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Sub-Saharan Africa IS Accessible for Travelers with Physical Challenges

Access Africa guidebook author and quadriplegic, **Gordon Rattray**, leads by example as he encourages travelers with limited mobility to tour and go on safari to Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa and Zambia's Victoria Falls.

Boating on the confluence of the Zambezi and Chobe rivers, Botswana. [Scott Hurd](#)



As an able-bodied overland driver in Africa in the 1990s, writing a safari and tour guidebook for people with limited mobility had never crossed my mind. Even if someone had suggested it, I would probably have laughed. Surely there wouldn't be enough accessible accommodation! Similarly, would the roads be good enough? And what about the flight to get there? Come to think of it, would there be any transport for someone who uses a wheelchair? Apart from all of that, what about the heat, the wild animals and the potential of illness? No, I might have said, leave Africa to the fit and strong; seaside holidays are surely challenge enough for those less able.



Giraffe Feeding Centre, Nairobi, Kenya.
[GoAfrica Safaris & Travel](#)

Several years later, after a diving accident left me quadriplegic and a fulltime wheelchair user, I was forced to reconsider my capabilities. I had to assess what I was able to do myself then learn how to use other people and various types of equipment to cope with the rest. To my surprise, I found that my travel horizons hadn't actually changed that much. A few 'test trips' getting out of the home comfort zone gave me the confidence to return to Africa, where I re-discovered the joy of real adventure. This first journey was a tentative visit to Tanzania, but after a more daring rummage around Ethiopia (which was new, and immensely rewarding territory to me) I was convinced that too few disabled travelers knew just what was possible. This led me to [Bradt Travel Guides](#), who were looking for information about disability travel to include in their titles.

Bradt's enthusiasm for the subject inspired the idea of a dedicated safari guidebook, but only once I started the research did I really begin to understand the task. Not only is there a huge range of different disabilities but many older people also have similar needs. On top of these, travelers with temporary ailments (broken legs, pulled muscles) and people with chronic knee or hip problems need to be considered. Of course, this surprisingly large audience is a bonus, but the dilemma it brings is how to make the information useful for everyone. For instance, the needs of a quadriplegic powerchair user differ entirely

from those of a strong paraplegic or someone who can walk with sticks. I realised that dividing readers into categories and rating accommodation as suitable (or not) for each group would be inaccurate and virtually useless.



Safari drive at the Masai Mara game reserve in southwest Kenya. [GoAfrica Safaris & Travel](#)

Guidebook Readers Decide What Best Suits Their Situation

My solution was to describe the facilities available as fully as possible, allowing readers to decide which best suits them. Unfortunately, there is no internationally-recognised standard system of assessment, and even if there were, safari accommodation often has features (for example, game and bird viewing areas) that set it apart. Therefore, I had to devise my own system. It starts with quick reference icons allowing easy location of potentially suitable properties, followed by written details of access through the accommodation, usually beginning at the arrival point and finishing in the bathroom of the most inclusive units.

Doing the research was a revelation. I know Africans have a well-deserved reputation for hospitality, and an immense ability to improvise that's often borne out of necessity. However, the reception I received was not expected. Virtually everywhere, lodge owners and managers were genuinely interested in the project, and they often wanted to know more. I carried simplified guidelines giving basic access requirements, and found that promises were regularly made to improve facilities. These pledges have often been kept – I've received photos of improvements since my visits – and, much to my delight, I've even seen adaptations carried out during my stay!



Light aircraft safari travel is also possible for wheelchair users. [Scott Hurd](#)

As well as being an adventure, a safari is relatively sedentary – the traditional method of exploring the wild places involves little more than sitting in a vehicle. While this makes it an ideal vacation for people with restricted mobility, most game driving is done in high 4x4s or minibuses meaning that solutions often have to be found for transfers. Many visitors will either need to accept help or use a tour operator with adapted vehicles.



Wheelchair clients use adapted [GoAfrica Safaris & Travel](#) vehicles on their custom-planned tours.

In this regard my timing has (by pure good fortune) been perfect. In the last decade, several African companies have invested serious time and money into this niche and there is now a specialised operator servicing every region I've covered in the book. In other words, the most visited game parks of the top six safari countries have transport options to suit the majority of physical disabilities. Perhaps more than anything else, this has opened Africa to everyone. If, of course, you don't mind being helped or you can step unaided into such cars, then you have virtually unlimited choice.



