

Explorable | Season One, Episode One: Transcript of interview with John Morris

JOSH: Exportable is a podcast about travel disability and inclusion. I'm Josh Loebner Director of Strategy at Designsensory.

TOBY: I'm co-host Toby Willis senior product manager for inclusive technology and president of the ability inclusion movement at Expedia group. We're Both blind. We love everything travel. This is Explorable!

TOBY: Josh how are you.

JOSH: Last time you and I were in person it was before all this chaos.

TOBY: Yes it was! I miss the normality of those times but I'm managing well.

JOSH: Good good. Toby, are you doing good?

TOBY: Yeah doing great. Enjoying the ride.

JOSH: Well our guest today is John Morris founder of wheelchair travel dawg. Disability consultant and world traveler. John's disability advocacy and travel experiences have been featured in The New York Times The Guardian PBS Lifehacker and dozens of other media outlets.

John has been a lifelong traveler and in 2012 he became disabled in an auto accident. John is a triple amputee exploring and advocating for inclusion at destinations across the globe. So John here's the first question. When did you start your journey connecting travel and disability? And where are you in that journey today?

JOHN: Well I started wheelchair travel dot com IN 2015, but my personal first experience with accessible travel traveling with my own disability was at the start of 2014.

I had just gotten out of the hospital after the car accident and I wasn't really sure what was possible, and I took that first trip, actually, to see all my moderate play in the college football national championship game. And fortunately they were victorious. So go Noles. But over the time that passed since that first trip I recognize that there was a hole in the information.

There was a lack of information about travel for people with disabilities. And I started a blog to share some of the insights that I was gaining— things that I was learning while on the road traveling with my own power wheelchair and I was sort of shocked to see the response. I started getting emails from people all around the world asking for more information about the places that I had written about and if I had traveled to any other places.

And so I created a website that was constantly growing. And today I am confident in saying that it's the largest state sensible travel Website on the Internet with information about a whole host of destinations. But I think that you know the work is far from done because so many people are still out there who have not been connected with the past to be of accessible travel.

So many people still have questions that need to be answered. And so many destinations you know continue to lack information. I'm one guy. I can only go to so many places in the world and while I'd love to see the entirety of the world, every country and every city and meet every person ... I just don't have the bandwidth for that. I can't do all of that in my lifetime.

It's a work in progress and constantly growing but I'm hopeful that you know more people are connecting with the information every day and taking advantage of it to open their world.

TOBY: So John I'd be curious to hear from you some challenges. Disability Inclusion challenges or are misperceptions that you've encountered personally or that you've helped the business work through? And what big problems remain?

JOHN: The first problem I recognized fairly early on because of my web site when I started traveling oftentimes I was the only wheelchair user that I would see out in the world for days. And of course there are many other people with disabilities both visible and invisible who are underrepresented in the public sphere.

But it was those emails from people reading my website that told me wow this community is much larger than I imagined. And so I began looking into it. And many studies tell us they estimate that the global disability population is about one fifth of the entire world's population.

And so you know one of the other things that surprises a lot of businesses that I talked to is that the accessible travel market is the fastest growing segment of the travel industry. And so I think there is perhaps a mind set barrier because people don't see disability to the degree at which it exists in society and prioritize the need to pursue accessibility and inclusion initiatives.

And so one of my goals has always been giving people a platform to show that they exist. And I think one of the ways that I'm able to do that is by encouraging more people to get out there into the world and be seen. You know I want to be seen everywhere—whether it's on the airplane at the airport on the city bus—or if I am out sporting a band or at a movie theater.

I think visibility is one of the biggest actions that we can all take. Every person with a disability has the right to be seen. And oftentimes the ability to be seen as well and so I try to encourage people to get out there as much as possible. And I think that that really can be something that everyone can do to move the needle a little bit and break down and break down that improper view that the disability community is small.

JOSH: That's great. Yeah I think we're both right there with you on shattering that misperception that it's just a small small group push—and that's definitely not the case. I want to ask a question about compliance versus commitment. So the Americans With Disabilities Act is celebrating its 30th anniversary now and there are different compliance initiatives across the globe.

So many are ensuring that there is an accessibility which is positive and that that is a compliance. But there's also a double edged sword in that potentially some might just see that compliance as the only thing to do when it comes to inclusion for people with disabilities. I want to get your thoughts on compliance.

JOHN: Well The ACA in the United States established a baseline ability. These are the minimum standards that exist and all businesses should comply. There are a lot of spaces within the world—not just the travel industry—where that compliance is lacking. And so I think compliance is necessary to get people in the door. And then a certain level of commitment on the part of the business owner or the destination or you know any public facing entity.

It's very necessary in order to keep that customer. I think competition has to exist everywhere and that includes, you know, in attempting to to capture the business of disabled people. And so I think that, well, one great way to demonstrate commitment is involving disabled people in the development of products and services.

