



When camping, we sacrifice many things.

A fireplace for a firepit. Morning alarms for magpie carolling. Social media for campfire charades. Streetlights for stars.

These compromises are good for the soul – but for some of the more senior outdoor enthusiasts and individuals living with mobility issues, chronic health conditions, and/or an intellectual disability, they come in addition to pre-existing challenges that impact their everyday. As a result, the outdoors can present more difficulties for these campers than for others.

Around Australia – and the world – the quality of camping for some elderly members of society and people with a physical disability has improved. Many campgrounds and national parks offer wheelchair access, while some have also introduced the means to accommodate campers with visual impairments.

It may take more preparation and energy, but camping with a disability is absolutely possible – and can be equally as enjoyable.



Camping with a disability is absolutely possible, and can be equally as enjoyable. Credit: Shutterstock

Camping With a Physical Disability and Some Elderly Adventurers

In selecting an ideal campsite, park, or scenic trail, seek out concrete ramps with textured surfaces, and routes that incorporate either pavement or boardwalks. As well as this, call ahead to confirm with the campsite owners or park rangers that both disabled access is



available and the facilities suit the individual's specific needs; for instance, handrails, ramps, hoists, or pool lifts.

Campgrounds and Sites

Many campgrounds and parks around Australia offer disabled access and relevant facilities. Operating multiple sites throughout the country, Big4 Holiday Parks offers cabins and villas with accessible features for guests with physical impairments.

Stringybark Campground, nestled in Deep Creek, South Australia, also provides accessible toilets and hygiene facilities, meanwhile maintaining a true campsite ambiance. Their objective is for guests to feel effortlessly at one with the natural environment beyond their back door.

Over in the pretty Shaws Bay of New South Wales, the Reflections Holiday Park puts your comfort first, featuring accessible cabins, nearby nooks for wheelchair-friendly experiences, and a picturesque view of the Richmond River.

Trails

In SA, the wheelchair-accessible Adelaide Park Lands Trail scribbles its way through the city's parklands and entangles across the River Torrens. With three circuits each varying in distance - collectively reaching just over 18 kilometres - the trail passes cafes, birdwatching crannies, picnic spots, and playgrounds. In the summertime, individuals on the trail can also experience the animated Elder Park, often colourful with festivals and events.

Located near the Royal National Park in NSW is Ironbank Flat. The picnic area offers both wheelchair access and the essentials for outdoor dynamics, such as a BBQ area and canoe hire.

Barron Falls Lookout Track is entwined within the Barron Gorge National Park in the clement and ever-summery Queensland. The nature trail follows 1.2 kilometres through temperate rainforest, suspended above the forest floor with wheelchair access all the way to Din Din Barron Falls Lookout. In the wet weather, the waterfalls are cloaked with a thick mist, while the summertime sees them sunlit, splashing like champagne against the gorge walls.



In selecting an ideal trail, seek out routes that incorporate either pavement or boardwalks.
Credit: Shutterstock

Preparation

With the nature of physical disabilities varying from one individual to the next, there is no common length of time spent in preparing for an outdoor excursion or camping trip. Albeit, the methodical and often physically demanding process of transporting somebody in a wheelchair takes more time than it does to simply swing open the car doors, throw in the camp clobber, and buckle in the kids – so it's recommended to allow plenty.

In some special schools, transporting a student with a physical disability requires fitting their chest harness, fastening their ankle straps, loading their wheelchair onto a ramp, and applying their wheel brakes. After raising the ramp and positioning the wheelchair inside, the wheels are individually latched to the floor of the compatible vehicle, and an additional seatbelt is secured around the chair. While this is a method in some schools and organisations, others may follow more modern systems.



It's recommended to allow plenty of time for the methodical and often physically demanding process of transporting somebody in a wheelchair. Credit: Shutterstock

Supplies and Considerations

For optimal campsite convenience, it's recommended to choose tents with greater internal space, and taller entry and exit points. This allows effortless movement in and out, with less stooping and crouching for both individuals with mobility barriers and some elderly campers. By the same token, cabins should feature wider doors, while bathrooms should have larger interiors and personal care beds.

At mealtimes, some sites provide picnic tables with an extended top that frees up room underneath for a wheelchair. This avoids the alternative method of transferring somebody from a mobility device onto standard bench seating. If manual lifting can't be achieved, the latter requires individuals to bring along the sling prescribed by their physio. This is used in conjunction with either a 'ceiling' or 'manual' hoist, ideally provided by most caravan parks offering disability access.

An adequate sleep system beyond the familiar four corners of the home mattress is essential for those with a physical disability and some elderly camp lovers. For this reason, a raised camp stretcher with an airbed or thick mattress is recommended to provide sufficient support. Sleeping above as opposed to against the ground also bodes well in colder climates, as body heat is better contained and insulation more efficient.

