

# Breaking down barriers to travel

Championing  
disability  
inclusive and  
accessible  
travel



In partnership with



**Leonard  
Cheshire** 

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## **Breaking down barriers to travel: championing disability inclusive and accessible travel**

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# Foreword



**Peter Kern: Chief Executive Officer  
Expedia Group**

At Expedia Group, our purpose is to bring the world within reach for all travelers, and we endeavor to do so by eliminating barriers that exist for many today, including for people with disabilities. Putting travelers' needs at the center of innovation knocks down barriers to travel, making it more enjoyable and accessible.

We recognize that disability inclusion starts within our own workforce and office spaces. We are proud to share our commitments through annual participation in the **Disability Equality Index Benchmark** and our membership of The **Valuable 500** which we signed in 2020. We are proud of the progress made by our internal communities at Expedia Group, including our Accessibility Engineering team, Accessibility Champions, and Ability Inclusion Movement (AIM) Employee Resource Group.

This report highlights the current state of and opportunities for inclusion and accessibility within the travel industry for people with disabilities. We are grateful to Leonard Cheshire for their partnership and to the travelers and industry partners who shared insights and best practices. Together, we have the opportunity and responsibility to create frictionless travel for everyone.



**Tiziana Oliva: Managing Director -  
Global influencing and programmes**

## **Leonard Cheshire**

As an international pan-disability charity, Leonard Cheshire supports individuals to live, learn and work as independently as they choose, whatever their ability. We work with individuals and organizations to break down barriers and open doors to opportunity all across the world. Expedia Group's mission to **"bring the world within reach"** embodies this and we are delighted to partner with them to bring this report to life.

At Leonard Cheshire, we are really excited about the opportunities a more inclusive travel industry represents for people with disabilities. Reading through this report, I feel very inspired by the wide range of innovative practices that are being pioneered by travel companies around the world. I very much hope that this report will motivate even more organizations to embrace inclusive practices so that the travel industry can become world-leading in developing products and services that are truly accessible for all.

# Introduction

**Inclusivity is a key element to exceptional travel experiences – enabling individuals all over the world to experience diverse countries, cultures and opportunities. Yet often, disability inclusion is not at the forefront of travel products and services.**

This report will support travel providers to understand why disability inclusion matters to the industry whilst celebrating and learning from providers already striving to be more inclusive through their innovative practices.

By highlighting case studies of products and services that are making an impact, we aim to support organizations across the industry to understand the changes they can make to become more inclusive providers.

The report also draws upon the real experiences of people with disabilities



and shares their stories, collected through surveys and focus groups, to further illustrate why inclusivity should be a priority for the industry.

Whilst this report focuses on disability inclusion, the benefits to working in more inclusive and intersectional ways applies to all travelers. We hope this report provides you with inspiration and ideas for how your organization can “bring the world within reach” for all travel customers in innovative and inclusive ways.

## Understanding disability

**According to the World Health Organization, 15% of the global population has a disability.<sup>1</sup> That equates to roughly 1 billion people. But what does the word ‘disability’ actually mean?**

Disability is a complex term and understandings, definitions and disability-related language differ all around the world. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,<sup>2</sup> for example, defines disability as:

“[persons] who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

We recognize that there is no universally agreed language for referring to people with disabilities and different types of disabilities, and preferred terminology varies across different communities, cultures and countries. For the purposes of this report, we will refer to ‘people with disabilities’ and ‘impairments’ and ‘conditions’ throughout to reflect language used within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The term 'disability' is often associated with a physical condition, or a condition which is visible. But it is important to understand that 'disability' is a broad term. Many conditions, both visible and non-visible, could be considered 'disabilities' based on an individual's experience.

An individual may have a physical, a hearing, or visual impairment, a mental health condition such as depression, anxiety or bipolar, a neurodivergent condition such as dyslexia, ADHD or autism, or a long-term condition such as asthma, diabetes, cancer or HIV/AIDS. This list is not exhaustive, and individuals with disabilities may have more than one condition.

Disability is a common fact of life and data suggests the prevalence of disability is rising as our global population ages. Global statistics predict that by 2050, over 20% of the global population will be over the age of 60 and more likely to acquire an impairment or long-term condition.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the World Health Organization already predicts that 15% of the world population has a disability, in reality these figures are likely to be much higher as a result of how data is collected and how people identify.

A best practice model of understanding disability is the '**social model**'. The social model explains that an individual may have a condition, but they become 'disabled' by the barriers that exist within society. Disability is the social consequence of having a condition when faced with a barrier.

**Disability: [persons] who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others**

**The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**

Examples of this model of thinking could include:

- An individual with a mobility impairment, who uses a wheelchair, is not disabled until they encounter a flight of stairs, or the absence of step-free access, which prevents them from entering their hotel.
- A D/deaf individual who uses American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate is not disabled until the lack of ASL or closed-captions available during a safety video on their flight prevents them from receiving the instructions.

