

The Accessible Travel Talk Show

Episode 2: Circling the Globe in a Wheelchair with Blandine Even

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Guests: Blandine Even of [1000 Discoveries on 4 Wheels](#)

Host: John Morris of [Wheelchair Travel](#)

Transcript by John Morris

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Announcer: You're listening to The Accessible Travel Talk Show. In each episode, we'll explore new destinations, activities and ways to travel, inspiring you to open your world. Now, please welcome our host, WheelchairTravel.org founder, John Morris.

John: Joining us today from Belgium is my friend Blandine Even, founder of the disability and travel blog 1000 Discoveries on 4 Wheels. Blandine uses a wheelchair, but says that the extra work required to plan and organize accessible trips has not diminished her desire to travel the world. Welcome, Blandine.

Blandine: Hi, John.

John: It's such a pleasure to have you on.

Blandine: It's a pleasure to be your guest. Thanks for the invitation.

John: It has been about a year since I last saw you in Portugal.

Blandine: Yeah, a bit less than a year. It was in October. And it was a great trip, a bit too short. I hope I can go there again.

John: We could talk about a thousand discoveries. See what I did there? [Chuckles] But since we only have a short period of time, I'd like to talk about your trip around the world, which you started in 2016. What made you decide to circumnavigate the globe?

Blandine: Well, that won't surprise you, But I've always loved traveling. So when I was a child, my biggest dream was to go on a trip around the world. But, you know, I wasn't sure it would come true one day. Belgium is a small country, so I had traveled a bit in Europe with my parents and my first and only trip outside Europe was when I was 17. So I went to the U.S. as an exchange student after I graduated from high school in Belgium. I spent a year in Washington State. I was living with host families, going to an American high school. So that was an amazing experience. Then a few years later, I had just graduated from university. And I was trying to find a job. But with a wheelchair, of course, it wasn't easy. Then, one of my former schoolmates told me he was doing an internship in Australia. There was a possibility for me to go there the next year. So, as you can imagine, I immediately said yes. And as I was planning my trip, I realized while Australia is on the other side of the world, so - why not take this opportunity to just make a few stops on the way there and maybe on the way back?

John: I think I think that that is a great idea. If you're going to travel all across the world, you might as well stop at a few places along the way. How did you pick your itinerary? What what did you do to build that and prepare?

Blandine: The thing is, I want to see almost every country in the world. Even North Korea.

John: Oh, you know, North Korea, while you know, it's a horrible regime and all of that, I have wanted to go there for a very long time. And then I recently heard from one of my readers who actually did go on a trip to North Korea with his wheelchair. And he said that it was very inaccessible, which you would imagine being the case. But it did sound like a lot of fun.

Blandine: Wow. So maybe one day. Well, I didn't go to North Korea. But while I made choices, it was not easy. I knew I had to be in Sydney in January for my internship. So the first thing I did was checking the weather because, you know, it's not good to go to some parts of the world at some time of the year. Then as I was flying with my chair, which, you know, it's quite stressful and there's always a risk of it being damaged. I checked which countries had direct flights between them. I made sure the companies would not refuse to take my chair because unfortunately, that can happen.

John: Air Asia [Coughs twice]

Blandine: Well, yeah, I haven't traveled with them, so. And finally, I did some research about accessibility in places I was planning to go to. Just to make sure it would be possible to find some reasonably accessible accommodation and transportation. By the way, I found some great information on a web sites called WheelchairTravel.org, [laughs] you know.

John: Well, I should tell everyone that you were not paid to say that.

Blandine: No, I confirm. [laughs]

John: Obviously, I think there are a lot of other things that travelers should consider as well. One of the first things that I have to deal with, what I'm planning to go abroad is to make sure that, you know, my visas are in order. And I'm sure that that you had to do that as well. But also, I feel like you said you left in September and you had to be in Australia in January. So you had three months to explore the world. And I imagine, you know, that's that's a long time to be not only away from home, but on the road.

Blandine: Yeah, so I was on the road for three months, but I was away from home for a year. I had to pack clothes and equipment and everything for a year, basically. In one backpack. So, again, I had to make some choices. But thankfully, when you live with, like, two pair of pants and five t shirts for you, it's very easy - you don't have to worry about what you're gonna wear every day. I kind of like it.

