



10 MOST ACCESSIBLE CITIES

As nominated by
survey respondents





INTRODUCTION

This report explores the 10 world cities which were voted 'most accessible' by 3,500 disabled people in a recent travel survey, led by the Valuable 500.

The survey took place between the end of August - September 2022, and involved participants from five countries; UK, USA, Japan, China, and Australia. All of the people who took part self-identified as having a disability.

The Valuable 500 invited expert world travel writer, Martin Heng, to delve deeper into the destination findings and produce this report.

Throughout the report, Martin has provided deeper context around the accessibility of each city from his own extensive personal and professional travel experience.

Martin Heng – Author

Born in Birmingham, UK, Martin has a BA and MA in English literature from Cambridge University and an MA in Communications from RMIT University, Melbourne. He left England in 1987 and lived, worked and travelled around the world before migrating to Australia in 1997. A bicycle accident on his 20km commute to work in 2010 left him a quadriplegic.



Martin worked for Lonely Planet from 1999 to 2020 in numerous roles, including seven years as Accessible Travel Manager & Editorial Adviser from 2013 to 2020. In this role he published a number of accessible travel titles, including the world's largest collection of Accessible Travel Online Resources, which was cited as best practice by the UNWTO, and an accessible guide to Rio de Janeiro that was supplied to all athletes participating in the 2016 Paralympics. Since 2014 he has become a regular speaker at travel conferences held by such global travel NGOs as UNWTO, WTTC, IATA and PATA. He is currently working on a handbook and training programme for tourism service providers for a branch of Tourism Australia.



ACCESSIBLE CITIES

With an estimated billion of the world's population living with disability, and an ageing population – particularly in the developed world – it's becoming increasingly important for municipal authorities to cater to an increasing need for accessibility. While no city can claim to be fully accessible – access needs are far too wide-ranging and diverse – there are several that deserve praise for the efforts that they are making, and the cities nominated by respondents to the Valuable 500 survey are all among them.

Few would argue that these 10 cities are the most accessible cities in the world, although some would make most experts' lists. From my knowledge and experience – I have visited or lived in six of them, four in a wheelchair – Singapore would have to be close to the top of anyone's list. So why were these cities chosen? Notably, Singapore, Amsterdam and Paris are the only cities on this list that aren't in the home countries of respondents to the survey. In fact, in every case, respondents chose a city in their home country as the most accessible.

This is undoubtedly because travellers with a disability need to be confident their needs will be met – failure in our case doesn't just mean disappointment, but potentially disaster – and that means they need to be able to access information to confirm not only that they will have somewhere to stay, but that they will also be able to get around and see what they want to see.



Clearly, it's much easier to get accurate information about accessibility in one's own country, where you know not only the language but also systems, and how things work.

The importance of information about accessibility is a key and common thread in surveys from all countries, both in choosing the most accessible city and in nominating what travel providers could do better. Safety and familiarity are also more important to people with disabilities – as they are to senior travellers, who share many of the same access needs, and represent a significant proportion of the accessible travel market – so a lack of cultural difference, no language barrier and easily understood signage are influencing factors.

It's also relevant that disabled people in most countries are afforded discounts or other benefits – such as free entry for themselves or a companion, and skipping lines – which encourages domestic tourism. In reality, my experience in many places is that foreigners are often granted the same privileges; Paris is explicit in extending such benefits to all visitors with disabilities, no matter where they come from.

It's unsurprising that all of these cities are found in developed countries – or, in the case of Shanghai, arguably the most modern city in China. The survey asked about accessibility in cities that respondents had visited and of course there is a great overlap between accessibility for tourists and residents.





Both groups benefit equally from accessible transport networks, effective antidiscrimination legislation and established, policed building codes that improve physical access to the built environment, as well as an economy strong enough to support maintenance of infrastructure such as pavements, kerb cuts, tactile ground surface indicators (TGSi), functional elevators and so on.

It's no coincidence that six of the cities on the list ranked in the top 10 of the Global Cities Index, a measure of the world's biggest, most interconnected cities – cities that set global agendas, and serve as the hubs of global integration, as engines of economic growth and as gateways to their regions.

All of the cities on the list are leading tourist destinations: four are in the top 10 and all but one are in the top 50 most visited places by international visitors. (The only outsider, Sydney, ranks at 56 only because it is so far from anywhere else!)



A list of the busiest airports in the world tells us that those destinations that don't make the top 10 are heavily visited by domestic traffic, meaning they are top domestic tourist destinations, with Orlando being a case in point. So it's in their interest to maintain infrastructure for the huge return on the tourist dollar.

It's also worth noting that four destinations out of the 10 are home to a Disneyland! Disney theme parks have a strong tradition of inclusivity, which surely spills over to local communities in terms of both infrastructure and attitude.

With such an influx of tourists with access needs, it pays local businesses to be more accessible. But familiarity with clients with disabilities also promotes a spirit of acceptance among host communities. A strong thread throughout surveys in all countries is the importance of being treated with respect, and how a greater understanding of disability and the needs of people with disabilities can be as important as accessible infrastructure. Understanding and empathy can't remove physical barriers, but they can go a very long way towards mitigating them.

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AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS

Amsterdam, like London, is a city that has been a cultural and financial centre for centuries thanks to its history as an important trading entrepôt.

In the Netherlands, equal treatment is considered so important that it is enshrined in Article 1 of the Constitution, which forbids discrimination on any grounds, including disability or chronic illness.

Under the 1994 Equal Treatment Act an Equal Opportunities Commission was established, and in 2003 the Equal Treatment of Disabled and Chronically Ill People Act was passed, calling for modifications to be made to allow equal access and opportunity, including specifically on public transport – but with the proviso “unless this would impose an unreasonable burden on them” that’s unfortunately common in such legislation around the world.





The Netherlands ratified the CRPD in 2016 to further promote, protect, and safeguard the human rights of people with disabilities. And if people with disabilities feel discriminated against they can complain to the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights.

