

AARP INTERNATIONAL

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Making Waves



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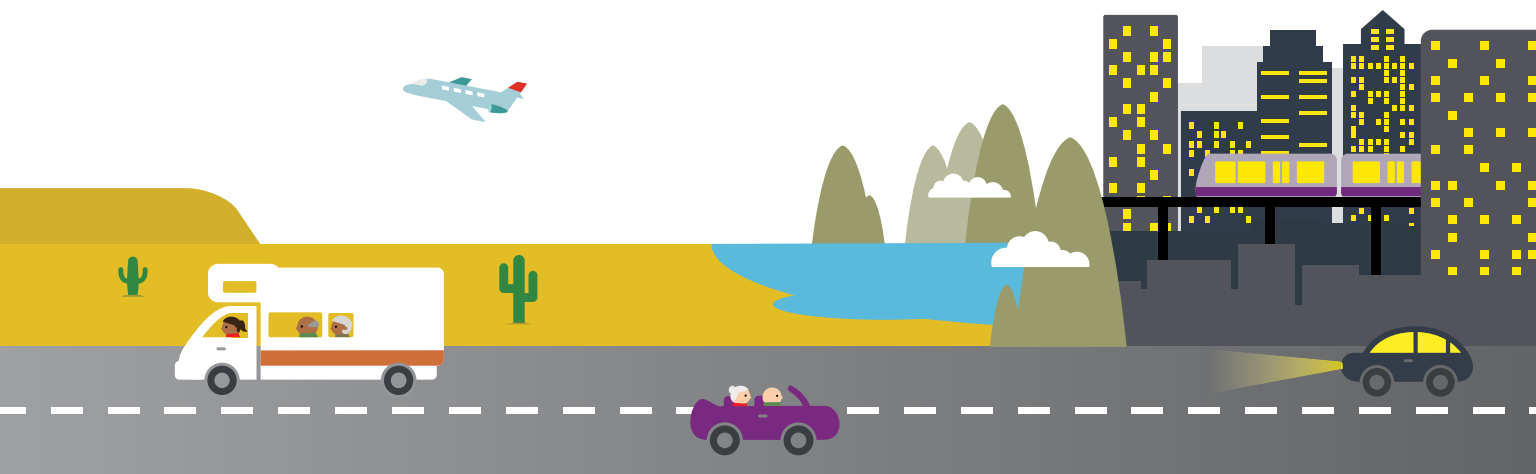
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TRAVELING TOGETHER

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Both older adults who travel independently and those who accompany their adult children are on the rise.

With medical and technological advances increasing both longevity (the United States 65-plus population is projected to hit 92.2 million in 2020¹) and quality of life, more older adults than ever are engaging in travel—currently 45.5 million annually (and growing in number) in the US alone. Many of them travel independently, but with multigenerational US households on the rise² and increasing numbers of Americans (currently 34 million-plus) caring for an older relative, the number of caregivers aged 50 and under who travel with their older parents continues to

climb—in many cases, an arrangement that makes travel possible for older people who would be unable or unwilling to vacation on their own. Both older adults who travel independently and those who accompany their adult children or other relatives result in a growing demographic whose visibility—and economic clout—are on the rise.

As these population and travel trends continue to shift toward an older demographic, it behooves the travel industry decision-makers (e.g., hotel owners, tourism board directors, airline managers) to take older adults' needs and interests

into consideration in their planning and policies. After traveling 300,000-plus miles (and counting) with my mother since she turned 65, I've seen firsthand the joys that travel can bring to older people. In our journeys together, I've also seen many of the travel-related challenges older travelers face, especially in two areas: transportation and accessibility.

