

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/traveling-toward-an-idea/>

Accomable founder and Airbnb product manager Srin Madipalli describes how traveling the world in a wheelchair, and then learning to code during business school, revealed an opportunity to build a site that listed accessible accommodations. That product, Accomable, started as a hacked-together side-project. An unanticipated demand for accessible accommodations propelled the idea toward serious fundraising rounds and global scale.



Transcript

- So, up until about 2011, I'd never really traveled.. I'd only ever gone on those vacations that parents force you to go on to meet relatives that you really don't want to visit.. And I'd always wanted to go on more exciting adventures.. All of my friends had gone traveling and had seen so many cool places, and so many times they would share those experiences and I'd be like, "Oh, I wish I could do that," 'cause I'd never really done anything.. And so I took those six months off to see whether it was possible.. So with one of my, sorry, two of my care assistants, booked a bunch of trips, not really knowing what to expect.. I had the most amazing time.. It was an experience where I went all around Europe, I went to many parts of the US, I went on a camping safari in South Africa, and learned to scuba dive in Bali, as you can see from the photo.. And this was from an adapted diving center in Bali where I turned up to a big flight of steps and I asked, "How is this adapted?" And there was six guys saying, "We will help you." Not exactly quite adapted but it was an amazing experience.. However, things didn't always go to plan..

So lots of times I would use well-known travel websites and things that were supposedly accessible clearly weren't.. This is actually not a photo from that trip but just goes to show you what people with disabilities often have to face when traveling.. So this is actually in a registered, listed ADA accessible room at a major hotel chain.. Clearly, as you can see, it is not possible to use this hotel room.. The width between the bed and the furniture is far too narrow.. I simply couldn't use it.. And this actually was about 11:30 at night when I arrived and then I had to find other accommodation in the middle of the night just after coming off an 11-hour flight from London to the Bay Area.. And actually on that trip I remember another experience.. A place that I had booked, the property owner claimed to not have steps at the home, turned up to see three steps, and I asked the property owner, "Why didn't you say it had three steps?" The property owner said, "Well, it does have, "well, it's step-free, "but you have to get past the first three steps." And so these are the kinds of challenges and barriers that people face when traveling with a disability.. And so fast forward about three years..

So I went back to school again, as mentioned.. I did an MBA at Oxford.. And on the program I was very fortunate enough to get to know some engineers, and I always thought, "Ah, I'm too old to learn to code and this is it." Very gratefully, some of these people said, "That's absolutely nonsense," and started to help me learn to code.. So by the time, fast forward two years later, I'd learned quite a lot of sort of Ruby on Rails programming, had done a lot of online courses, and a lot of times just taught myself, where by the time I graduated I was starting off as a, I was basically working as a freelance web developer, making basic web apps for whoever needed anything.. And I just rolled off a really big project and also on the side with my friend Martin here, this is from our trip in 2011, yeah, around then, in California.. We thought to ourselves, "Could we build something interesting and cool "that could help people with disabilities travel?" So Martin and I went back a long way, childhood friends who both love to travel, and we'd had a bunch of side projects where we were running a lifestyle magazine just to share information and advice on accessible travel.. And so in the summer of 2015 I effectively just locked myself in my bedroom for about 20 days and hacked together a very basic prototype of what became Accomable.. Now, I don't know whether it shows very well on the projector screen, but there were two unique things about what we built.. The first was that we had lots of different filters.. So normally a website may have just had a box called Wheelchair Accessible..

We took that box out and actually had lots of different things.. It could be grab rails, roll-in showers, medical equipment.. Loads of different things that people could search for and that we'd verified was accurate.. The second thing is, and we

always also used to joke about, was we had more toilets on the website than any other website out there.. So joking aside, it's something really important, to see really good bathroom pictures when you are traveling with accessibility needs.. The bathroom is so important and it's so vital for your own dignity to be able to use it.. And so we were meticulous in collecting photography and making sure that if somebody said they had those things, you could see on the photo whether it was there or not.. So, as you can see from that photo, it's one of our first listings in Barcelona, the shower is perfectly roll-in, the grab rails are solid, and there is space under the sink.. And so, I shared this product just on social media just to see what people would think, and a thing just wanted to reiterate this actually wasn't a business at the time, it was just a fun project with a couple of friends just to see whether we could help friends, our community, our family, find somewhere good to stay when going on vacation.. And I've always been sort of inspired by sort of the approach of when you're building something to be as hands on as possible and to do everything as manually as possible at the beginning to kind of learn from your users..

So, after building the prototype and seeing that we were getting some initial traction, I effectively sort of went on the road.. Had an absolute superhero of a support worker, care assistant.. Me and him basically did about 3 1/2, 4,000 miles around Europe for three months.. We would source recommendations on social media and I would just contact that person and say, "Hey look, would it be possible to stay with you? "I would go there and sort of build the product "around your user." And effectively, every time I would stay there I would ask for feedback, iterate the product again.. And I come very much from a rapid prototyping background where you're constantly looking to improve the product, to push code out again.. And actually this is a photo of me staying at one of the listings we had in the Catalan region of Spain, that the website broken down so I literally had to push effects on the edge of a mountain.. And so we pushed this site out, and low and behold we actually had some people using it, which was the most incredible experience ever.. And our first customer was Suzanne from Belfast, in Northern Ireland, which is a part of the UK, and she'd gone on her first-ever trip to Barcelona, and sent us this note afterwards saying, "Accomable allowed me to experience "my first girls holiday with my best friends." And then she sort of added a note onto that saying that this was the first steps to independence, and I was just really grateful that we had enabled her to travel for the first time.. And so, we're like, "Okay, awesome, what do we do now? "We've got a business on our hands." So what started then was probably two of the craziest rollercoaster years ever, when we realized that there was a nucleus of an idea here and that this could grow.. We raised a lot of money from venture capital investors in London and grew to an eight-person team..

And over the course of that two years we got over 2,000 listings with properties in just over 60 countries...