

# Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 60: Travel

Guest: Bani Amor and Srin Madipalli

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/>

## Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Greetings, hoo-mans! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. Today's episode is on travel with Bani Amor and Srin Madipalli. Bani Amor is a queer travel writer who explores the relationships between race, place, and power. They're gonna talk about decolonizing tourism and the need to expand travel writing and culture. Srin is a Product Manager at Airbnb with a focus on making travel easier for people with disabilities. Srin will share his experiences as a disabled traveler and about Accomable, a travel platform for people with disabilities he co-founded that was acquired by Airbnb. There's a lot of joy and difficulty when traveling whether it's by air, train, or car, and you'll hear some useful tips from both Bani and Srin. Are. You. Ready? [electronic beeping] Away we goooo!!!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, Bani, thank you so much for being on my podcast today! Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself.

BANI: Thanks for having me, Alice. This is dope. Well, I'm a queer travel writer. I write about like relationships between power and place and travel and migration. I also write about gender and climate and food. I'm working on my own travel show; it's a radical travel show. And yeah, every now and then, I write about disability and living with chronic illness and chronic pain.

ALICE: And tell me a little bit about how you got into travel writing.

BANI: I got into it I guess by necessity. I had been traveling since I was a teenager. I had been having a very transient lifestyle for a long time because of a lack of stability and things like that, and I didn't really have any support or anything backing me. It wasn't until my 20s when I had come back from Latin America, and I was backpacking when I was in New York, and I just could not find work doing anything. I was unemployed for so long, and it was really difficult. And eventually, I was just like, I write, I travel. Why can't I be a travel writer? Can I do that? It's so white. It's so static and stale and so narrow, so I was like, yeah, I definitely can do that.

ALICE: That's awesome.

[upbeat folk guitar music break]

## Diversity in travel writing and decolonizing travel

ALICE: What do you think is needed in terms of not only, obviously, diversity in travel writing but the kind of stories and issues that are covered in travel writing?

BANI: Diversity is one thing, but when we're talking about the impacts of tourism on host cultures and what they do to the environment, the people who work for them, and people who have to live with the kind of aftermath of a tourist presence on their lands, we don't get to hear from them, you know. We mostly hear from just the tourists. So, I just think that different voices can really complicate that and not just diversify it but really, we can talk about the reality of tourism and what it does to communities.

And then also, a lot of my writing and what I like to write about is informed by experiences living and traveling in Ecuador where I am right now, where my family's from, where I feel very much like a local. And then I feel very much not, like not a local all the time. So, yeah, I guess I'm interested in platforms or spaces that we can open up in travel culture that we can have conversations that are not just like here's where you can go and eat, and these are the nicest beaches, you know?

ALICE: You write extensively about decolonizing travel culture. Can you break it down for us in terms of how it relates to travel?

BANI: At its heart, we're talking about repatriating lands to original people. We're talking about reparations and creating channels for people, communities who have been robbed of sovereignty and of wealth, how to make those amends and give that land back, give that power back to those communities to be able to have the right to self-determination. I see tourism as being a continuation of a colonial presence on a lot of colonized lands, and it's very stark. When we look at what these "explorers," quote-unquote, were writing back in the day, there's this narrative that they're going to explore and seek the exotic and learn about human nature as if people of color are these zoological creatures.

You know, you have powers from European countries. You have these white and foreign and national elite powers that usurp all of the natural resources and build these industries that don't give opportunities for local people to actually work in and have gainful employment, and you just have a lot of labor abuse. You have a lot of gendered abuse. It just relies on a lot of inequality to make money, and that happens through displacement. That happens through keeping people away from the actual beach where they live. In a lot of resort towns, a lot of resort places, look at the Caribbean islands, a lot of people are not even allowed to move freely in their own hometowns. You live at the behest of the resort and where they want you to go.

So, when I talk about decolonizing travel, I'm talking about having that land and that narrative and that voice of how communities want the story of them and their economies and their environments to be impacted by tourism. How can they be in power of how that looks like and how guests—or us as settlers—can engage in their lands or not?

[upbeat folk guitar music break]

## How to prepare to travel to other people's lands

ALICE: What are some ways people when they do travel, they can prevent becoming an asshole when learning, exploring, and being on other people's lands?

BANI: Make sure that you're doing the basic: if a place says don't take pictures here, then don't do it. Or if you're taking pictures of people without asking their consent, don't do that. Don't take things or mess things up, especially in sacred places. If you're not supposed to show a part of your body, then maybe don't do that, you know? Just try to be a good guest. As well as I would say you wanna avoid the bigger resorts, like all-inclusives, cruises. It's not good. It's not good especially for people who live near the water. And a lot of resort places are in the global South, it really leads to climate disasters. It's a whole big thing, and all-inclusives are a big part of that: just all of the trash, all of the water it takes, the impact in the economy it takes to import stuff just to give it to these people who are gonna be going back to their homes and getting those same things soon.

