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: Today, I'm joined by Ryan Smith from Australia. Ryan is a wheelchair travel vlogger and graphic designer. His favorite Venn diagram would be one where travel, wheelchairs and culture overlap. He makes videos and writes about accessibility at his web site FreewheelWeekends.com.au, where his goal is to make the kind of travel resources he would like to use. He is a believer of disability advocacy through visibility and lives in Melbourne, Australia, with too many ferns and not enough soy milk. That that is funny, Ryan. You can follow his website on social media and all of that, and we will share those links at the end. But, Ryan, it is so nice to have you on today.

Ryan: G'day John, great to be here.

John: G'day. I love that. I will never be allowed to say that in conversation with anyone.

Ryan: I'm not allowed to use y'all either.

John: Oh, that is true. That is distinctly American. But, you know, I - We've been talking a lot recently and we connected really through your videos. You shared one of your videos with me and I thought that it was fantastic and needed to be seen by more of my
readers. And I was very happy that you agreed to write a guest post on WheelchairTravel.org to share those videos. And I hope that my readers and the listeners here will check out some of the resources that you have created.

**Ryan:** It's my pleasure, John, and it's great to connect with you. It's wonderful to be part of this broader community. It's easy to get wrapped up in your own little world and you have such a good reputation out there of being the place to go when it comes to wheelchair travel. So it's a, it's a real pleasure.

**John:** Well, I appreciate that. I don't know if anyone listening out there has seen my YouTube channel, but I made an attempt to create some videos very early on in the life of my blog. And they were absolutely terrible, cringeworthy, horrible videos. But, you know, now I can send people looking for videos about accessible travel to Ryan, who has so much experience in design and video creation. His works are really wonderful.

**Ryan:** That's very generous, very kind of you, John.

**John:** So one of the areas that you have been exploring as of late is Egypt. And, you know, I say this about a lot of destinations - The fact that it's not a destination that I ever expected to be able to travel to as a wheelchair user. You know, after my car accident, I thought, well, this is the end of my travel life. And if I get to go anywhere, it'll be maybe to New York City, but certainly not to Cairo, Egypt. But here on this podcast, I have been there and you have been there. So we have two wheelchair users who have gone to Egypt. And I don't know, I guess I'd like to ask first impressions. What did you think of it when you went there and why did you go?

**Ryan:** Well, we went to Egypt - It wasn't actually on the top of my list. I have to be honest, there are a lot of places that I haven't travelled that would probably, you know, pip Egypt as a first place to visit. But my partner is very adamant about not visiting the same place twice, and she's travelled much more widely than I have, would you believe, and she's a wheelchair user as well. And so Egypt and that area of the world, we were debating about Jordan and being in that area. And so we decided that Egypt and Israel were going to be at the two countries that we were going to visit in in depth. But Egypt was incredible. And I don't regret a second. It's very much a place of contrasts. There is this desert, and the very fine dust that sits around the pyramids and across a
lot of the land there and around the Nile. The Nile, as you know, is the lifeblood of the country. That's what really brings it to life, both from an agriculture and transportation point of view. It's sort of the center of the country, if you like, in a lot of ways. We did a lot of planning and as you know, John, as a wheelchair traveler, it's something you almost can't do enough of. And so we were very, I don't want to say meticulous, but we we spent some time - we spent a fair bit of time going over our kind of key destinations that we wanted to visit. We had a pretty good idea of what to expect from an access point of view. And we were surprised that it was more accessible than we thought. Particularly the older temples and attractions that you might think wouldn't be accessible. The pyramid...

