



BAY MAGIC TOURS

Clockwise from left: Bay Magic Tours works with senior living centers to organize trips for their residents; a Wheel the World San Francisco itinerary includes a visit to the Palace of Fine Arts; a group visits the Golden Gate Bridge on a Wheel the World tour.



WHEEL THE WORLD



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Accessible tours allow everyone to see the world

By Marlene Goldman

The travel bug can strike at any age. But as people get older, the travel experience can come with added challenges.

In a recent AARP survey, about 29% of travelers age 50 and older reported traveling with a disability or conditions that make travel difficult. Among those, mobility challenges are the most common (67%) with most reporting that the condition has either a moderate or minor impact on their ability to travel.

But studies show that older adults with disabilities are highly motivated to travel and are willing to spend significantly for the experience. U.S. travelers with disabilities spend nearly \$50 billion annually on travel, according to a 2024 study by Open Doors Organization and the Harris Poll. Including companions, their total economic contribution is estimated at over \$100 billion per year.

Bay Area tour companies are increasingly catering to older travelers, including those with disabilities.

Wheel the World

Wheel the World, based in San Francisco, designs travel experiences for people whose mobility or stamina may have changed over time, whether they use a walker, wheelchair, scooter or simply prefer a slower

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For older travelers, that often means the need for accessible hotels with verified details like bed height, door width and bathroom layouts.

“We arrange private accessible transportation, day tours with shorter walking distances, flexible pacing, accessible outdoor experiences on paved or stable paths, museum visits with places to sit and rest and even cruises with accessibility filtering,” Burns said. “What makes us different is that we verify accessibility information ourselves instead of relying on generic labels. That clarity helps seniors and their families book with confidence and enjoy the trip instead of worrying about logistics.”

Wheel the World offers flexibility in its itineraries, adjusting pacing, transportation and activity intensity so that no one feels rushed or left behind.

“Our small group tours are especially impactful,” Burns said. “When travelers are surrounded by others who understand accessibility needs, something shifts. Many tell us it’s the first time they don’t

feel like they are slowing anyone down.”

The travel experiences are designed around comfort and independence, including a wide range of hotels with verified accessibility information, so older adults can clearly see features like step-free entrances, accessible bathrooms and common areas before booking.

The tour company also offers accessible car rentals, which allow travelers to explore at their own pace.

Burns notes that some of their popular local experiences include visiting the Golden Gate Bridge, adaptive outdoor activities like inclusive cycling and trips to museums such as the de Young, Legion of Honor, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asian Art Museum. Many of these locations offer step-free access, accessible restrooms and comfortable layouts.

“The goal is simple: to make it possible for seniors to experience the Bay Area’s culture and natural beauty without unnecessary stress,” Burns said.

Outside the Bay Area, Wheel the World organizes tours to popular spots for older adults, such as Costa Rica, Madrid, Paris,



BAY AREA OLDER ADULTS

Bay Area Older Adults organizes local excursions for adults age 50 and older, including a nature walk through Shoreline Park in Mountain View.

London and Greece, all with sophisticated infrastructure for travelers with disabilities. In the U.S., top trips include Colorado, Oregon, Michigan, New York and Florida, notably Miami and Tampa.

“These trips often lead to lifelong friendships,” Burns said. “The repeat rate in our group tours is high — not just because of the destinations, but because of the community that forms. Accessible travel, when done right, creates connection and confidence — not just a vacation.”

Bay Magic Tours

Bay Magic Tours organizes a handful of trips a year for older adults, though the company works primarily with local senior living centers including Rossmoor in Walnut Creek, Paradise Valley Estates in Fairfield, the Sequoias San Francisco, Smith Ranch in San Rafael and Atria Tamalpais Creek in Greenbrae.

Bay Magic Tours owner and president David Rubens has 25 years of experience organizing tours, having started with corporate groups before expanding to senior communities.

At least one tour a year focuses on a destination in Northern California, such as Monterey. Tours have a maximum of about 20 people and can cater to older adults with disabilities, including those who need walkers. Guests are also encouraged to bring family members and caregivers.

Recent longer trips have included the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, a Mississippi River cruise and Alaska for the Northern Lights.

“We always offer options in our itineraries for people to participate or not participate based on what the activity is,” Rubens said. “For the hotels and the restaurants and the attractions that we go to, we make sure that

they’re senior friendly as much as possible. I’m always talking to restaurants about smaller portions and to hotels about safety, especially in the bathrooms.”

He adds that they are careful to make sure people understand they need a certain level of ability depending on the tour. For example, the company is running a tour this summer to Yellowstone National Park, but because of the high elevation, they are requesting medical clearance.

Margaret Wallace, a recreation therapist and certified tour director, accompanies all the tours, offering guests personalized attention. Wallace emphasizes the social benefits for the older adults on her tours.

“It helps people to have something to look forward to, and the education and continued learning is really good for people,” Wallace said. “It’s a great socialization tool because people are having these shared experiences together. They’re making new memories together, and there’s a lot of value in that in terms of community building.”

She added that to have experiences of awe, whether it’s incredible scenery or from what they are learning, is enlivening.

“They’re experiencing it together and sharing it with other people, and that’s quite a benefit as well,” Wallace said.

Bay Area Older Adults

Bay Area Older Adults, a volunteer-led nonprofit established in 2009 in San Jose, offers trips for adults age 50 and older and focuses on local excursions.

The organization’s mission is to empower adults of all abilities to take charge of their health, according to Anne Ferguson, executive director, founder and chairperson of the board.

In 2012, the agency

Details

Wheel the World: www.wheeltheworld.com

Bay Magic Tours: www.baymagictours.com

Bay Area Older Adults: www.bayareaolderadults.org

launched a community-based healthy living program to address social isolation, which was developed to attract older adults who live independently and are interested in learning about culture, science and history, as well as experience outdoor physical activity such as nature walks and environmental volunteering. The program was designed to build community among older adults in the Bay Area.

“For five years, we worked with visually impaired older adults to offer educational, outdoor walking programs that were designed to promote socialization and physical health,” Ferguson said. “The educational component focused on their other senses — sound, taste, smell and touch.”

The organization now regularly takes other older adults who use canes and walkers and those who have hip, knee and similar challenges on educational tours and nature walks.

“Most everyone has hearing impairments, so we use voice amplifiers so they can hear our educational presentation,” Ferguson said.

Sample trips include guided walks in the Santa Cruz foothills, or short hikes in San Jose along the Stevens Creek nature trail led by a local wildlife expert.

Whatever the experience, the benefits of travel for older adults are multi-tude.

“Travel keeps people moving, mentally engaged and socially connected,” Burns said. “It gives seniors something to look forward to and something to talk about. It strengthens family bonds and helps combat isolation.”

Accessibility isn’t just about ramps and elevators, Burns added.

“It’s about independence. It’s about being able to say, ‘I can still do this,’” she said. “Exploring the world at any stage of life reinforces dignity, confidence and joy — and that’s something everyone deserves.”

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