



The Vamush family preparing for a flight from Phuket to Chiang Mai, Thailand. Photo with the courtesy of the Vamush family

TO TRAVEL WITH A WHEELCHAIR IN ANCIENT CITIES

Aaron Dov Vamush

I grew up near the Old City of Jerusalem and after the reunification of the city I, too, joined the swarms of people that flowed back to the Old City, and since then I have toured it on foot lengthwise and widthwise.

Aaron Dov Vamush, Travel consultant for people with mobility disabilities.

Then the Yom Kippur War broke out, and I fought on the canal front, where I was also wounded. A long and complex evacuation eventually brought me to Soroka Hospital, where I was operated on for long hours. The hospital informed my parents that if I stayed alive, I would be bedridden for the rest of my life! I later underwent a long rehabilitation at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, and after ten months I returned home - confined to a wheelchair.

Getting around in those years in Jerusalem with a wheelchair was almost impossible as there was no lowering of sidewalks at all. Thus, if there was no adjacent parking near the desired destination, it was not possible to get there alone without help. This was a huge obstacle on the road to independence.

Needless to say, returning to visit the Old City required a team of dedicated attendants to do so.

My parents instilled gypsy blood into me so I did not intend to give up the passion for traveling and hiking. Whereas in Israel I began working in the field of accessibility and lowering sidewalks in Jerusalem immediately upon my release from the hospital, when I traveled abroad, I learned that I must compromise - it is impossible to make accessibility demands in foreign places, and one must get organized accordingly with help. Alternatively, when my independence was more important to me, I realized that I could not reach and experience everything. At the same time, I learned that in traveling not only the destination has a purpose, the way is also an enriching experience in itself.

Thus, for example, on a trip to France I dragged the family all the way from Normandy to visit Mont Saint-Michel, a small town on a cliff just out in the middle of the sea with a well-known church at its top. In the past it was possible to reach the cliff only at low tide. Later, a rampart has been built that allows access to the cliff even during high tide. Well, we got there and passed the rampart on dry land to the exposed cliff. We entered the town and began walking along a street that was getting steeper and steeper. I had to give up the desire to get to the church at the cliff top, but the experience of getting to this unique place, meeting people who insisted on parking their cars on the sand and then ran back as haunted before the tide reached and flooded their cars, added value and a little fun to this visit, even if we did not manage to climb to the top of the cliff.

While Mont Saint-Michel was an incomplete experience, the visit to the Gibraltar cliff (still in British hands) was a formative experience, as one could enter with the wheelchair into the tunnels the British dug at the top of the mountain for their cannon batteries to protect this important outpost that controlled Gibraltar, which was the only crossing between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean.

An access road leads to the top of the cliff next to which is the entrance to the tunnels. You enter and move on until you reach the windows or rather, gunfire openings, where you get an amazing view of the whole area. All this is possible because the cannons were moved on wheels and hence, the tunnels were quarried without stairs and on particularly comfortable slopes. Outside the tunnels, you get to meet other residents of the cliff, the Gibraltar monkeys. They are not the most pleasant in the world. The legend has it that Gibraltar will not fall as long as the monkeys live there. My humble contribution to the realization of the legend was a banana sacrificed in favor of a monkey that jumped on my shoulder and snatched the banana from my hand.



The tunnels of Gibraltar. © Arne Beruldsen | Dreamstime.com

Such dedicated construction (for cannon maneuvering) is sometimes also found in castles and palaces that were built for fear of rival attacks, and therefore batteries and ramps were built that made it possible to move the cannons easily. In retrospect, I discovered that I could use them to climb the walls with a wheelchair. I have been exposed to such castles in England and Wales, for example. There are such also in Israel, for example in Acre, which is a world heritage site. The city has also undergone serious wheelchair accessibility and provides a wonderful experience for its visitors.

The visit to the ruins of the city of Pompeii began with arguing with the site guard at the entrance to the city: we arrived at an entrance that was steep and bumpy and the guard waved at us a movement, which I interpreted as: “go away, there is no wheelchair access here”. I said that if so, we will just take a peep inside to get an impression of the place. Now he already asked for an entrance ticket. I said: “Why? You have just said that there is no access for a wheelchair”. We entered and surprisingly we were able to cover quite a bit of the city, until we reached one of the streets that led to some of the interesting houses to view due to the murals and other remains, but here a serious obstacle was already waiting for us. The streets in Pompeii were built for carts and the sidewalks next to them were 40-50 cm high. In the middle of the street was a large block of stone that did not allow me to cross into the street. It was clear to us that this would not be overcome by me and my spouse alone and we were already thinking of turning around and retracing our steps when a cheerful group of tourists noticed our situation and came to help us swinging me with the chair over the barrier. They also stuck around to make sure that on our way back we didn’t get stuck again. And while

we were still walking around the site, we met another tourist in a wheelchair, who identified himself as a tourist from Germany, who also did not give up his ascent to Pompeii.