John: I think, you know, I eased my way into my trips to Egypt. I actually didn't go there truly intentionally. The reason that I went there, some people know this about me, but but I'll tell the world now, I'm an addict of airline miles and points and earning status on air carriers to get perks like upgrades. And a couple of, I guess a few years ago now, Qatar Airways had mispriced some fares that originated in Cairo. Cairo had just - or Egypt had just devalued its currency, and so you could secure business class fares from Egypt to the United States for seven or eight hundred dollars round trip. And so I decided that as an easy way to get status, I would fly on these fares. And so I booked several of them, which meant that I had to be in Egypt, in Cairo three different times. And so that's how I initially got there. And the first time, I only stayed for a night in an airport hotel, which is actually connected to the Cairo airport. On my next trip to Cairo, I stayed for four or five days and then was able to explore much more and go out to the pyramids and whatnot. And the reason that I was able to develop, you know, the courage to spend more than a night there was because I had found an accessible taxi service that uses the typical London black cabs. And I don't know if you use those while you were there, but it was certainly a benefit to me because it was accessible transportation that was rather affordable.

Ryan: We did. Yes. When we were in Cairo, we used the London black cabs. We found them very useful. We also and you know this about travelling in some particular places, that - Your connection with the hotel is the connection to the rest of the world. So they will have access to people on the ground that can help you with tickets, with transportation. It's almost like a fixer. Your hotel can be your fixer if you like. So we developed a good relationship with a taxi driver down in Luxor, actually. And we hired
him for three or four days running, and he was he was our key, our guide to that city. And he was absolutely invaluable. And we developed such a rapport with him that he knew some people that could take us out on a felucca, which we couldn't get to otherwise, which is one of the boats that sails down the Nile in Luxor. We had him help us out at at the Valley of the Kings. He actually invited us to his house and we met his wife and his children. It was incredible experience. And so, as you know, these are the types of experiences that you can't - you stumble across and you can't organize or plan. But when they do happen, they really make travel that much more worthwhile.

**John:** Absolutely, I think, you know, my driver, the first time in Cairo was wonderful as well. And just last year, I went to another city in Egypt, Sharm el Sheikh, which is one of the resort towns along the coastline. And my driver was with me. One day I took a trip to St. Catherine's Monastery, which I've written about in quite a bit of detail for those who would be interested. And I was in the car with him for eight hours that day. So we had plenty of time to talk and learn about each other and figure out what was up. But yes, I found the taxi drivers to be an enormous resource. And then also the staff in the hotel, the concierge, like you say, was able to to sort things out. I remember when I was in Cairo or really Giza by the pyramids, I stayed at a hotel by the pyramids and they were able to secure my tickets for the light show that occurs - I don't know if it's every night there, but they light up the pyramids and the Sphinx to play this beautiful story about the history of what occurred there. And so that was memorable as well,

**Ryan:** I'm sure, Yeah. Our taxi driver that took us to - Hamad was his name - That really welcomed us to Egypt and really had so much pride in showing us his country and the sights in Luxor. He, when we went to the Valley of the Kings, it was the first time he had been since high school. And it's another reminder that you forget the things that are in your own backyard. And so he was, his eyes were wide open, and he was looking at this place again, which has so much history and which sits in his backyard effectively that he maybe neglected to look at or to visit with his children or even on his own, to to take a look and remember that this is, you know, part of our culture and part of our history. And he was really enlightened or enlivened - is the right word for - after that visit, during that visit.

**John:** I think one of the things that I try to remember when I'm visiting some of these iconic sites around the world is that there are many people within whatever country it is
that I'm visiting that may wait their entire lives to make that journey, to see that. Obviously you get, I assume that you got from Cairo to Luxor on an airplane, which may not be accessible to the majority of people in the society. I think the first time that I really recognized the - I guess I would call it the blessing or the gift of being able to go and explore all of these places around the world is when I went to the Great Wall of China for the first time. And there, I, you know, I expected to see a bunch of tourists from America and Great Britain and Australia. And I was very surprised to see that the vast majority of the people who were there were actually Chinese people. And they were there and telling me that they had waited all their lives to make this journey, to actually see the Great Wall that is so iconic and that everyone in the world knows exists. Everyone knows that the Great Wall of China is an impressive construction feat. But people are waiting forever to see that. And so it is so wonderful that the different countries that we visit, and in particular Egypt, in the sense of this conversation, that they are able to to share their history and heritage with us.

