

TRAVEL

DISPATCHES



ANN SCHONLAU

Stunning views make Rocky Mountain National Park a favorite.

Told to 'take a hike'? Try these spots

The winners of the 10Best Readers' Choice Awards for Best Park for Hiking are in. Nominees in the contest, sponsored by USA TODAY and 10Best.com, were chosen by a panel of experts and voted on by the public.

1. **Rocky Mountain National Park**, Colorado
2. **Isle Royale National Park**, Michigan
3. **Great Smoky Mountains National Park**, Tennessee and North Carolina
4. **Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks**, California
5. **Ocala National Forest**, Florida
6. **Grand Canyon National Park**, Arizona
7. **Zion National Park**, Utah
8. **Glacier National Park**, Montana
9. **Shenandoah National Park**, Virginia
10. **Yosemite National Park**, California

CHIME IN

A new Readers' Choice contest category launched this week. Vote for Best AI Fresco Dining Neighborhood at 10best.com/awards/travel/



DELTA PRIVATE JETS

Some fliers may have a chance to upgrade their flight to a private jet.

Delta offers an elite private invitation

Delta Air Lines is about to up the ante on frequent-flier upgrades, though it will be offered only to a select few fliers.

The carrier is rolling out a new program that will give some of its elite frequent fliers the chance to buy an "upgrade" that allows them to switch from their commercial flight to a flight on a private jet. The offer will go to a small number of fliers, usually 24 to 48 hours before their scheduled flight. The upgrades will run from \$300 to \$800.

The program, which could begin as early as this week, first was reported by Bloomberg News.

Delta says the effort will target "high-value customers" who already have achieved elite "Medallion" status. When schedules allow, some customers now could receive an offer to forgo their regular flight and instead take a seat on a private jet scheduled to fly the same route at around the same time.

Delta Private Jets operates a fleet of 66 aircraft in a business that targets corporate and wealthy fliers. However, planes frequently fly "empty leg" repositioning flights that have no paying passengers on board. The ability to shift elite frequent fliers to such flights helps Delta promote a premium brand image. But it also gives the airline a method to court corporate fliers — some of whom might have the means to consider paying for travel on Delta's private jet unit.

Ben Mutzabaugh



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Anne Thomas stops at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial during her tour of the nation's capital.

D.C. by wheelchair: Putting ADA to the test

Most areas are well-equipped for those with disabilities, but there are still a few potholes

Melanie D.G. Kaplan
Special for USA TODAY

Twenty-five years ago this July, President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The legislation represented a sea change for those with disabilities. Not only does ADA prohibit discrimination in employment, housing and transportation, it does the same for public accommodations like restaurants, theaters and museums.

Anne Thomas, a storyteller and former civil rights lawyer, has been in a wheelchair since she was 18. In 1976, a car accident left her paralyzed from the chest down, and a doctor suggested she check herself into a nursing home for the rest of her life. Fortunately, she didn't heed his advice. Instead, she went to law school, traveled the world, scuba dived and drove to Alaska.

But in her early disability days, handicapped bathrooms and wheelchair ramps were virtually non-existent. Now that cities are largely accessible to those who are disabled, she decided an ADA anniversary celebration was in order. And what better place than Washington, where the law was enacted?

Mostly, she wanted to find out what it's like today for someone in a wheelchair to visit the nation's capital, where we both live. I joined her to assist and document.

At the U.S. Capitol Visitors Center, Anne wheeled herself easily over the smooth floors, zipping ahead of groups in matching T-shirts to see the Helen Keller statue. We joined a tour in front of a model of the Capitol Dome and made sure to test out the restroom, where Anne delighted in finding wide bathroom stalls and low drinking fountains.

On our way out of the underground museum, a guard directed us up a long ramp to street level. Just an hour into our trip, I'd caught on to one of Anne's most important travel tips: Always find the elevator. We did.

Our next stop was the Library of Congress. In a free, docent-led tour of about 20, three were in wheelchairs. I could tell the part-timers (one woman had plantar fasciitis, an elderly man was tired of using his cane) because nobody was as adept as Anne in swiveling



Anne Thomas pauses in front of a portrait of Christopher Reeve at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington.

which two buses stopped — one didn't have a wheelchair lift and the other had room only for standing passengers. The drivers told us we should have called ahead to make sure there were accessible buses on the route.

"This is what I deal with all the time," Anne said.

I later emailed the company, which apologized and issued a refund. The company's general manager, Jerry Miller, said Old Town Trolley advises travelers to provide at least 24-hour notice to guarantee the availability of a properly equipped vehicle. The company asks customers to board at either the Union Station or Welcome Center locations.

At the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, we joined another free tour. The ranger talked about FDR's disability and demonstrated his "cane and man" method of walking by leaning on a cane and a person to hide his disability from polio. We passed a group of World War II veterans in wheelchairs and a Pennsylvania choir singing *God Bless America*.

At the National Building Museum, I pushed Anne around three sides of the building before

I came to appreciate every asphalt pothole, cement crack and angled sidewalk that wheelchair-using folks have to face.

around, hugging curves or backing into an elevator.

After lunch, we headed to the National Air & Space Museum, where we waited for a tour bus. That morning, I'd bought two \$35 Old Town Trolley tickets. We waited close to an hour, during

TIPS FOR ACCESSIBLE TRAVEL

PLAN AHEAD. When looking for hotels, Expedia, Travelocity and Hotels.com all have multiple filters related to disabilities that address wheelchair access, accessibility equipment for the deaf and Braille signage. Some search engines, like Kayak, don't have any.

RESEARCH WEBSITES. DisabledTravelers.com offers information on accessible travel, including lodging, travel products and access guides. Washington.org's guide to disability information offers accessibility links at museums, galleries and memorials.

CALL FOR DETAILS. Figure out what's important to you and ask: Does your hotel have a grab-bar by the toilet and a bench in the shower? Does your theater have sign language interpreters and if so, which nights? What about audio tours at a museum or elevators at a memorial?

REMEMBER ADA. Public spaces are required by law to offer alternative access for those who are disabled. Some go above and beyond — many museums in Washington, for example, loan wheelchairs free. Others don't do enough. Don't be afraid to talk to the manager about what you're seeking or to make suggestions so the travel experience continues to improve.

finding an entrance with a ramp. I came to appreciate every asphalt pothole, cement crack and angled sidewalk that wheelchair-using folks have to face. We spent the following hours in Washington's Penn Quarter neighborhood, going to the National Portrait Gallery and several local stores.

In the tourist areas, we had been fortunate. Anne was sometimes waved to the front of lines, but it also meant a special patting-down at security, since her wheelchair couldn't go through the metal detector. Some assistance was seamless — like the especially helpful Kennedy Center shuttle drivers on our visit for a free nightly concert.

In commercial areas, we found some stores without ramps, or too-narrow aisles. As we called it a day, Anne hailed a cab and I walked toward Metro — out of habit now, looking for an elevator.