Barriers are not just physical. Barriers exist in the ways we communicate, in the environments we create, in the technology we use and the attitudes we act upon. The social model helps us to recognize what barriers have been created and consider how we can best remove them to create more inclusive opportunities.

**We need to deliver products and services that remove barriers for people and enable travel opportunities, not 'disable' them.**

# Why do accessibility and inclusion matter?

All over the world, legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)<sup>4</sup> and the UK Equality Act,<sup>5</sup> alongside the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,<sup>6</sup> outlines the legal duty of providers to offer accessible products and services for disabled customers. However, we should do more than 'comply'.

**We must recognize the commercial value and importance of this consumer market and the social imperative to create inclusive opportunities for travel and discovery:**

- **Untapped spending power:** The 'Purple Pound' refers to the spending power of people with disabilities, their families, friends and companions. Within the US, this figure equates to \$490 billion per annum.<sup>7</sup> Within the UK, the Purple Pound currently equates to £249 billion per annum.<sup>8</sup> Open Doors Organization recently found that travelers with disabilities have taken a total of 81 million trips over the last two years and spent \$58.7 billion on travel (2018-19). This spend increased from \$34.6 billion in 2015.<sup>9</sup>
- **A growing consumer market:** People with disabilities are a growing consumer market,<sup>10</sup> and we must provide products and services which are disability inclusive. As the prevalence of disability is expected to rise, we should also consider accessibility and inclusion as a means to future-proof products and services for future customers. Wheelchair Travel<sup>11</sup> recently found that 87% of people with disabilities travel with at least one other person, representing a significant opportunity for providers and destinations to expand their market.
- **Expanding your customer audience:** Research has also revealed that fostering an inclusive culture is vital for attracting and retaining customers. Accenture<sup>12</sup> surveyed around 3,000 airline, cruise line and accommodation customers across North America and the UK. They found that 82% of travelers value feeling welcomed and being treated fairly, while 74% care about whether the company offers a range of products and services to make those in their consumer market feel included.
- **Customer retention:** Companies without a strong inclusive culture risk losing out on new customers. In the UK, Purple found that 3 in 4 people with disabilities and their families have stopped supporting businesses citing poor accessibility and / or poor customer service.<sup>13</sup> Businesses risk existing customers shifting their spend to their competitors. Accenture found that within the previous year, 42% of travelers with disabilities surveyed shifted more than 10% of their travel spend away from a company that did not reflect their inclusive values.<sup>14</sup>

## When considering accessibility and inclusion, it is important to understand how these terms differ.

Accessibility and inclusivity are often used interchangeably. But in reality, they may mean very different things.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) standards for web accessibility describe accessibility as the degree to which a product or service enables a consumer to equally perceive, understand, navigate and interact.<sup>15</sup> This can be applied when we think about different products and services. In many cases, 'accessibility' does have technical standards and regulation, such as those for the built environment<sup>16</sup> or web accessibility.<sup>17</sup> However, 'accessible' means different things to different people, and is dependent upon the barriers each individual faces.

Inclusivity, on the other hand, refers to products and services that are not only accessible but appealing to use and make people feel valued and 'included'. The Centre for Global Inclusion defines an inclusive environment as one which ensures: "equitable access to resources and opportunities for all. It also enables individuals and groups to feel safe, respected, engaged, motivated, and valued, for who they are and for their contributions toward organizational and societal goals."<sup>18</sup>

"When I'm traveling with family members and I'm about to board a plane, I've sometimes found that the staff assistance will take me a completely separate route through the back corridors of the airport. I've been separated from family and been told they're not allowed to come with me. Often this might be the most accessible route or quickest way for me to reach the gate, but it isn't best practice and doesn't really make you feel included like other travelers."

**Amalie - Focus group participant**

We want to create travel experiences and opportunities that are both accessible **and** inclusive – practical, pleasurable to experience, and represent the same opportunities for all consumers.

Creating accessible and inclusive opportunities within the travel industry ensures we can work with the broadest customer base. This brings benefits to a wide range of customers, not only those with disabilities, and encourages innovative practices and initiatives – examples of which are explored later in this report.



# How can we remove barriers for travelers with disabilities?

The travel industry has already begun to innovate and provide products and services that offer more inclusive opportunities for travelers with disabilities – but there is still more to be done. As an industry, we have the power to make great change and learn from other organizations already championing disability inclusion.

Following a difficult year for the industry in 2020, the UN World Tourism Association (UNWTO)<sup>19</sup> argues that engaging with travelers with disabilities is an opportunity for the travel industry to stay afloat and ensure businesses flourish following the global pandemic.

When redesigning opportunities for travel in a post-pandemic world, we must recognize the importance of removing barriers to travel opportunities and ensure we create truly inclusive and accessible experiences for **all** customers.