Together with the Netherlands' status as an affluent country with further European Union regulation and safeguards, it's no surprise that Amsterdam is on the list.

While older buildings may not be wheelchair accessible – and cobblestones may be an issue for people who have a mobility need or who are visually-impaired – public buildings, spaces and public transport are all relatively accessible. Pavements are well maintained in the city's popular tourist areas, and there are plenty of kerb cuts and TGSIs.


Where the city has an advantage over many others is in its extensive network of 400km of bike lanes to accommodate the approximately 900,000 bicycles in the city – more than the number of residents and four times the number of cars! While caution should be observed, wheelchair users can and do avail themselves of the smooth ride. What's more, the topography is very flat, although there are steep bridges to negotiate.

In one of the most bike-friendly cities in the world, it's even possible to rent adapted bikes – including ones that can incorporate a wheelchair!

Public transport in Amsterdam is fairly accessible. All stations on the metro are wheelchair accessible, but some types of train are less easy to board than others due to the gap between the platform and the train.

Some older trams are not wheelchair accessible, but all new ones are; however, not all tram stops are accessible – GVB, the operator of trams, buses, ferries and the metro, has an online trip planner that shows all accessible stops and services. The 14 ferry lines are not only accessible, they are also free!

As is the case in many cities, buses are the most reliably wheelchair accessible, but they are not as useful for visiting tourist attractions as the trams and metro.



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Dutch Railways (NS), which runs a service from Schiphol Airport to the city centre, is accessible with assistance and a reservation. Several taxi companies offer accessible services, but all require at least 24 hours advance notice, which is far from optimal and subpar compared to most other cities on this list.

With the exception of the Anne Frank House and Rembrandt's 17th-century home, almost all of the city's tourist attractions are accessible. It's even possible to take a wheelchair-accessible canal cruise. As is common, museums and galleries have placed a particularly strong emphasis on accessibility. The Rijksmuseum, for example, has a floor plan for people with a mobility disability, special guided tours, audio tours and touch tours for blind or visually-impaired visitors, International Sign Language tours for D/deaf visitors, and accommodations for visitors with sensory sensitivities.

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Museum4All lists accessible accommodations at all museums in the Netherlands. There's no shortage of accessible hotel rooms in Amsterdam, with all major hotel brands represented and all neighbourhoods in the city well served. Where the city does not perform well is in provision of information. The national tourism organisation has a page dedicated to travelling for the disabled, but there is scant information and nothing of any practical use. Similarly, the official visit Amsterdam website is almost devoid of information.

Both websites still refer visitors to a private website that had wide-ranging and detailed information on accessible travel in the Netherlands, but sadly most of the information has now been taken down as its owner has moved on.



LAS VEGAS, NV, USA

The primary drivers of Las Vegas' economy are tourism, gaming and conventions – which in turn feed the retail and restaurant sectors – and it is this rather than the city's 150,000 disabled inhabitants that have provided the incentive for it to become one of the most disabled-friendly cities in the US.

The importance of tourism to the city is explored in detail by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority in their 2019 report: tourism accounts for 20% of Las Vegas' GDP, as compared with a national average of 6%, and garners the highest share of overall employment at almost 30%, which is double the national average; it is home to 14 of the world's largest 25 hotels and 25 of the 50 largest.





As a tourist destination Las Vegas is the Strip – essentially a stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard South that’s lined with resort hotels and casinos. Since the Strip was built or renovated after the passing of the ADA in 1990, it is almost entirely ADA compliant, but the city’s hotels and venues go well beyond mere compliance.

The majority of hotels have pool hoists; some – like the Bellagio – have ceiling hoists in some of their rooms; many have movable hoists, visual and vibrating alarms, complementary wheelchairs and mobility scooters and, tellingly, a designated ADA specialist, as well as evacuation procedures for guests with disabilities – something that is shockingly often overlooked in many destinations.

But what’s startling about Las Vegas’ hotels is the sheer number of accessible rooms on offer. Some, like the Bellagio, offer dozens of accessible rooms, some offer hundreds – across all price brackets and room types, including Las Vegas’ famed themed rooms and suites.

The Strip is also a breeze to get around. Pavements are smooth, wide and well endowed with kerb cuts, and pedestrian crossings are equipped with visual and audio signals. There are about 20 elevated walkways to cross the Boulevard, all serviced by lifts.



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All public transport is cheap and accessible. The Las Vegas monorail and private monorails operated by hotels are fully accessible, as are all local buses. A tram service connecting some hotels is accessible and free. The local bus company also runs a Paratransit service that operates 24/7; seniors and disabled passengers with certification from their home state pay reduced fares. Not only is there a large fleet of wheelchair-accessible taxis, Uber and Lyft both have a programme for passengers with mobility difficulties.

Naturally, casinos and showrooms are completely wheelchair accessible and equipped with assistive technology for D/deaf and hard of hearing visitors. In addition to lowered spaces for wheelchair users and people of short stature, casino personnel are trained to assist people with vision or hearing loss at the gaming tables; craps dealers will even place bets for those who need assistance. Bingo can be played using Braille or large-print cards or, for those with dexterity issues, using electronic machines. Some slot machines and table games are wheelchair accessible and others have movable chairs.



Many hotels offer free gaming schools to their guests, and sign language interpreters can be provided. Clearly, it pays for venues to go out of their way to be inclusive.

Other attractions are also wheelchair accessible, including the High Roller Ferris Wheel, the tallest observation wheel in the world, and the SlotZilla Zip Line and Zoomline. It's even possible to go karting with hand controls! Two of the most famous – the Fountains of Bellagio and the Fremont Street Experience – are not only wheelchair accessible, they are also free.

Las Vegas doesn't have everything going for it: some wheelchair users find the distances and the crowds difficult to manage, even within the hotels and casinos (with their carpets to boot). Perhaps because it is so accessible, the official Las Vegas visitor authority has absolutely no information on accessibility for visitors to the city. High-level information "for visitors with special needs" (questionable terminology) is hidden away on a Vegas Means Business website.

