



There's a whole world out there just waiting to be explored, and with the right knowledge, preparation, and contacts you'll be ready to journey to distant lands.

International Accessibility

By Cornelia Danielson, Domico Corradin, Laurel Van Horn, and Bill Lasher, Jr.

Those with physical disabilities who live and travel in the United States have come to rely on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), knowing what to expect when it comes to compliance within the nation's borders. But what about people who are drawn to other regions of the world? While it's true that the ADA does not provide global coverage, you will find that variations on the act do exist elsewhere—not in all countries, but in many. In addition, there are professionals both here and abroad who've taken it on themselves to provide accessible services for those who require them. The information is out there, you just need to do a little research before you go.

Or, perhaps, to have someone else do it for you. That's exactly what you'll find in the following story, with sections providing first-hand analyses of the state of accessibility in Switzerland, Australia, Italy, and the Canadian Rockies. So pack your bags, update your passport, and dare to be undaunted!

*“The air cooled and freshened
as we climbed higher, winding
through tall evergreens,
and the train circled back
on itself twice as it roared
into the blackness of
the Spiral Tunnels.”*



Ponte Vecchio on the Arno River, the Fountain of Neptune, bottom right, and the view of Florence from the Boboli Gardens, bottom left.



ITALY

Cornelia Danielson

Florence lies in a valley on the banks of the Arno river, crossed by seven bridges linking the city's original Roman settlement on the north bank to the "Oltrarno," the 11th century extension, on the south. A medieval circuit of fortified walls over five miles in length once surrounded what is known today as the "centro storico," or historic center, where most of the city's monuments and museums are located. Although large tracts of walls were torn down in the mid 19th century, the boulevards created in their place still mark the nucleus of Florence, birthplace of the Renaissance, a compact, medium-sized city with a population of about 375,000 that is visited by over six-million tourists a year. Accessible? Yes, but with a good dose of what the Italians call "pazienza." Rough cobblestone streets, sidewalks lacking curb cuts, and congested traffic—combined with a relaxed interpretation of "accessibility"—make patience and being well-informed the keys to enjoying your stay here.

Thanks to improvements made in the Jubilee Year of 2000, many of the sidewalks on the north bank of the river were redesigned with curb cuts. Ex-



tensive pedestrian zones were created between the Ponte Vecchio, which is the most wheelchair-accessible bridge, and the Piazza del Duomo, or cathedral square. Improvements have been slower on the south side of the river, where many sidewalks are still too narrow for wheelchairs to negotiate.

Major attractions such as the Accademia, home of Michelangelo's *David*, and the world-famous Uffizi are both wheelchair accessible. Wheelchair entrance to the Accademia is through the exit, or "uscita," door. The door at the reservation holders' entrance to the Uffizi is wheelchair accessible, although assistance is advisable to navigate threshold lips and the uneven stone pavement under the ramped

east portico. Both museums can provide standard-size manual wheelchairs, especially advisable in the Uffizi, where seating is rare. During summer months both museums remain open until 10:00 several evenings each week, and sipping a glass of cool wine on a hot summer's night on the terrace of the Uffizi's café—with its spectacular views of medieval towers and the dome of the cathedral—may be one of the outstanding memories of your visit. Equally spectacular is the view from below in the Signoria Square from an outside table at the elegant café Rivoire which, in

Italian Information

APT (Agency for the Promotion of Tourism)
www.aptfirenze.it

The Accessible Guide to Florence
www.xlibris.com

Italian Rail (accessible seating reservations)
199.30.30.60

SO.CO.TA (accessible cabs)
39 055 41.01.33

addition to a delectable menu, serves granita di caffè con panna (iced coffee) in the summer and cioccolata calda con panna (hot chocolate) in the winter, both topped with a cream so thick that you almost need a knife to cut it.

