

# Accessibility in Tourism 101

As the tourism sector continues to evolve, the importance of accessibility in attracting and accommodating a diverse range of visitors has never been greater. Ensuring that your business is inclusive and accessible not only aligns with ethical values but also presents a significant economic opportunity. The expanding inclusive travel market presents a growing customer base, one that is more engaged and loyal, and offers the potential for increased visitation and longer stays.



The simplest way to develop your inclusion and avoid ableism, is to educate yourself and your team.



## Customer Characteristics

Incorporating accessibility into your business doesn't require a deep understanding of every possible type of impairment. Instead, the focus should be on fostering an environment where all customers can feel confident and comfortable. Empowering your team with the knowledge to manage these needs, and offering minimal assistance when required, can help create an inclusive environment that benefits everyone.

There are many forms of impairment varying from a minor mobility impairment to multiple and complex conditions. Impairment can be either visible or invisible, with the majority (over 70%) of customers with disabilities having an invisible impairment. Understanding these varied needs is crucial for providing an inclusive experience for all visitors.



If you have reservations or believe your operation is inaccessible to customers with disabilities, rather than prohibit them from participating, consult with the [Makingtrax Foundation](#), who provides an Adaptive Advisory Service.

Most customers with disabilities who visit tourism establishments are independent, healthy, and travel with family or friends, meaning that many guests requiring assistance will not need extensive support. However, a small percentage of customers may have higher support needs, which could necessitate a more private or adapted experience. It is important to be mindful of the different forms of impairments and develop your operation to accommodate these customers effectively.



Customers with disabilities, including those using mobility aids like wheelchairs, may belong to one or more categories and have varying abilities. Many are strong, fit, and highly capable.

Type of Impairment	Impairment Characteristics and Considerations
Physical	<p>Affects movement or physical function.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Moderate physical limitations:</b> May have difficulty with balance or energy levels but can walk moderate distances unaided.</li> <li>• <b>Lower extremity limitations:</b> May use a wheelchair or mobility aid but can stand and walk with assistance.</li> <li>• <b>Full-time wheelchair users with lower extremity limitations:</b> Some individuals can stand with assistance and self-transfer with minimal help. Generally comfortable in standard seating, though some may need extra support for balance.</li> <li>• <b>Lower extremity and core limitations:</b> May require a wheelchair and can self-transfer with minimal assistance. May experience balance challenges, so additional support seating is preferred.</li> <li>• <b>Lower and upper extremity limitations:</b> Require a wheelchair and may need a support person. Their self-transfer ability varies; some can transfer independently, while others may require assistance. Most will need additional support seating for balance, as standard seating may not be ideal.</li> </ul>
Sensory	<p>Affects one of the five senses, typically vision and hearing.</p> <p>Often physically able to participate but may feel overwhelmed in large groups and/or have limited ability to concentrate or retain information.</p>
Communication	<p>Affect the ability to express and/or receive speech, convey and/or understand information (such as difficulties due to strokes or autism).</p> <p>Able to participate physically, but may use alternative methods to express themselves and understand information.</p>
Cognitive	<p>Affects the ability to access, process, or remember information (such as memory loss associated with dementia or difficulty processing information due to brain injury).</p> <p>Able to participate physically, but may have challenges understanding or accessing information due to sight or hearing impairments.</p>

## Assistance and Service Options for Customers with Limited Mobility

When considering customers with physical impairments, recognise that many can navigate challenges independently or with minimal assistance. The level of assistance a customer requires depends on the individual and the experience. It's not just about ability but also personal comfort threshold. While some prefer to remain as independent as possible, others are more comfortable receiving assistance.

Customers traveling solo are typically highly capable and relatively independent, depending on the accessibility of your operation. Those who require extra assistance in daily activities will usually be accompanied by a support person, whose role is to assist the customer rather than act as a minder or guardian. Customers traveling with friends or family may or may not have a designated support person.

Independent	Support Person Assistance	Full Assistance
<p>Some customers can manage on their own. They may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stand or walk short distances or with walking aid.</li> <li>Self-transfer across distances or up heights, and some may prefer to bum shuffle up steps and structures.</li> <li>Use hoists independently.</li> </ul>	<p>Some may participate with the help of a support person brought with them. They will provide minimal or significant assistance to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stand or walk.</li> <li>Navigate certain transfers.</li> <li>Use hoists and harnesses for more challenging transfers.</li> </ul>	<p>Some may require full assistance and be accompanied by a support person who needs help with a two person lift/hoist transfers. In this scenario, staff training is required to safely assist the support person.</p>

Rather than prohibiting access, businesses should aim to offer staff assistance in each of the above scenarios. This will ensure that all customers, regardless of their mobility level, can select activities that align with their comfort threshold and participate in activities comfortably and safely.