We have identified four key themes for travel providers to consider when developing disability inclusive practices:

- 1. Designing barrier-free travel experiences**
- 2. Making information clear**
- 3. Providing inclusive customer service**
- 4. “Nothing about us, without us” – involving people with disabilities**

The following pages of the report examine these four themes and highlight where travel providers across the industry are providing innovative and inclusive products and services for people with disabilities.





# 1) Designing barrier-free travel experiences

Given the increasing prevalence of disability around the world, we will have customers who have an impairment or long-term condition, whether we know about it or not. We must better understand the diversity of our customers, anticipate that people with a range of different impairments and conditions will use our products and services, and proactively ensure they are accessible and inclusive so that customers do not face barriers.

In the latest survey of their readers, Wheelchair Travel<sup>20</sup> found that a destination's accessibility was the most important decision-making factor for travelers when booking their next holiday. So how can we ensure we design opportunities that are both accessible and inclusive?

The Design Council has produced a set of principles<sup>21</sup> that explain how we can ensure an inclusive approach to design:

- Placing people at the heart of the design process.
- Acknowledging diversity and difference.
- Offering choice where a single design solution cannot accommodate all users.
- Providing for flexibility in use.
- Providing buildings and environments that are convenient and enjoyable to use for everyone.

These principles are used to make the built environment inclusive but can also be applied to creating inclusive products and services. We should recognize people with disabilities as consumers who want choice, pleasure and high-quality, just like any customer.

Creating inclusive and accessible products and services also provides opportunities for organizations to innovate, develop partnerships and create exciting opportunities and experiences.

**In the latest survey of their readers, Wheelchair Travel<sup>20</sup> found that a destination's accessibility was the most important decision-making factor for travelers when booking their next holiday.**



## **Makingtrax: Adaptive adventure tourism**

**Makingtrax are pioneers and experts in inclusive tourism, providing and supporting adaptive adventure opportunities for travelers with disabilities. Based in New Zealand, 'the adventure capital of the world', Makingtrax lead their own adaptive experiences for travelers with disabilities - from rafting to paragliding and everything in-between.**

Makingtrax also offer training and consultancy to adventure operators in New Zealand - giving providers the knowledge and skills to remove barriers for travelers with disabilities and confidently make changes where required. In doing so, Makingtrax supports adventure tourism operators to join the 'inclusive tourism' movement and become a part of their 'Inclusive Directory'.

To promote and champion the development of inclusive adventure opportunities, Makingtrax developed the 'Trax Seal' - a benchmark of adaptive adventure travel and inclusive tourism. The Trax Seal is given to all approved Makingtrax subscribers to display on their websites, marketing materials and social media. By showing the Trax Seal, providers are highlighting their support and commitment to inclusive tourism and if required, their ability to access support and guidance from the Makingtrax team. The seal also helps clients feel confident in the organization's ability and commitment to adapting and tailoring adventures for an individual to ensure the most inclusive experience.



“

**After I became a tetraplegic in 2010, I looked at the outdoor industry and realized that there weren't that many opportunities out there. With a lifetime of experience, I wanted to open the adventure industry as much as I could. Inclusive tourism is key - we have to tailor our experiences to our clients and give travelers confidence that we can provide them with a great, inclusive adventure.**

”

**Jezza Williams, Trax Director**

Photo: © Makingtrax New Zealand

## **Carnival Cruise Line: Creating a sensory inclusive environment**

**Carnival Cruise Line is dedicated to providing fun and memorable vacations to travelers with disabilities. In February 2020, Carnival Cruise Line became the first cruise line to be certified 'sensory inclusive' by KultureCity - a leading non-profit dedicated to accessibility and inclusion for individuals with sensory and non-visible disabilities.**

To create a sensory-inclusive onboard environment, Carnival Cruise Line has made KultureCity Sensory Bags available throughout the fleet. These bags contain items to help guests relax and manage sensory overload. For example, comfortable noise cancelling headphones, fidget tools, a KultureCity VIP lanyard to provide accommodations or adjustments, a feeling thermometer and a card listing onboard venues which typically have loud music and lighting effects. These bags can be checked out by guests, on a complimentary basis, for the duration of the cruise.

All of Carnival's guest facing staff have received specialized training and their Guest Services and Youth Staff are available to assist customers with any sensory-related questions and make accommodations should any barrier arise.

As a part of their commitment to drive greater awareness among their guests, two short informational videos are shown on in-stateroom televisions that explain the KultureCity partnership and Carnival's overarching mission of acceptance and inclusivity.



**Carnival Cruise Line and KultureCity share a heartfelt commitment to acceptance and inclusivity. Working together, all of our guests can maximize their enjoyment and be the truest versions of themselves during their time on board.**



**Vicky Rey, Vice-President of Guest Care and Communications, Carnival Cruise Line, and ADA Responsibility Officer**

### **Martha's story**

**Martha loves to travel the world and explore with her family. Martha is blind and has traveled widely but she often struggles to find holidays which offer her the choice, opportunity and ultimately, the inclusive adventure opportunities she is looking for.**

"For me, going on holiday is about seeing the world but it's also about trying out new things, new activities and going out of my comfort zone. I love those activities that I don't think people would normally associate with a blind person, like sailing, skiing, rowing or canoeing. I find I have to really search to find holidays that will do that, where I know I'm going to be supported. Inclusion and accessibility need to be across the board, not that [a holiday provider] has a stereotyped view of what activities they think that you might be suited to, because that can be very frustrating".



