

## **Accessibility better in Costa Rica for disabled travelers**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Imagine coming to Costa Rica for vacation and finding yourself unable to visit the beach or take in the mountain vistas overlooking vast coffee plantations.

For that matter, imagine a vacation where you could not cross the street, eat in a restaurant or even get to a bathroom.

That is the challenge that faces disabled people who have a yen to travel, but find facilities, tourist attractions or living accommodations inaccessible.

Enter Monic Chabot, a Canadian immigrant to Costa Rica who has worked for much of the past eleven years to raise the consciousness of government officials, business people and the tourist industry to the needs of disabled tourists, especially those who use wheelchairs.

“A lot has been done in the last ten years to improve the situation here,” Chabot said. She especially praises a 1996 law which respects the rights of handicapped people and has moved government agencies and private businesses to be more sensitive to the needs of the disabled.

“Monic is making the industry more aware of the power of niche marketing,” explained Lawrence Poole of Montreal, Canada who has worked with Chabot to provide training seminars and develop projects in Costa Rica. “While we like to think of tourists as a monolithic mass, they are in fact different small niches that collectively add up to the big numbers.”

Poole said that today, 15% of tourists are considered to be in the disabled niche while between 15 and 30% are in the senior citizen’s niche. He advocates that the tourist industry market and develop programs for those niches rather than designing broad programs for a wide market that may leave some groups out.

Chabot and Poole have presented numerous training seminars here to help the tourist industry learn how to make their facilities more accessible to disabled travelers.

Chabot also designs specialized tours for those who need particular assistance. When she is contacted by a potential client, she learns what the traveler’s disability will allow them to do. She ascertains whether they will be traveling with a companion, if they will need an assistant here, or if they will travel independently.

She then sets out to find accessible hotels and attractions that are willing to work with her client. While some facilities aren’t at all accessible, Chabot said that she is pleased by the growing number of business people who are sensitive to the special needs of her clients.

“For example, there are over 1,000 permits for accessible taxis in Costa Rica,” she affirmed. “And, the hotels are becoming more accessible.”

Unfortunately, many hotels are being constructed without access or assistance, she said.

Chabot has taken groups of disabled travelers to the rainforest canopy, the deep jungle, volcanoes, the Andean páramo, a jungle river and mangroves, Pacific beaches, a coffee plantation, an eco-center and many local attractions.

In the fall of 2001, she led the first group of blind people to ever climb Mount Chirripó, a feat that people from all over the world consider to be a daring physical and mental accomplishment for any climber.

“Costa Rica’s access has greatly improved since my first visit in 1990,” said Poole who is paraplegic. “Then I was an oddity and I remember conversations with Ticos who would ask me why I was there. However, the support that I got from everyone was extremely supportive.”

But, Costa Rica has a way to go in this area. “There are access issues in Costa Rica as there are everywhere,” said Blake Bunting, a paraplegic who lives in Los Angeles and visited Costa Rica in 2002 with the help of Chabot. “The most obvious and difficult are the high curbs without curb-cuts in the city.”

Poole warns potential travelers to check before they travel. “The big thing to watch out for are the places which post or advertise themselves as accessible but do not meet universal access standards,” he said. “There is nothing worse than arriving someplace with expectations and then discovering the huge differences in what is promised by the Americans with Disabilities Act or the usual US or Canadian standards and what are found to be local standards.”

He also advises that while some people may want to visit the jungle or a remote beach, they may not have the fitness level required.

Chabot cautioned that those who use wheelchairs need to be realistic about their expectations. “Some of them want to travel independently but there are limits to the accessibility of some activities,” she said. “For example, while some people may want to go kayaking independently, they may have to have a guide to help them.”

Warning that some agencies may refuse to take disabled people on some adventure trips, she cautioned, “We cannot ask those who provide services to put themselves at risk.”

Nevertheless, Chabot is encouraged by the response of Costa Rica’s tourism industry to the potential of disabled tourists and the number of such people who are selecting Costa Rica as a destination.

Travel for the disabled is as important as for anyone else, Poole said. “Once disabled people have access to life’s beauty and pleasure, then developing our capacities so that we can contribute to the social fabric becomes a real potential.”

Information on Monic Chabot’s service for disabled travelers can be found at [www.empowermentaccess.com](http://www.empowermentaccess.com).

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