

Welcome to The Magic City! Miami, Florida on Wheels by Lorinda Gonzalez

Tropical weather, palm trees on every corner, and delicious Cuban coffee. Welcome to Miami! The city whose heart beats to the sounds of a Latin drum, where beaches and nightlife never end. Miami is one of the world's most renowned vacation spots because of its rich culture and diversity, which also embraces accessibility.

Known as one of the most populous urban area in the United States, the Miami area is a hub for culture, media, entertainment, fashion, art and international trade. The city boasts modernized infrastructure design and is a central tourist location. Just like the rest of the state, the terrain is smooth with no high mountaintops or steep hills in sight. The vast majority of the city is well paved, with proper cutouts at each street end for wheelchair users. Miami International Airport is a newly renovated hub connecting domestic and international flights directly into the city. The airport was recently linked to the Metrorail Train system, making Miami one-step closer to a fully accessible city via public transportation. However, take note that the trains stop at midnight so if you're a night owl, you're better off renting a private vehicle.

The transit system is a bit old – the trains date back to the 70's - but are ADA compliant. As of 2013, all public transit bus routes were made wheelchair accessible and equipped with a lift. There are two train systems serving Miami Dade County – Metrorail and Metromover – that are fairly easy for a person with a disability to use. All stops have elevator access to platform levels and aside from a two-inch gap between the platform and train car, the Metrorail is easy to get on and off of. The Metromover is a free option, circling Downtown Miami 7-days week. Venues such as the American Airlines Arena, the James L. Knight Center, the Port of Miami and the Perez Art Museum are a few of the hot spots one can easily travel to on the Mover. If you're interested in going to Miami Beach, a quick Mover ride to Bayside will lead you to a dock where you can get on a water taxi to cross the Intercoastal. That's where you'll find south Florida's premier wheelchair accessible beaches. At select spots, both manual and motorized beach wheelchairs are offered on a first-come first-serve basis, free of charge. The City of Miami Beach provides this service along with a mobi-mat system that allows wheelchair access directly to *la playa*. Don't forget your sunscreen!

Interested in the nightlife? You'll find that Miami is a city where there's always something going on. From the bustling streets of South Beach, surrounded by the beautiful – while not very accessible – Art Deco district, to the infamous Cuban neighborhood of Little Havana, Miami has something enticing to offer everyone. If you're interested in embracing Latin history and culture, Calle Ocho is your go-to spot. The streets in this area are somewhat outdated, so getting around in a wheelchair can be a challenge. About half of the stores have one small step to enter the buildings while the others are stuffed wall to wall with knick-knacks to take home. Don't fret; if you visit Calle Ocho September through May, the weather will be just cool enough to enjoy a stride up and down the main street where you can enjoy great music, yummy treats and a cultural experience you're sure to never forget. If you're more into the high end lifestyles of the rich and famous, the plush hotels of Miami Beach and the historic hideaways of Coral Gables may be your preference. Both are fairly wheelchair accessible, with Coral Gables boasting some of the most beautiful Spanish Colonial style architecture in the southern US. If you prefer quieter, mom & pop shops, Coconut Grove is a great place to visit. While the main sidewalks are clear of debris, hundred-year-old trees grow naturally out of side street sidewalks making it difficult to get around.

The hottest parties are in South Beach, but it wasn't until recently that the city updated their bus system to make it accessible for wheelchair users. They now offer a new bus system, the South Beach Local, where you can ride throughout the city for only 25¢ per trip. Buses run every 13 to 30 minutes daily, stopping at popular destinations throughout the area. All air-conditioned buses are wheelchair accessible, making it a breeze to take a leisurely stroll down Lincoln Road or Española Way or down to South Pointe Park for a view of Fisher Island and cruise ships sailing out of the Port of Miami. Hop on again and ride in comfort to any place on Washington Avenue – a prime shopping area in Miami. The South Beach Local makes getting around SoBe a breeze. Just be careful not to drink too many mojitos – the bus stops running at 12:49 am every day.

If you're ready for the warm Florida sun on your face, miles of blue ocean and a never ending night, pack your bags and get ready to enjoy the Magic City! *Bienvenidos!*

Author: Lorinda Gonzalez resides in South Florida with her family and service dog, Remy. She was diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy at the age of three, and has used a motorized wheelchair for mobility since the age of nine. Lorinda holds a Bachelor in the Arts Degree in English Writing and Rhetoric, and is currently completing a Masters of Arts Degree in Communications. She is a co-found of NMD United, 501 ©3 and on the board of multiple non-profit organizations. In her free time, Lorinda enjoys spending time with family and friends, painting, listening to music, and traveling to historical locations.