## **Enterprise Rent-A-Car – UK: Accessible transport options**

**Enterprise Rent-A-Car is dedicated to providing a range of accessible transportation options for customers with disabilities.**

Within the UK, Enterprise offers a number of products for customers with disabilities. Through their partnership with specialist provider, Lynx, Enterprise offers vehicle adjustments for customers with disabilities at no additional cost. These adjustments include portable hand controls, indicator extensions and foot pedal extensions among many others.

As a result of this partnership, Enterprise can guarantee these adjustments will be fitted and ready for use within just 48 hours of making a reservation – providing customers with a smooth, effective and efficient means of requesting adjustments.

Enterprise also offers a surrogate driver service to enable customers with disabilities who do not hold a driving licence the opportunity to rent a car. This service allows an individual to rent a vehicle if they are accompanied by a driver who has a licence. However, the surrogate driver is not required to produce a credit card or meet financial requirements. This service is also available to customers at no extra cost – providing further flexibility for travelers.



**We partner with disability organizations, charities and external suppliers to make Enterprise as accessible as we can to people with disabilities. For customers, we have a dedicated section on our website which outlines our services, how we can help and encourages people to get in touch. We are also working hard as an employer to make Enterprise a place that is open to and supportive of employees with disabilities where people are valued for who they are.**



**Jeff King, Director of European IT, Enterprise Holdings, and Chair of the Disability Committee**

Whilst we can anticipate we will have disabled customers and make products and services accessible and inclusive, we should also be reactive when individuals face barriers and make changes for them. Customers must have a clear and simple means of requesting accommodations, adjustments or changes. Once we have made these changes, we must ensure that we make them again in future, so that the customer continues to receive an excellent service. Inclusive providers will make their accommodations or adjustments process clear, simple and effective.

## Recommendations:

- Develop a strategy to ensure your travel experiences are inclusive, accessible and barrier-free for travelers with disabilities.
- Build inclusive design into your processes when creating new products and services.
- Review your existing products and services to help identify any existing barriers, then take action to remove them. For example, ensure your experiences, opportunities, websites, communications and buildings are accessible.
- Ensure you have an accommodations or adjustment policy and process that works for your organization and travelers with disabilities.

## 2) Making information clear

**A key area in which we can enable travelers with disabilities to make fully informed decisions and understand the opportunities available is providing greater clarity of information.**

**We need to ensure that travelers know what inclusive products and services are provided, what they can expect from providers and how inclusion is valued. Providing clear information about products, services and processes in advance will also allow any traveler to consider the barriers they may face and request accommodations, adjustments or changes easily and effectively.**

“In terms of things that I look for when choosing a travel provider, language used is really important. If I get a sense from their booking forms and website that they really do understand what it means to provide inclusive accessible travel, then I will feel reassured and more likely to book. Travel can be stressful for anyone, but it’s 10 times worse when you’re worried about running into barriers. I always have to plan so much more time into my travel as it is often inaccessible.”

**Focus group participant**



## Alaska Airlines: 'Fly for All' App

Alaska Airlines has a strong commitment to providing accessible services for people with disabilities, and partners with many disability organizations to offer innovative and inclusive services.

Through these relationships, Alaska Airlines has hosted 'practice flights' for travelers with disabilities, in particular those with autism and their families. These 'practice flights' create an opportunity for families to practice going to the airport, going through security and boarding an airplane – providing clear information about what to expect in advance of their journey. These events are booked up within minutes – demonstrating the demand from families who want to fly but may face barriers during their travel experience.

To expand their offering for customers with disabilities, Alaska Airlines partnered with Infniteach to create an app to meet this demand.

Alaska Airline's free app, 'Fly For All', helps to remove barriers for travelers with disabilities by clearly explaining the different stages when getting ready to fly. The app features a series of photos and descriptions, with an optional read-aloud setting, that describes every step of the travel process from packing a bag to landing at a destination. It also features interactive content, including a travel checklist, matching games and communication cards anyone can use to communicate non-verbally with employees and other travelers.

The app also highlights and signposts travelers to further information about other accessible travel services and available assistance.

“

**Fly For All was designed to be inclusive and has been helpful for lots of travelers, including travelers with disabilities, families with young children, and unaccompanied minors traveling alone. We've received positive feedback from customers that have used the app, noting that it's a very helpful tool to help them prepare and reduce any worry about an upcoming trip!**

”

**Ray Prentice, Director of Customer Advocacy,  
Alaska Airlines**





A key area in which we can provide more clarity is the use of the term ‘accessible’ when promoting experiences, products or services. Whilst the term ‘accessibility’ explains the practical use of a product or service for a broad range of people, how accessible something is depends upon the barriers the individual faces. Using the word accessible is not enough.