### Transfer Assistance

A key challenge for customers with limited mobility, particularly wheelchair users, is transferring over, up, into, or onto structures, platforms, vessels, vehicles, activity equipment, or across rough or uneven terrain. However, each individual has their own preferred method of transferring and will typically direct staff on what they require. Adaptive equipment exists to assist with transfers. Examples include:



**Transport  
Harness**



**Transfer  
Wheelchair**



**Transfer  
Harness**



**Platform  
Hoist**



**Transfer  
Board**



**Stair  
Climber**

Finding the most practical and cost-effective solution for adaptive equipment requires knowledge and experience, which can make a significant difference in ensuring ease and accessibility. It is important to never assume what someone requires without consulting the customer and never purchase adaptive equipment without consulting adaptive advisors with lived experience.



By offering flexible options assistance, you open your doors to a wider range of customers, enhancing both their experience and the inclusivity of your operation.



## Transportation

One of the challenges for customers with limited mobility, especially power wheelchair users, is the ability to use standard transport including coach and shuttle services. It is recommended that you consult the customer before suggesting a specific service, as well as listing the different options within an Access Guide.



An Access Guide is a resource that provides clear, accurate information about the accessibility of your business, helping customers understand what to expect before they visit. It does not imply that your establishment meets any specific accessibility standard—instead, it outlines your current features, services, and potential barriers, allowing customers to assess how they might navigate your space.

**Standard Vehicles:** It may surprise you to know that most customers who use a manual wheelchair can ride in a standard vehicle, including cars, vans and coaches, although some may require a little assistance. This can be as simple as putting the customer's wheelchair in the back of the vehicle. If a wheelchair user is travelling independently, it is very unlikely that they cannot self-transfer into a vehicle independently. If they are unable to self-transfer, it is likely they will be travelling with someone who can assist and that they have mastered techniques that work for them.

A low to the ground vehicle provides easier transfer to and from a wheelchair compared to higher vehicles. The front passenger seat is the easiest, especially in a two-door car as the door opening tends to be wider.



Modern manual wheelchairs are custom made to fit the user, are very strong (made from quality carbon fibre, titanium or alloy) and weigh around 12 to 16 kg. The wheels can pop off with a push of a button and they have a folding back or collapsible frame. The cushion is the most important part as it provides a safety barrier and pressure relief to avoid injury.

**Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles:** Wheelchair accessible transport services are helpful to some customers that require them. Most who require wheelchair accessible vehicles use heavy power wheelchairs and can't self-transfer due to function, weight, nerve pain or muscle tone and/or personal preference.

Although you can offer assistance by providing a specific service after consultation with the customer, it is advised to provide the customer with options prior on the Access Guide.

## Hiring Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles in Queenstown

Customers who require wheelchair accessible vehicles in Queenstown are often domestic travellers and typically use their own or hire one from outside of Queenstown prior to arrival. As of January 2025, no car hire company within Queenstown offers wheelchair accessible vehicles, although a couple of hire companies transfer vehicles to Queenstown during high season.

## Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Services in Queenstown

[Queenstown Taxis](#) provides a wheelchair accessible van with a hoist. However, the service is more suited to local users who have a predictable schedule. There are major availability restrictions that create a barrier for visitors wanting to book last minute (such as due to weather changes, activity cancellation or in search of a spontaneous adventure).

- There is only one van and one driver who is trained to use the hoist.
- The van is only available during normal business hours and is unavailable after 6pm and during school pick up windows.
- The van is not in mainstream service and is serviced prior to use, so it must be booked several days to a week in advance.

## Experiences, Activities and Tours

Depending upon your operation, there will be a significant number of customers with physical impairments who will have little to no impact on your standard experience process and can even create a more meaningful experience for all involved. Other customers may require and/or desire a more intimate, private and/or adapted experience.

If you offer both standard and private experiences, keep in mind that tailoring to meet the specific needs of your customers can significantly expand your potential clientele. When making adaptations, consider adjusting:

1. **Customer-to-Guide Ratio:** Consider having a second guide or instructor to enhance customer support and engagement throughout the experience. Even in smaller groups, this can be easily achieved. For example, on a kayaking experience, you could use a tandem kayak with the guide seated at the rear or add an extra guide in a single kayak to assist with communication and interaction.
2. **Group Size:** Be transparent about the group size. Some customers may prefer smaller, more intimate groups, as larger groups can feel overwhelming.
3. **Distance and Duration:** Adjust the distance and/or duration of the experience to accommodate the customer's physical comfort and attention span.
4. **Advanced Check-in Time:** Allow customers extra time to prepare before the tour starts. This may include gearing up, accessing transportation, accessing the meeting point, or receiving a customised safety briefing.
5. **Flexible Trip Departure Point:** Choose a departure point that best suits the customer's needs. For example, allow customers to meet directly at the departure point instead of a base location, especially if they need easier access to changing facilities.
6. **Alternative Access:** Offer different ways for customers to access your experience. For example, provide a ramp or step-free entry for water-based activities, or for land-based experiences, offer vehicle access to a scenic viewpoint for those unable to hike.