The three dwellings of the Medici, the family who dominated Florence for 300 years, are well worth a visit. Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, built by the banker Cosimo the Elder in the mid 15th century, is wheelchair accessible on the ground floor only. The palace chapel decorated by Benozzo Gozzoli is located at the top of an impressive but formidable baroque staircase, with no elevator. Palazzo Vecchio, today Florence's town hall but originally built as the city's government palace, was transformed into a stately residence for the Medici dukes in the mid 16th century. Wheelchair entrance is from the side of the palace behind the Neptune fountain. The third Medici home is across the river. Known as the Pitti Palace, it now houses five museums, all of which are wheelchair accessible. The decorative arts museum known locally as the Museo degli Argenti is wheelchair accessible on the ground floor only but still worth a visit to see the magnificently decorated summer apartments.

The Boboli Gardens, behind the palace, extend for 11 acres over hilly terrain and are traversed by packed dirt and gravel paths. Sections of the garden to the left and immediately behind the palace—the entrance is from the left side of the palace courtyard—as well as the lower gardens, which are entered via the Porta Romana, are the most suitable for wheelchair users. Antique and artisan's shops are concentrated in the Pitti Palace neighborhood. Trattoria Quattro Leoni, in Piazza della Passera and located between the Ponte Vecchio and the Pitti Palace, has accessible outside seating, weather permitting, from April through October, with reservations advised.

In addition to Santo Spirito, many of Florence's important churches were made wheelchair accessible for the Jubilee Year. Santa Croce, with its tombs of Michelangelo and Galileo, has a ramped entrance on the north side. Giotto's famous Bardi and Peruzzi chapels are reached by steps but can be partially viewed by wheelchair users from the nave. The churches of Santa Trinità, Santa Maria Novella, San Lorenzo, and the cathedral, or Duomo, as well as the cathedral museum—known as the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo—with its haunting *Pietà* by Michelangelo are all wheelchair accessible, although assistance will be needed for the low, wide steps at San Lorenzo's entrance.

An interesting alternative to staying in a hotel might be renting an apartment in a palace or villa. Palazzo Belfiore, close to the Ponte Vecchio, has a large ground-floor studio apartment called the "Francesco de' Medici," which sleeps four and has an adapted bathroom. For those who prefer the country, the Frantoio delle Grazie with a two-room wheelchair accessible apartment in a 16th century villa, is only a 15-minute drive by car from the historic center. For general tourist information and a short list of hotels offering wheelchair accessible accommodations visit the APT (Agency for the Promotion of Tourism) Web site or consult

The Accessible Guide to Florence, which provides detailed descriptions of the city's accessible accommodations, restaurants, museums, and transportation.

Florence is serviced by the small Amerigo Vespucci airport, with connecting flights to major European cities. Buses and trains connecting the Pisa airport to Florence's Santa Maria Novella railway station are presently not wheelchair accessible, but from Pisa's central railway station, only a 10-minute cab ride away, wheelchair accessible trains leave frequently for Florence. Italy in general has an excellent rail system, with wheelchair accessible cars with adapted restrooms primarily on the newer Eurostar trains.

Although much of Florence's historic center is closed to regular traffic, visitors holding disability parking permits—American permits are considered valid according to a 1997 EU agreement—can receive permission to enter. Cars fitted with hand controls can be rented from Hertz, and accessible taxis are available with 48-hour advance notice by calling the SO.CO.TA cab company. Small electric buses (A, B, C, and D) traverse the historic center and are

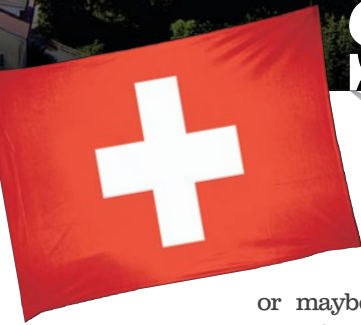
especially useful to slow walkers, but only the D is wheelchair accessible. Many of the city's larger buses on major lines are 100-percent wheelchair accessible in theory, though platform lifts often jam and few stops have been made truly accessible.

As for the weather, Florence is always beautiful, but perhaps its stark architecture is best suited to the less crowded late autumn and winter months. If possible it's always best to avoid late June through mid September, with its high season prices, unbearable heat, and hordes of tourists. People with disabilities are welcome in any season, however, and recently passed legislation provides entry to any Italian state museum—no ticket, and no reservation necessary.