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LONDON, UK

London is another global megacity, a status it has enjoyed for centuries. As such, there are many architectural barriers to accessibility, but the city has worked hard to remove them to cater for the 20% of the population that lives with disability, as well as the enormous number of tourists with access needs: about 2% of total inbound overnight visits to the UK in 2018 were taken by people with an impairment or travelling within a group where a member had an impairment, accounting for about 2% of all inbound visitor spending.

Where the US has the ADA, the UK introduced the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 (subsequently incorporated into the 2010 Equality Act), giving disabled people the right of access to goods, facilities, services and premises, including transport-related infrastructure. Disabled access to buildings is covered by the relevant building code.



The 1998 Human Rights Act offers further protection from disability discrimination, while the independent Equality and Human Rights Commission helps to ensure that the strong equality and human rights legal framework is working.

When it comes to accessible tourism, VisitEngland is a world leader, thanks largely to its accessibility specialist, Ross Calladine, who developed England's first Accessible Tourism Action Plan. Over the course of 13 years he has overseen the production of guidance and support tools for the industry, and founded England's Inclusive Tourism Action Group, all of which has helped to better equip the UK's tourism service providers to serve the accessible tourism market.

He presided over the groundbreaking study into the value of the purple pound to tourism – a whopping £15.3 billion in 2018 – which has done much to convince destination management organisations and policymakers the world over of the immense value of this market segment.

One of the main outcomes of such strong commitment by the national tourism organisation has been the publication of a wealth of all-important information needed by disabled people to plan holidays and excursions. VisitLondon's Accessible London page has information on pretty much everything you need to know as a disabled visitor. There's also a link to AccessAble's professionally audited, searchable database of detailed access guides to attractions, hotels, shops and restaurants, among other venues. AccessAble has published its own access guide to London's cultural heart: the South Bank.



57%
of respondents chose
London because of its
accessible transport links.

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London's pavements are generally in good repair and well endowed with kerb cuts and TGSIs, and most pedestrian crossings are equipped with both visual and audio signals. In terms of public transport, the city is comparable to New York: most forms of public transport are very accessible, with the glaring exception of the subway (Tube), which dates back to 1863.

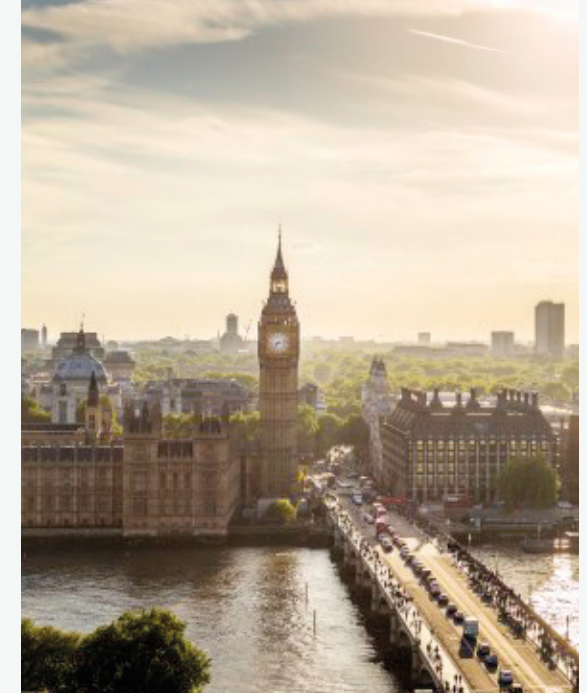
Only about a third of Tube stations have step-free access, but even if starting and destination stations have step-free access, interchange stations may not and there is always the dreaded gap to mind – careful planning and notification of a staff member is required before boarding a train, which is far from ideal or equitable.

In terms of the rest of the rail network, half of overground stations, the Emirates Air Line and all DLR stations have step-free access. All buses are wheelchair accessible, as are all tram stops and most ferry piers. All of London's famous black cabs are technically wheelchair-accessible, but power wheelchair users may find that space is tight and headroom insufficient.

VisitLondon's Accessible London page has information on pretty much everything you need to know as a disabled visitor.

48%

**lauded the accessibility
of London's museums and
other cultural attractions.**



This should improve as a new fleet of more accessible black cabs is phased in over the next couple of years. Hearing induction loops can be found at many ticket offices, platforms, in taxis and on many buses, and guide dogs are universally welcome. Transport for London's accessibility page hosts comprehensive information about accessibility, including downloadable accessibility maps and a tool to plan accessible journeys. Transport for London also embraces the hidden disabilities sunflower programme, which is gaining wider recognition in the UK.



The majority of tourist attractions are accessible; 20 of the most iconic are featured by VisitLondon, with links to each venue's accessibility information. A detailed guide to the accessibility of theatres in the West End also lists accessible performances and information to help plan a theatre visit.

London has a huge supply of accessible hotel rooms in all price brackets, featuring not only step-free access, but also hoists, Braille signage, hearing loops, visual alarm systems and other accommodations. This is due not only to strong legal frameworks, but also to the legacy of improvements to infrastructure for the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics.

With an estimated 8–10% of London 2012 visitors having mobility needs, then Mayor Boris Johnson said, "The Paralympic Games has already provided the impetus to make accessibility improvements, which are set to leave a superb legacy to the fabric of this city including in transport, sport, housing and the public realm."

Among many other improvements to the public infrastructure, £4m was spent to make the South Bank step-free and more accessible.



40%

said London has accommodation that is close to cultural attractions, shops, and restaurants.

45%

said information about accessibility is easy to find.



NEW YORK CITY, USA

New York is a truly global city, attracting millions of visitors from everywhere for both business and pleasure, but also in its own right as a multicultural melting pot, where you might hear half a dozen languages within half an hour on its streets.