In their recent report, *Wheelchair Travel* found that more than 88% of travelers with disabilities do not believe that hotels provide enough information about accessible room types and their features on their websites.<sup>22</sup>

All travel providers should provide clear and helpful information regarding their facilities to enable travelers with disabilities to understand the services available. If providers use the term ‘accessible’, they should explain why the service is accessible or what aspects of the service or product are deemed ‘accessible features’. For example, step-

free access, hearing loops, adjustable bed heights, alternative formats, accessible transportation or quiet zones.

Many travel industry organizations are currently working to influence the information shared by providers online regarding their accessibility features. TravelAbility<sup>23</sup> have been working to launch their “Landing Page initiative” – a campaign to encourage providers to develop easily accessible webpages which provide comprehensive information about accessibility features and support travelers in their decision-making.

Expedia Group also publishes guidance for their lodging partners on how to better market the accessibility of their properties on Expedia Group websites.<sup>24</sup> This includes how to upload photos that will be most useful to travelers with disabilities, and providing specific room dimensions and exact accessibility features, with examples listed.



## **Royal Caribbean International: Accessible Seas brochure**

**Royal Caribbean International is committed to providing the most accessible cruise vacation experience for all their guests. They offer a number of programs, products and services to support this.**

Royal Caribbean's latest Accessible Seas brochure is an example of how they are supporting guests with disabilities by providing clear information in advance. This brochure outlines key information for guests with disabilities about the accessible design, features, amenities and accommodations available onboard. For example, the width of accessible room doors, roll-in showers with grab bars, lowered sinks, large print menus, Braille signage and orientation tours. Detailed information regarding Youth Staff training is also provided – highlighting to guests the level of training given and qualifications held by their teams.

The brochure also outlines a clear process and the time required for requesting accommodations, such as sign language interpretation, a shower stool, assistive listening devices and a visual-tactile alert system. Guests can complete an online form or contact Royal Caribbean's Access Department through a variety of communication methods. Comprehensive 'Frequently Asked Questions' are also available.

In addition to their onboard accommodations, Royal Caribbean's Accessible Seas brochure also outlines key accessibility features available at their private island destination, Perfect Day at CocoCay. This includes information such as accessible routes throughout the island, an accessible tram, complimentary beach wheelchairs and accessible pools.



**We are an industry leader in providing accessible cruise vacations. Since its introduction in 1999, our Accessible Seas brochure describes our accessibility program onboard our ships in detail and helps our guests and travel agents in planning accessible cruise vacations.**



**Ron Pettit, Director for Disability Inclusion, Royal Caribbean International**



## Anil's story

**Anil is passionate about disability inclusion and frequently travels across the UK to speak about his experiences, and abroad for family holidays. He uses an electric wheelchair and has often faced barriers when booking accessible accommodation.**

“When I have booked package holidays, the representatives at the travel agent have always assured me that the hotel would be accessible. Unfortunately, this has never been the case and there were instances where the ramp was so steep you could not push my wheelchair to the top. Or I have found that the room and bathroom can accommodate my wheelchair but there is no shower chair and so I am unable to use it. I think hotels should outline each of their accessible features in detail on their websites and in their documents, with photographs. Without this, they shouldn't be able to say they are 'accessible'.”

## Recommendations:

- Review the existing information that you provide for travelers with disabilities to ensure it gives them the necessary information to plan their travel experience.
- Provide your teams with training or resources so they can ensure any communications they create are accessible and inclusively designed.
- Review your communication methods to ensure they are accessible and inclusively designed.
- Track the requests you receive and use what you learn to improve your products and services.



### 3) Providing inclusive customer service

Inclusive customer service is key to providing a positive experience for guests and travelers. A best practice approach to inclusive customer service recognizes the importance of barrier-free communication and a smooth end-to-end process for the full customer journey. This involves providing a clear and accessible means of communication and making adjustments for individuals as and when barriers may arise.

A customer's journey starts at the 'inspiration phase' – when first considering taking a trip and researching the options available. Inclusive customer service should begin here and continue through every stage of their journey – from traveling, arriving at their destination and all the way through to their post-trip review.



"I've spoken with customer service teams when traveling who have said – 'we've made this accessible for you and if you need any extra help give us a call.' But as a deaf person, I can't do that."

**Sam, Focus group participant**

According to Open Doors Organization, technology plays a key role in the organization of travel, with 68% of travelers with disabilities in the US using technology such as a website or app to book their trips.<sup>25</sup> In the UK, the Click-Away Pound report found that 69% of customers with disabilities will click away from websites if they face barriers – diverting a spending power of £17.1 billion per annum.<sup>26</sup>

Customers with disabilities are more likely to spend their money on the website which poses the fewest barriers, than the website which offers the cheapest products. Businesses will be unaware of this lost income as more than 90% of customers experiencing difficulties using a website

will not contact the provider.<sup>27</sup> These figures indicate that organizations must consider the accessibility and inclusivity of their websites to ensure that customers with disabilities are not 'clicking away' and are able to access inclusive services and products.