John: Yeah. You know, I think when I'm traveling, every few months I choose a new wardrobe and it's all set for me because everything has to fit in one bag. And of course, you have to deal with things like getting laundry done and the like when you're traveling. But the fashion choices are easy. Just hopefully you choose something that's in season.

Blandine: Yeah, yeah.

John: So Blandine, you, I mean, you went from Europe to Asia you said, to kick off the trip. Where did you stop first?

Blandine: So my first destination. It's a place you know about and you like, it's - it was Beijing in China. Honestly, I was a bit worried because it was my first time in Asia. As I said before, the only country I had been to outside Europe was the U.S. And everyone had been telling me, you know, it's hard to travel in China. Chinese people don't speak English. And actually, it was amazing. And people, I mean, everyone I met was smiling, happy to help. And the food was good. I mean, sometimes I was wondering what I was eating, but it was good.

John: I love Beijing. And I also love the Peking Duck. It is one of my favorite foods in the world. But one thing that I did notice about Beijing compared to other cities in China like Shanghai or Hong Kong was that I was a bit of an oddity there in that I didn't see very many other wheelchair users. And a couple times when I was using the stair lift in the Metro, which we'll talk about or I'll ask you about in a minute, people were taking photos of me using that thing. And I thought that that was kind of funny, that I was I was a bit of a celebrity there because of my wheelchair primarily. But Beijing, I think, you know, obviously it's one of my favorite cities, but it's also one of the least accessible that I've gone to multiple times. And I'm just curious, like, how did you how did you manage that inaccessibility and get on there?

Blandine: Oh, it's funny because for me, from what I remember, it wasn't that inaccessible, like the sidewalks, for example, for me, I felt it was not too bad because it was not worse than the one in Brussels. And the good thing is there are a lot of cycle lanes, so if you have an electric chair, if you like to go fast, you can just mingle with all the scooters and motorbikes. Then public transport, I had found some information, but not too much. So I was not sure what would be accessible. So when that's the case, I always book a hotel in the city center. So in Beijing, my hotel was like fifteen minutes walk from the Forbidden City. I took a normal taxi once - I asked my hotel to call one which is easier than waving a cab in the Chinese street when you're in a wheelchair and don't speak Chinese. And I used the subway a few times, also. It takes some time to find the lift or stair lift - sometimes it doesn't work. But I always managed to reach my destination.

John: So yeah, the the last few times that I'd been to Beijing, you know, things are getting a little less accessible just because a lot of the infrastructure in public transportation is deteriorating a little bit on the accessibility side. But I am a little bit

hopeful because the Olympics, assuming we get beyond this coronavirus by 2022, I think - I think it's 2022. There will be another Olympics there in Beijing, which will hopefully lead to more investment in accessibility. But, you know, one of the things I think that was very difficult for me and I couldn't figure out last time I was there, was getting to the Great Wall of China. And so I'm curious - Did you make it to the Great Wall?

Blandine: Of course. As I told you before, going to China and not seeing the Great Wall, it's like going to Belgium and not eating chocolate. So I had to go.

John: Well, don't tell anyone, but I'm not really a big fan of chocolate.

Blandine: Okay, bye!

John: So, I mean, how how was the Great Wall? Like, what was your experience like?

Blandine: I know I use that word a lot, but - amazing - again. And it's you know, I was planning to book a tour with my hotel, but I was very lucky. I'm always lucky when I travel. On my first day in Beijing, I met a Belgian woman who was there visiting her Chinese friends. So they invited me to the restaurant for my first day. I had a wonderful Chinese dinner. They gave me their phone number. And a few days later they asked me, oh, well, do you want to come to the Great Wall with us?

John: Absolutely, I do!

Blandine: So we went to Mutianyahu. I'm not sure how to say it. That's one of the two parts of the wall which is supposed to be accessible. And I know you went to the other part.

John: Yeah, the other part is Badaling. And it is, well, I can't compare it to the Mutianyahu - I have no idea how to pronounce that either, but it was very accessible at Badaling, insofar as there was a ramp that would allow me in my wheelchair to get up onto the Great Wall, but only on a very limited portion. And unfortunately, it wasn't very picturesque, but it was still, you know, obviously getting on the Great Wall is an

incredible experience. And so, I mean, you went there. Did you get on top of the Great Wall?

