



POWERING TRAVEL | SEASON 2 | EPISODE 1

Breaking down barriers: The importance of accessibility in travel

What to listen for:

Tune in for episode one of Powering Travel's second season, featuring Wheel the World's Alvaro Silberstein in conversation with host Brandon Ehrhardt and guest host Toby Willis.

This episode explores the world of travel through the lens of accessibility. Hear Alvaro's and Toby's personal insights on traveling with disabilities and seeking out inclusive travel options.

Listen for a conversation around considering disabilities in travel, the importance of accessible travel experiences, and how you can help make travel open to all.

Introduction:

[00:00:04] **Brandon** Travel providers are the backbone of the travel experience. In this brand-new season of Powering Travel, we'll dive into industry trends, hot topics, and actionable advice to help business leaders continue evolving and enhancing the travel experience. One trip at a time. It is on. Welcome back. Season 2 Powering Travel. It is finally here. I'm Brandon Ehrhardt, your host of Powering Travel. It has been quite a bit of time since season one and there have been some changes around here. For one, our good friend Sally Smith. She clapped when the plane landed. That is a one-way ticket off of this podcast. She will no longer be joining us. She's taken a different opportunity outside of Expedia Group, so she's left both the company and the podcast, but we wish her the best of luck. Don't worry though, without Sally, you're not going to get me flying solo. We have an action-packed season planned and we're lining up a power roster of guest hosts for each of the episodes. So get ready to hear a bunch of new smart voices from across Expedia Group. Today's guest hosts is no exception. I first met Toby when he brought a very important topic to the forefront around accessible language. We were in a meeting a couple of years ago and someone continued to use the word blind with a negative connotation four times in the same meeting. And Toby stood up and really gave the audience an understanding of kind of the meaning behind our words. And so, he's a great speaker for our topic today around accessibility. Really appreciate him joining me. Toby, I'll let you introduce yourself.

[00:01:38] **Toby** Thanks, Brandon. And I certainly remember that moment in 2019, but I don't remember the meeting because I spent the entire time trying to gather the nerve to call out a former executive at the company in front of hundreds of people. My name is Toby Willis. I'm senior product manager for inclusive travel here at Expedia Group. So, I look after accessible travel for people with disabilities and also inclusive travel for folks from other marginalized backgrounds. I also am the founder and current president of the Ability Inclusion Movement we call AIM at Expedia Group. It's our ERG for employees and allies with disabilities outside of work. I'm chair of the Disability Empowerment Center and also serve on the Pedestrian Advisory Committee for the City of Seattle. On a broader scope, I sit on the advisory board for travel ability, and I couldn't be happier than to be here helping kick off season two with this first episode.

About Wheel the World:

[00:02:37] **Brandon** Toby, you're the perfect person for us to have on the show today because we're focusing on an aspect of the industry that we know can use a lot of improvement, and that is accessibility when it comes to travel. You actually already knew today's guests going into the interview, right?

[00:02:50] **Toby** That's right. I've gotten to know Alvaro quite well over the years. He and I serve currently on the advisory board for Travel Ability, and I interviewed him last year for my podcast, Explorable, which focuses on accessible travel as well.

[00:03:03] **Brandon** This was quite the perfect pairing for this conversation between you and our guest, Alvaro Silberstein, co-founder of Wheel the World. Wheel the World is an online marketplace for people with disabilities and seniors to book accessible trips. A Chilean entrepreneur, public speaker, and passionate disability advocate, he created Will the World in 2018 to empower millions of people to explore the world without limits. With a background in management consulting leading companies with a Latin American focus, Silversea works closely with businesses to offer fully accessible travel experiences, making it possible for people with disabilities to enjoy some of the most challenging destinations such as Machu Picchu, Easter Island, and Patagonia. In addition to all the work he's doing with his own company, Wheel the World, Alvaro has also served as an advisor to the Chilean government for the development of national strategy for the social inclusion of people with disabilities. All right let's jump into it. Here's our conversation with Alvaro. Alvaro, leading us off, season two: Welcome to Powering Travel. We are very interested in diving deeper into your company, Wheel the World. Can you give us some more background on the company and what inspired you to start it?