Expedia Group translates Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 into more user-friendly guidance that is hosted online for anyone to access.<sup>28</sup> Their aim is to support developers, designers, and testers reinforce learning regarding accessibility and improve understanding throughout the industry and community at large.

Research carried out by Amadeus<sup>29</sup> found that many customer service teams or specialists are only available by phone, which can create barriers for some travelers with disabilities. Customers should have different means of contacting customer service teams, for example email, phone, website, chat function, post and apps. Providing options can ensure that customers can effectively communicate throughout their journey.

## **Air Canada: Accessibility training program**

**Air Canada prides itself on its dedication to providing accessible travel experiences. Continuously building on this goal of delivering excellent customer service to all, Air Canada has developed and implemented an ‘accessibility training program’.**

The training program was specifically designed to raise awareness among employees of the broad spectrum of disabilities, both visible and non-visible, potential accessibility barriers customers may encounter and the ways in which Air Canada can provide an inclusive service.

To support the learning, Air Canada invited individuals with lived experience of disability to get involved in the training and share their stories. This included Air Canada customers, Canadian Paralympic athletes, retired Canadian military and Air Canada employees.

All customer-facing employees complete this training program and the training is also undertaken by any management involved in decision-making or working in a policy or procedure setting. This commitment to learning and development shows how Air Canada is ensuring that barriers are removed for travelers with disabilities through the daily delivery of customer service excellence.

“

**Air Canada takes great pride in ensuring its customers are well taken care of during all phases of the journey, from booking through to leaving their arrival airport. In order to deliver our services accessibly, we devote considerable resources to meet the needs of all customers. This training, itself built on an inclusive approach, is an additional layer to these efforts, consistently raising awareness, and providing increased support when needed.**

”

**Arielle Meloul, Executive Vice President, Chief Human Resources and Communications Officer, Air Canada**



Throughout each stage of a customer’s journey, teams should have the knowledge, skills and confidence to recognize where a customer may be facing a barrier and react to create a more inclusive and accessible experience for the customer. We must recognize the importance of learning and development opportunities to enable employees to provide excellent customer service.

## Stephanie's story

**Stephanie has not traveled for a number of years as she is increasingly concerned by the barriers she may face. Stephanie has a visual impairment and because of the lack of understanding she has previously experienced whilst traveling, she is nervous about traveling independently.**

“When you have a visual impairment, it's a non-visible disability and it makes it much more difficult to put your views across. People don't really feel that you need help, because they see you walking independently, but they don't understand the other implications.

Often staff have been trained but haven't had the opportunity to put it into practice, or there is a real disparity between members of staff. In my experience, some are very knowledgeable and others don't know what to do. I would love it if every representative for travel companies is trained in how to be that first point of contact or has a team who specializes in making those necessary changes to make every journey a success.”



## Virgin Atlantic: Non-visible disability symbol

Virgin Atlantic is committed to giving all customers easier access to travel, and is proud of its work removing barriers for travelers with disabilities.

To create a more inclusive travel experience for its customers, Virgin Atlantic has created a specially designed symbol for travelers with non-visible disabilities. Offered to passengers at no extra cost, the symbol is available in multiple formats and can be worn as a pin-badge, discreetly tucked inside a passport or downloaded to a phone. This initiative was designed by former Virgin Atlantic employee Geraldine Lundy, who was awarded an MBE in recognition of her award-winning contributions to accessible travel.

This symbol can be used at any point on a journey to discreetly let staff know an individual, or their family, is facing barriers whilst traveling. All customer-facing staff have received extensive training on how the symbol works, non-visible disabilities, providing inclusive customer service and making accommodations.

Prior to traveling, customers with disabilities can also speak with Virgin Atlantic's Special Assistance team. The team is available to discuss all aspects of a customer's journey and any accommodations, adjustments or changes which might be required. This could include priority boarding, reserved seating, or arranging for an escort through the airport.



Our customers' journeys are so important to us. Whether it is our customer's first flight with Virgin Atlantic or their 50th, we welcome them onboard as friends and try to assist them in any way we can. We pride ourselves with helping to make lasting memories for our customers and helping them to build their confidence in flying, as this sometimes can be seen as a stressful situation for those with non-visible disabilities. Whether it is a trip to Disney World, an escape to a Caribbean Island or to visit family or friends, we are here to help all our customers travel safely, comfortably and without barriers.



Virgin Atlantic's Special Assistance team

### Recommendations:

- Ensure your websites and apps are accessible and inclusively designed.
- Provide your customers with different channels of communication to get in touch with you and make information available in alternative formats.
- Give your customer service teams the knowledge, skills and confidence to make accommodations or adjustments for travelers with disabilities.
- Develop a clear process for making accommodations and adjustments and signposting your customer service teams to further support when required.