Blandine: Yeah, well, the part where I went to you had to first take a bus, then cable car, then you see lots of stairs. So there are some ramps. You can see the wheelchair sign. So you think, OK, It's accessible. But the thing is, their ramps were made over the stairs, so there's like 50 degrees incline. Well, as you know, there are a 800 million people in China, so you're never on your own. There's always someone to help. And Chinese people, they love to help. So there's about a dozen of other Chinese tourists who helped me get there. They pushed my chair. Then they pulled it with some ropes up and down the ramps for an hour. And we made it, so I was able to get there and well over maybe 50 meters. And that was incredible. It's clearly one of the best memories of this trip and of my life, I think.

John: Oh, wow. Yeah, I think that's wonderful. What I will say is, even though I can't compare the two supposedly accessible sites outside of Beijing on the Great Wall, I can say that Badaling, in my experience, was much more accessible than Blandine described at her site. Of course, Badaling does not have a cable car and probably some of the beauty that's out there. But if what you want to do is just get on the Great Wall in the easiest and most accessible way possible on a trip to Beijing, I would say go to Badaling. But, you know, I think Beijing obviously is a great city. But this was the first stop on your world tour. So where where did you go next?

Blandine: So after Beijing, I went to Xian by train. You know I love traveling by train.

John: Europeans!

Blandine: I saw the terracotta army. Then I took another train, the night train, to Shanghai, which is an interesting city, quite different from Beijing. More international, I would say.

John: Definitely. Definitely. I think Shanghai was a city, I think where I don't want to say anything offensive, but I just felt as though it was a more worldly city. And so I think there is also maybe more exposure to disability there, because no one was taking

photos of me and my wheelchair. And I was really disappointed because I thought that I was a celebrity in China. But that apparently is only in Beijing.

Blandine: You are a celebrity.

John: Oh, well, thank you. Thank you, Blandine. So after China, you told me that you went to Cambodia and Vietnam, right?

Blandine: Yeah.

John: Vietnam has been a dream destination of mine for many years. But, I haven't been able to sort out transportation with my power wheelchair. How did you manage to get around?

Blandine: Yeah, I forgot to explain that. But I was not traveling with my heavy power chair. You know, I have a Permobil chair - pretty similar to yours. It's great. It's comfortable. But the only problem is it's impossible to lift it. So you can only go to places that are perfect, accessible. I cannot use a manual chair on my own. So before this trip, I bought a small electric wheel which can be attached to the front of my chair. It only weights like 10 kilos, it can fit in the normal car. It goes quite fast also, like 18 kilometer per hour for mine. I'm not sure how that in miles.

John: Well, that's about double the speed of my power wheelchair, so.

Blandine: I'm not paid to say it, but mine is an Italian brand. It's called free rides. That's great. I know that other brands like Batak or Firefly, so if people are interested.

John: I think that that is great. And I'm definitely jealous of the speed that you had with that attachment. So but, were you I guess then with the manual wheelchair, you were able to use more typical forms of of transportation?

Blandine: Yeah, you probably noticed that wheelchair accessible taxis are usually quite expensive. So the good thing is in Vietnam and Cambodia, I was able to use just normal taxis, trains, buses, tuk-tuks, even boat. You know, I went on Ha Long Bay, for example. So I didn't have to worry about having perfectly wheelchair accessible transport.

John: So, something that, since you brought up tuk-tuks, I want to mention, and I don't know if you saw these in Cambodia while you were there, but when I first went to Cambodia, it was only because there was a wheelchair accessible tuk-tuk with a ramp that I could roll my power wheelchair onto. And so I was able to explore the capital city of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, with that wheelchair accessible tuk-tuk. Now, I'm sure that you went to more exciting destinations like Siem Reap, but I was stuck in the capital city at that time.

Blandine: Yeah, I also used the accessible tuk-tuk. Of course, I had to try it when I heard about it.

John: Well, you know, I just think that that is such a simple accessibility innovation. Let's put a ramp on the back of this tuk-tuk so that wheelchair users can use it. And it's not going to cost a whole lot of money to make that a possibility. I wish, I wish that the back accessible tuk-tuk would make its way to Vietnam and then I would be able to get around there. But, obviously, you got to live out my dream trip to Vietnam. What? What about it was special to you? What do you remember the most?

