

READY TO GET AWAY? WITH  
PROPER PLANNING YOU CAN  
SEE THE WORLD.

BY JOANNE CLEAVER

Getting back on the road was Stephanie Lee's definition of getting back to normal. As a consultant who helps travel agents find the best industry resources, white-water rafting and swimming in tropical lagoons were just a day at the office. Lee took up to 18 trips annually.

But in 2014, the joint pain, balance problems and skin ailments she had been experiencing were diagnosed as mixed connective tissue disease, a form of arthritis. After nearly two years, Lee started traveling again in 2016 – although less often and with more planning.

"I get to destinations early so I can rest for a day before a conference. My trips are longer because I need to recuperate before I can travel again," says Lee, 37. To keep medications chilled, she takes direct flights so ice packs stay cold. She also now builds in time to see friends when traveling for work, which is all the sweeter, she says.

Traveling doesn't have to be derailed by arthritis. In fact, it's even more important when it feels as if everyday life is constrained by medical and logistical considerations, says Rochelle Rosian, MD, a rheumatologist at Cleveland Clinic.

"People with chronic illnesses find that they are very consumed with the day-to-day. Having a vacation is something to look forward to, and that's always a good thing. It's optimism," she says. For Lee, trips are reminders that she can still grow professionally.

"People [with chronic conditions] who like to travel can continue to travel," Dr. Rosian adds. "You prioritize to manage your energy and pain throughout the day so that you can continue to do what you enjoy doing."





## Plan for Success

The single most important rule for people who have limitations is to make travel plans early and meticulously. The more you know in advance, the greater your chances of having the experience you want. That means everything from mapping distances in an airport to calling hotels directly for accommodations you need.

When making reservations, the more specific your requests, the better. It's not enough to say, "I have arthritis," because staff won't know how to translate that to practical help. What does work: asking specific questions and spelling out requests in detail. If you need a wheelchair ramp, find out the precise street address of the ramp entrance where a driver can drop you off. Before you go to a restaurant, find out if its restroom is accessible, says Joan Eisenstodt, founder of a meeting and hospitality consulting firm in Washington, D.C.

Eisenstodt, who developed severe joint deterioration after cancer treatments, travels monthly for work. She uses a scooter for distances longer than a block.

"I have found that when you explain your situation, people are very helpful," she says. If you're traveling with companions, make sure they know your situation, she adds, "so they can support you when you need to take a break."

A package tour can take the stress out of planning, but before booking, make sure the operator is licensed and has experience working with people with physical limitations. (Some tour operators cater specifically to people with disabilities.) Communicate directly with the tour operator to confirm accessibility of hotels and destinations, and make sure you can opt out of a challenging activity or substitute a more accessible option.

Traveling with a group with mixed abilities has advantages, says Eisenstodt. People with similar abilities can plan activities that they can do together. For instance, those with sun sensitivities might plan an indoor spa day while others in the group head to the beach. "Choose a locale or agenda that enables people to 'step off the train' or take a break," advises Dr. Rosian.

We asked travel pros as well as casual travelers for their favorite arthritis-friendly travel destinations. Here are some of their suggestions:

### Specialty Outdoor Center.

Some destinations provide outdoor sports and adventure experiences, from skiing to kayaking to rock-climbing, specifically for people with disabilities and their families. Two such destinations are the National Sports Center for the Disabled, with locations in Winter Park and Denver, Colorado, and the National Ability Center in Park City, Utah.

Karin Sheets, whose daughter has multiple physical and developmental disabilities, assumed traveling was out of the question for her family until she discovered the National Ability Center. Together, the Sheets family learned how to cross-country ski, and the facility offered plenty of breaks for rest and wellness checks.

The experience made a disability-travel advocate of Karin: She launched a blog, [SpecialNeedsTravelMom.com](http://SpecialNeedsTravelMom.com), to help other families travel, regardless of medical conditions. "Your family deserves those memories, too," she says.

### National and State Parks.

Don't assume any national park in the U.S. is off limits, says Ray Bloomer, director of education and technical assistance for the National Center on Accessibility at

**TRAVELER'S TIP:** For Maura Hibbitts, preparing for a trip also means preparing physically. "I found it really helped me to do physical therapy for several months ahead of a big overseas trip," she says. "A fitness routine could do the same, especially by focusing on what you will be doing – for example, if you are doing a lot of walking, start walking at home and do exercises to help strengthen those muscles. By getting into the best shape possible for the trip, I enjoyed it so much more, and my [arthritis] didn't stop me."





## TRAVEL RESOURCES

**Wheelchairtravel.org** is written by a passionate traveler who is a triple amputee.

**Travelonthelevel.blogspot.com** tracks accessible travel destinations.

**Accessible Journeys (disabilitytravel.com)** is a tour operator for people who use wheelchairs.

**Sage Traveling (sagetraveling.com)** is an accessible-tour operator for European travel for people with mobility issues.

**Federal Aviation Administration (faa.gov)** provides a summary of rights for people with disabilities navigating airports and flying.

**National Park Service (nps.gov)** offers an Access Pass, which provides discounts for those with permanent disabilities.

