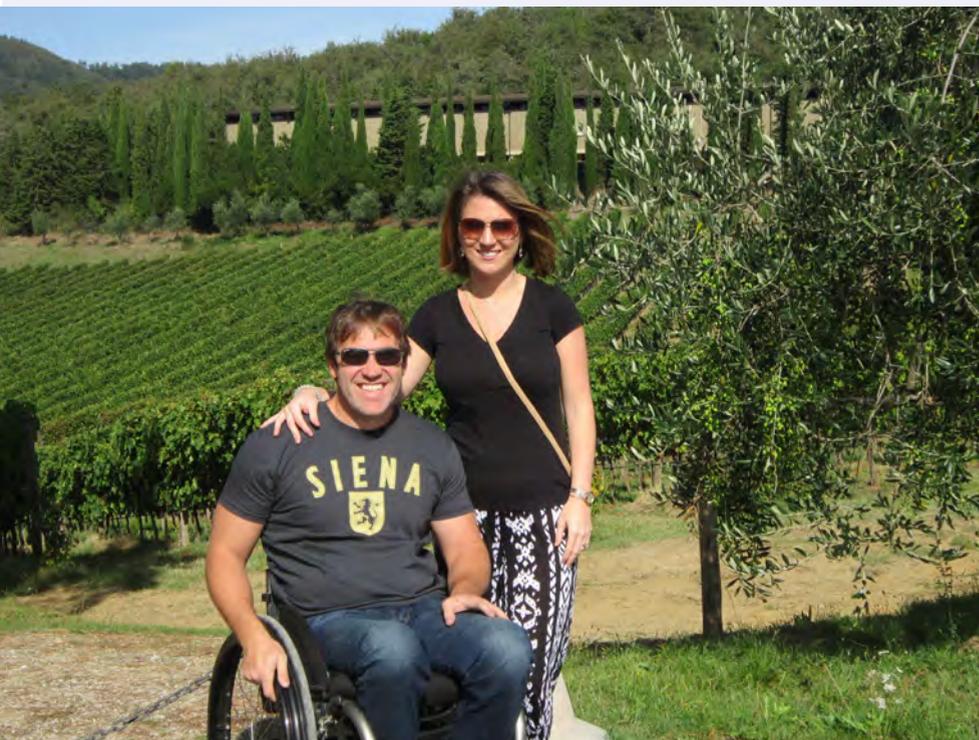
tinuation. We then can advise people on how best to allocate their valuable time. People leave their homes for experiences. That's our focus. We want to help people make the most of their vacations.

NM: Can you give us any examples of special arrangements?

JS: Last year during our group trip to Paris, the Seine River was at flood stage. We

“As a disabled person, I put a huge amount of effort into planning my trips, sorting through online information ... and so I started a how-to website on accessible travel.”

had a dinner cruise planned but the boats could no longer fit under the bridges. So instead, with the group's agreement, I had an employee rearrange things. We spent the evening at the Moulin Rouge — seating and accommodations for all. Then, on the day we were to visit the Louvre, it was closed to evacuate works of art from the basement. We quickly arranged



John Sage has personally visited over 140 cities in Europe since his 2001 injury. He augments his personal experiences with detailed research to provide the most useful accessible travel info he can.



Katya and Mohammed Abbas enjoy Sage's "Full Accessible Rome Experience."

tours to the Monet and Rodin museums instead. I am very familiar with the accessibility at both locations and knew it would work. Another couple who were traveling without our support ended up leaving Paris early — they couldn't make the changes like we did.

NM: What exotic places and array of excursions have you arranged?

JS: We do anything from hot air balloon rides in Tuscany, to snorkeling in Cozumel, to wine-tasting in Rome. I got back last week from a research trip to Munich, Salzburg, Zurich, Interlaken, and Lyon. We will now offer some great new mountain destinations — that's not easy to find in a wheelchair. We figured out a way to visit Hitler's Eagle's Nest mountain hideaway. We have a boat tour in Zurich; gondolas to see mountaintop glaciers in Interlaken; and in Lyon, we figured out wheelchair accessible transportation to get to the Notre Dame Basilica and the Roman ruins.

NM: What is the average cost of a trip?

JS: Our eight-day group trip to London and Paris in July 2017 was \$6,356 per person. We will offer a 10-day group cruise of the Mediterranean in 2018 for \$5,639, if booked early. Although we do some escorted trips, customizing family and couples' vacations is our primary service.

NM: What are your favorite places?

JS: Two of my favorite European cities are Florence and Barcelona. I especially like the smaller European towns, too.

NM: What other services do you provide?

JS: In addition to arranging the step-free accommodations, accessible vans, roll-in shower, etc., we do things like obtain permission to use the elevator to get to the

top of the Acropolis. We anticipate what our clients might want before they even know to ask for it. We advise clients on really cool experiences that are wheelchair accessible.

Our 24/7 emergency support service makes us unique, too. A client can call at any time if there is a problem — anything from a train strike, where's my driver, or a broken leg — we can help.

NM: Any final tips?

JS: Most people can do more than what they think with a disability. It just takes the right amount of planning.

TARITA DAVENOCK, TRAVEL FOR ALL

When Tarita Davenock was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, her doctor recommended a job change. She has always loved traveling and already had 11 years of travel agency experience, so it seemed natural for her to take the next step and establish her own inclusive tourism business. Davenock, who serves as vice chair of the Standards Council of Canada — Canada's version of the National Council on Disability — has now been in the travel business for 22 years.

New Mobility: Tell us about your experience working with travelers with disabilities.

Tarita Davenock: My agency has arranged over 5,000 trips globally for clients with many different disabilities, including those with spinal cord injuries, autism, diabetes — to name a few. Each client is unique, as is each disability. We have contacts all over the world to help



Tarita Davenock

get needs met at each destination.