Looking out over the town of Zurich from the surrounding mountains, and a view of downtown, bottom left. The Hotel zum Storchen is shown at top center, and the Zürich Hauptbahnhof—or “Main Station”—at bottom right.

SWITZERLAND



Bill Lasher, Jr.

What comes to mind when you think of Switzerland? Is it the picturesque mountain vistas, or maybe your mouth waters at the thought of fine Swiss chocolate? Perhaps it's the world-class skiing, or the unspoiled, old-world countryside and relaxed way of life. Whatever it is, Switzerland is definitely a special destination that's sure to become one of your favorite travel memories.

For international travelers Switzerland can be reached by plane arriving in one of its three largest cities: Zurich, the country's largest international flight gateway; Geneva; or the capital city of Berne. If you're traveling around Europe and plan to visit Switzerland, however, the high-speed rail system is an excellent option to air travel. In fact, you'll find the rail system to be an equally efficient way to go from city to city, or even to get around the larger cities.

While Switzerland doesn't have high-speed trains of its own, the French TGV, German ICE, and Italian Cisalpino extend into Switzerland for inter-country access. These trains are capable of speeds of 120-plus miles per hour, and they offer a very relaxed travel atmosphere. But the often-

difficult terrain between Swiss cities requires the trains to travel at greatly reduced speeds. All three high-speed train lines offer wheelchair-accessible cars, complete with bathrooms capable of accommodating a wheelchair user, wider aisles, and wheelchair seating.

It's important to arrange travel on these trains in advance, and you must arrive at the train terminal at least 45 minutes prior to departure to ensure that a wheelchair lift and the personnel required are ready to board you onto the train. Each major rail station has a disabled travelers office, though they can be difficult to locate. Most European rail lines leave on time, and Switzerland is no exception, so if you don't arrive early to arrange a wheelchair lift, the train will leave without you!

While it is evident that the Swiss travel and tourism industry has made efforts to provide access where possible,



Swiss Sites

Europe for Visitors
www.europeforvisitors.com

Switzerland Travel Guide
www.alpinetraveler.com

Zurich-Downtown Switzerland
www.zuerich.com

Rail Europe
www.raileurope.com

and certainly this is the case in newer construction, Switzerland is a very mountainous region with cities that are hundreds of years old, so be prepared for the occasional workaround when attempting to navigate a city or a tourist attraction by wheelchair.

A case in point—Zurich. This city is Switzerland’s main commercial and cultural center, and it is also considered to be the wealthiest in Europe. One trip down the Bahnhofstrasse, one of the most fashionable shopping streets in Europe, will prove this. As such, Zurich boasts many new and updated buildings that are very wheelchair accessible. The city center itself is easy to get around, although it’s occasionally necessary to take alternate routes to avoid a stairway. A wheelchair with four-wheel suspension for navigating the cobblestone streets and back alleys will definitely make for a less jarring ride.

The main train station in Zurich, the Hauptbahnhof, is one of the busiest in the world. The Zurich Hauptbahnhof has over 50 rail platforms scattered throughout four underground levels, with more than 200 underground shops. It can be very confusing to navigate, but there are elevators or ramps leading to each level and train platform.

When traveling on the high-speed trains a wheelchair lift is



necessary, but when traveling on the local commuter trains there are wheelchair-accessible cars on some trains where a wheelchair can roll straight into the car. This does require the user to “wheelie” the front wheels over what can be a gap of up to 9” between the platform and the train car. The trains don’t wait at the stop for very long, so this must be done rather expeditiously. As I mentioned, only some of the trains have accessible cars, so you may have to wait for several non-accessible trains to pass before an accessible train arrives.

From Zurich you may want to take a short train trip to the top of Uetliberg mountain. After the train departs Zurich Hauptbahnhof it makes about a dozen stops, each more rural than the previous, on the way to the final destination of

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switzerland continued >

Uetliberg. Some stops are easily wheelchair accessible, some have stairs, and in the case of the final destination, Uetliberg, be prepared for a drop from the train car to the ground of about 16". Fellow tourists are more than happy to assist wheelchair users on and off the train, but the brave and active traveler should be able to navigate this obstacle with a wheelie drop out the door—a definite crowd pleaser—or you could lower yourself backwards using the handles located conveniently next to the door.