**Washington.org** provides details on accessible destinations in Washington, D.C.

**U.S. State Department (travel.state.gov)** provides a roundup of disability access in foreign countries.

Indiana University, which oversees accessibility for the National Park Service (NPS). "Most national parks, in some way or another, can facilitate almost everyone to some degree," he says. Each of the 417 national parks has a staff person versed in accessibility who can advise as to the current condition of trails, the location of benches and accessible restrooms and how to handle waiting in line for popular destinations.

You can pick a park and then explore accessibility, or you can choose a location based on your needs. For instance, people who can't walk far may look for wheelchair-accessible trails. Sun-sensitive people might head for the deep shade of Muir Woods in Marin County, California.

Monuments, museums and other important sites in Washington, D.C., (many of which are managed by NPS) are accessible, and it is improving as new museums open and existing ones are updated. For instance, the new National Museum of African American History & Culture is fully accessible, and the east wing of the National Gallery of Art was renovated with accessibility as a priority.

### Historic Sites.

Accessibility was not a consideration when Venetians were building their city's bridges and canals or when the ancient Greeks sited temples atop hills. Use former sites of the Olympic Games as a filter for choosing destinations, says Ron Pettit, access manager for Royal Caribbean Cruises International. The Olympic Games are followed by the International Paralympic Games, so those venues hew to a high standard of accessibility. Barcelona, for example, blends history, culture and accessibility, thanks to its status as an Olympics host, Pettit says.

### Places in the Sun.

Warm, sunny climates make popular destinations, especially for people whose joints ache in the cold and damp. Arizona's dry climate, for example, can be merciful for arthritic joints.

"I love the desert Southwest because I find the dry climate doesn't affect my arthritis as much as colder and humid areas do," says Maura Hibbits, of Broadalbin, New York, who has osteoarthritis (OA). "There are so many wonderful National Parks in that area

to visit, and you can easily adjust what you do depending on ability."

Florida also has many accessible attractions, both modern and historic. The state has generally flat terrain, day cruises and municipal parks, such as in St. Petersburg, that offer low-cost or free use of beach wheelchairs.



Hibbitts especially likes St. Augustine, Florida, which boasts a historic fort and pre-colonial architecture. "There is a wonderful sense of history, lots to explore, easy to walk around, as well as activities like trolley tours if the walking is too much," she says, noting that it's best to go in early spring or late fall, when the humidity is lower.

### Thermal springs.

Hot mineral springs where you can soak achy joints and relax can be found around the world. Thermopolis, Wyoming, has a dry climate with "wonderful thermal springs and pools to soak in year-round, [which] does wonders for arthritis," Hibbitts says. Take day trips to "Native American sites [and] beautiful drives into the Bighorn Mountains."

### Set sail.

With meals, entertainment and amenities just outside your stateroom door, a cruise can be a perfect travel option for people with limited mobility. You can take part in as many or as few activities as you like, and medical care is available if needed.

But confirm accessibility details in advance, especially for off-ship excursions. Royal Caribbean is one cruise line that offers trip planning tools on its website. Some excursions depend on local shuttles, which may not have lifts or steps that are easy to manage.

Avalon Waterways, which operates river cruises in Europe, generally plans stops at larger cities that are more accessible, such as Prague, Vienna and Budapest, says managing director Pam Hoffee. Most walking daytrips include a riding option.

### All-inclusive resorts.

Similarly, all-inclusive resorts have entertainment, food and a selection of amenities, including spas. Some spa and wellness resorts, like Canyon Ranch in Arizona and other locations, provide an experience designed to help you jumpstart a healthy lifestyle.



## READER'S FAVORITES

We asked readers and social media followers what arthritis-friendly destinations they love. Here are some of their responses:

**Cape Ann, Massachusetts:** I love these seaside towns, from the working seaport at Gloucester to the more tourist village of Rockport. Lots of art galleries, places of historical interest, walking is fairly easy, wonderful fresh seafood and beautiful scenery. —MAURA HIBBITTS


**Montreal, Canada:** As someone with sun sensitivity due to lupus, I look for places that have good indoor activities. Montreal's Underground City provides extensive passageways and transportation, with shopping, restaurants as well as cultural and historic sites. —SUZY SASZ-PALMER

**Charleston, South Carolina:** The warm weather combined with beaches, beautiful gardens and parks encourage everyone to go outside and be active! Everyone there is so kind and always willing to lend a helping hand when needed. —ALAYNA TRAVAGLIONE

**Mediterranean Cruise:** We started in Spain, included stops in France, Italy and Palma. Go at a time of year that isn't too hot (March/April perhaps). Choose excursions that include a ride, without much walking. (The bus to a winery for lunch in Italy was awesome.) —STEPHANIE KENNEDY

**Cape Town, South Africa:** Our favorite. Our winter is their summer, so it is lovely to be on the warm, sunny beaches, take the bus around Table Mountain, or a stroll along the promenade. People are so friendly, and it is so affordable! —DULSI COVINGTON

Lee is getting back to cruising altitude with her new travel strategies. On a recent trip to San Diego, she says, "The old me would have been driving around seeing everything. But the new

me was content to take an electric bike around San Diego and to take a little extra time with family and friends." 

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