

Rolling past the barriers

Travel agent smooths way for wheelchair clients set to explore the world

BY VALERIE HILL
RECORD STAFF

James Glasbergen is a traveller, a guy who loves to absorb new experiences, new places and people, despite having to rely on an electric wheelchair for mobility. As a quadriplegic, Glasbergen admits travel is not always easy, but it is possible, and he's made it his life's work to help others enjoy the thrill of wanderlust.

"In 2003, I wanted to go to Europe," said Glasbergen, director of World on WheelZ, an accessible-travel service at Frederick Travel in Waterloo. "I came across a company in the U.S. that did accessible travel. I did seven countries in five weeks. "Europe is so old; it's not as accessible as North America."

That trip planted a seed that perhaps this political science graduate could become a travel agent, one with a specialty unique in Canada. Glasbergen did a placement at Frederick Travel, and the company then hired him to launch this new division, advertising mostly through its website.

News of his burgeoning practice travelled fast within the disabled community.

Glasbergen's clients now range from those reliant on wheelchairs to seniors who still want to travel but are no longer able to keep up with a younger, more active group.

He is able to organize trips such as African safaris, and tours in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and North America, although he said Canada is not as accessible as the U.S., where there are strict laws. Asia is largely inaccessible, with the exception of Hong Kong and Thailand.

He was recently contacted by an agent in Portugal who is starting to develop accessible tours.

"It's really an untouched market in a lot of places," Glasbergen said.

SEE TRAVEL: PAGE W2



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Despite having to rely on an electric wheelchair for mobility, James Glasbergen has travelled to famous sites such as the Parthenon in Greece (above) and the Colosseum in Rome (below). Now he helps others with limited accessibility through a service at Frederick Travel in Waterloo.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

James Glasbergen is framed by the view of Athens taken from the Acropolis.

- ON THE WEB:**
- James Glasbergen's website is www.worldonwheelz.com.
 - E-mail: worldonwheelz@aol.com.
 - Call 519-745-1860 or toll-free 1-800-578-8958.
 - Upcoming trips include Mount Rushmore leaving Aug. 26 and Portugal and Spain, Sept. 16.

Travel: Details are essential

CONTINUED FROM PAGE W1

Donna Mackay, manager of recreation and integration for the Ontario March of Dimes, has used Glasbergen's services for two group cruises in the Caribbean. She said the first trip attracted 13 people, and the next year "it doubled in size."

It's all about planning and communicating, Mackay said. "It's all in the details."

The first consideration was the flight. Airlines must be aware of the travellers' needs, and there must be suitable ground transportation.

Even just getting from the dock to the ship had to be carefully orchestrated because electric wheelchairs can easily weigh 250 kilograms. Cabins had to be accessible, including having wheelchair showers and wide doorways, and pools should have a power lift to get the traveller from the wheelchair into the water.

"There were a few problems," Mackay admitted. "Equipment that was supposed to be ready wasn't always there."

She said it is critical all elements be in place, and this is where attendants come in.

Travelling is stressful for most people but, when there is the added issue of reduced mobility, the anxiety can mount. She said one woman had never travelled; another was travelling with a dog guide; a couple, both in wheelchairs, came from Ottawa to join the

Toronto-based group.

The March of Dimes hired attendants, whose services were included in the fees paid by the travellers. "We got a group discount," Mackay said. "It was extremely cost effective."

While the price of basic travel is no different between accessible and standard, costs do rise when the traveller requires a personal attendant.

Glasbergen said attendant costs will depend on how much care the traveller requires. "One person might require 20 minutes of help per day; another might require six hours," he said. "So, it is up to the attendant and the disabled traveller to decide who pays for what."

Glasbergen said services and accessibility vary widely around the world. Among the destinations still out of bounds is Egypt, which would be his own top travel choice.

"In Quebec City, you can't find a roll-in shower; and in Europe roll-in showers can be hard to come by," he said.

"Venice is not accessible at all, but you can still go there. The No. 1 thing to remember is plan ahead... months ahead."

"Accessible transportation (ground transport) is the hardest thing to find." In the Caribbean, islands such as Jamaica and the Dominican Republic do not have accessible group transportation. "If you're in an electric wheelchair, you need to go to a developed island like Aruba."

He said cruise lines are his top recommendation, such as Holland America and Royal Caribbean. Both companies have made their ships very accessible.

"I want to be able to get off the ship in every port," he said. "I do two to three trips every year."

When Glasbergen has a new client, his first question is "What are your needs?"

He said adequate insurance coverage is important. Travel insurance for people with disabilities includes pre-existing conditions.

Mackay said March of Dimes' clients are really hooked on travel now and hope to have a trip every year. Most of her clients had full-time jobs; another was just finishing law school.

"It's important for someone's well-being to get a vacation," she said.

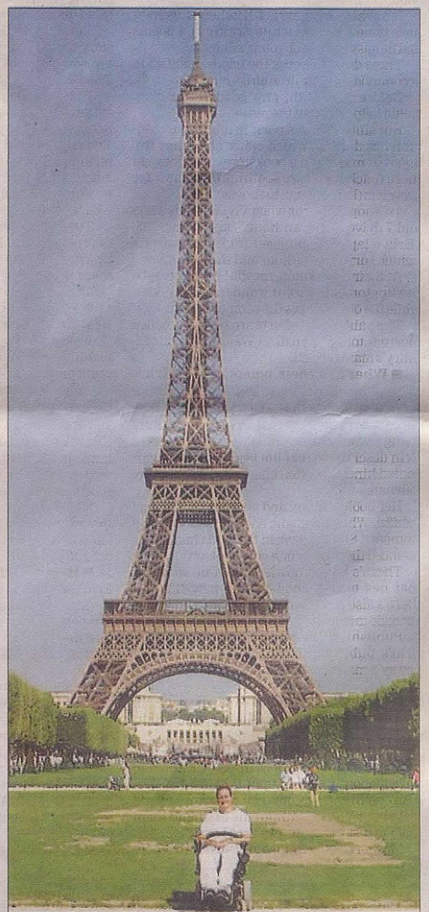
An unexpected bonus of the trips was raising awareness. She said other travellers were curious and often approached her group asking questions.

"We opened a few eyes," she said. "They did everything everyone else did on that ship."

Mackay concluded that for many of the travellers, the trip provided a sense of freedom.

"There was a tremendous feeling, they got to experience something they wouldn't otherwise."

vhill@therecord.com



Like most tourists to Paris, James Glasbergen takes in the Eiffel Tower on one of his vacations.