Once out of the train there is a wide, mostly paved, and occasionally steep road to the peak of Uetliberg. The peak has a visitor center, a restaurant and hotel, and a very tall, stair-laden, completely inaccessible lookout tower. The view from the top of Uetliberg is awe-in-

spiring as you look down on the city of Zurich, Lake Zurich, and the surrounding countryside. On a clear day the Alps can be seen in the distance in all their majesty.

There are many wonderful destinations around Switzerland that are worth noting, such as the city of Interlaken and the nearby Jungfrau peak, which can be reached by taking the Jungfraubahn cog railway that runs inside the mountain to the summit. Once at the summit visitors have a breathtaking view of the Aletsch glacier field, and they can explore the Ice Palace and its ice sculptures or have a bite to eat at one of Jungfrau's two restaurants. There are also 113 miles of downhill ski trails and 45 cable cars and lifts in the Interlaken region for the ski enthusiast.

Switzerland is a country of

many languages, though German is used primarily. Along the French border, French is prevalent, and along the Italian border, Italian is mostly spoken. English is also spoken in most areas of the country, although it's mostly used by those in the tourist and travel industry. It has its own currency, the Swiss franc (CHF), which is one of the world's most stable currencies. Though surrounding countries have converted to the widely used euro, not all shops in Switzerland will accept it, so it's best to exchange currency and use the Swiss franc when traveling around Switzerland.

Do as much research as you can about the locations you would like to visit in advance, and have a rough game plan when you arrive. Be sure to ask the locals what there is to do in the area, and where they go to eat. You'd be surprised by how much they know about accessibility, and what places would and wouldn't be wheelchair accessible.

Finally, keep an open mind and prepare for the occasional accessibility issue. You can't expect a 500 year-old mountain city to be as accessible as San Diego, but you will have a lot of fun and see some truly marvelous sights. Switzerland is worthy of all the superlatives you can think of, and it will undoubtedly be one of the most memorable trips you'll ever take.



The Sydney Opera House has become a world-renowned symbol for the city. Floatplane tours take flight from the harbor, at right, and Luna Park draws thrillseekers from near and far.



AUSTRALIA

Domonic Corradin

In late January of this year my good friend Matty and I packed all our gear into the car and headed off on a road trip from Melbourne to Sydney for the Australia Day weekend festivities. The drive there was a lot of fun. The route we chose wasn't the fastest way, but it gave us a chance to spend some time driving along the coastline. On the way there we

stopped to pick up a motorbike for a friend and then finished the last few hours of the trip. All told it took us about 10 hours to get to Sydney, with only a little taste of the early morning traffic everyone seems to gripe about incessantly.

We made a quick pit stop in Sydney for a wink of sleep and some food before heading to another co-hort's farm near the town of Dubbo for a bit of motor-

bike riding. I was about to take my first ride on a motocross bike in 14 years. I used to race before my injury, but I hadn't gotten the chance to sit in the saddle since then. Needless to say, I was pretty excited... picture a kid with a new toy at Christmas and you'll get the idea. I had no way of knowing at that point the gift would end up exploding in my face.

The annual celebration runs through the weekend and comes to its peak on Monday, with everyone heading down to Circular Quay (pronounced "key") for the huge 10K wheelchair road race. I have to say, the Australian populace is all about their sports, and wheelchair sports is not neglected at all. Whether you're wielding a cricket bat or smashing into your opponent with a rugby chair, people love to cheer you on. In fact, during the most recent Olympics in Beijing, the Paralympics received just as much local television coverage as the able-bodied competitors. As for this particular race, I would have been there cheering them on in person if it weren't for the savage beating I'd received at the hands of a Yamaha YZ450F that put me in the ICU for a few days. So, this time around I had to live vicariously through my friends for the party.

While I was soaking up the hospitality at the Sydney Royal North Shore Hospital, my friends were enjoying the last sight of their paycheck at the Star City Casino and Hotel. Matty is also in a wheelchair, so he was my "eyes and wheels," so to speak, to vouch for the accessibility of the hotel. The Star City complex is a Vegas-style casino and hotel with all the bright lights and ringing bells you can handle, and with approximately 1,000 rooms to choose from.