Less well known is that almost a million people living in New York City identify as having a disability and the city hosts six million visitors with a disability every year. This was what drove Victor Calise – New York City’s Commissioner of the Office of People with Disabilities, for a decade until 2022 – in his mission to make New York City the most accessible city in the world.

Calise made sure that provisions in the NYC building code went over and above requirements set out in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by introducing inclusive design guidelines.



He worked with the Department for Ageing to facilitate ageing in place – for example by installing benches around the city for people who can't walk long distances. He helped introduce Link-NYC, replacing pay phones with state-of-the-art kiosks, each equipped with free Wi-Fi, phone calls, a tablet for maps and city services, and device charging.

Kiosks are equipped with a hearing loop, Braille and an accessibility tile to access to zoom and colour inversion controls, Telecommunications Relay Services, and a shortcut to the Talkback screen-reader instructions – touchscreens are a nightmare for blind or low-vision users. LinkNYC also provides video remote interpreting, whereby you can get a live American Sign Language interpreter on the streets of NYC! The vast majority of the city's attractions are accessible thanks to the ADA and New York State and City human rights laws. For the same reasons, there's no shortage of accessible hotel rooms. As is the case the world over, museums and galleries in New York have put a very strong emphasis on inclusion. Most of these venues – like the Guggenheim, Cooper Hewitt, the Museum of Modern Art and Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum – have a dedicated accessibility page explaining the numerous accommodations they offer.

Most Broadway theatres offer a range of accommodations for people with disabilities; a great website to find shows that meet particular needs is Theatre Access New York City. Much of the iconic Central Park is accessible, while information about the accessibility in the 29,000 acres of parks in the city can be found here. Wheelchair users can access the various observation decks that give a panoramic view of New York.



The official guide to New York City has an accessibility page that hosts in-depth articles on different aspects of accessibility in the city, as well as accessible guides to some of its more prominent tourist attractions.

Almost a million people living in New York City identify as having a disability and the city hosts six million visitors with a disability every year.



This is where New York scores highest: providing information that allows people with disabilities to plan their trip and avoid disappointment – or worse. The official guide to New York City has an accessibility page that hosts in-depth articles on different aspects of accessibility in the city, as well as accessible guides to some of its more prominent tourist attractions. There’s also a searchable, filterable database of 1,500 points of interest – including tourist attractions, museums, galleries, hotels and restaurants – that gives basic accessibility information.

Where New York doesn’t score so well is in the accessibility of its subway which, dating back to 1904, is one of the world’s oldest. Currently, only about 29% of the city’s 472 subway stations are accessible to some extent, and that’s without taking into account frequent elevator outages. Although the Metropolitan Transport Authority (MTA) is investing billions of dollars to make more stations accessible, progress will be painstakingly slow: 81 stations are slated to be upgraded by 2025 with a similar number to be upgraded in each subsequent decade until the network is finally fully accessible only in 2055.

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The good news is that all buses and ferries, and most overground trains and stations, are wheelchair accessible. Information about the accessibility of public transportation is on the MTA’s accessibility page, while its trip planner has an Accessible Trip tick box that removes options that are not wheelchair accessible – a great feature that is shared by many public transport apps and websites around the world. Accessible taxis can be booked through Accessible Dispatch and through ride-sharing apps: New York is as yet the only city in the world to force ride-sharing companies to become accessible.



ORLANDO, FLORIDA, USA

Along with New York and Las Vegas, Orlando consistently ranks in the top five most visited US cities by international visitors. Of all the cities on the list it has the busiest airport, which speaks to a huge volume of domestic travel: pre-pandemic, the city drew more than 75 million visitors annually, pipping New York as the most visited destination in the USA.

This is partly due to Orlando being one of the busiest American cities for conferences and conventions; the Orange County Convention Center is the second-largest convention facility in the country.

But the main lure is clearly the theme parks: Visit Orlando “prides itself on building perfect vacations that make dreams come true for all visitors – especially those with physical or cognitive disabilities”.

This commitment is borne out by the exhaustive resources it provides on its website – a great example of how destination management organisations should be providing information for people with access needs.



Orlando is frequently ranked as one of the most accessible US cities and one of the reasons is surely that its theme parks set a very high bar when it comes to inclusivity.

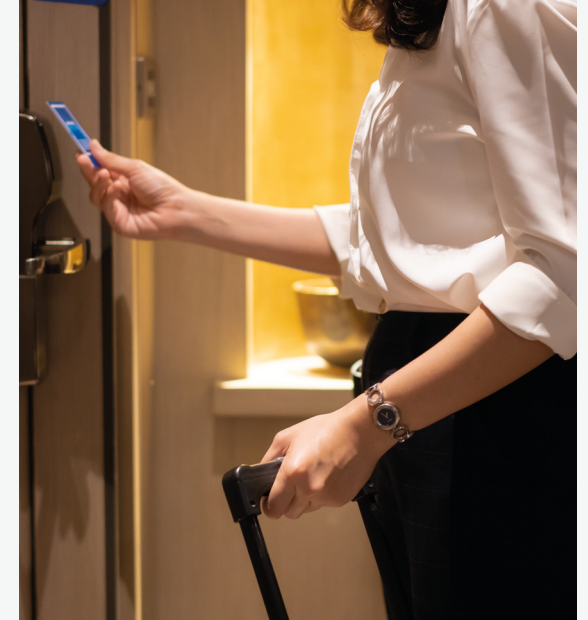
While most people outside the US think only of Disney World, there are actually 12 theme parks in Orlando, six run by Walt Disney World, three by Universal Orlando Resort and three by SeaWorld. It's estimated that, pre-pandemic, Walt Disney World alone hosted more than 50 million visitors annually, making it the most visited resort in the world.

Disney theme parks are renowned for their commitment to inclusivity, with accommodations not only for wheelchair users, but for visitors with vision, hearing, cognitive and sensory disabilities too. Their detailed menu of services for guests with disabilities gives a comprehensive rundown of everything they offer, together with downloadable guides for each of their theme parks.

