

Waves on wheels

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Cruising is a perfect fit for travellers with 'accessibility' needs.

There's nothing like sailing through the Caribbean on a cruise ship to help cope with the winter blahs...or with almost anything, really! Cruising is the most accessible way for people with disabilities to see the Caribbean. How else can you visit four different islands in one week without having to change hotel rooms?

Most cruise lines today adhere closely to the *Americans with Disability Act (ADA)* standards, and some even go above and beyond to meet the needs of their disabled travellers. Cruise lines like *Holland America*, *Royal Caribbean*, *Celebrity*, *Princess*, *Regent* and *Crystal Cruises* are typically ahead of the curve, especially with their newer ships.

I recently enjoyed a 7-day cruise on *Royal Caribbean's Explorer of the Seas*, where my goal was to check out access on the ship as well as in some Western Caribbean ports. Upon boarding the ship, I was happy to find the medical equipment that I had rented waiting in our stateroom. Several cruise lines have exclusive relationships with one or two medical companies which will deliver equipment such as wheelchairs, hoist lifts and oxygen directly onboard the ship right to your stateroom in many ports around the world.



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Most wheelchair accessible staterooms are slightly larger than a regular stateroom to allow a wheelchair user to wheel freely, and my oceanview cabin was no exception. The bathroom was spacious and included a roll-in shower. Access around the ship was very good as well. The Palace Theater and Studio B (home to their popular Ice Show) both had accessible seating areas, and the pool had a lift for people with disabilities. Only the Casino was slightly hard to navigate when it was full of people, but remained accessible nonetheless.

While most major cruise lines offer great access onboard their ships, the ports can be a completely different story. Although ships dock at ports throughout the Caribbean, several ports require that ships anchor at sea and use small boats, called tenders, to bring passengers ashore. *Royal Caribbean* is one of only two cruise lines whose tenders are accessible to wheelchairs and scooters. Three of the four ports of call on this 7-day itinerary involved tendering, which was a good opportunity for me to see how 'accessible' their tenders really are. All of them turned out to be ramped, which is nicer than a hydraulic lift because it is faster and you don't have to worry about it breaking down. Although some of the ramps were steep, all were manageable in my electric wheelchair with assistance from the crew.

I was also able to do a little touring at some of the ports.

Cozumel has wheelchair accessible taxis, which we were able to hail from a stand near the cruise terminal. The driver took us on a two-hour island tour, including a short stop at **San Gervasio**, home to some Mayan ruins. At **Grand Cayman**, I toured the famous Turtle Farm where 16,000 giant and baby sea turtles reside. However, **Costa Maya** did not have accessible transportation, and modified taxis were still on order in Belize City at the time of our trip, so we spent the days at those ports shopping and catching some sun.

Cruising is an ideal vacation for travellers with disabilities, whether you have mobility or visual impairments, are deaf/hard of hearing or have other special needs. More accessible ships, affordable pricing and exciting destinations make cruising a perfect fit. Consider a cruise for your next vacation! ✓