Guest, Herbert Winterl, tests the wheelchair access at Ngepi Camp, Namibia. [Ngepi Camp](#)

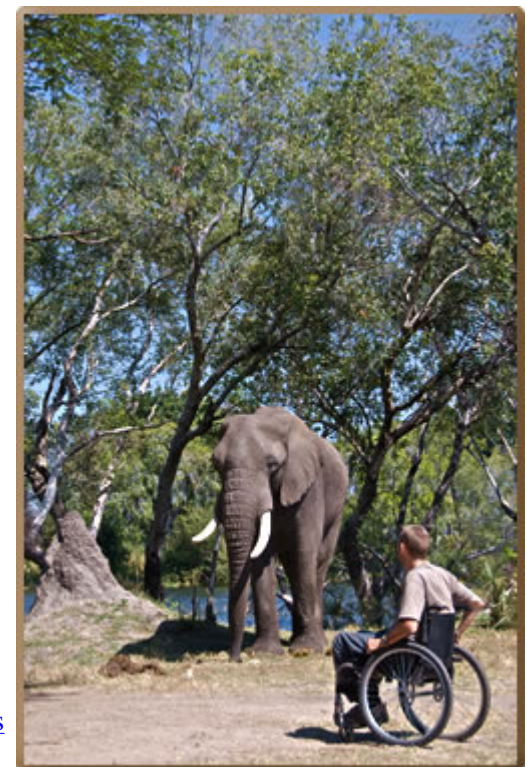
On top of that, it's worth remembering that some lodges run boat trips, or have waterholes with viewing decks, providing even more potentially accessible game viewing opportunities. Very often, the best experiences are not the result of a wide-ranging game drive but a relaxed river cruise or a patient – and peaceful – wait in camp. I've explored all these options thoroughly in the book, describing transfer styles and road conditions, and listing the operators, the regions they cover and the services they provide.

Health and Air Travel Are Perennial Concerns

As well as accommodation and ground transport, the two next most commonly voiced concerns are health and air travel. Because of this, I've dedicated whole sections to each subject. I too have my concerns about flying, but they mostly involve the absurdity of sitting in a pressurised tube, travelling too fast, too high off the ground! Western airports are more efficient and organised than most public buildings and although standards in Africa vary, there are facilities matching any in the 'developed' world.

Regarding health, while it is essential to think carefully about the potential effects of tropical travel, good preparation in advance and care on the road remove most risks. I've called in expert advice for the chapter on health issues, and have paid special attention to insurance. This is another crucial consideration, especially for people with disabilities.

Contrary to what most people might think – and what I would have said years ago, a safari IS a real option for people with limited mobility. Since I first returned to Africa as a chair user I've never doubted the need for this guide, and now, after putting it together – despite the dilemmas – I'm even more convinced of this. The result, I hope, will provide readers with a balanced view of their options. It should help experienced travelers to see what's possible and will hopefully inspire those more novice travelers to consider going on safari. Even people who have no wish to visit Africa should find the book useful as it contains information and resources that can apply to travel anywhere in the world.



Once a safari overland driver himself, guidebook author, Gordon Rattray, now rolls through Africa on a different set of wheels. [Ingrid Vekemans](#)

Access Africa: Safaris for People with Limited Mobility is written for those with reduced mobility, whether disabled by catastrophe, illness or simply the aging process. Reviews of facilities and ease of access feature 300 hotels, lodges and camps to suit all budgets. Safaris and tour options in Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, South Africa, Botswana and Zambia's Victoria Falls are covered. Tips, tricks and advice from a wheelchair travel expert will inspire and offer confidence whether the reader is a well-seasoned travel veteran or a novice to the pleasures of adventurous holiday exploration.

Published in September 2009 by [Bradt Travel Guides](#) in the United Kingdom and by [The Globe Pequot Press](#) in the US. Available at local bookstores and online book shops, 368 pages with 28 maps and many color photos. ISBN 13: 978 1 84162 286 6.

Gordon Rattray graduated in Botany from Glasgow University before traveling the world. Truck driving and a passion for adventure eventually brought him to Africa in the mid-1990s where he explored more than 20 countries as an overland driver. After his diving accident rendered him a wheelchair user, he returned to the continent to pursue more adventures from a different perspective. He is a regular contributor to Bradt guides and runs www.able-travel.com, an information service for travelers with disabilities.



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