On the streets of Pompeii © Katatonia82 | Dreamstime.com.

In contrast, the king who built the circular observation tower in Copenhagen, Denmark, had, according to the story, an aspiration to reach the top of the structure in his chariot and therefore, ordered that the tower be built as a spiral with a rising ramp encircling the tower from the inside to its head. This makes the visit there also possible for a hiker with the wheelchair.

In Seville, Spain, we arrived to visit its famous cathedral and while I was trying to peek into the entrance to its square tower, “La Giralda”, built during the Muslim era, a group of tourists, who had just come down from the tower happily informed us that “there are no stairs here. You can go up.” To my great surprise, there were indeed no stairs, but a not particularly moderate slope. My wife got excited and said “Let’s go up, so what if it’s a little steep. We’ll do a section or two and rest.” And indeed, when she was pushing me and I was pushing myself, we went up two ridges at a time and stopped to rest. When I already felt drained and thought we could not continue to ascend any more, we encountered a group of young tourists from Germany descending from above. “Need any help?” they asked and we both answered together “Yes!”. These guys replaced my wife and within a few moments brought me up to the top level. We thanked them a lot and they slipped down and disappeared. We advanced around the corner and ... Good grief. A short staircase blocked our way out to the observation deck of the tower. But less than two minutes passed and more tourists showed up and immediately came to help us climb the stairs and out to the observation deck. And the view ... a bird’s eye view of the old city. An experience I have not had for years. And if you ask, how come this tower was built without stairs? The story is that the tower was built

this way because the muezzin, who had to go up and call out for the believers' prayer, was already old and was brought up to the tower while riding a horse.



Inside La Giralda tower of the Cathedral of Seville. © Joserpizarro | Dreamstime.co

In Rajasthan, India, many palaces and forts were built so that the Raja or Shah, could ascend to the palace while riding on the back of an elephant. These ramps are usually a little too steep for an independent wheelchair climb, but with a bit of “Indian power,” as our local guide put it, i.e. the help of a person or two who pushed me from behind, I was fortunate to visit several such fascinating palaces and castles.



Wheelchair access at the Red Fort in Delhi, India. Photo: courtesy of the Vamush family.

There are countless other sites that can be told about, such as the city of Sim-Rip in Cambodia and in its center Angkor Wat temple, where a small detour brings us to a stairless entrance and to the inside of the complex. The old town of Edinburgh in Scotland, and the palace that dominates the city from above and which can be reached by accessible shuttle and then roll down alone. Ancient cities in France in the Dordogne region and throughout the south of France. The remains of the city of Mycenae of the lost culture of that name in the Peloponnese in Greece. So is the “Plaka” in Athens, Greece. This is an ancient neighborhood that was a crowded and ragged slum, full of garages and workshops. At the time I tried to get there with a wheelchair and ran away for my life. Towards the Athens Olympics, the area has undergone a serious restoration and facelift and has become a beautiful area, with a pedestrian zone, a variety of restaurants and cafes. There they also paved the way for wheelchairs to the specially built lift to transport the disabled Paralympic guests to the heights of the Parthenon. When there is a will, old neighborhoods can also be made accessible and turn into a vibrant and accessible area for everyone.

After my release from the hospital and my return back home to Jerusalem, I aspired to return to the Old City. Over the years, as I roll myself through the various gates of the city, I have learned how I can reach every area in the city. Over time, I became involved in several accessibility projects in the Old City and I enjoyed strolling through it and even leading friends, who were also confined to wheelchairs. Today, with the “Jerusalem Accessibility” app, the city is even more inviting.

So, if the fire for hiking is burning within you too, remember that wheelchair-accessible ramps and trails are revealed in the most unexpected places. So are good people in the middle of the road, and there are many, and they are happy to help when needed. Although we are likely to have disappointments from time to time, we will discover more often wonderful places and special people who turn the departure from home to the unfamiliar into an experience that stays with us for life. One only has to wish and dare!