The last time I came through Sydney I stayed at the Shangri-La Hotel downtown, which offers a spectacular view of the harbor, including the world-famous Sydney Harbor Bridge and Opera House. My suite had a multiple-room setup that was



very easy to navigate. Getting around the room was quite easy, even without being assigned to an officially accessible room. My wheelchair fit fine around every decorative piece of furniture and through all the doorways. The bedroom was the best of all, with two giant windows coming to a corner to provide a panoramic view of the harbor. The hotel itself has a great wide-open entrance and very friendly staff. Climbing the hills up from the wharfs is quite a challenge until you learn the tricks. There are elevators in a few of the buildings along the way that remove a good section of the climb. It's good to have someone around who can give you a helping hand up some of the sidewalks, no matter how strong you think you are. Even with the climb, I still vote this hotel a must-stay, and you shouldn't let the terrain deter you from exploring the city, as it's not all hills.

You can also choose to use the public transit. There are accessible city buses and taxis galore. The ferry boats are cheap, with ramped entrances that make it



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Australian Accessibility

[Australian Government](#)
(search “accessibility”)
www.australia.gov.au

[Australian Human Rights Commission](#)
www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights

[Disabled-World.com](#)
www.disabled-world.com/travel/australia

[Lifeline Australia](#)
www.lifeline.org.au/lib/accessibility

pretty easy to board and disembark, and they can take you pretty much anywhere in the harbor you may want to go once you get down to the wharf level. There is even Luna Park across from the hotel, in case you

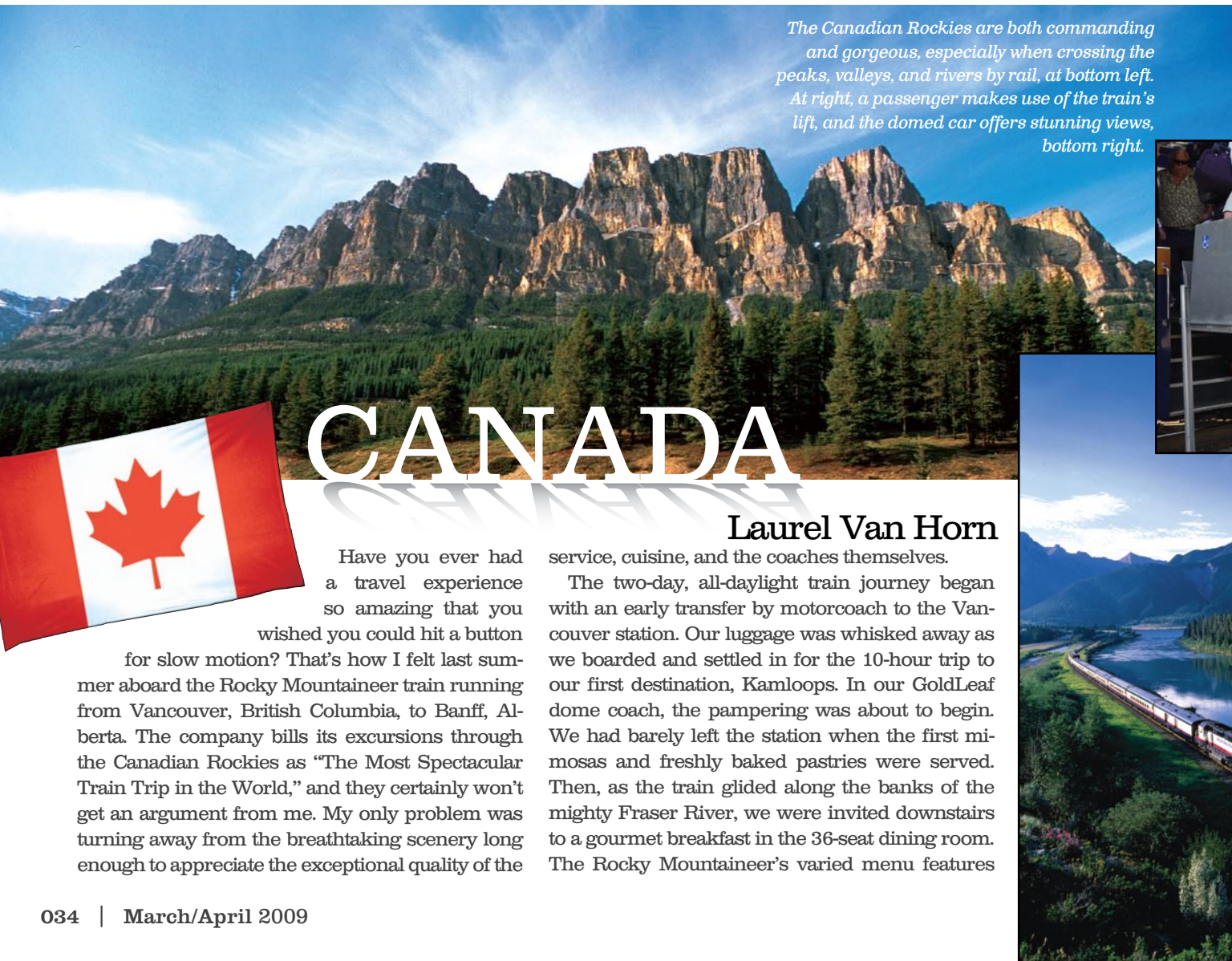
have an itch for cotton candy or a Ferris wheel ride.