Ryan: Yeah, we found an enormous amount of pride with the Egyptians to show us the remarkable history and really share with us that culture.

John: So Valley of the Kings, when I first wrote about Cairo, Egypt on my web site, someone went through all the places in Egypt that they had been and they said everything is inaccessible, you should never go there, it's terrible. And I said, well, you know, I enjoyed Cairo. But, you know, everything I've heard about Luxor is that it can be a little bit difficult. How how did you find it there?

Ryan: Yeah, isn't accessibility such a loaded word and such a vast scale of meanings for accessibility. That's maybe a conversation for another time to go into detail. Luxor we found accessible. Now, we did have the privilege of staying at a rather good hotel, so that was a good start. And again, we traveled with our trusted taxi driver who we used for three or four days in a row. The thing about the older attractions and the historic places we visited and you'll know this around the pyramids is that, of course, these constructions were made 4000 years ago where they were using maybe mules and donkeys and carts and horses, and so a lot of the time we found ramps. Now, they weren't ADA kind of gradient accessible ramps, but they were ramps nonetheless. And with a little bit of help, we got around it. There were occasional sort of steps here and there. But for the most part, these places are relatively accessible. At the ancient
temples and the burial grounds and, of course, the pyramids. And again, accessibility is as I said, a very loaded word. And I think this, and I was reading about adaptability and, you know, compliance and adherence let's say. You can comply to accessibility, but not really be accessible and you can adhere and really want to help people and have an attitude of really welcoming people. And you kind of make do. And if people really want to show you their country and they're really excited for you to visit and take the most out of your your journey with them, then a lot of the times they'll find a way to make it work for you. And I think this is a really great way to make a connection with people, too. If you don't have someone there immediately with you that can help you, introduce yourself, put your hand up, ask a stranger. I think this is a wonderful way to break the ice and get a connection with somebody. And it's not just them helping you, you are actually helping them as well, because at the end of the day, they will go home feeling good about themselves and they will know that they've done something good in their day to help somebody else in the world, which I think is inherent with all of us. We all want to help one another.

**John:** Well, I always say one of my number one tips to people who intend to travel with a wheelchair or in general - whether they have a disability or not - is to never be afraid to ask for help. So many people in the world are good. I think the vast majority of us are good people who are willing to lend a hand if we are able to do so. And I have had so many opportunities made accessible to me because of the efforts of others to share that with me. And it seems like you had many of those experiences in Egypt as well. But yeah, you know, Valley of the Kings, I'm very jealous that you've got to go there. And I saw your video of the Karnak temples. And based on what appears in your video, it actually looked fairly easy for you to get around there in your wheelchair.

**Ryan:** Yes, Karnak Temple was was relatively flat. The same with Luxor Temple. Valley of the Kings. So there's 60, around 60 different burial grounds or tombs at Valley of the Kings. We visited four and they were accessible. They weren't strictly accessible, and I'm doing my inverted commas with my fingers here, but they were they were doable. Right. And so there might be a small step of a few inches and maybe some ridges on a ramp here or there. Might be a little bit steep, but very doable. And we got to see some tremendous work, like incredible paint work and engravings and carvings and just beautiful, beautiful work. And of course, because it's underground, it's been preserved really well. They've done a relatively good job on the access there, and I don't know if it
was intentional - my thoughts are it's probably not. But the first entry way to a lot of these temples is wooden floor boards with enough room to turn, to turn around. There's enough space to sort of stand back or sit back and have a really good look at the walls and the details and the carvings in the colors. So they are, for all intents and purposes, wheelchair friendly. And they are doable. Definitely doable.

