

Paralyzed since age 14, Ashley Lyn Olson celebrated her 30th birthday by skydiving in Lodi, California.

A photograph of Ashley Lyn Olson skydiving with an instructor. They are both smiling and pointing towards the camera. The background shows a vast landscape from a high altitude.

# A WORLD Without Barriers

COURTESY OF [wheelchairtraveling.com](http://wheelchairtraveling.com)

**Now more than ever, the tourism industry is opening its doors to travelers with disabilities. • By Rebecca L. Rhoades**

**L**ISTEN TO ASHLEY LYN OLSON talk about her recent trip to Ecuador, and you can hear the excitement in her voice. “We got to go river rafting on the Amazon and zip-lining, which was really fun. And, of course, we visited all the towns and saw a cacao farm where they actually dry the cacao seeds and sell them to the market,” she says. “I’m more on the extreme adventure side of travel, but it was also fun to do the little local things.”

Sounds like any young woman who just returned home from a vacation, doesn’t it? Well, Olson isn’t your average adventure traveler. When she was just age 14, the now 30-year-old California native was in an automobile accident that left her paralyzed. That’s right: the former all-star athlete who was voted “Best Dancer” in her eighth-grade class is wheelchair-bound.

But Olson, CEO, founder and chief editor of [wheelchairtraveling.com](http://wheelchairtraveling.com), which serves as a source of information for disabled travelers to empower them to

experience the world of travel, didn’t let her injury stop her. Not only has she been zip-lining numerous times, but she’s been hot-air ballooning and sky-diving. She’s hiked in parks and strolled on beaches. And she’s traveled to cities from coast to coast as well as to such foreign countries as Japan, Greece and Germany.

“There are many people my age, young adults, who are going to change how people see disabilities and what that word actually means,” she says. “Personally, I hate the word ‘disability.’ I’ve never used that word to describe myself. My legs just

don’t work. I can do everything else. I can drive. I can run a marathon if I wanted to. I can go biking. I just can’t use my legs.”

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

According to the 2012 U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, more than 37 million Americans of all ages have a disability. While ambulatory disabilities are the most common, affecting more than 20 million individuals, other included handicaps are visual, hearing and cognitive (autism, Down Syndrome and dementia), as well as those involving self-care (difficulties with personal care, such as dressing or bathing) and independent living (a physical, mental or emotional condition that causes difficulties with doing daily activities alone, such as shopping or visiting a doctor’s office).

Of those who identified as having a disability, approximately 69 percent travel



More than 25 million disabled Americans travel for business or pleasure.

PHOTO CREDIT: LAUREL VAN HORN



Travelers can rent a variety of equipment, from wheelchairs to portable oxygen tanks.

COURTESY OF SPECIAL NEEDS GROUP

for business or pleasure, according to Chicago-based nonprofit Open Doors Organization, which through research and training helps the transportation and hospitality industries better serve the disability market.

“We’re a baby-boomer generation. We’re the first generation to have travel as a birthright,” says Andrew Garrett, owner and CEO of Special Needs Group, a Florida-based company that rents wheelchairs and scooters; oxygen; audio and visual aids; and other equipment to cruise lines, hotels, theme parks and individuals across the world. “Today’s travelers aren’t ready to slow down and not be able to travel. They’re ready to get out and do even more because they’ve worked so hard their entire lives. They don’t want to sit at home and experience places on the Travel Channel or the Internet. They want to go and see those places personally.”

Of course, travel for even the most able-bodied person can be demanding, if not downright difficult at times, with overcrowded airports, unfamiliar forms of public transportation and inadequate facilities. Now imagine trying to navigate all of that without being able to see or while in a wheelchair.

“The biggest issue for travelers with disabilities is hotels,” says Eric Lipp, founder and executive director of Open Doors Organization. Diagnosed at age 29 with the genetic disease

Von Hippel Lindau, which caused a tumor to grow on his spinal cord, Lipp was diagnosed with incomplete paralysis following surgical removal of the tumor.

“It’s always difficult to gauge what an accessible room is going to look like,” he notes. “There are a lot of little things that go into the design of a hotel that are never considered, especially things like the weight of the door and how the handles are placed. Not just the room doors but the major thoroughfare doors.

“Then there are so many little things that people who are blind or have low vision have to deal with, like the fact that the shampoo, conditioner and body lotion bottles all look the same,” he adds. “You and I even have to read them to make sure we’re grabbing the right one.”

Olson concurs, saying that hotels, particularly hotel bathrooms, are one of the main reasons that many people with disabilities are apprehensive about traveling.

“People are scared because they don’t know what [the bathroom] is going to look like,” she says. “Sometimes it’s too small. Sometimes you’ll find that a shower bench will be affixed on one side of the wall while the nozzles and shower head will be on the complete opposite side of the shower.”