Some assistive equipment and wheelchairs can also be retrofitted with features better suited to the terrain – for instance, tyres with a thicker, more robust tread for traversing rubble, large roots, and rough surfaces. A basic toolkit and pump for wheelchair maintenance is also



advised to have on hand.

It's one thing to adapt at the campsite, but it's another to do so on the journey there. A rooftop cargo carrier can assist in holding your standard getaway gear, and consequently clear more space in the back of a vehicle for additional mobility equipment.

With the inevitable action-packed nature of camping, finding the opportunity to rest and recharge is absolutely necessary for some elderly campers and outdoor adventurers with a physical disability. As well as the tours, trails, and recreational activities, games and hobbies from home are suggested means of entertainment for back at base camp after wheeling in, backing up, and finally hitting the brakes.



Finding the opportunity to rest and recharge is absolutely necessary for outdoor adventurers with a physical disability. Credit: Shutterstock

Food and Mealtimes

Individuals with a physical disability or chronic conditions can experience issues beyond the inability to move, such as dietary restrictions and alternative food consumption methods. This can also be the case for the elderly, so it's recommended to prepare food ahead of time to avoid the inconvenience of spending time in a grocery store local to the campsite.

With the great outdoors naturally comes a greater level of activity – so meals should ideally be energy-dense and satiating. That goes for the no-cook varieties too, which can make for more convenient snacking and tucker times amid the dynamic of the outdoors.

For those with oral eating and drinking care plans, ensure there is access to a hand blender for puree-ing food (battery-operated, if power access is scarce). Alternatively, pre-blend, prepare, and freeze food prior to the trip, before allowing to defrost ahead of mealtimes. Set



up on flat surfaces, and carry any modified eating equipment necessary such as cutlery, bowls, and cut-out cups too.

For individuals who are enterally or 'gastro' fed (involving the ingestion of food via the gastrointestinal tract), it's essential to carry their prescribed nutrition, feeding line, pump/tube, and any spare components for emergencies. Access to clean water and sinks is also crucial for cleaning equipment after mealtimes.

Camping With an Intellectual Disability

While some are without the need for mobility assistance, individuals with an intellectual disability face daily challenges in communication, social interactions, and processing information.

For these outdoor devotees, camping can improve their independence, self-esteem, and sense of autonomy, as well as enhance social, resource, and communication skills. For children alike at schools or community organisations offering disability services, camping provides the opportunity to interact with their peers beyond the classroom. By the same token, those without an intellectual disability can recognise the reality and lifestyle of those with, fostering a more accepting camp community.

Supplies and Considerations

On outdoor getaways or camping trips, it's essential that caregivers include the individual's Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) device. An AAC device is versatile in its application to an extensive population and relevance to all age groups, utilised by those who struggle with verbal communication. Additionally, pack any sensory or calming toys relevant to your child or group member's sensory defensiveness – be that in regards to sound, smell, sight, taste, or touch.

Many people with an intellectual disability rely on environmental signage; wayfinding markings with immersive and indicative designs (such as 'Do Not Litter', 'Turn Here', or 'Toilets'). A camping ground with clear signage, including numbered campsites and colour-coded areas, opens the opportunity for these adventurers to independently explore without confusing their camping space with another.

Ensuring Comfort

For some people with an intellectual disability, travelling to an unknown location can be a stressful experience. As both personality and level of ability vary from person to person, one approach to alleviate this may work better for some than for others.

Common strategies to lessen stress or discomfort are playing music, involving the individual in the preparation process leading up to departure, encouraging their involvement in setting up camp, or simply allowing them to first adjust to their surroundings.

Navigating the park website and looking at photos of your destination together can help prepare an individual for what they can expect. As well as this, 'social stories' are a strategy for explaining what is about to happen, what will be involved, and how an individual can expect to participate. This helps them to visualise and inwardly prepare for the upcoming holiday, supporting their involvement in the camping experience. When assembling your



setup too, consider inviting them to help choose where to pitch the tent, roll out sleeping bags, or prepare a campfire.

A Considerate Camping Community

From physical barriers to communicative challenges, people with varying abilities experience diverse degrees of difficulty in day-to-day routines and social interactions. Irrespective of this, camping promotes new connections, nurtures the pre-existing, and fosters an appreciation for the natural environment that exists beyond the streetlamps of suburbia.

In offering these individuals the same opportunities and choices, the first step is to recognise the similarities that live in all of us.



Camping promotes new connections, nurtures the pre-existing, and fosters an appreciation for the natural environment. Credit: Shutterstock

Do you know someone with a disability who loves the outdoors?