Blandine: Can I say everything? Yeah, I love everything. Landscapes, markets, museums, mostly people and food also. People are going to think I'm thinking all the time. But people in Vietnam they were very kind, like in China. But in Vietnam, I didn't even have to ask for help. People just came to see me when they saw me needing help. And obviously, it's one of the least accessible country I've been to. But actually, I was able to go everywhere. Seriously. As for the food, I tried everything and I loved everything. All the Vietnamese typical food.

John: That really sounds great. I really hope that I will be able to make it to Vietnam at some point. But I always love hearing your stories about that trip. But let's jump continents now, because if everyone recalls you were taking a three month tour of Asia, but then you had to go to Australia for this internship. And how long were you actually in Australia?

Blandine: So I arrived in Sydney two days before New Year's Eve. And as a note, as a nice New Year's celebration in Sydney, I watched the fireworks from the rooftop of my

hostel. It's probably - it's the most impressive fireworks I ever saw. So I went to Melbourne by train a long 12 hour journey because trains in Australia, it's not like in Europe. I spent a few days there. I saw the Great Ocean Road. And I went back to Sydney where I was working from January until June.

John: You know, Australia is a well, it's a country and a continent that has eluded me for far too long. I, I have had to cancel two trips just in the last year. So I'm excited to ask you more about this exploration that that you embarked on. I think that, you know, Australia is, it's the smallest of all the continents, but it's still really big. Right? What all did you get to see while you were there?

Blandine: Yeah, it's huge. So, of course, I didn't see everything. And as I say, the trains are not really developed there. So I was lucky that my mom and sister, they traveled all the way from Belgium to Australia in July, so we rented a car and did a three weeks road trip along the East Coast. So we went from Sydney to Cairns, the Great Barrier Reef and a few Dream Islands. Then we flew to Uluru, you've probably heard about this huge reds rock in the middle of nowhere. It's really impressive. And then back to Sydney.

John: So one of the things that I hear about people visiting Australia, New Zealand and the like is that there are some pretty incredible adaptive activities that you're allowed to - that it's possible to participate in as a wheelchair user or if you have other forms of disability. And so I'm wondering, did you participate in any of those really extreme adventures?

Blandine: Maybe not extreme, but a little bit. You know, I'm in a wheelchair. I know for some people it's like so sad. But I've always tried to focus on the things I can do and not the things that I cannot do or can't do anymore. And fortunately, there are a lot of things I can do. So in Australia, I did some scuba diving or the Great Barrier Reef. I saw some little fishes and turtles.

John: Did you find Nemo?

Blandine: Yeah, or maybe that was his cousin. I don't know. Yeah. And in New Zealand they have, they actually have a special company there that does adventure things for

disabled people. And I was able to try paragliding for the first time, which was also incredible. And yeah, you know, when you're underwater or up in the air, you don't need your chair. You don't have to worry about steps or accessibility problems. So that feeling of freedom is - it's wonderful.

John: That sounds incredible. And it's making me feel even worse that I have not made it there yet to to experience these things.

Blandine: You will, you will.

John: So one more continent before we have to wrap up. South America, I believe that you stopped there on your way back to Europe after your internship. And I'm excited to talk about the continent because I just started exploring South America two years ago and I visited four of the 12 countries. Argentina was my first, followed by Uruguay, Colombia and then finally Brazil. Can you tell us about this trip to South America?

Blandine: Well, I've never been to where Uruguay or Columbia and I was less than a day in Argentina. I'm not sure that counts. I also want to explore more of Latin America. You know, one of my dream is going to the Machu Picchu. I love inaccessible place!
[laughs]

John: Mine, too.

Blandine: And so you're right, after Australia, I flew over the Pacific Ocean. But again, I like to make stops on my way somewhere. So I stopped in New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Easter Island. Wow.

John: Yeah, Yeah, I think I think I'm getting really jealous right now.