Universal Studios hosts similarly broad-ranging information for their theme parks that covers the full gamut of disabilities, and also offers downloadable planning and navigation guides that are disability-specific. SeaWorld has published a 21-page accessibility guide to its park, again with more than just mobility disabilities in mind.

48%

**of those who selected
Orlando chose it for
its wide variety of
accessible accommodation.**



Disney theme parks are renowned for their commitment to inclusivity, with accommodations not only for wheelchair users, but for visitors with vision, hearing, cognitive and sensory disabilities too.





All theme parks offer not only physical accommodations, but also intangible benefits to people with disabilities, such as measures to avoid queues. Needless to say, there is no shortage of accessible hotel rooms in Orlando, not only at the resorts themselves but also at the multitude of other accommodations in the city.

The theme parks are not the only attractions in Orlando: there are dozens of other things to see and do, and the high standards of inclusiveness set by the theme parks are almost invariably lived up to by other venues. The relatively new Dr Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, which hosts Broadway musicals, ballet and all manner of concerts, has a suite of accommodations, including American Sign Language interpretation for certain shows and free assisted-listening devices. It's also a certified autism centre, and provides social storybooks.

The Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral is not only fully ADA compliant, it has also developed an autism awareness guide among its many other accommodations for disabled people.

29%

said its museums and other cultural attractions have good accessibility support and facilities.



The Orlando Science Center, a hands-on science museum that's been operating for more than 60 years, shows that age is no impediment to a strong commitment to ADA compliance. Unsurprisingly, the city's other museums – the Orlando Museum of Art, the Mennello Museum of American Art and the Cornell Fine Arts Museum – follow suit. The Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral is not only fully ADA compliant, it has also developed an autism awareness guide among its many other accommodations for disabled people.

All public transport – the LYNX bus service, the SunRail overground train and the I-Ride Trolley – is wheelchair accessible. Further accessible transport options are offered by Mears bus, coach and limousine service. In addition, there are plentiful wheelchair-accessible taxis. There are also complementary buses run by each of the theme parks.



PARIS, FRANCE

Paris, like several cities on this list, is a city of huge cultural and historical significance. It's also the second-most visited city in the world, with upwards of 19 million international visitors each year, almost on a par with London, in addition to 20+ million domestic visitors.

The Louvre is the most visited museum in the world and, together with the Eiffel Tower, one of the most visited tourist attractions in the world.

France has a long-standing tradition of support for human and social rights, dating back to the French Revolution. France ratified the CRPD in 2010, but the earlier Law 2005-102 was enacted “for the equal rights and opportunities, participation and citizenship of disabled people”, and mandated accessibility for disabled people to public establishments from 2015.



It's not only public buildings themselves that must be accessible but there must also be a continuous chain of access, which includes access to public transport, kerb cuts and ramps. This is why almost every point of interest in the city is accessible, and why much of its infrastructure and public transit network is also accessible.

Hosting the Olympics and Paralympics has resulted in improvements in accessibility in all host cities since at least Sydney 2000, and winning hosting rights has also provided a further impetus to making Paris more accessible. In the lead up to the 2024 Games, the city is creating 15 accessible pilot districts around Olympic and Paralympic sites, enhancing access to public spaces, hotels, services, shops and so on.

While the French transport minister has admitted as recently as October 2022 that Paris is "behind on transport accessibility", Paris has vowed that the biggest hubs on its metro will be accessible to people with disabilities by the Paralympic Games opening ceremony on August 28. Pavements in the city are generally in good repair, with kerb cuts not plentiful but adequate, and pedestrian crossings equipped with visual and audible indicators. TGSIs can be found, but are not as ubiquitous as in many cities.

In terms of public transport, Paris has much in common with both London and New York: the Metro is largely inaccessible for wheelchair users, but buses, ferries and overground trains are viable alternatives.

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The only Metro line that is fully accessible to wheelchair users is its most recent, Line 14. Visually-impaired passengers benefit from colour-coded, legible signage and audible announcements, with the direction trains are travelling being indicated by the use of either a male or female voice! However, only Lines 1, 4 and 14 have audible announcements of the next station.

D/deaf and hard of hearing passengers are alerted to the next stop by a flashing light, and Metro trains are progressively being equipped with screens to show upcoming stations.

All trams and almost all buses are wheelchair accessible. Trams are progressively being fitted with audible and visual announcements for people with vision or hearing loss, respectively, but this is a work in progress.

The Montmartre Funicular allows pedestrians and wheelchair users to bypass the

300+

steps to the highest elevation in Paris, where the beautiful Sacré-Couer is located.



Overground trains are also wheelchair accessible (although a very few stations are not), and equipped with visual and audible announcements. The Montmartre Funicular allows pedestrians and wheelchair users to bypass the 300+ steps to the highest elevation in Paris, where the beautiful Sacré-Couer is located. Wheelchair-accessible taxis are not plentiful, but are available to book. It's worth noting that public transport is effectively free for people with an obvious disability.

Entry to many of the city's museums, including the Louvre, is also free to people with disabilities. What's more, in many cases disabled people don't have to line up but can jump to the front of the queue. Remarkably, wheelchair users and their companions can jump the queue and the barrier to sit directly in front of the Mona Lisa!

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As in many cities, museums have taken accessibility to heart, but in Paris this is taken to the next level: museums are equipped with tactile or multisensory supports, Braille, large-print or video guides and induction loops, with information about the accessibility of all Paris museums to be found on a single website. For information about accommodations for people with disabilities made by cultural venues, Accès Culture lists detailed information and has downloadable brochures updated each season.

Provision of information is where Paris ranks very high: not only does the Paris Convention and Visitors Bureau publish comprehensive information on visiting Paris with a disability, it has also produced an Accessible Paris guide, available for download or in hardcopy from tourist information centres. In recognition of the importance of accessible tourism to the city, France's overseas tourism bureaus such as that in the UK, also publish detailed information about accessibility in Paris.