## 4) “Nothing about us, without us” – involving people with disabilities

People with disabilities should be involved in creating accessible and inclusive products and services. The term “Nothing about us without us”<sup>30</sup> is cited frequently within the disability rights movement to explain that no policy, service or decision should be made without participation from member(s) of the group affected.

People with disabilities should be a part of our decision-making and consulted on the creation and design of products and services. We should seek feedback from our customers to use their knowledge and expertise – giving them the opportunity to share their views and ensuring we represent the demographic of the customers we are hoping to reach.

“To make something truly inclusive you have to work with disabled people and build that inclusivity in from the ground up. Because who knows accessibility best? It’s disabled people...”

**Focus group participant**

### Disability Advisory Boards

Many organizations have been very successful in the establishment of Disability Advisory Boards. Airlines such as Delta, United Airlines, Alaska Airlines and EasyJet all actively use their Disability Advisory Boards to consult with people with lived experience of disability and review their current practices. Members of the board are typically external volunteers and represent a broad demographic of consumers with disabilities. Using these boards allows these organizations to learn and develop their products and services whilst being held accountable by travelers with lived experience of disability.

“Over the last 5 years, we’ve seen significant and positive changes for passenger experience in aviation. A key contribution to this has been the implementation of Disability Advisory Groups at airports, bringing key expertise and advocacy. A regional airport in the UK is undergoing significant changes to its infrastructure and terminal design. The Disability Advisory Group was an integral part of the process and has enabled the designers to ensure this considerable investment has been inclusively designed for a diverse range of passengers.”

**Josh Wintersgill, Leonard Cheshire Ambassador, Founder of easyTravelseat and member of Disability Advisory Groups within the travel industry**

## **Marriott International: ‘Room for All’**

**Marriott International has a longstanding commitment to elevate the guest experience and develop innovative solutions for inclusion. Last year, Marriott set out to build a better travel experience for people with disabilities by creating ‘Room for All’. This innovative research and design project aimed to reimagine the traditional ‘accessible room’ by making it more functional, enjoyable and welcoming to all.**

Marriott engaged leisure and business travelers with disabilities to gain valuable insights. By holding learning sessions, visiting guest rooms and traveler’s homes, Marriott was able to understand the barriers people experience. These learnings allowed Marriott’s design team to rethink their approach through the lens of customers with disabilities.

During this co-creation process, Marriott identified several opportunities to elevate the guest experience using the principles of design thinking, a human-centred approach anchored in understanding customers’ needs. They prototyped, tested and unveiled the new ‘Room for All’ at their Innovation Lab in 2019. The ‘Room for All’ features roll-in showers, appropriate bed heights and voice activation for guests.

Following the success of ‘Room for All’, Marriott established a global standard for bed height for accessible rooms across all Marriott International hotel brands. Since then, more than 200 hotels have adopted the new bed height standards to increase accessibility.

Marriott International is eager to test additional smart solutions to further enhance hotel stays for guests with disabilities. These include new floor surfaces to aid wheelchair manoeuvrability, new bathroom designs, height-adjustable and moveable desks, voice activated room controls and additional guidance regarding the use of Braille.



**At Marriott, we believe our core strength lies in our ability to embrace differences and create endless opportunities to travel and explore the world. ‘Room for All’ proudly exhibits Marriott’s steadfast commitment to continually improve the guest experience at our hotels so that they are inclusive and accessible for all.**



**Alex Ahluwalia, Area Vice President, Marriott International**

## Changing from the inside out

Whilst this report has focused on the external changes we need to make to provide more inclusive products and services for travelers with disabilities, we should also consider the changes we can make internally.

Engaging and consulting with people with disabilities to develop more inclusive services is of vital importance, but this does not just apply to external consumers. We should be employing people with disabilities within our organizations and celebrating the diversity of our employees – ultimately, representing the demographic of the customers we wish to serve. Using the expertise of our own people will allow us to develop more inclusive and accessible opportunities and experiences. We should recognize our employees as travelers in their own right and learn from their diverse experiences. Employing people with disabilities has also been shown to improve brand loyalty and perception with consumers.

Accenture found that companies that embrace best practices for employing and supporting more people with disabilities in their workforce are, on average, twice as likely to have higher total shareholder returns than their competitors.<sup>31</sup> We need diverse people within our organizations to ensure we embed best practice and create an inclusive culture from the inside out.

“We see travel services being provided but we don’t often see people with disabilities being involved. We want to be involved as employees, and as managers, to help make a service which is accessible.”