If you're feeling more adventurous you can even take a breathtaking sea-plane ride around town and out to sea. Or, for a less hair-raising outing, you can hire one of the water taxis for a tour around the harbor. I took a boat ride for about an hour and got a great history and tour of nearly the entire Sydney harbor. This was one of those instances where having an able-bodied travel buddy paid off, though. The only way to board the taxi was to be carried piggyback down the stairs of the dock. All went well, though, and it was more than worth the small amount of trouble.

Also, to see the fireworks over the harbor is a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I think everyone needs to put it on their list of things to do. Australia Day brings out an amazing display just

after sundown. This year they were shot up and over Darling Harbor, right in front of the Star City Casino and Hotel. A large part of the celebration also included a parade for the Chinese New Year, with oriental dragons and street performers. While the Australian Open was going on the restaurants and pubs were filled with Federer fans watching on TV, which really added to the spirit of the celebration.

With everything I've done and seen in Sydney—including the inside of a hospital room—there's still something left on my “to-do” list, which is to make it to the top of the Harbor Bridge. It costs \$200 AU, and it's a \$40-million annual business, but I've heard that the reward for making the steep climb is one of the most incredible views in Sydney. So when I say that I haven't climbed it, I need to add one more word... yet!



The Canadian Rockies are both commanding and gorgeous, especially when crossing the peaks, valleys, and rivers by rail, at bottom left. At right, a passenger makes use of the train's lift, and the domed car offers stunning views, bottom right.

CANADA

Laurel Van Horn

Have you ever had a travel experience so amazing that you wished you could hit a button for slow motion? That's how I felt last summer aboard the Rocky Mountaineer train running from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Banff, Alberta. The company bills its excursions through the Canadian Rockies as “The Most Spectacular Train Trip in the World,” and they certainly won't get an argument from me. My only problem was turning away from the breathtaking scenery long enough to appreciate the exceptional quality of the

service, cuisine, and the coaches themselves. The two-day, all-daylight train journey began with an early transfer by motorcoach to the Vancouver station. Our luggage was whisked away as we boarded and settled in for the 10-hour trip to our first destination, Kamloops. In our GoldLeaf dome coach, the pampering was about to begin. We had barely left the station when the first mimosas and freshly baked pastries were served. Then, as the train glided along the banks of the mighty Fraser River, we were invited downstairs to a gourmet breakfast in the 36-seat dining room. The Rocky Mountaineer's varied menu features

local wines and fresh ingredients from Western Canada's coastal and inland regions and the food travels just a few short steps to the table since each dome coach has its own kitchen.

