



Cruise Lines Lead the Way in Accessible Vacations

By Erica Silverstein

Finding the perfect accessible vacation can be tricky. Hotels and resorts may be difficult to navigate. Transferring luggage between hotels or onto trains or airplanes as you visit multiple destinations can be a chore. A cruise can eliminate or minimize many challenges.

In fact, cruising is one of the safest and most accessible ways to travel. According to the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), more than 80% of travelers with mobility, sensory and neurological or cognitive challenges rate cruising as the best vacation option for them.

Cruises provide travel experiences for all ages and abilities, and at a range of price points. For those with mobility limitations, it's one of the best ways to see the world.

Advantage of cruise over land travel

Cruise lines build ships with accessibility in mind. All CLIA member lines comply with international and federal accessibility regulations, and as they launch new ships, are increasingly adding accessible accommodations.

Wheelchair-friendly cabin features include automatic doors, wider doorways, extra floor space by the bed, and smooth thresholds. Lowered closet rods, safes and sinks make cabin amenities easier to reach from a wheelchair.

“Most cruise ships are more accessible than the typical hotel,” says John Sage, CEO of Accessible Travel Solutions. “The in-room accessibility is generally good. The accessible bathrooms tend to have roll-in showers and tend to be quite standardized [across cruise lines and ships].” Sage himself is a wheelchair user who has visited more than 120 countries.

Most cruise lines provide sign language interpreters and assistive listening devices, large-print menus, Braille signage, visual-tactile alert systems in cabins, and relief areas for service dogs.

Companies such as Scootaround and Special Needs at Sea can provide rental items such as motorized scooters, oxygen, bed rails and wedges, and recliners for in-cabin use, all delivered to the ship.

Accessible shore excursions

“One of the biggest success stories in the whole travel industry when it comes to accessibility over the last several years is the growth in accessible shore excursions,” says Sage.

While in the past there were few options for wheelchair users other than pricey private tours, according to CLIA there are now more than 100 designated accessible shore excursions available at cruise ports around the world – many in partnership with Sage’s company. Often, these tours use wheelchair-friendly vans that can park close to attractions including cultural and historical sites and beaches. They focus on destinations with accessible pathways and bathrooms, and employ guides trained to accommodate travelers with disabilities.

CLIA reported in 2024 that 45% of cruise travelers had booked an accessible shore excursion in the previous year.

Attentive crew

The microcosm of a cruise ship means travelers will encounter the same crew members throughout their cruise. Crew learn, for instance, everyone’s dietary needs – which are also typically saved electronically for reference. Many ships allocate dedicated galley space to handle food for people with allergies.

Cabin stewards get to know in-room preferences – no need to keep repeating instructions to new hospitality staff, as you would if changing hotels.

“There’s also the big advantage of unpacking once,” says Sage. “For people with disabilities, that matters a lot. Moving baggage can be quite a hassle.”

Smart planning is the key to success for travelers with disabilities

The ideal accessible cruise will vary from person to person, but Sage has one piece of advice for everyone. “To have a really accessible, frustration-free vacation, [travelers] should look at the shore excursions before they choose the itinerary.” Most cruisers do the reverse and then are disappointed when they can’t find tours that suit.”

Because no two cruisers’ needs are the same, the best advice for a successful cruise is to work with a knowledgeable travel agent who can advise on cruise lines that will meet specific accommodations. Travelers with disabilities can also reach out to cruise line accessibility departments for more information (check cruise line websites for more information).

A sampling of cruise accessibility pages:

Carnival Cruise Lines: <https://www.carnival.com/about-carnival/special-needs>

Royal Caribbean: <https://www.royalcaribbean.com/experience/accessible-cruising>

MSC Cruises: <https://www.msccruisesusa.com/manage-booking/accessibility-and-medical-requests>

Norwegian Cruise Lines: <https://www.ncl.com/about/accessible-cruising>

Holland America Line: <https://www.hollandamerica.com/en/us/about/our-company/accessibility>

Disney Cruise Line: <https://disneycruise.disney.go.com/guest-services/guests-with-disabilities/>

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