**Aloysius, Focus group participant**



## Recommendations:

- Involve people with disabilities, including customers, employees and Employee Resource Groups, in the design and review of your products and services.
- Involve people with disabilities in reviewing strategies, policies and processes relating to providing barrier-free experiences for customers and employees.
- Gather and value feedback from customers with disabilities, both positive and negative, to understand how to improve your products and services.
- Review how you recruit and retain employees to ensure you are accessing and developing talented people with disabilities.
- Encourage senior leaders, Executive and Board members to share their experiences of disability, champion inclusion and accessibility, create accountability and drive change.



# It's time to take action

Together, we have the power to “bring the world within reach” and create great change for travelers with disabilities.

By creating more inclusive and accessible experiences, providing clear and accessible information, delivering inclusive customer service, consulting with people with disabilities and using the knowledge and experience of your employees, all travel providers can become more ‘disability confident’.

Now is the time to take action! Please consider the recommendations above and pledge your commitment to disability inclusion through one of the following actions:

- **Champion and celebrate disability inclusive practice within your network** - lead by example, encourage your senior leaders to engage in initiatives and support other partners and providers to advance their inclusion journey.
- **Educate your organization** - engage with disability organizations such as **Leonard Cheshire** to access expert training and support on providing inclusive customer service for persons with a disability.
- **Sign the CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion pledge** - commit to a number of set actions to drive inclusion within your organization. You can also join the **Inclusive Travel sub-group**, established by Expedia Group.
- **Join The Valuable 500** - a global CEO community revolutionizing disability inclusion through business leadership and opportunity. Join the pledge and commit to ‘putting disability on your board agenda’.
- **Audit and benchmark your organization** - use frameworks to support your disability inclusion journey such as Disability:IN’s **Disability Equality Index**, the UK Government’s **Disability Confident** campaign, Business Disability Forum’s **Disability Standard** and the Australian Network on Disability’s **Access and Inclusion Index**.



Expedia Group and Leonard Cheshire would like to know what you thought of this report and any actions you plan to take. Please complete our **short survey** to provide feedback on the report and highlight the changes you hope to make at your organization.

# Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the following contributors. Further information about each organization, their products and services and disability inclusion work can be found by following the links below.

## Travel industry organizations:

- [Air Canada](#)
- [Alaska Airlines](#)
- [Amadeus](#)
- [Avis Budget Group](#)
- [The Beamsley Project Charitable Trust](#)
- [Carnival Cruise Line](#)
- [Enterprise Rent-A-Car](#)
- [Gabana](#)
- [Makingtrax](#)
- [Marriott International](#)
- [Royal Caribbean International](#)
- [Soneva Kiri Resort](#)
- [Virgin Atlantic](#)

## Disability organizations:

- [Disability:IN](#)
- [Open Doors Organization](#)
- [TravelAbility](#)
- [Wheelchair Travel](#)

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If you could like this document in an alternative format such as Braille, large print or audio, please contact us on [consultancy@leonardcheshire.org](mailto:consultancy@leonardcheshire.org).

## About Expedia Group

Expedia Group (NASDAQ: EXPE) is the world's travel platform. We help knock down the barriers to travel, making it easier, more enjoyable, more attainable and more accessible. We are here to bring the world within reach for customers and partners around the globe. We leverage our platform and technology capabilities across an extensive portfolio of businesses and brands to orchestrate the movement of people and the delivery of travel experiences on both a local and global basis.

Our family of travel brands includes: Brand Expedia®, Hotels.com®, Expedia® Partner Solutions, Vrbo®, Egencia®, trivago®, Orbitz®, Travelocity®, Hotwire®, Wotif®, ebookers®, CheapTickets®, Expedia Group™ Media Solutions, Expedia Local Expert®, CarRentals.com™, Expedia® CruiseShipCenters®, Classic Vacations®, TravelDoo®, VacationRentals.com and SilverRail™

## About Leonard Cheshire

We are Leonard Cheshire – supporting individuals to live, learn and work as independently as they choose, whatever their ability. Led by people with experience of disability, we are at the heart of local life – opening doors to opportunity, choice and support in communities around the globe.

Like our founder, we believe that diversity creates a world of possibility. Through pioneering research and innovation we're building a fairer, more inclusive society. One that recognizes the positive contributions we all make, and where we are all proud to play our part.

Leading by example, we do everything humanly possible to empower people to live their lives as freely and as fully as they choose.

## Methodology

We conducted desk-based research to gather information and data on global disability figures, travel industry reach and inclusion data. We analyzed research reports and used our own disability expertise and insight to develop the report.

To gather stories and examples of best practice from within the travel industry, we developed a "Call for Case Studies" survey which was distributed to both Leonard Cheshire and Expedia Group's networks. From these submissions, we selected examples which highlighted innovative practice and represented our key themes of the report.

We held three focus groups, engaging with people with lived experience of disability across Leonard Cheshire's networks. We also launched an online survey regarding experiences of accessibility and inclusion when traveling for people with disabilities. This was shared via our networks and social media pages. We analyzed the transcribed focus groups and survey responses. Different themes were identified from the conversations and used to influence the key themes of this report.

# Endnotes

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