Back upstairs the panoramic views got better and better as the train passed from the wide, fertile Fraser Valley into the ever-narrower Fraser Canyon. Cameras clicked as we slid past the churning waters of Hell's Gate and reached the point where the clear blue Thompson River enters the muddy Fraser. Our route wound along the Thompson as it changed from a raging torrent carrying whitewater rafters to the wide, beautiful Kamloops Lake. We crossed bridges and passed waterfalls and a huge osprey nest before suddenly, it seemed, arriving in the Wild West. This was big sky country with sparse vegetation, hot and dry.

While our fellow travelers enjoyed dinner and an optional show, we met with Kamloops Tourism at a restaurant overlooking the city. Now home to 85,000 people, it was only settled by Europeans in 1811. The First Nations, however, have been here for more than 2000 years. That evening we visited the accessible Secwepemc Museum and Heritage Park to see the archeological remains of "pit-houses" used by the Shuswap during their winter encampments.

At 6:30 the next morning it was all aboard for Banff and 10 hours of even more spectacular scenery. After passing by the houseboats on Shuswap Lake we would climb through Rogers Pass with its tunnels, glistening glaciers, and snowcapped mountains, then crossing the Continental Divide into Banff National Park. In the meantime, we had serious eating to do. Truth be told, I can't remember a single meal that day and barely even sat down. It was just too exciting. Around each bend was yet another breathtaking view. Outside on the lower-level vestibules, the air cooled and freshened as the train climbed higher and higher, winding through tall evergreens. The train circled back on itself twice as it roared into the blackness of the Spiral Tunnels.

It's not just the scenery that makes this trip so impressive, but also the engineering feats in evidence all along the way—the bridges, tunnels, and even track beds themselves slicing through the narrow canyons. Building the transcontinental railway across the Canadian Rockies was an epic struggle that pitted man's ingenuity and dogged determination against the most rugged terrain and extreme conditions. Countless lives were lost before the last spike of the Canadian Pacific Railway was driven at Craigellachie in November 1885.

All too soon we were in picturesque Banff, saying goodbye to those who had shared the journey. These were mostly older couples, and a mix of

British, Europeans, Japanese, and Americans. For them, too, this was the trip of a lifetime and, like myself, most were too intent on the experience to do much socializing. I did meet one amazing couple from Australia, however, who were literally on a world tour. What caught my eye was his white cane as we boarded in Vancouver. Often they, too, would be out in the vestibule, soaking up the atmosphere as the train wound upward. On parting David Rumble handed me his card headed "Blind-fella Travel—Enjoy life to the Max" with his job title listed as "Traveler."

If you come to Western Canada to ride the Rocky Mountaineer, do take time to explore its other treasures. Vancouver is a wonderfully inclusive city and Banff, too, exceeded my expectations. Its new public buses are wheelchair accessible, as are most attractions, including Upper Hot Springs, Banff Gondola, Lake Minnewaka Boat Tours, Banff Springs Hotel, Chateau Lake Louise and also, we are told, the Ice Explorer on the Columbia Icefield Glacier.

Canadian Contacts

The Rocky Mountaineer

www.rockymountaineer.com

The Whistler Mountaineer

www.whistlermountaineer.com

Canadian Tourism Commission

www.canada.travel

Canadian Abilities Foundation

www.abilities.ca

The Rocky Mountaineer currently offers two-day train journeys on three different routes: Kicking Horse (Vancouver to Banff/Calgary), Yellow Head (Vancouver to Jasper), and Fraser Discovery (Whistler to Jasper). In addition the Whistler Mountaineer provides three-hour excursions between Vancouver and Whistler. While all trains can accommodate guests with wheelchairs, access varies between the two classes of service. Only single-level RedLeaf coaches, including two with domes, have a wheelchair space with tiedown. Accessible restrooms have limited floor space, so one may need to transfer to the train's foldable compact wheelchair. This is also used for non-ambulatory guests who prefer to travel in GoldLeaf service and transfer to a seat. A small elevator connects the upper and lower levels in the GoldLeaf dome coaches. For boarding, a sturdy manual lift is available in each station. While you can reserve an adapted hotel room in each locale, wheelchair taxis for transfers are currently available only in Vancouver, Whistler, Calgary, and Kamloops. Please mention any disability-related needs when you book. *CF*