Blandine: I know, Usually when I mention these destinations, people start hating me, sorry. Well, Easter Island, I have to talk about it. It's technically part of Latin America. You know, it's part of Chile, but it's the most remote inhabited island in the world. When you are there, you feel like you are far from everything. It's a very special atmosphere. I never thought I would go there one day. Sometimes when I look at my pictures, I still have a hard time realizing I've been there actually. And it's not really accessible. But the

good thing is it's small. There's only one village, one main road, which is 18 kilometres long. So I was able to get around pretty easily actually? And then after Easter Island, I flew to Santiago on the main continent.

John: Oh, wow, you know, I actually connected on a flight for a few hours in Santiago, but I never left the airport. So I can't count Chile as a country that I've actually visited.

Blandine: I only spent a few days in Santiago and I didn't see much, but I remember I went to the highest skyscraper in Latin America. I know you also love skyscrapers, so you have to add that's one to your bucket list.

John: Definitely. Definitely. For sure. So what was your last stop on this South American journey?

Blandine: Last stop on my way around the world journey, actually, it was Rio in Brazil. I know you've been there, too. And I really enjoyed it. Of course, I read about the city's bad reputation. So I was a bit more careful than I was in other countries. Like usually I had dinner in my hotel. I didn't use my camera when it didn't feel safe. But nothing bad happened to me. And most people I met, they were nice. Like everywhere else I would say, yeah, I forgot to say my wallet had been stolen in my hotel in Tahiti, so I didn't have it anymore.

John: Well, you know, I think - now we hear about Tahiti. So that's another, another incredible stop on your journey. But, you know, my wallet has only been stolen in one place. And that was in Los Angeles, California. So you look after your wallet if you ever visit Los Angeles. And to the people of Los Angeles, I'm sorry to drag you under under the rug here, but, you know, I think Rio is really an incredible city. I fell in love with it almost immediately. What what was your experience like there?

Blandine: Yeah. And as for the wallet, I was saying the good thing when you don't have your wallet anymore is you can't get it stolen. You know, so I was not worried about it. And I also loved Rio. I found it surprisingly accessible. I knew they also made some improvements for the Olympics, like in Beijing. So there should be Olympics everywhere. So everywhere would be accessible.

John: Absolutely.

Blandine: I used the subway almost every day. Not every station is accessible, but most of them I think. I also drove many kilometres along the cycle lanes. Then as a tourist, of course, I went to the Sugarloaf Mountain where there was a cable car, which is perfectly accessible. Then the Christ statue is a bit more complicated to get to, it's via a small train, but it's doable. So I would definitely recommend Rio to disabled traveler who are looking for an accessible destination in South America.

John: Yeah, I think - Now, granted, I've only seen a portion of the continent, but I would say that Rio and Buenos Aires are probably the two most accessible cities on the continent and Rio for me would take the lead just because of the much wider accessibility of public transport there. The city buses were a little difficult, but the metro was accessible and I really got on there really well. So looking back on this long trip around the world, would you have done anything differently?

Blandine: No, not really. The only thing is I wouldn't have gone to Japan. Sorry. I know a lot of people want to go there, but my three weeks there were like a living nightmare. But. Well, that's another story.

John: Yeah. We will we will have to get you back on to discuss that in the future. Maybe when I've built up a little more goodwill with my readers in talking about all the wonderful things that you can do, we talk about the darker side and accessible travel maybe. But Blandine, I just checked the clock and it seems that we have run out of time. And so I'd like you to tell listeners where they can find you online.

Blandine: Well, I haven't been very active online recently, but people might find some useful information on my web site. It's called Mille Découvertes Sur 4 Roulettes. Sorry. It's in French, as you can guess. But there's always Google Translate. And of course, you can always send me an e-mail or Facebook message in English if you have some questions.

John: And I will be including the link to your Web site in the show notes on this podcast episode, so people will be able to get there. If you visit Blandine's web site through the Google Chrome browser, it will automatically translate the text from French into your

native language. And so Blandine, I'm really happy that you came to tell us about your incredible trip around the world. And I hope that you will join us again for a future episode.

Blandine: Oh, thank you, John.

Announcer: Thanks for listening to The Accessible Travel Talk Show. To join the conversation and access the show notes, visit TravelTalkShow.org. And don't forget to keep up with John at WheelchairTravel.org, your source for accessible travel inspiration. See you next time.