Another common hotel-related complaint is beds that are either too high or too low for easy access [bed height is not regulated by the Americans

with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was enacted in 1990]. Even worse: beds surrounded by raised platforms. And then there was the situation that served as an impetus for the creation of Olson’s site. “I went to a lodge that had an ADA-accessible room, but it was on the second floor, and there was no elevator,” she says, adding that she wanted “to take pictures of the bathrooms and stuff so people can really see what the setup is before they book a room. I’m not trying to be mean. After all, maybe the place doesn’t have an elevator, but if you can walk a bit, maybe it could work for you. I want to give an objective look at the real-world situation, and then you can decide whether or not it works for you.”

And it’s not just nonambulatory travelers who face challenges when on the road. One out of 88 children is now estimated to have an autistic disorder, making family vacations difficult to nonexistent for their parents. But some resorts are going above and beyond to cater to these young guests.

In Florida, the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) at the University of South Florida has been working with local hotels and businesses to establish standardized criteria by which they can be deemed “autism-friendly.”

“We do quarterly training sessions with CARD to help our employees understand what autism is and how to interact with people who have autism,” says Cathy

Claesson, media director for TradeWinds Island Resorts in St. Pete Beach, one of a handful of autism-friendly hotels in the Tampa area.

TradeWinds has also created an autism-friendly program that offers room safety kits that feature a hanging door alarm, outlet covers and table-corner cushions; downloadable books that parents can review beforehand with their kids to familiarize them with the resort; a broad selection of gluten-free meals and snacks; and an ever-changing array of sensory activities for kids.

“We’ve heard from a lot of parents who are thrilled that we offer this [type of program],” says Claesson. “They say that they don’t usually travel because their kids have so many needs.”

In Tenafly, New Jersey, the Clinton Inn Hotel in 2009 became the first hotel in the country, and quite possibly the world, to offer a suite designed just for guests

with a child with autism. In the room, all of the glass, including water glasses, is unbreakable; the furniture has rounded corners with soft bumpers; the television is secured to the wall; and the room door features an alarm that alerts parents if their children try to wander.

Wyndham Hotels & Resorts quickly followed, installing specially equipped “Thoughtful Rooms” in its Garden Hotel Austin [Texas] and Tampa Westshore [Florida]. And Marriott offers a designated special needs’ desk that helps travelers with specific accommodations.

### ACCESSIBILITY AT SEA

One industry known for its positive approach to disability travel is the cruise industry. In fact, cruising is one of the most popular forms of travel for persons with disabilities. According to Open Doors Organization, 12 percent of Americans with disabilities have taken

a cruise in the past two years, compared with 10 percent of the general population.

“Cruise lines know we’re coming, and they want us,” says Lipp. “It’s an industry that gets it.”

While accessibility features vary among cruise lines and even among ships, the fact that most ships sailing today have been built or modified after 1990 means that they abide by ADA guidelines. Foreign ships that dock at U.S. ports are also required to follow these guidelines (although foreign ports are not).

One cruise line that has been committed to improving onboard accessibility is Royal Caribbean International, which has outfitted its ships to meet the needs of not only those with mobility disabilities, but also those with hearing, visual, cognitive and other disabilities.

Its latest ship, *Quantum of the Seas*, which launches in November, features



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Wheelchair accessible stateroom on Royal Caribbean International's *Quantum of the Seas*

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environments, so you can get a lot of information up-front.”

For information about an individual cruise line's or cruise ship's accessible features, check the line's website. Special Needs Group also offers a roundup of accessible features for each ship for 18 top cruise lines at [specialneedsatsea.com/](http://specialneedsatsea.com/) cruise-accessibility.

Whether it's cruise ships making their public spaces more manageable for people in wheelchairs or hotels providing Braille menus in their restaurants or resorts offering special programming for autistic children, growing segments of the tourism industry are catching on to the needs of travelers with disabilities.

“It's not only possible no matter what your special need or disability is to be able to go on a trip, but to have an enjoyable trip,” says Garrett. “So don't just think about it; get out there, and do it!” ●

34 accessible staterooms with wider doors; roll-in showers; lowered sinks, closet rods and safes; amplified telephones; and captioned televisions. The pools and whirlpools offer lifts, the spa features a wet treatment room with roll-in shower, and the casino offers lower playing tables. Even the ship's North Star observation capsule, which takes guests 300-plus feet in the air for 360-degree views, is handicap-accessible.

Royal Caribbean in 2014 also became the first cruise line to be certified as “autism friendly.” In addition to offering sensory-related toys, autism-friendly movies, modified kids programming and special dietary accommodations, all crew members have been trained in autism awareness.

“Cruising is a nice way to vacation for people with disabilities,” says Lipp. “Cruise ships are contained

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