NM: Can you share a few examples of special arrangements?

TD: I have arranged what I call "sexy undies" (Depends) to be delivered to a client's stateroom on a cruise so she didn't have to fill her entire suitcase with them. For multiple destinations, we find services or companies that can deliver the needed equipment or product to the resorts or hotels for our clients. One family wanted to take their autistic child to Disney World. We arranged reduced crowd contact and lower light exposure to ensure a smooth trip for the family. My post-doctorate is in behavioral and cognitive psychology, which is instrumental in this planning.



One of Davenock's satisfied cruise customers reenacts the famous scene from *The Titanic*.

NM: What exotic places and array of excursions have you arranged?

TD: You mean the funky stuff? We helped one gentleman who uses a wheelchair to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. He had his own climbing team but we arranged the other aspects of the trip. I can also arrange an African safari and trekking. But if you just want to sit and drink wine, we do that, too.

NM: What other services do you provide?

TD: We find where to repair mobility equipment during a trip. We do anything from family trip planning to getting tickets to *Wicked* on Broadway or to Wimbledon, ensuring wheelchair accessible seating.

NM: What is the cost for a trip?

TD: It depends on the number of people in the group, your travel requirements and the dates. For examples, on bret-approved.com, our travel partner (like TripAdvisor but accessibility-focused), a

DISABILITY SERVICES

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NM: What are some of your favorite places?

TD: The South Pacific, Hawaii ... the world is so beautiful, I can't pick just one.

NM: Can you give us some travel tips?

TD: I have 10,000! Plan well in advance and pick a destination that suits where you are in life. Bite off what you can chew and no more. If you've just been diagnosed with MS or a spinal cord injury, give yourself time to get back into traveling — start with small trips.

MIRIAM ELJAS GOLDMAN, ACCESSIBLEGO

Miriam Eljas Goldman vividly remembers businesses telling her mom, a wheelchair user with multiple sclerosis, that they were accessible, only to get there and find out they weren't. Goldman figures if this could happen to her mom, an advocate who improved accessible transportation in Silicon Valley, it could happen to anyone. She says this is what inspired

her to create accessibleGO, a full-service accessible travel platform that provides searches, reviews and bookings of accessible hotels, cruises, transports and destinations domestic and world-wide.

NEW MOBILITY: Tell us how your mother inspired you to open an accessible travel agency.

Miriam Eljas Goldman: When I was 12, my mom was diagnosed with chronic-progressive multiple sclerosis. Growing up, I remember her going from a cane to a walker and eventually to a wheelchair. One very distinct memory I have of the issues that we dealt with as a family was during a visit to the theater. We called ahead and they told us we could get in with a wheelchair, no problem. We got there and there were steps. Then the manager goes to this broom closet and pulls out a cracked piece of plywood that we were supposed to use as a ramp — and this was years after the ADA was passed! I didn't want to put my mother and her heavy wheelchair on that, but my mom said, "Let's just go!" She was very adventurous.

I was well aware of these issues grow-

ing up. I always wanted to do something in that space of helping persons with disabilities. Not until this year did the travel website idea crystalize. As a starting point, my partner Jeff Schlanger and I selected the top 20 U.S. cities based on annual number of tourist visits. Our travel platform website has been up and running for about one month now.

NM: What does your travel service offer that others may not?

MG: We have a number of features on our site and we believe these combined components create a secret recipe for self-planning a truly accessible vacation.

We have the Booking Engine, defaulted to the ADA setting, where you can actually book an ADA room in any of our 20 U.S. cities. We will add more geographic regions in the future. Our cruises booking has been very popular. We include all cruise lines that leave from U.S. ports and provide detailed accessibility information for each cruise line.

Second is the Trip Planner, a directory of service providers for each city like taxis, tour companies, equipment rental,

DISABILITY SERVICES

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Miriam Eljas Goldman says her mom, Emma, is the inspiration behind her travel agency.

and attractions that are accessible.

Third is our Content feature, which is a cheat sheet guide of each destination. It's an overview of the city's accessibility and things to do as a quick read, like the "Top 10 Things to Do" in each city. We also include the best times and seasons to visit.

Last is our Community feature where you can read/provide reviews,

similar to TripAdvisor but for the disabled community.

NM: What exotic places and array of excursions do you offer?

MG: We are a travel platform, not a tour company. Our focus is to offer à la carte services so people can pick what they want and do it. We are providing tremendous information to easily plan your own accessible trips. We are developing relationships with hotels and cruise lines so we can offer guaranteed vs. requested accessible bookings. Also, reviews will be a key component. Our goal is to get as much data and as many reviews as possible to help a disabled person create their own trip the way they want.

NM: What other services do you provide?

MG: Ours is a unique, do-it-yourself idea. Content and community make our site different from others. Our goal is to offer a condensed online site where you can read reviews, choose accessible rooms and attractions, and book all of it online at one place. We will perfect a mobile app in the future after we gather feedback.

NM: What is the cost for a trip?

MG: There is no charge to the consumer other than the built in commission that we receive from booking.com — we are part of The Priceline Group Partner Network which owns booking.com.

We will be adding discounted packages in the future — something like New York hotels, tickets to Liberty and dinner. The idea is still to pick what you want, but a package would be one option.

NM: What is your favorite place to travel?

MG: The Bay Area in California. I grew up near there and I do love it!

NM: Any travel tips?

MG: Live life to the fullest.

NM

RESOURCES

- Accessible Go, 888/621-2568; www.AccessibleGo.com
- brettapproved, www.brettapproved.com
- Sage Traveling, 888/645-7920; www.sagetraveling.com
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