[00:04:10] **Alvaro** What's Wheel the World? Wheel The World is a startup that we have a clear purpose that is to make the world accessible. Since 2018, we've been building an online ecosystem, an online marketplace, so people with disabilities can find and book accessible travel experiences at the website, WheelTheWorld.com. You can find accommodations, tours, activities, multi-day trips, transportation services. And our value proposition that we're bringing to the industry is that every single travel experience that you book through WheelTheWorld.com has detailed accessibility information and also verified user experience that we focus on accessibility and we recommend our users what best fits their needs. We push to guarantee the accessibility that our users are booking online, actually making it a reality. Since 2018, more than 3,000 people have booked trips with us from 15 different countries around the world, traveling to 200 destinations in 30 countries around the world. I'm a wheelchair user since I am 18 years old, and travel has always been important to me. Travel and also adventure, I come from a family that we went camping every year with my three older brothers and my parents. I love sports, I love outdoor recreation, and I was part of a car accident. And the very first question that I made after realizing that I would not be able to walk again was, "how would I be able to do all these things that I love to do?" Going on hikes, surfing that I also love to do. It took me a long time to realize that I could also travel. And I could also enjoy places. There was a time around seven years ago that with my good friend Camilo, the other co-founder of Wheel the World, we started thinking on organizing a trip together to Torres del Paine there in Chile. My dream was to visit this place, being myself, Chilean, but always I thought that it would be impossible for me to go to this place that was such a remote, unseen, inaccessible. But we started figuring out with Camilo on how to do this trip, we realized that we needed a special hiking wheelchair. We realized that we needed to figure out where to stay, how to move around, because nobody else in our wheelchair did the trip that we wanted to do. So, we decided to transform our trip into a project. And it was like the first time ever of a wheelchair user to complete the W Trek in Torres Del Paine National Park in Patagonia. But with the mission to then allow other people to repeat the ride like this, if we can make this, other people can do it as well. That was our vision at that point.

A better traveler experience:

[00:07:18] **Toby** Curious to know what your customers are saying. It sounds like you're opening up a lot of opportunity for those of us with disabilities to travel. And just wondering if you have any antidotes or feedback from customers about the Wheel the World and their experience with travel.

[00:07:33] **Alvaro** Their feedback from customers has been amazing. I mean, normally it's an emotional reaction. At first, when they get to know about us, they get excited because they in general, we people with disabilities, we are not used to getting services that are like specifically designed for our needs. Many times, they are kind of like worried if this is true or not. But they're emotionally grateful about the work that we do. Then, of course, through their experiences, has been incredible, the different feedback that we have received. One that I have like shared with different people recently is, for example, about a couple that travel with us to Africa, and they did an accessible safari that we offer and the person who did the booking with us, she mentioned that is not disabled. She has a husband that is a wheelchair user and she mentioned they as a couple, they are always adapting to their circumstances. They have the mindset, as I assume most of people with disabilities have, that we are used to adapting to those environments that present us challenges. And she mentioned for the very first time, I felt all the time that the circumstances and the service and their management was adapted to our needs. And when you hear that kind of feedback, it makes all the effort makes it is worth it and it makes sense. All the efforts that for the five years that we have worked at Wheel the World is basically what it's all what do we do for, right.

[00:09:15] **Toby** That resonates so deeply with me. Because, you know, I think it's very fulfilling to be able to open these opportunities for people. We've heard it said that travel is the toybox of life and we all deserve to play at Expedia Group. We all love travel. It's we believe it's a force for good and for all of us, including people with disabilities, to have access to those opportunities. This is just so important for us to be fully included. So, thank you for the work that you're doing.

[00:09:43] **Alvaro** And yes, thank you. Thank you. I love the "travel is a force for good" tagline. I love it and I agree. In my case, for me, traveling has been also part of my like, rehab process of having a disability and how to adapt to the worlds. When you travel, you have to adapt. You have to go out of your comfort zone. Those are the instances in life that you learned. I think in all my trips that I have done, I have traveled a lot. Having a severe disability, I have my body paralyzed from the chest down. I move partially my arms and I don't move the fingers of my hands. Every travel experience has taught me about myself, about what can I do? How should I figure out how to ask for help? Many times. So, I totally agree with the travel as a force for good tagline of Expedia.

