

Travel For All

Wheel the World offers to take the guesswork out of accessible travel around the globe for people with disabilities.

by Geri Koepfel
photos courtesy of
Wheel the World

Kelly Narowski of

Kansas City, Mo., is a manual wheelchair user and seasoned traveler who visited 50 countries by the time she turned 50 in May last year. Granted, she checked off a few dozen when her husband, Paul, now retired, was a U.S. Army officer stationed in Germany.

Narowski is a level T6 paraplegic who has a master's degree in disability law and used to be a travel agent, so she's familiar with which countries are easier to navigate.

However, there were many places she wouldn't go alone until she discovered Wheel the World, a San Francisco-based company that caters to travelers with disabilities and their families by offer-



Cory Lee and Kelly Narowski

ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH/© GETTY IMAGES_SWITCHPIPI



ing all the specifics an individual needs to know before traveling.

“I trust them to check things out and make sure they’re accessible,” says Narowski, who’s also a professional speaker and disability rights advocate.

She went on Wheel the World group tours on her own to Chile in November 2022 and Spain in June 2023, and she plans to visit Greece and Mexico with them this year.

Narowski doesn’t have to worry if the bed will be the right height, if the bathrooms will be set up correctly, if the vans will have a wheelchair ramp or if someone can help her with luggage — Wheel the World handles everything.

That’s a big contrast from planning a trip on her own.

“It’s probably 30 hours of research and planning for international trips, emailing with hotels about accessibility features,” Narowski says.

Even with all the work she would put in, Narowski says she had to hope the information she received was correct.

“With Wheel the World, all you have to do is book the flights,” she says. “I just show up.”

They Dreamed Bigger

The idea for Wheel the World was spawned after two friends, Alvaro Silberstein and Camilo Navarro, forged plans in 2017 to visit Torres del Paine National Park in southern Chilean Patagonia. Although they were both from Chile, Silberstein had sustained a level C5-6 spinal-cord injury at age 18 in a car crash and never considered such a challenging excursion.

“We realized that nobody else, never, in a wheelchair did the trip we wanted to do,” Silberstein says. They were flying blind with no details on accommodations or how to move around the area.

Wheel the World helps people with disabilities plan accessible adventures and vacations.



Alvaro Silberstein, left, and Camilo Navarro launched Wheel the World in 2018.

Then, they dreamed bigger; Silberstein and Navarro, Master of Business Administration students at the University of California-Berkeley, saw the opportunity to build a company to help people with disabilities travel the world.

“Our mission is to make travel accessible and make people with disabilities explore without limits,” Silberstein says.

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Silberstein had heard about the Joëlette, a one-wheeled chair that he could use to traverse the terrain, but it was \$5,000. Undeterred, he and Navarro transformed the trip into a documentary project and ended up funding it via donations.

Wheel the World, which launched in 2018, lets individual site users build their profile and plug in their specific needs, and it guarantees those needs will be met. Door widths, bed heights, whether there’s space under the bed

Adventurers use a Joëlette one-wheeled chair to traverse rocky terrain.





The Wheel the World team collects more than 200 data points for hotels.

or not, sink heights, distance from the wall to the bed, shower types, transportation methods and more are considered.

“We collect more than 200 data points for a hotel,” Silberstein says.

Information for those with sight or hearing disabilities is collected, as well as for those with a wide range of mobility issues.

The company is funded by venture capital and uses technology and crowdsourcing for its Accessibility Mapping System (AMS). So far, Wheel the World has sent trained “mappers” to do site inspections and visit tour companies to collect data. In the next phase, providers and customers will be able to supply information, which will be verified.

The Wheel the World team doesn’t just take people to far-flung places — it makes sure they get to fully participate in experiencing them.

They determine what type of equipment is needed for activities, such as scuba diving, skiing or parasailing, and whether accessible restrooms are available on excursions. Because of this dogged research, the firm has offered accessible tours and activities that weren’t available in the past.

“We were the first travel company to provide a tour for wheelchair users in Machu Picchu in Peru,” Silberstein says.