In an excellent and long-standing countrywide "Tourisme & Handicap" initiative, museums, cultural attractions, hotels and restaurants that provide access, special assistance or facilities for disabled people can be certified and display a special logo at their entrances. There's a nationwide searchable and filterable database of the ever-increasing list of places that qualify.



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SHANGHAI, CHINA

Shanghai is yet another economic and trading powerhouse on the list. It's an enormous city with a population of about 25 million, almost exactly the size of Australia's. The population of the metropolitan area is a staggering 39 million, making it the most populous city on the planet.

Its \$1.33 trillion GDP makes it the 15th largest economy in the world, outranking dozens of countries.

Its meteoric rise to megacity status means that much of its development has happened in recent years – most of downtown Shanghai is less than 30 years old – so its infrastructure is relatively new and there are few problems with inaccessible “heritage” buildings to overcome.



China signed the CRPD in 2007, and ratified it in 2008, but barrier-free construction in Shanghai had already begun in the 1980s.

In 2003, the Measures for the Construction and Use of Barrier-Free Facilities in Shanghai became the first local regulations on barrier-free construction to be instituted in China. In 2021 the Measures for the Construction and Use of Barrier-Free Facilities in Shanghai were comprehensively updated and extended to cover access to information, media and cultural products for a broader range of disabilities.

In terms of tourism, it's significant that the Measures contained detailed provisions to improve the accessibility of public transport, including for people who experience vision or hearing loss.

The Measures also specifically mentioned cultural tourism services: museums, art galleries, theatres, community and tourist attractions are mandated to provide wheelchairs, audio and text guides, or sign language interpretation and other barrier-free services for disabled people, older people and others.

Considering that 35% of respondents chose Shanghai because of its clear signage, it's interesting that the Measures also mandated that public service entities be equipped with electronic information display screens and handwriting boards for D/deaf and hard of hearing people, and voice information services for those who are visually impaired.



39%

said that Shanghai is
accessible because of its
accessible public transport.

Shanghai's official travel information page doesn't make a single mention of accessibility, which makes finding information about accessibility virtually impossible, at least for foreigners, and tells us that accessible tourism isn't even on the radar in China.



The Shanghai Disabled Persons' Federation is charged with a number of tasks in the Measures, including consultation, implementation and monitoring, but it doesn't enjoy a high profile and lacks the means to perform its function effectively.

When it comes to the city's accessibility, much progress has been made over the last decade. Thanks to its modernity, pavements in central Shanghai are generally in good condition, with plenty of kerb cuts and TSGI leading to pedestrian crossings and lifts. Yet access to stores, restaurants and supermarkets can be problematic – some residents report having to travel to the nearest shopping mall because their local supermarket is not accessible, and tourists must do the same. Apart from most major metro stations and popular attractions, shopping malls are also the place to find accessible toilets.

Shanghai has the largest metro network of any city in the world, with 459 stations and 772km of track catering to an average of 9.5 million passengers per day. It's also fully accessible for wheelchair users, although street-level lifts can be hard to find, and some accessible entrances may be locked.

Although, as of mid-2020, Shanghai had more than 2,400 accessible low-floor buses on 81 bus routes, there are a staggering 1,585 bus routes in Shanghai, which means just 11% are accessible. The tourist hop on/hop off Big Bus All is wheelchair accessible, however, and may be more useful for the tourist than the metro. 338 overground railway stations, servicing 15 rail lines (including Maglev), are barrier-free.

38%

**cited the wide variety of
accessible accommodation.**



There are only about 50 wheelchair-accessible taxis to serve this enormous city and, being the same design of the London black cabs (Hackney carriages), not all power wheelchairs will fit inside, and taller passengers may not have enough headroom.

Because they are mostly new, many of Shanghai's tourist attractions are at least partially accessible. Many of the Oriental Pearl Tower observation decks (although not the highest) are wheelchair accessible, as is the Skywalk in the Jin Mao Tower. Underground, the Bund Sightseeing Tunnel, one of Shanghai's most popular attractions, can also be experienced by wheelchair users but as with the metro, lifts may be locked.



People's Square and Park are largely wheelchair accessible, but surrounding amenities are generally not; Yu Yuan, meanwhile, is plagued by steps. Shanghai Museum is fully wheelchair accessible and offers audio guides in numerous languages as well as multimedia touch-screen terminals, but it lacks the commitment to accessibility shown by most museums the world over.

Shanghai has a multitude of hotels, but is not well endowed with wheelchair-accessible rooms, and standards may differ greatly from what foreign visitors are used to in their own country – even those in international hotel chains. Having said this, 32% of local respondents – those responsible for Shanghai being on the list since just 13 respondents from other countries nominated Shanghai – chose the city because of the wide variety of accessible accommodation. This tells us that either their expectations are different or that they find it easier to find the information they need, or a combination of both.

Provision of information about accessibility is where Shanghai fails dismally. Shanghai's official travel information page doesn't make a single mention of accessibility, which makes finding information about accessibility virtually impossible, at least for foreigners, and tells us that accessible tourism isn't even on the radar in China.

20%

**nominated Shanghai as
most accessible city.**



Shanghai has the largest metro network of any city in the world, with 459 stations and 772km of track catering to an average of 9.5 million passengers per day. It's also fully accessible for wheelchair users.



SINGAPORE

Singapore truly is the gateway to Asia, not just because of its geographical location, but also because it's such a cultural melting pot. Whatever you might think of the British Empire, it was responsible for the growth of Singapore from a settlement of a few hundred people to a bustling metropolis with a truly multicultural population – so much so that not only does Singapore have four official languages, multiracialism is actually enshrined in the constitution and continues to influence national policies and politics.

At independence, Singapore also had in place a strong bureaucracy and rule of law, both of which contribute to it being the most disability-friendly city in Asia and among the most accessible cities in the world.

