

UPDATE

# Rolling Out the Welcome Mat for Travelers With Autism

A growing number of theme parks, hotels and special attractions are introducing autism training and sensory guides.

By Elaine Glusac

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When Nicole Thibault had her first child, she imagined traveling everywhere with him. But by age 2, he would become upset by simply passing a restaurant that smelled of garlic. Waiting in line elicited tantrums and crowded places overwhelmed him. Autism was diagnosed within the year.

“I thought maybe our family dream of travel wouldn’t happen,” said Ms. Thibault, 46, of Fairport, N.Y., who now has three children. But she spent the next three years learning to prepare her son for travel by watching videos of future destinations and attractions so that he would know what to expect. The preparation helped enable him, now 14 and well-traveled, to enjoy adventures as challenging as exploring caves in Mexico. It also encouraged Ms. Thibault to launch a business, Magical Storybook Travels, planning travel for families with special needs.

Now the travel industry is catching up to the family. A growing number of theme parks, special attractions and hotels are introducing autism training and sensory guides that highlight triggers, providing resources in times of need and assuring families they won’t be judged.

## Battling stigma, finding acceptance

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 59 children falls on the autism spectrum disorder, up from one in 150 in 2002.

Autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, is a developmental disability that can cause challenges in social interaction, communication and behavior. Some may have sensory sensitivities and many have trouble adapting to changes in routine, which is the essence of travel.

The growing frequency of autism diagnoses and the gap in travel services for those dealing with autism created an overlooked market.

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“There’s still a lot of stigma for families with children on the spectrum,” said Meredith Tekin, the president of the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, which certifies organizations from schools to hospitals in cognitive disorders. In the past two to three years, the organization has worked with more than 100 travel providers on autism programs. “We went from zero in travel to getting requests from dozens and dozens of places,” she said.

Some families skip travel altogether — an I.B.C.C.E.S. study found 87 percent of families whose children have autism don’t take family vacations — but others insist it feeds minds and teaches coping skills.

“We’re bringing up kids in a world that’s constantly changing and the more we can do to make them a little bit more comfortable with change, the better,” said Alan Day, a travel agent who founded Autism Double-Checked, a consultancy that trains travel companies in autism readiness, after he was told his own son was on the spectrum.

Autism isn’t just a childhood issue, of course. Stephen Gaiber, 30, of Irvine, Calif., began writing the Autistic Traveler blog last year to share his experiences and embolden others like him to travel.

“I fear being misunderstood or not knowing what to do,” he said. “I strive to be mainstream and know what I’m supposed to do by planning ahead.”



The Thibault family at Discovery Cove, Orlando, Fla., 2018. via Thibault family

## Autism-friendly theme parks

I.B.C.C.E.S. certification requires 80 percent of staff members who interact with guests to undergo up to 21 hours of training in sensory awareness, communication and social skills; to pass an exam demonstrating their understanding; and be recertified every two years. The organization also conducts an on-site review to suggest changes that would better serve travelers on the spectrum.

Among the newly certified destinations are SeaWorld Orlando, the Aquatica Orlando and Discovery Cove, where visitors can swim with dolphins and snorkel with tropical fish. All three were certified in April.

Additionally, the International Board created sensory guides for the parks, available online, that rate attractions on a scale of one to 10 in five senses — touch, taste, sound, smell and sight. There are also corresponding signs in the parks with sensory ratings.

“We’re not asking SeaWorld not to be SeaWorld, but to provide families with options,” Ms. Tekin said, stressing the importance of having materials available before a visit, which allows families to discuss what to expect and anticipate any pitfalls. “Most individuals on the spectrum or their families are planners.”

Each park also created a quiet room with neutral décor, minimal noise, lighting on dimmer switches and interactive toys where families can take a time out.

“Our programs accommodating guests with physical disabilities have been robust, including identifying what rides are best suited based on individual abilities,” said David Heaton, a vice president at Aquatica Orlando. “We saw an opportunity to improve assistance with developmental disabilities.”

## Resorts, malls and destinations

The website Autism Travel ([autismtravel.com](http://autismtravel.com)) lists I.B.C.C.E.S.-certified destinations including Beaches Resorts, the three family-friendly all-inclusives in Jamaica and the Turks & Caicos, that qualified in 2017. In April, the resorts received advanced certification, introducing new one-on-one childcare, a private room for check in and a culinary program that allows for a greater range of special requests. Beaches also extended autism training to its dive instructors.

In March, the Mall of America near Minneapolis also became autism certified, offering sensory guides to its indoor amusement rides.

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The most ambitious among autism-spectrum efforts is in Mesa, Ariz., the Phoenix neighbor that draws significant family traffic with Major League Baseball spring training and water sports on the Salt River. The city aims to be the first autism-certified travel destination in the country, requiring 60 members of its travel bureau, Visit Mesa, including hotels and attractions, to undergo autism training and implement programs to make travelers with autism welcome. City officials say they are more than halfway to their goal and expect to reach it by the end of summer.

For Marc Garcia, the chief executive of Visit Mesa, the program was borne of personal experience; he has a 5-year-old with autism among three children.

“We travel like other people and we’ve received the strange looks and awkward stares when your child acts up and has a tantrum at a hotel, restaurant or attraction and it’s uncomfortable,” he said.

Inclusion, he added, is both good practice and good business.

“If you’re friendly to a community, that word spreads fast and they become hyper loyal. We thought it was a good opportunity to do business and to get out in front of it.”

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