Wheel the World has offered trips to Alaska, Morocco, Tuscany,

Iceland, Costa Rica, South Africa and more. But it’s also a booking service for less exotic locales, such as overnight business stays, visits to see relatives or weekend vacations.

So far, 6,000 people from 10 countries have traveled to more than 200 destinations with the company, and the goal is to assist millions.

Accessible Travel Sans Snags

Wheel the World customers say the company offers peace of mind and a seamless experience to make travel more enjoyable.

Clint Cook of Cumming, Ga., has traveled extensively throughout his 35 years in a manual wheelchair and says no matter how thorough or specific he’s been when booking, mishaps occur.

Wheel the World arranges accessible tours and activities.





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He first used Wheel the World for a “tourist in his own town” trip to nearby Atlanta. He went to Stone Mountain and rode the gondola, visited the World of Coca-Cola, Centennial Park and more.

“They showed me things that were accessible that I didn’t even think of,” Cook says.

He was so impressed that he booked a trip to Costa Rica for a week in November 2023. “It’s a game-changer to know that every single aspect of our seven days was planned out to the T,” he says.

Cook notes that accessibility looks different for everyone, but Wheel the World ensured that every traveler had the same experience. For a five-hour journey through a rainforest, for example, they rented scooters.

“If I had planned this part of the trip on my own, I would’ve wheeled the whole thing in my manual chair,” he says. “I would not have enjoyed it nearly as much because it would’ve been more like work.”

Travelers can find and book accessible hotels, activities and multi-day trips in more than 250 destinations.

A rental car might not have the promised hand controls. A bus arrives with no lift. The bathroom door is too small.

“All those things I’ve been faced with,” Cook says.





Wheel the World guarantees travelers' needs will be met.

Also, during a visit to the Arenal hot springs in Costa Rica, Wheel the World staff arranged for a young powerchair user to access the water like everyone else. They helped him out of the chair onto a water chair and then positioned swim noodles under him so he could float independently.

"It was amazing for me being able to see the joy he had," Cook says.

The group also went to a rescue zoo, a national park, a cooking class and even surfing. There was "not one single snag," Cook says, adding that he'll use Wheel the World from now on for all of his trips, even domestically.

A "One-Stop Shop"

One of the most high-profile votes of confidence for Wheel the World comes from accessible travel

blogger and influencer Cory Lee, who began his blog, *Curb Free with Cory Lee*, in 2013. He partnered with the company in 2022 to promote trips to his followers.

"I think the best thing about it is they are kind of a one-stop shop for accessible travel," Lee says.

Previously, travelers had to book an accessible hotel on one website, look up transportation on another site and reach out to yet another place for a tour.

"You can go to their website and book everything in one place, and it makes it so much easier and less time-consuming," Lee says. "Before, I was spending days or weeks or months booking a trip that was wheelchair-accessible."

The biggest struggle, Lee says, is finding accessible transportation, so he's grateful they always manage that. Narowski also mentioned the company's superior customer service. On one trip, she says, a staffer found a replacement wheelchair part for a fellow traveler in Barcelona, Spain. They also helped Narowski

traverse a large hill in her chair in northern Spain so she could access a restaurant.

"I would've had to stay at the bottom of the hill and not go to the restaurant if I was alone," Narowski

Air Force veteran Kevin Ortiz travels with help from Wheel the World.





Clint Cook, left, says he plans to use Wheel the World for all of his trips, even domestically.



Wheel the World tours are limited to five wheelchair users and their companions.

says, adding the employee was “super gracious” about it.

Another benefit of Wheel the World, Lee says, is that their tours are limited to no more

than five wheelchair users and their companions, so everyone can interact and get to know each other.

Narowski also praises the camaraderie she found.

“You really do make friends on these trips ... long-term friends,” she says. “You spend so much time with them getting to know them. There’s something about international travel that allows you to be your most authentic self.”

Silberstein says traveling is the best way to live life to the fullest.

“For many years I thought, for me, happiness was very limited being disabled,” he says. “Once I realized I could go places, travel, explore, meet people from other places, other cultures, I realized my disability is not an impediment to being happy.”

For more information, visit wheeltheworld.com. ■



Cory Lee says Wheel the World is a “one-stop shop” for accessible travel.