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# Opening Whole New Worlds of Inclusion

✧ By David McKeand

*Helicopter rides onto the glaciers in Alaska. Dancing with the Maori people in New Zealand. Snorkeling with the dolphins in Hawaii. Kissing the Blarney Stone in Ireland. Horseback riding on the beach in Fiji. A private meeting with the Pope at the Vatican. Praying at the Western Wall. Mud facials at the Dead Sea. Batik making in Malaysia. Watching wild kangaroos in the Outback of Australia.*

## Sound like a dream?

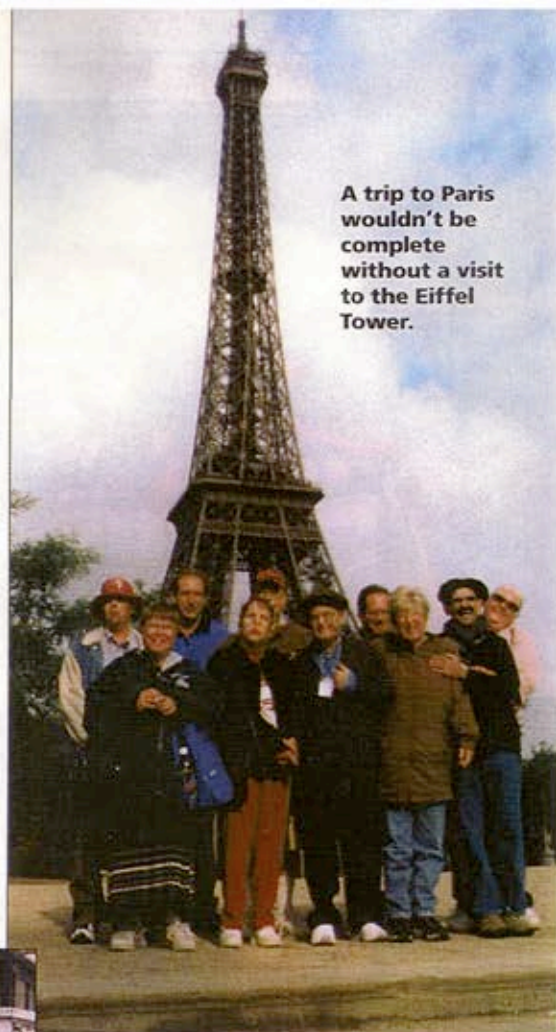
Not at all! These experiences and many more are all part of very real "dream come true" travel adventures offered by the 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization appropriately named, NEW DIRECTIONS for people with disabilities, inc. "We specialize in providing high-quality, educational and life-changing travel experiences that promote inclusion for people with brain impairments," says enthusiastic founder and executive director, Dee Duncan.

Since 1985 NEW DIRECTIONS for people with disabilities, inc. (NDI) has been offering one to six tours a month to vacation destinations all over the United States and abroad. A full-range of destinations is offered including: Las Vegas, Disneyland, Disney World, Hawaii, bike tours, cruises and dude ranches. More than 7,000 travelers who have mild to severe disabilities such as mental retardation, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and autism have enriched their lives through their travels with NDI.

The tour guides provide any level of support that is needed to ensure a totally



What's a trip to Venice with out a gondola ride?



A trip to Paris wouldn't be complete without a visit to the Eiffel Tower.

safe, fun, and educational experience. Tour guides are typically special education instructors, Independent Living Skills counselors, nurses, nurse's aides, and others who have specialized training in assisting people with disabilities. "Many of our staff members have been leading these tours for 20 plus years," says tour leader, Bob Morrison. "We know how to keep things running smoothly even when there are challenges." According to Milwaukee attorney and NDI board president, Robert L. Habush, "This is an award winning organization with a stellar record of safety."

Fortunately, it is increasingly being recognized that there is more to life for people with disabilities than having a place to live and work. A full life includes leisure and recreation. NDI takes this a little further. "We believe that people with disabilities deserve the best that life has to offer—with no compromises," says executive director, Dee Duncan.



Some adventurous travelers choose sports like white water rafting in creating a memorable travel experience.



Travelers learn the hula in Hawaii.

So why is travel so important? Travel vacations provide the optimal hands-on learning environment. The benefits of hands-on education have been widely validated through education research. It is a superb way to learn about the world for those who have limited reading and writing skills.

It is over simplification to say travelers "work on" life skills, social, and independent living skills during these tours. Even to say, "practicing" these skills falls short. They are DOING these important skills. "Travelers are naturally learning every minute, but they don't know it. The of the skill sets being developed by boarding buses, planes, trains, boats, taxis, meeting new people, ordering from menus and eating in restaurants,

checking in to hotels, having new roommates, unpacking, packing, working new keys, lights, showers, buying souvenirs, exchanging money, etc. "They think they are having fun!" says special education teacher and tour guide, Ann Toback. And they are.

For people with and without disabilities, travel allows for breakthroughs in understanding our world. The results often are profound. "I had to reacquaint myself with my daughter when she returned. She had become this new and independent person," says Mary Smith, mother of a NDI traveler.

Travel also results in soaring self-esteem! This is the number one benefit that parents and care providers report. The travelers are experiencing things that they never thought they could. One parent reported, "I can't tell you what it was like at the first Thanksgiving dinner after we discovered New Directions. For the first time, my son with autism was talking about exciting places he has been and experiencing things that his siblings had not."

The most important result from these tours, however, may be beyond the individual benefits to the participants. As it turns out, the relaxed atmosphere (and attitudes) during vacations provides an

outstanding opportunity to promote inclusion in a most natural way. "We don't have to stand on any soapboxes," says tour leader, Danna Mead.

Tour leaders report that the "inclusion transformation" usually takes three days. The first day, when our tour groups arrive on the boat or at the fancy resort or hotel, the other vacationers are in a bit of shock. This does not fit with their image of people with disabilities. (They don't sip exotic drinks on sunset cruises in Tahiti, do they?!) By the second day, other vacationers are a bit curious. They begin to pull aside the tour guides to ask questions such as "What facility are you from?"

The tour guides have been specially trained for these opportune moments to shatter the stereotypes. "They are not from a facility. They are individuals who are on a vacation tour. They live in all different areas of the United States. Sam, this lady wants to know where you live. Can you tell her?"

From here the relationships build. By the third day, the NDI travelers and the other vacationers (or hotel employees, etc.) are often socializing, dancing together, and sharing meals together. By the end of the tour there are often tears of separation and exchanging of addresses. Most important, there has been a personal and profound change in the "other" vacationers' perceptions. Often they approach the tour guides and say something like "Thank you. My eyes have been opened."

NEW DIRECTIONS for people with disabilities, inc. is based in Santa Barbara, California. Their programs are open to people throughout the United States and abroad. The program is funded through donations of in-kind gifts, foundation grants, individual cash donations and tour fees. For more information, see their website at [www.NewDirectionsTravel.org](http://www.NewDirectionsTravel.org) or call 888- 967-2841. •

David McKeand has a BA in special education graduating from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. He taught in Grand Junction, Colorado and in Santa Barbara, California. For the past 17 years David has worked with New Directions. He is the Program Director and is committed to providing fun, safe and enriching vacation travel to people with disabilities throughout the world.