[00:10:43] **Toby** Yeah, I love that perspective because we think about travel a force for good, it reminded me of my recent trip where I decided to use public transit to get to and from the airport. So, it was a bus to a subway, to whatever, you know, a half mile walk. And as a blind person, you know, it's like I could have taken a lift and just like door-to-door service. But it's really rewarding and therapeutic for me to, like, figure out how to do that independently. A lot of people don't understand that, but it's very rewarding to have that feeling of being independent. And, you know, that's what that's what we're doing when we're when we're making travel more accessible, is we're allowing people to have that autonomy and independence and freedom to choose the mode or the method or the means that suits them.

[00:11:26] **Alvaro** They also feel that rewarding experience of being independent, right. And being able to figure it out in a in a smooth way. And that's pretty much what we want, too, for our customers. We always see disabilities as a minority. 15% of the world's population has a disability, but actually I believe that is not a minority. All of us will have a disability sooner or later, right? Some of us get to this community earlier than others, but all of us who are hearing this podcast will have a disability at some point because of aging. So that's why as service providers, as business owners, as professionals, we always need to consider that accessibility and inclusion is something that will impact our lives, too, sooner or later. And that's why it's so important that right. And that's why we need to concentrate on every aspect of our society.

Accessibility tips for hotels:

[00:12:27] **Brandon** So thinking through accessibility and, you know, I really love the quote that “travel is the toy box of life.” I want to move us from the toy box to the toolbox. We have a very large hotelier audience here, and I think in many instances, some view “is a hotel experience accessible or not?” as the question. But, you know, as we've done research and as we've understood better, it's not a yes or no question. It depends on the situation. So, as we think about lodging listings specifically, what would be some tips you would give hoteliers so that when someone's researching whether or not the stay would be accessible for them, they can make a good determination?

[00:13:15] **Alvaro** What we always advise to the to our partners, to the to the hotel chains and lodging services that we work with, is first you need to evaluate how's your accessibility end-to-end and assess what things work, what things doesn't, and understand how you can improve. Second one is train your staff. I mean, it's important that people who work offering services to people in general understand different accessibility needs, different disabilities, and what works and what doesn't in your lodging service. And third one is like when you have a good understanding of what works in terms of accessibility, show it to the world, right? It's important. We need to know and we as people with disabilities what's accessible for us and promote it the right way with good categorization. Many times rooms are not well categorized and that makes a big problem because even when you have an accessible room through the booking process, you cannot make sure that the room booked was exactly the one that is accessible. So, promote it in the right way so people can have a certainty that they will have the accessibility that they will see online.

Common challenges:

[00:14:36] **Brandon** 92% of consumers believe it's important for travel providers to meet the accessibility needs of all travelers. So, there is a desire to make travel more accessible. Let's talk about the current state of travel. What are some of the most common challenges that travelers with disabilities face when traveling?

[00:14:55] **Alvaro** Yes, and I would start with the lodging challenges. First is, like, less than 5% of the hotel rooms are defined as accessible in the world. And that's first — offering is limited, first challenge. Second one is very hard to find that accessibility. Many times the content, you cannot identify if it's accessible or not. Many times it's unreliable statements of accessibility. There might be a hotel that states that it's accessible wherever but when you get to see the content and also the pictures, you don't rely that that content shows exactly the accessibility. Information needs to be very detailed because it might be a hotel that is extremely accessible for me as a wheelchair user, but not to Toby. Details are very important because every person has different accessibility needs. And then there's the challenge of actually having the exact room. Many times we struggle, but when you get to their room that was supposed to be accessible, it was taken by another person. And there's the challenge of first leg room categorization and also having like over booking revenue methods that you end up booking something that was already booked, and you and the hotel make switches through that process. So, if I can like resume, well, this is there's an information challenge not having reliable and detailed information and then there's actually like booking guaranteeing challenge. So those are the challenges in the lodging. And the other challenge and I would love to also hear Toby's perspective and I'm an expert in disabilities related to physical disabilities and mobility. The challenge that is all over the news and it's more relevant and it needs to be fixed is air travel. There are huge problems around the airline industry of adaptive equipment being damaged, about very bad service to access airplanes, about not being able to access a bathroom inside an airplane. So and so there's a huge problem around the airline industry then that that needs to be fixed also urgently.