**John:** Now, I remember from a recent conversation that we had, a Skype or a phone call or something, you had raised the point that - In countries that maybe are not as developed in terms of infrastructure and accessibility, and thus they don't have some of the laws that you would find maybe in the United States or in Australia, that there really can potentially be a lot more opportunity to be a true explorer there with a disability. And I brought up an example in our earlier conversation about one of my visits to Germany. Berlin is one of my favorite cities in the world and I have a strange attraction to tall buildings and towers. But - and there is a wonderful tower, the Berlin fernsehturm. It's a TV tower on Museum Island in Berlin, and I want to go to the top of it to take a look at the city and the skyline. But I'm not allowed to because the only emergency exit route is a staircase. And so there's no accessible way out if, you know, in the very off chance the building catches on fire or something. And so now, you know, when I was in Cairo, I'm sure that the same was true of the Cairo Tower, which is the tallest building in Egypt. But I was able to go to the top of that building. And so I don't know if you have any thoughts to share from your trip where maybe you were able to do something or someone made an accommodation that might not have been totally safe, but that was allowed in Egypt and might not have been if you were trying to explore in Australia.

**Ryan:** Yeah, look, I don't think anybody has had a really memorable, wonderful adventure in a car park where it's flat and accessible and safe. You know, everybody wants to feel as though they have - at least, I want to feel as though I've overcome something. So I've faced a challenge, big or small and I've made it work and I've overcome this thing. And you're quite right, there are probably - it's probably legal, probably comes down to legal requirements and laws in place and around insurance and the idea of keeping visitors safe - is sometimes to our own detriment I think. Your example you were talking about before, in Berlin, is a surprising one to me because it's a first world country and you would expect it to be completely accessible and welcoming and et cetera. We had an example of that at the pyramids. And so we were wandering around, not really sure how to get around - the access around the Great Pyramid itself
is fairly rocky and it's broken stone and it's not particularly great wheelchair access there. And so before I knew it, we were getting up onto onto camels, which were parked nearby. And, yeah, we were assisted up onto the camels, they looked after our wheelchairs, the cameleers ensured that we got up there. There was no - we didn't sign any waivers or insurance agreements, we weren't given helmets or safety gear or any kind of training or anything like that. They just helped us up onto the camel and said, okay, well, let's have a little look around. And so that is an example, I think, of a bit of a can do attitude, I think. I don't think there was any negligence there. And again, I think it comes down to an attitude that, of course, we want you to have the best time that we can offer you at your visit at the pyramids. Of course, money was exchanged, so there's that incentive as well. But, you know, what we didn't do is have to go through kind of any kind of testing or legal training or any kind of waiver signing or anything like that. So I think this is an example where, in some cases, accessibility legislation kind of gets in the way of having a good time or having an adventure. It's not for everybody. And of course, risk is inherent in these activities. But you need to work at what you're most comfortable with. But going to Egypt and riding a camel around the pyramids. Wow. What an incredible adventure. What an experience.

**John:** Had you ridden a camel prior to that at any point in your life?

**Ryan:** No, no. I'm hoping to again, though. It was quite a good experience. Given that we're in lockdown here and we won't be travelling internationally very much soon, we're looking at travelling into the middle of Australia into what I call the Red Centre, the outback where it's all dust and bush. And there's actually a lot of camels out there. A lot of camel tours in the middle of Australia, there's even wild camels, which we have to cull and tame and all the rest. But, yeah, I'm looking forward to doing that again. But no, that was my first experience.

**John:** Well, you know, the first time that I had - was presented with the opportunity to ride a camel was in Dubai, but I opted not to. I said, you know, one day I'm going to make it to the pyramids and I would like to ride a camel in front of the pyramids as I, you know, see so many Instagram influencers doing. They go and they get their photo on the camel. And, of course, the pyramids in the background. I said, I'm gonna wait until that time. And so I did do that as well. I took that risk. Unfortunately for me, being an amputee below the knee, I have no feet to put in the stirrups of the camel. And I also
only have one hand. So I, I think that riding the camel was perhaps as close as I have ever come to death. And so I don’t know that I’ll be doing it again. But I did get the photograph. And so that was a wonderful experience. And like you, I had help getting up on the camel. And it was a memorable experience. And I think that some of those are the exciting things that we travel for, the death defying stunts in my case. And that creates a true memory that will stick with you and, you know, throughout life and be something that you recall fondly.