7. **Timing of the Trip:** Schedule trips to enhance customer comfort, safety and accessibility. For example, consider the timing in relation to tidal movements for water-based activities, or plan land-based experiences to avoid peak heat.
8. **Advanced Weather Check:** Offer customers an option to check expected weather and temperatures two days in advance, allowing them to reschedule if needed.
9. **Additional Support:** Such as assisting with access, supporting transfers, having staff trained in sign language, providing chill out areas, or lowering music for high sensory affected customers.



## Equipment Awareness

Most equipment is designed to fit a standard client, but due to limitations or body shapes that fall outside the standard some customers will require further information. These limitations could include pressure on sitting bones, lack of strength, muscle function, fine motor skills or body shape to be comfortable using, wearing, accessing or something personal to the individual.



The [Makingtrax Foundation adaptive advisory service](#) offers valuable expertise on adaptive equipment and assistance, helping to enhance your customers' experience and accessibility.

## Communicating with Customers

Understanding your customer will make a world of difference. The potential of your experience is dictated by the awareness of your operational staff's understanding.



Access may be awkward or challenging, but it doesn't have to stop customers from participating.

Take time to fully understand what your customer feels comfortable with. The best way to build understanding is through connection—the more we connect, the more comfortable we become.

Rather than making assumptions about their abilities, always ask how you can assist to ensure the best possible experience. When discussing accessibility—whether in conversation or when writing your

Access Guide—be transparent about the level of access to your experience or premises, as well as the amount of assistance your staff are prepared to provide. This helps customers understand what preparation or support they may need. See the *How to Write an Access Guide* resource for more information.

### Be Aware of Ableism

Ableism refers to the assumptions or attitudes—often unconscious—that can disadvantage or exclude disabled people, based on a societal preference for able-bodied ways of living and working. It's not always obvious or intentional; in fact, many forms of ableism are subtle and woven into everyday systems, language, and behaviours.

Understanding ableism can help us create more inclusive and respectful environments for everyone. For example:

- **Hostile ableism** includes direct and harmful actions, such as mocking, ignoring, or excluding someone because of their disability.
- **Benevolent ableism** can seem well-meaning—like offering help without asking, or framing disabled people as inspirational simply for living their lives—but it can still reinforce unequal power dynamics and limit autonomy.

By becoming more aware of these patterns, we can all play a part in making spaces more accessible and welcoming.

Including customers when troubleshooting solutions for them builds rapport and trust, provides valuable insights for staff, and helps create a smoother experience for everyone involved. If you are unsure about a customer's needs, consider arranging a meeting with them before the activity. Meeting customers with disabilities can feel intimidating, especially if you or your staff haven't had much prior experience. However, the most important part of inclusion is recognising and valuing that everyone is different and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to participate equally.

### Always

- **Engage directly:** Rather than speaking only to their support person.
- **Treat the customer with respect and dignity:** Allow the customer to decide if they want to share personal information.
- **Be mindful of personal space:** Only touch the customer or move their wheelchair if they request it.
- **Keep their wheelchair free from obstruction:** Never lean on it.
- **Recognise individual preferences:** Their preferences should guide any adjustments made to enhance their experience. For example, every customer has their own preferred method of transferring.
- **Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach:** Needs vary, so always tailor your support.
- **Avoid unnecessary separation of customers from other participants:** Segregation is not only outdated but can be discriminatory.
- **Prioritise reassurance, information, communication, and preparation:** These are the keys to ensuring a smooth and positive experience for all customers.

## Next Steps

- Share this document with your team to improve knowledge and awareness of accessibility and inclusion.
- Consider creating an Access Guide for your premises or experience. See the Member Hub for a detailed guide.
- You can also consider training your staff in effective communication and interaction skills will significantly enhance your customers' experience. It's highly recommended to collaborate with local organisations or experts to offer training sessions covering a range of accessibility needs. Below is just a few of the many organisations that can offer valuable education and support for your business. While there is no substitute for lived experience, asking questions is the most effective way to learn, as each individual's needs and preferences are unique.



This resource has been developed in partnership with Destination Queenstown, Lake Wānaka Tourism and the [Makingtrax Foundation](#).

**Makingtrax: Adaptive adventure tourism**

Makingtrax are pioneers and experts in inclusive tourism, providing and supporting adaptive adventure opportunities for travelers with disabilities. Based in New Zealand, 'the adventure capital of the world', Makingtrax lead their own adaptive experiences for travelers with disabilities - from rafting to paragliding and everything in-between.