Arguably, the main impetus for Singapore becoming so accessible is the longevity of its inhabitants. In order to allow for so-called ageing in place, which aligns with the values of the majority of Singaporeans, successive governments have committed to improving the accessibility of public infrastructure.



In fact, the city-state is one of a handful of jurisdictions in the world that has implemented a universal barrier-free accessibility code to cater for the needs not just of wheelchair users, but also people with vision or hearing loss or other disabilities.

Its code, in place for 30 years, is continually being revised, with the most recent update in 2019 mandating improvements to the accessibility of older buildings undergoing renovation, the safety and accessibility of escalators and elevators, and the provision of accessible toilets at the entrance level of all buildings, as well as larger Changing Places-style toilets – equipped with a hoist and an adult-sized change table – on other floors.

Since 2007, Singapore has had three five-year road maps detailing government aspirations to improve the lives of people with disabilities. The latest road map, the Enabling Masterplan 2030, was published in August 2022, with the government committing to all 29 recommendations to fulfil its vision of Singapore becoming an inclusive society by 2030. And because the government has taken the lead, private enterprise has followed.

The footpaths in the city are in excellent repair, with plenty of kerb cuts and TGSI to assist visually-impaired navigation. In a scheme that is unique in the world as far as we know, elderly and disabled residents are issued with a card that can be tapped at pedestrian crossings to give them extra time to cross roads. More than 95% of pedestrian walkways, taxi stands and bus shelters in Singapore are accessible to wheelchair users, the elderly and travellers with sensory disabilities.



95%

of pedestrian walkways, taxi stands and bus shelters in Singapore are accessible to wheelchair users, older people and travellers with sensory disabilities.

“
Singapore is one of a handful of jurisdictions in the world that has implemented a universal barrier-free accessibility code to cater for the needs not just of wheelchair users, but also people with vision or hearing loss or other disabilities.



The Mass Rapid Transport System (MRT) is fully wheelchair accessible. Unlike in most mass transit systems around the world, wheelchair users are not reliant on ramps but are able to board the train independently – not just access, but equitable access.

All stations have a barrier-free route, as well as wheelchair-accessible toilets and wider fare gates. There's tactile wayfinding, easy-to-follow signage, visual and audible indicators in lifts, on platforms, and on trains, and flashing red lights warn D/deaf users when train doors are closing. More than 85% of public buses are wheelchair accessible, while almost all bus stops are already barrier-free. Most cabs can store manual wheelchairs in their boot. Power wheelchairs would usually need to book a wheelchair-accessible taxi. Local ride-hailing app Grab also provides a service called Grab Assist, which offers additional assistance to seniors and wheelchair users.

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Unlike in most mass transit systems around the world, wheelchair users are not reliant on ramps but are able to board the train independently – not just access, but equitable access.”

85%

of public buses are wheelchair accessible, while almost all bus stops are already barrier-free.



The vast majority of tourist attractions are accessible to disabled people, including the new Gardens by the Bay complex, which also provides a free shuttle service for wheelchair users and wheelchair rental.

Visit Singapore gives an overview of accessible public transport and some tourist attractions, but provision of information is where the city could definitely do more. The Disabled People's Association of Singapore is probably a better resource, and includes links to many local disability-specific organisations, as well as a page dedicated to accessible Singapore for tourists.



SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

With the iconic Opera House and Harbour Bridge dominating its beautiful harbour, Sydney must be one of the most recognisable cities in the world. Although not Australia's capital, Sydney's undoubtedly the country's economic powerhouse and is rivalled only by Melbourne when it comes to its cultural and culinary influence on the world.

This vibrant, beautiful and dynamic city is a firm favourite with wheelchair users worldwide as the vast majority of its attractions are wheelchair-accessible and all new or renovated buildings must, by law, cater for wheelchair access. But the city's accommodations for people with disabilities don't stop with wheelchair users.

While the USA has the Americans with Disabilities Act, Australia has its own Disability Discrimination Act (which celebrates its 30th birthday in 2022) to protect the rights of people with disability and to ensure they are treated fairly.

This broad-ranging act covers everything, including access to public premises and the provision of goods, services and facilities – all things of great importance to tourists as well as residents.





Australia also has a federal disability discrimination commissioner who enjoys a relatively high public profile, and a strong and active human rights commission. New South Wales, like other Australian states, has a Disability Council to advise the state government on all matters related to disability. To complement these rights-based protections, Australia has a well-developed building code with detailed the specifications relating to disabled access. The federal Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport, introduced in 2002, is updated every five years.

Of course, this doesn't mean that access is perfect – far from it – but it does mean that there is a solid base and recourse for action when things aren't working as they should. In terms of infrastructure, central districts and suburban centres are well endowed with kerb cuts and tactile surface indicators.

This vibrant, beautiful and dynamic city is a firm favourite with wheelchair users worldwide as the vast majority of its attractions are wheelchair-accessible and all new or renovated buildings must, by law, cater for wheelchair access.



45%

of respondents chose Sydney because of the wide variety of accessible accommodation close to cultural attractions, shops and restaurants.

While some older buildings remain inaccessible to wheelchair users, most of the city's historic National Trust properties are at least partially accessible. Similarly, while many restaurants and entertainment venues are wheelchair-accessible, a significant number have a single, annoying step at their entrance, and many lack an accessible toilet. The vast majority of Sydney's main attractions, however, are accessible by wheelchair. What's more, many of them are equipped with hearing loops and some can arrange (Australian) sign language interpreters

Blind and vision-impaired residents and visitors will benefit from the Legible Sydney Wayfinding System that links central Sydney streets using more than 2,100 tactile and Braille street signs, pedestrian-friendly maps, information pylons, new signs and digital technology.



The tactile aluminium panels feature street names and building numbers in both Braille and large, raised lettering to allow touch-reading by people who are blind and close range reading for those with low vision. They have been placed next to push buttons at every signalised pedestrian crossing across the local area, replacing worn out rubber panels.