**Ryan:** You’ve got the photographic evidence too. You’ve got that. You’ve got that picture in you. And you waited and you got exactly what you wanted. I like that. I think that’s the sign of the determination and character, I think.

**John:** Well, I don’t want to critique my taxi driver too bad, he took the photo and, you know, the photo was not so Instagram worthy, but I tried to do my best with it. Apart from that, no issues with my taxi driver. He got me everywhere that I needed to go. And he was wonderful and friendly. And while I didn’t get to go meet his family, he certainly talked to me about them quite often. And I really grew a fondness for Egypt. I’ve been back several times since. And last year, after going to Sharm el Sheikh, I went back to Cairo and one of my very good friends from - who lives in the UK now - flew over to Cairo to join me. And we did, you know, some of the normal tourist things. Some people would maybe be interested to know that the Egyptian Museum, which holds King Tut and the largest collection of artefacts from Egyptian history, they are actually moving into a brand-new facility that is supposed to open later this year by the pyramids. And so it'll be moving out of the city centre of Cairo and to the pyramids, a wonderful new structure. It's beautiful. I saw it, you know, maybe halfway through its construction. And it'll be, I think, a great new stop on any person's tour or visit to the city.

**Ryan:** Yeah, it looks like a wonderful building, and I really hope that it lives up to the expectations and is a real house of history for the Egyptians. It's incredible culture and it deserves to be kind of celebrated in a way that's kind of bigger in scale to the Cairo Museum, which is - in its defense - was built in the early nineteen hundreds. The interesting thing that we noticed in Egypt was there was some - supposedly some money invested in accessibility at the pyramids - and it was quite a significant amount of money. And we struggled to see where that money was spent, to be honest. There were some trails and tracks around that, you know, may have been introduced, some
tarmacking that may have been done, but certainly was far from world class accessibility. And we did know that there was an investment made. So let's hope that the Egyptian museum lives up to the expectations and really, they do a wonderful job both on the access and the structure itself for the sake of everybody.

**John:** Yeah, I certainly hope so. I think that, like you, I didn't really see a lot of that investment. I rolled my wheelchair on a lot of the paved roads, so I was dodging cars and camels and other people. Accessibility at the pyramids is not as as lovely or as good as I would like to see it, but I was able to leave there satisfied, I think. It is quite an experience to lay your eyes upon something that you've read about and were taught from a very young age. And just the wonder and the magnificence of what is sitting there before you is really incredible.

**Ryan:** Likewise, John, it was incredible. It was such a wonderful place to visit. And we really enjoyed Egypt. We thought it was terrific. The temples too - not to forget the temples in Luxor. There's two main temples there, the Luxor Temple and Karnak Temple. Very accessible. Very welcoming. Good, good places to sort of rest. Great places to really capture and absorb all of that ancient culture.

**John:** So, Ryan, I had intended to talk to you about Egypt and Israel today, but we are running out of time - well we are out of time. I'm trying to keep these episodes to 30 minutes. We will definitely have you on again, I promise. And I love chatting with you. We always, I feel like, learn something from each other about whatever it is that we're talking about. And I would like the listeners here to check in with you on the Internet and on social media, so if you'll tell them where they can find you.

**Ryan:** Yeah, you can find me at FreewheelWeekends.com.au.

**John:** Awesome, awesome, and he's on Facebook and YouTube and I don't know, are you on Twitter?

**Ryan:** I'm not very active on Twitter, and unfortunately, John, my time is spent sort of creating this content much like yourself, and I don't get a lot of time to push it to all of the social medias that I would like to. My TikTok account is yet to be created.
John: Oh, yeah. I don't have a TikTok account either. I think I'm too old for that, but I'm being surprised every day as many of my friends are signing up and I'm like, well, you're even older than me. So how is that? How is that OK?

Ryan: They might not let us on.

John: Well, Ryan, it has been a true pleasure talking with you. And I hope we'll have you on again soon. And I hope you have a great rest the day there in Melbourne, a place that I would much rather be right now.

Ryan: Thank you very much, John. It's been a pleasure talking to you, as always.

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.