

Disabled Travel in Europe - Your First Trip

You may have taken a few trips with your disability, and now you're up for taking a trip to Europe. How difficult will it be? Where can you find accessible hotels? Are the tourist attractions wheelchair accessible? Are the busses, trains, and taxis accessible?

There are several issues to consider before taking your first disabled trip to Europe. Perhaps the most important is deciding on a destination. If you have a disability, your best options for a first trip to Europe are London or Berlin. Paris, Rome, and Venice are less accessible but can be visited in a wheelchair.

The top accessible European destinations, London and Berlin, have plenty of accessible sights to see, and minimal language barriers for English speakers. Both cities were heavily bombed during World War II and now have few cobblestones, and many hotels are housed in modern buildings with accessible entrances and bathrooms. London and Berlin both have very few hills as well as building code accessibility standards that have resulted in almost all of the tourist attractions being wheelchair accessible.



When visiting London, there's at least two weeks worth of attractions to see. Most museums have excellent accessibility including the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Cabinet War Rooms, the Tate Modern, and the Imperial War Museum. The most popular churches, Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral, are both accessible to disabled tourists. Wheelchair users are able to get great views of the city from the London Eye or one of the boat tours departing near Westminster Bridge. The Tower of London is minimally accessible with about 80% of it requiring ascending stairs and the other 20% of it requiring going over cobblestones.

Getting around London in a wheelchair is quite easy with essentially all of the busses having wheelchair ramps and a fleet of accessible taxis. Every taxi has a ramp, and wheelchair users can stay in their chair.

Berlin is another accessible European city, and perhaps the best destination in the world for 20th century history. Numerous historical locations can be visited in a wheelchair including the Berlin Wall, the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, and Checkpoint Charlie. Excellent accessible museums also exist in Berlin including the German History Museum, the Gemäldeergalerie art museum, the Jewish Museum, the Pergamon Museum, the Egyptian Museum, and the Museum of the Wall at Checkpoint Charlie. Most public bus lines are accessible and the #100 and #200 lines are particularly useful for tourists. A majority of U-Bahn stations are accessible via elevators.

Other popular European destinations are not as accessible as London and Berlin. The center of Paris is primarily made up of 19th century buildings, and many museums and hotels are housed in these old buildings with few being made fully accessible. Fully accessible museums include the Musée d'Orsay, the Pompidou Centre, Sainte-Chapelle, the Jewish Art and History Museum, and Les Invalides. Several other tourist attractions have certain areas that are not accessible including the Eiffel Tower, Musée Rodin, Notre-Dame, the Marmottan Monet Museum, and the Carnavalet Museum. The Louvre Museum is accessible but requires navigating a maze of elevators and wheelchair lifts. The Arc de Triomphe, the Cluny Museum, and the Panthéon have many steps without wheelchair ramps.

Surprising to many people, Venice can be visited in a wheelchair. Wheelchair users will not be able to visit all parts of the city, but several accessible neighborhoods can be visited by using the vaporetto boats to travel between neighborhoods. The height difference between the dock and the boat is generally less than the height of a curb. Disabled travelers should do a good bit of research before visiting Venice.

Rome is called the city of seven hills for a reason. Many Roman streets and sidewalks have inclines to them, and many Roman plazas have cobblestones. Some sidewalks near the Spanish Steps and the Borghese gardens would be very difficult for wheelchair users to ascend. Historical ruins including the Roman Forum and Colosseum can be visited by disabled tourists, while several other ruins including the Palatine Hill are inaccessible. The Vatican complex is generally accessible and, like all tourists, you can avoid time standing in line by taking a guided tour. Accessible bus and subway lines in Rome are few.



While accessibility challenges exist in Europe, disabled travelers can certainly enjoy accessible holidays throughout Europe. Be sure to do the proper accessibility research before your trip or hire a disabled travel agent who specializes in accessible holidays. Afterwards, you can arrive knowing what challenges may be in your path and how to get around them. Bon voyage!

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