[00:17:24] **Brandon** Toby, one of the things that I've heard you mention is the difference between prescriptive versus descriptive. When we're thinking about accessibility listings on our travel sites. Can you maybe give us a little bit more detail on the difference between prescriptive and descriptive and why it matters?

[00:17:43] **Toby** Yeah, for sure. It goes back to our comment about information sharing. That's half the battle is sharing the level of information that travelers need to make a confident and informed decision. So, my goal is to pivot the company from being prescriptive. So that's saying, "this room is accessible," to being descriptive, which is providing the level of information such as the door width and the bed height and the turning radius in the bathroom. And those levels of details allow for the traveler to make that decision for themselves. And that's really their crux of inclusion is independence, autonomy, and choice. So, it's allowing the traveler to say this is accessible for me based on the information that we have, and you can make that confident choice.

[00:18:29] **Brandon** Toby, I'm going to ask you this one and then, Alvaro, I'm interested in your opinion as well. How can travel providers ensure that they are considering all travelers, including those with visible and invisible disabilities, when they're making decisions for their business?

[00:18:44] **Toby** Oh, my gosh. That's such a broad question. Well, I have a really easy answer that will solve all the problems. Hire disabled people, period. The unemployment rate amongst people with disabilities is something approaching like 70% in the US. It's immoral and it's unacceptable. You know, nothing about us without us has been the rallying cry of the disabled community for years. Now that is changing to nothing without us. Period. And I think just hiring people with different disabilities, different lived experiences, is going to make your product better.

[00:19:19] **Brandon** Alvaro, from your perspective, how can travel providers ensure they're considering all travelers?

[00:19:26] **Alvaro** First is to assume that there's so much to learn about different realities of people and try to learn on how to adapt to that, then how to accommodate to that. I agree with Toby. Having people with disabilities in your teams allows you to provide solutions, products, services that work for people with disabilities and also work with experts in accessibility. And there's so many out there that will guide you through that process in order to think on developing services that are inclusive and accessible.

[00:20:00] **Brandon** Let's do a little bit of a report card or a grading. In what areas would you say the travel industry has made good progress and in what areas as there are still key opportunities to resolve?

[00:20:13] **Alvaro** In the hotels segment in general, there has been good progress, in resorts, in cruises, too. I think that there has been good progress in the tours and activity landscape, I think a little bit less. That's more geographically like where it has been more progress than others. And I think the US has done more progress compared to the rest of the world. Also, the UK, also Australia, and what has done zero progress again the airline industry. Absolutely. There has been zero progress in the past 20 years. And Toby.

[00:20:52] **Brandon**

[00:20:53] **Toby** Yeah, I think a lot of the barriers that I face as a blind person who travels with a guide dog are attitudinal. So, I think there's been some progress made in the way that society thinks, feels, and acts around disabilities. You're starting to see boomers aging into disability and they have a lot of discretionary spend. I think something like 17 trillion, or something like the most wealth in human history, that is driving for change. Also, you know, millennials and Gen Z's more socially accepting of disability as an identity. There's progress made in some fronts, and I think, you know, not the least of them is acceptance, which is important. But I think we have a long way to go not only in attitudinal barriers but also in physical barriers, like Alvaro was just talking about, where it's just physically difficult, if not impossible, to travel.

How our tech helps: Rapid API:

[00:21:47] **Brandon** Toby, I'm so glad that you were here for this today. You both came with so much knowledge and expertise in this travel space. Just kind of mind blowing that we haven't made more progress as an industry. But I think with the conversation today, we've at least set some of the path forward and what we can do. Glad you both are doing this kind of work from your respective positions within the travel industry. So, you know, thank you so much for joining and then giving those tips to our listeners.

[00:22:09] **Toby** Of course, I'm always happy to talk about this topic. This is something that's very personal to me as a disabled person who uses a service animal. I've experienced a lot of discrimination and I know Alvaro has as well. And this, you know, I think it's very poignant to look at the different experiences that he and I have. And it goes so far beyond that with something like, you know, 1.8 billion people in the world having disability of various severities. And it's really an individual experience that one has. So, it's a tough nut to crack because of the complexity. I think that there's a lot of us working on various aspects of the travel lifecycle. Folks like Alvaro and myself who are out there traveling with visible disabilities, Alvaro's facing physical barriers, I'm facing attitudinal barriers with my guide dog, and there's so many more people out there with unseen disabilities. I think it's really important for us as travel professionals to be cognizant and to teach ourselves about these experiences so that we can better serve travelers with disabilities.