JOSH: I think disabled people have to be involved at every step of the process so that we can ensure that, you know, whatever it is that we're selling is accessible to them.

TOBY: I would love to hear you share maybe a story or two of one where you have seen compliance but it just kind of stops there and another maybe where an airline or a hotelier or an attraction maybe pushed beyond that compliance and really welcomed you as as a tourist or traveler just just like anybody else.

JOHN: Well as a travel blogger I go on a lot of press trips. So destinations or airlines or hotels invite me to come check them out to provide feedback and then also to share it with my readership.

And I think that those businesses in particular have demonstrated a higher level of commitment than is required because you know they brought in you know my input and they're actually targeting the disability community.

I just surveyed my readership this year and I asked them, in the travel industry, have you or have you not seen a disabled person, or any marketing towards disabled people in a travel industry advertisement.... and 90 percent of them have said no.

And only 6 percent of them had said yes. There were a few percent there who were not sure. And so I think that there is a lack of commitment across the industry and not just the travel industry but across all segments of the economy. But there are certainly businesses that are taking things a step further.

I'd like to point out Delta Airlines, for example, they have established a disability advisory board and so they brought on people with disabilities from across the community all types of disabilities from around the country to provide input and insight into their services for disabled people.

it's something it's a very small investment that a company makes but it can have a potentially enormous impact in the passenger experience for Delta's disabled customers. So I think I think that that is a great example of a major corporation involving disabled people and learning from them learning from their experiences to create a better product and service offering.

TOBY: That's great. John I appreciate that sentiment and I often encourage companies to hire, you know. And don't just hire people with disabilities for screening or testing or certain roles that are related specifically to their experience but hire professionals to do various jobs throughout the company and there's you know the unemployment rate is unacceptable in the disability community.

So companies like Delta can not only have that advisory board built in, but they can affect change in the employment side of the House as well. Another point you touched on that's very

near and dear to my heart is what I'm calling "inclusive design," is good design, and we can make this more awesome for everybody by getting it right. For those of us who need it most.

JOHN: And I think putting people who lived this experience like us in the role of product development design and implementation roles that influence how the products and services are delivered is integral to scaling and sustaining change and driving for full inclusion of the disability community.

TOBY: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JOHN: I think visibility at all levels... when you talk about employment. I think I think that's critical. I always remember when I see another wheelchair user working at a company that I am a patron of. And also other types of disability as being so involved in the broader accessibility and inclusion movement.

You know I'm aware of what I'm seeing, and so it's very important to have that level of inclusion, you know, to welcome customers who have disabilities as well. And then designing something around you know Universal Design is one of the I think the tracks that we're on. Unfortunately I think that's a great example of commitment rather than compliance because the FDA doesn't embrace universal design; it embraces a targeted approach to creating accessibility for particular situations and to aid particular people and particular types of disabilities whereas universal design creates an environment that is useful to everyone. And so I think I think that those are some of the trends that—uncertainly tracking in particular—within the travel industry.

TOBY: Awesome. Appreciate that insight. And that's good segway into the last question here as we start to wrap up. We're interested to know from your perspective why the disability community is important to travel.

JOHN: Well I think you know, if I'm if I'm talking to a business owner or a board of executives the answer to that is the business case. There is an incredible amount of value that can be captured in serving the disabled community. Open Doors Organization did a study a few years ago that said: the value of the accessible Travel Market in the United States was seventeen point three billion dollars a year.

And so that's an incredible sum of money that businesses can compete for and win if they embrace accessibility and inclusion and create products and services that appeal to disabled people. So I really think that the case is the business case and also recognizing the fact that this community is growing.

We've heard very frequently over the last five or so years about the baby boomers who are soon to or in the midst of retiring right now. And so these people are bringing a lot of new capital to the market. And one of the things that everyone likes to do is to travel.

And so I think that it's important to create a travel industry and travel products and services that are open to those people who are going to be coming with a whole host of physical challenges. And I think that they can benefit— not only someone like me who, you know, who came to be disabled in a car accident, and now uses a wheelchair but it can also benefit retirees as they age and certainly as our life expectancy increases.

TOBY: Yeah that's great. Inclusive design is good design and I think you know accessibility is not inclusion and these are some really good points and I want to add that the estimated global spend is ninety five billion. So you know for those of you listening who work and have a global reach and in your business that's a very compelling number when you're speaking to leadership you're talking about there's no real disruptors in the travel industry and it's a ninety five billion dollar market and growing.

JOSH: John how can folks get in touch with you.

JOHN: My Web site is [wheelchair travel dot com](http://wheelchairtravel.com). And from there you can access all of my social media and email and certainly look forward to hearing from everyone and wish you guys the best on this new podcast endeavor.

JOSH: Explorable is a Designsensory original production in collaboration with the travel ability summit and produced by Brad Carpenter. Find out more about our production podcast and insights at [designsensory dot com slash originals](http://designsensory.com/originals).