Also, in an Australian airport first, Sydney Airport launched a partnership with Aira, a service that enables blind and low-vision travellers to navigate the airport using their smartphone. Public transport is almost wholly accessible – albeit with assistance required from drivers, and with the notable exception of a few railway stations – with all relevant information on every form of public transport in the city provided by Transport New South Wales on their accessibility page.

Wheelchair-accessible taxis are plentiful and, if self-driving, even interstate or international disability parking permits can be used in one of Sydney's many mobility parking spaces. Provision of information about accessibility – a key requirement for people with disability to plan their trip, as highlighted by survey responses from all regions – is where Sydney scores highly.

In addition to the transport-specific information previously mentioned, the city's destination management organisation hosts an Accessible Sydney site that's full of useful information arranged thematically: museums and galleries; history and heritage; outdoors and wildlife; bucket-list attractions; and getting around.

49%

**of respondents chose
Sydney because of its
accessible transport links.**



Provision of information about accessibility – a key requirement for people with disability to plan their trip, as highlighted by survey responses from all regions – is where Sydney scores highly.



TOKYO, JAPAN

Japan's Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities was enacted in 1970 to "support the independence and social participation of persons with disabilities" by implementing measures to guarantee access to public facilities, transportation and, importantly, information.

The act also prohibits discrimination, and includes many other specific measures, such as recognition of Japanese Sign Language as an official language. Tokyo's 2006 Barrier-Free Act sought to standardise barrier-free environments at airports, train stations and shopping centres and covers wheelchair ramps, elevators, multipurpose toilets, TGSI, talking ticket machines and accessible bathrooms amongst other things.



Tokyo won the bid to host the Olympics and Paralympics in 2013, and Japan ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in the following year.

Accessibility laws were amended in 2018 and 2020, mandating hotels and public transport facilities to eliminate barriers, while requiring their employees to assist disabled users. In 2017, the national government established its “Universal Design 2020 Action Plan” promoting universal design across the country, joining a handful of jurisdictions around the world.

Also in 2017, the Olympic organising committee released the Tokyo 2020 Accessibility Guidelines, containing suggested standards for vehicles, buildings, hotels and amenities. Tactile ground surface indicators were invented in Japan, so it’s no surprise that they are ubiquitous.

The main streets are well endowed with kerb cuts, and although smaller streets often have no pavement so wheelchair users share the roads with cars, bicycles and other pedestrians, drivers are a lot more considerate than in other countries.

Accessibility to stores and restaurants, however, can be problematic: the lack of space in Tokyo means stores are often cramped, making navigation for wheelchair users difficult or impossible. Many stores and restaurants have a step or two to enter, and the traditional genkan – where people remove their shoes before entering a home or restaurant – is almost always at a different level.



74%
chose Tokyo for its
accessible transport.

”
Tactile ground surface indicators
were invented in Japan, so it's no
surprise that they are ubiquitous.



The accessible alternative is to shop and eat at one of Tokyo's countless shopping malls or department stores. Accessible bathrooms are plentiful and usually large and well equipped.

Nearly all train and subway stations in Tokyo are wheelchair accessible. If not familiar with the station disabled travellers will be personally escorted to the correct platform! The majority of buses in Tokyo are wheelchair accessible (but not highway buses or the airport shuttle). Lift-equipped wheelchair-accessible taxis are available, but not easy to book; regular sedan taxis that are marked with the wheelchair symbol merely indicate that there is enough room in the boot for a wheelchair. Modelled after London's black cabs, which are all wheelchair accessible, JpnTaxi was introduced to most taxi fleets prior to the Olympics and can be hailed via an app.

Parks and gardens can be hit and miss but many of Tokyo's top scenic gardens are accessible.

Around
50%

of respondents said Tokyo has a wide variety of accessible accommodation close to cultural attractions, shops, and restaurants.



Most of Tokyo's tourist attractions are at least partially accessible, even its many ancient shrines and temples. Birdseye views of the city – from the Tokyo Tower, Shibuya Sky or the Tokyo Skytree, for example – are all possible for wheelchair users.

Tokyo's world-class museums and galleries are generally very wheelchair accessible. Parks and gardens can be hit and miss but many of Tokyo's top scenic gardens are accessible. Shinjuku Gyoen, one of Tokyo's biggest, most popular parks – a great place for viewing cherry blossom and the changing colours of autumn – has an access map, but also a universal smartphone app guide that uses voice, video, text and vibration. Arts and entertainment venues, particularly iconic ones such as the Kabuki-za and National Noh Theatre, are well set up for people who are visually impaired, D/deaf or hard of hearing, or have mobility issues.



In 1983, Tokyo Disneyland became the first Disney theme park outside of the US and is the third most visited theme park in the world, hosting more than 16 million visitors a year.

As with all Disney theme parks, accessibility is a premium, with accommodations for people with vision, hearing, or mobility impairments as well as dietary restrictions or developmental disorders. In terms of information provision, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government has created the Tokyo accessible tourism portal, but apart from 30 accessible itineraries, it doesn't provide a lot of information.

The Tokyo Universal Design Navigator is a much more useful search engine for information on accessible transport, accommodation, shopping, amusement parks, restaurants, parks, shrines and temples. The 44% of respondents who chose Tokyo for easy access to information about accessibility indicates there is a lot more Japanese-language information available.

While there are some guidelines for accessible hotel rooms, hotels with fewer than 50 rooms are exempt and, until recently, hotels with over 50 rooms only needed one accessible room, leading to a severe shortage of accessible accommodation.

Requirements are being raised to 1% of total rooms for hotels with more than 50 rooms, but only for new hotels or those being renovated. What's more, Japanese guidelines for accessible hotel rooms are not as strict as those in jurisdictions such as the USA, UK and Australia.



44%
of respondents chose
Tokyo for easy access
to information about
accessibility.

Nearly all train and subway stations in Tokyo are wheelchair accessible. If not familiar with the station disabled travellers will be personally escorted to the correct platform!