[00:23:22] **Brandon** Agreed. I think what's so interesting is that from our own Expedia Group research, we know that 70% of consumers would choose a travel option that was more inclusive to all types of travelers, even if it's more expensive. So, if you're thinking about this from a revenue perspective, it's a no brainer to invite more travelers to your properties. It's a good business decision, more importantly, it's the right thing to do. We shifted the conversation to talk more in detail about how Wheel the World and Expedia Group are working together. Wheel the World is exclusively leveraging our Rapid API technology, offering its customers access to Expedia Group's global hotel supply, and the ability to travel without limits. Our Rapid API will allow Wheel the World to filter lodging properties by accessibility, making a seamless end-to-end book the experience for travelers with disabilities. Wheel the World is also part of our Expedia Group Accelerator program. This initiative is designed to advance innovation in the travel industry by supporting startups like Wheel the World to fast track their growth and innovate on Expedia Group's purpose-built technology platform. Let's hear about Alvaro's experience on the platform.

[00:24:29] **Toby** Alvaro, tell us about your involvement in the Expedia Group Accelerator program and what it means to Wheel the World and what you think it means to the accessible travel industry at large.

[00:24:41] **Alvaro** It has been amazing, great program. We have been part of as a startup in many accelerator programs, and it hasn't been just for the media or for the PR, it's actually with partnerships and collaboration projects as a reality and we are super excited about it. At the Wheel the World, we have defined very clearly our core values, and we are like very straight to them, and one of them is collaboration and we have defined that core value because our purpose is to make the world accessible and it's impossible that we will do that on our own. We need to collaborate to make that happen. I would say that for us, being able to be part of the accelerator program and find partnership opportunities with Expedia, it's amazing. And it has also allowed us to see and to position ourselves in a more focused way in the industry, as experts in accessibility.

[00:25:46] **Brandon** Yeah, that's awesome. Because to me it's really clear what Expedia Group gets out of this, right? It's going to be excellent to add a layer of content to the accessibility content we already have. So, thinking about bed height, room width, shower specifications, and characteristics from your lens, as you think about partnerships, how do you approach it?

[00:26:10] **Alvaro** My approach is that we can provide that information. It's verified, right? It's reliable. It's credible. It has an approach that is actually like focused on the process to get that information right. And being able to access hundreds of thousands of partners of Expedia, that on our own we would not be able to access.

[00:26:36] **Brandon** All right. Thinking about recent positive changes in the industry, looking down the road 3 to 5 years, what are the key changes that you hope take place so that travel can become more accessible?

[00:26:49] **Alvaro** What we envision is that we can make travel providers take action and actually invest in accessibility. We are clear that this will happen if they see a business opportunity around it. And we are totally convinced that it is with more accessibility, travel providers will make more money, they will have more clients, they will have more loyal clients. And what we envision to happen like five years from today is that actually through the data that we collect, the experiences that we have through the business cases that we are generating and will generate at scale, we can easily build business cases to travel providers so they can invest with more confidence that this will have a return on the investment.

[00:27:48] **Brandon** Toby, I want to ask the same question of you. You snap your fingers and can make anything happen in the travel industry to make it more accessible. What's the one thing you pick?

[00:27:57] **Toby** You know, I think it's awareness. I think it's really difficult to make everything everywhere all the time accessible to everyone. People's attitude and willingness, I think, is the great place for me to cast my first wish, because people having the willingness, I think, to try to include people with disabilities is so meaningful, even if it's not possible all the time, just having the right attitude. So I think awareness, you know, as a company, we have an opportunity to leverage our position in the industry to educate and help our partners understand the importance of making travel more accessible and inclusive.

Final thoughts and key takeaways:

[00:28:39] **Brandon** So thinking about key takeaways and actions. What's one change a travel provider can to make today to make their service more accessible?

[00:28:47] **Alvaro** Educate yourself, your team, your service, and train yourself to raise awareness and to better serve your guests with disabilities. All of this is basically what the Wheel the World does with partners. We are helping them understand their accessibility, telling them what works, what they can improve, and training their staff. We're so convinced that what we do makes a difference, so consider looking for Wheel the World.