Transportation Challenges

When evaluating possible destinations, a top priority for many older travelers is being able to get around easily. Regardless of age, the vast majority of tourists favor using public transportation, because it's typically the most cost-effective option and usually reaches major tourist sites. In the US alone, there has been an increase in adults 65-plus opting for public transportation, with more than 1 billion trips in 2009 (up a whopping 55 percent since 2001³). An older adult who requires a wheelchair (either full time or just for



PHOTOS: VALERIE M. GRUBB



- 1 Val Grubb (right) with her brother Eric and mother (then 81) traversing the Juneau (Alaska) Icefield via Coastal Helicopters in August 2011.
- 2 Val's mother (then 79) cruising around Battambang, Cambodia via motorcycle.
- 3 Eric and Mom encounter a few sidewalk challenges while exploring the



long distances) is likely to encounter some obstacles during his or her travels, because wheelchair accessibility is far from universal on buses, trains, subways, and other forms of public transportation. (In my hometown of New York City, for example, only 106 of 468 subway stations are wheelchair accessible⁴). Unfortunately, this inaccessibility means that in many instances the only options available to wheelchair users are rides in taxis or private cars—both of which are considerably more expensive than a subway or train ticket.

City managers and transit directors, beware: If older travelers can't find (or afford) the transportation options they need in your city, they may very well take their dollars elsewhere. And since people over 50 control more than half of the discretionary income in the US⁵, they have many dollars to spend—and you don't want to lose them.

Accessibility Challenges

The ease of getting around is only one consideration for older travelers, though: Accessibility of lodgings, restaurants, tourist sites, and other local destinations is important, too. Hotels are of particular concern in this department, because travelers need to be able to access all areas of the property.

Although older hotels and restaurants are often at a disadvantage (installing an elevator, for example, is quite expensive), many newer venues still fall short of making their facilities truly accessible. And even when wheelchair-friendly features are

present, occasionally they aren't up to the task. Mom and I once stayed in a hotel in Phnom Phen, Cambodia, that did have an elevator—but it was broken during our stay. Fortunately, the hotel staff came to the rescue with an unusual fix that definitely falls in the “above and beyond” category of service: They arranged for two workers to carry Mom up and down the stairs while we were on the property. (That's definitely not a long-term solution, but it was a unique experience we'll never forget.)

Hotel and restaurant managers should aim to achieve as much accessibility as possible. Not only will investments in improved accessibility (such as adding ramps over stairs and installing assist bars in bathrooms, for example) pay for themselves in increased revenue from travelers who need and seek out those features, but US law requires compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act statutes (and many US-branded hotels require their international operators to comply with those standards as well).

Tourist attractions, on the other hand, aren't always as easy to make accessible. There's no room inside the Statue of Liberty for an elevator, for example. And even though Mom and I were fortunate to have a driver who helped us arrange for local assistance to get close to each temple at Angkor Wat on that same trip to Cambodia (by carrying her wheelchair when needed), this site and others with similarly rough terrain, steep stairs, and narrow pathways will always pose a challenge to anyone confined to a wheelchair.

Still, there are measures that can be implemented at many sites. Paved walkways, ramps, handrails, and benches, for example, can make sites easier to explore by providing paths that older people and wheelchair users can negotiate more easily. Making these changes whenever possible will go far toward enticing older travelers to visit those destinations.

Summary

With the global 65-plus population projected to hit 714 million by 2020⁶, the cities that offer the best transportation and accessibility options for older adults and wheelchair users can improve their chances of securing a greater share of the more than \$1 trillion spent annually on travel and tourism. Older travelers are out there—and increasing in number by the minute. And they wield a great deal of financial clout, so anyone who makes decisions that affect the travel industry should pay attention to and accommodate their needs. ●

¹ www.aoa.gov/Aging_Statistics/future_growth/future_growth.aspx.

² A recent AARP study found that 44 percent of 45- to 55-year-olds had at least one living parent and one child under the age of 21 living with them (www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/07/17/in-post-recession-era-young-adults-drive-continuing-rise-in-multi-generational-living/).

³ assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/ppi/liv-com/fs218-transportation.pdf.

⁴ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_accessible_New_York_City_Subway_stations. Detailed information about those stations can be found at web.mta.info/accessibility/stations.htm.

⁵ www.ada.gov/olderaccess.htm#Anchor-36680.

⁶ www.nia.nih.gov/research/dbsr/world-population-aging



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