[00:29:17] **Brandon** Hey, Toby, can I ask you a slightly different take on that question. It's a little bit different. So, thinking about the considerations for terminologies and questions to ask. You brought up awareness earlier, and I think sometimes there is a reluctance to ask questions because there is a fear of offending. So, talk the audience through the considerations to make on using terminology and, you know, questions that are fair game.

[00:29:39] **Toby** I'm asked this question a lot, and I think it's a really important question because as disabled people, we want to be included. And I think a healthy sense of curiosity is important, but that has to be balanced with respect and relevance. I mean, you know, my blindness, it's certainly a very prevalent characteristic, but it's not the only thing that defines me. So, I think just get to know people. Another way to educate yourself is getting engaged with the community at the local level. So, there's charities and nonprofits and NGOs everywhere around the world dedicated to disability inclusion. So, there's an opportunity there for you to learn because a lot of this is cultural, there's cultural differences around the world. So, I'm speaking to you as someone with my own experience, you know, growing up in the in America, United States. And even that's changed over the years. It's changed with the different regions I've moved around, too. So, I would just encourage people to have a healthy sense of curiosity, balanced with a sense of respect, and the willingness to educate yourself. And I'd like to ask Alvaro a question sort of related to this. Like, what would you tell our supply partners who are daunted by getting started with accessibility and disability inclusion?

[00:30:52] **Alvaro** I would suggest like give it a try, right? Like do a test trial with offering your service right to someone who has a disability closer to your community. I mean, one third of the world's population has a disability, so every

person knows someone who has a disability. Reach out to that person, invite them to your service, try it out, see how it works, and then move forward. Understanding better through professional support as companies, as Wheel the World or others, and then continue understanding how to go step by step, improving your services to become more inclusive.

[00:31:34] **Brandon** All right. We've talked about your company and advice for travel providers, and I think our listeners will agree your passion for travel for everyone is palpable. You're in a room of like-minded folks. You know, I love travel, too, and I also use this podcast for inspiration. So, we got to do some talk about bucket list trips. What is your bucket list trip? I'm going to go first. I'll hand it to Toby, and we'll finish off with Alvaro. Sound good? All right. For those of you listening to season one, you know that I'm a huge fan of the country of Vietnam. I only was able to go to Ho Chi Minh City first time around. Bucket list trip is to do a river tour in Vietnam. And I want to go to both the, you know, the northern part of the country and some of the southern coastal parts of the country. So, I get a nice mix of art and culture and some beach time to relax. But I'm excited to get back to Vietnam.

[00:32:28] **Toby** Oh, that sounds really awesome, Brandon, and I hear Vietnam is actually super accessible for people with mobility disabilities. Great place to visit, I'm sure, for lots of our travelers. My bucket list I want to talk about today is, because I love sailing, I want to sail around Indonesia, which I think is something like comprised of like 18,000 islands. But I definitely want to hit — I probably can't make all of those — but I want to hit a bunch of islands, Indonesia. And I love the culture, I love the music, I love the food. That's my top bucket list item today.

[00:33:02] **Alvaro** I would say the bucket list trip. I have met in person with Toby twice and the two times Toby has asked me about Torres del Paine in Patagonia. So, my bucket list trip will be we go with Toby to Patagonia.

[00:33:16] **Toby** Yeah, totally.

[00:33:21] **Brandon** There you have it, Toby. Better get those hiking boots ready.

[00:33:24] **Toby** Oh, that was so great. I'm really flattered that he would say that.

[00:33:28] **Brandon** Thanks again, Toby, for taking the time to do us with me today. I know it's not always easy to carve out time from your busy day for something like this, but I do appreciate your expertise. Learning more about attitudinal discrimination was something that opened my eyes. In addition to kind of the great conversations that you're bringing forward to Expedia Group every day, making sure that travel is more accessible. We're going to link you to some resources in the show description if you'd like to learn more about Wheel the World and how they're powering travel. Thanks again for joining us for season two of the Powering Travel podcast. We want to hear from you. So, connect with us at PoweringTravel@ExpediaGroup.com. Subscribe to get notified when new episodes are live and be sure to rate and review the show. That's how more people find us. We have a jam-packed season for you. It's going to be even better than season one. Thanks for listening.