And I hope that there are more developments and solutions that are created or guides. Like there's this one in Hawaii where Native Hawaiians have written a book called *Detours: A Decolonial Guide to Hawaii*, and it's like this is what we can do or we can't do as guests to how we can contribute to decolonization in Hawaii as tourists. So, that's really interesting, and I would like to see that for a lot of other places.

You don't wanna really go to a place and then try to figure out how can I be not as harmful here? It's before you go and why you're going and where you're going, but especially the why. What do you need that you wanna get from far away that you can't get here? If it's work, you're traveling for work. But if it's for something else, then it's very interesting to see what people's actual inclinations are. What are their intentions when they're going around? If you're gonna go to a place in particular, I would definitely also look at the history of that place and also the political: what's going on right now? You should try to do some research, know a little bit about their history, learn some language, and yeah, you'll have a much better understanding at least about how other you are.

ALICE: That's wonderful. Thank you.

[mellow acoustic guitar break with birds singing in the background]

### Bani's love of travel, accommodations, and sharing ideas with other travelers

ALICE: So, what do you love about travel?

BANI: Yeah! [laughing] I love so much of it! Like I was saying before, I started traveling when I was really young, and it was really out of necessity. I was having issues with police and I was having issues with courts, and I felt like I had to leave. And now, it's like many years later, and I really still have a very slow, transient lifestyle. I just move from place to place. And to be real, it's not as exciting as it used to be. And also, physical disabilities as an adult and these chronic illnesses and pain have totally changed my relationship to travel. So, it's just like a lot more painful and a lot more difficult to deal with. I live in New York, and then I just come to Ecuador about every year, and I don't really travel much other places. I just keep coming back here. You know, I still always kind of love being in a new place. I don't need anything really special. I just like to be somewhere new and just have that in my mind. It's something very basic and very innate.

ALICE: So, on Twitter recently you wrote a thread using the hashtag #CripTravel, and you wrote about the great deal of labor it takes when you're traveling and disabled. So, what have you learned that you could share with other disabled travelers?

BANI: I mean it's gonna be a lot in the preparation, right? The biggest hurdle, really, is getting out, so it's how you're gonna navigate the airport, how are you gonna navigate the airline? What

are the rules? What are they gonna take away from you? You know, there's surprises unfortunately, especially if you're a chair user. And sometimes they don't know everything, or they tell you different things. They can damage equipment. It can be kind of scary, and it can kinda suck. To me, especially when you're dealing with the airports and TSA and all these, that's when it becomes out of your control. And I think that's where a lot of communities, if you're trans and dealing with TSA, it's not fun. The whole airport situation is just really difficult for me. I have a sitting disability. It hurts when I sit down, so planes, buses, cars: it's just it's like a lot of pain. It's really bad. So, I just bring things to treat myself. I have patches for heat, and I have things for sciatica, compression socks. I'll request a chair, things like that. My needs specifically, I have to be on the ground floor. Usually, I have to sleep on the floor, so I have to bring a mat or something with me. And it's difficult with other things. This time I was like, do I bring a heat pack? Am I gonna bring an ice pack? 'Cause it's hard to find places that'll actually have a freezer to hold your ice pack or to heat up a heat pack.

When it comes to you folks out there, whatever your needs are, you're gonna have to kind of like hopefully get in touch with other disabled folks online. There are a lot more disabled travelers, and the #TravelingWhileDisabled hashtag is also pretty popular. So, I used the #CripTravel one 'cause it's just a little shorter. Yeah, but it's something that I think that we as disabled travelers are talking about more and also something that's important for me to kinda demand accessibility at least with hotel listings, Airbnb listings. Just tell us where things are. 'Cause even as a writer, if I'm applying for residencies or things like that, I have to email them and ask them, "What is the bathroom like? Is there a step?" Things like that. Everyone put all your information online. It's not that hard.

What's really cool about social media and the Internet is that there's access to other people who are going through the same thing or looking for the same shit that you are. I'm glad I was able to have a Traveling While Disabled roundtable a few years ago when I started having to kinda think about these things. And it's great that there are other disabled people of color travelers out there, especially women of color travelers, queer disabled travelers out there sharing their experiences and stuff. So, I'm really excited just to connect with more people and make more space for those narratives, that kinda networking to happen.

[mellow acoustic guitar plays until the end of Bani's interview]

ALICE: Well, thank you for all that you do, and I just really appreciate your voice on Twitter and on social media. And I'm just so happy to have you on this episode.

BANI: Aw, that's so sweet of you. Thanks for having me on, Alice.

[Introduction to Srin's interview.](#)

ALICE: So, Srin, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

SRIN: Thank you for having me, Alice.

ALICE: Why don't you introduce yourself if you don't mind.

SRIN: So, my name is Srin Madipalli, and I am the Product Manager for accessibility at Airbnb. I'm actually from London. I used to be a corporate lawyer but started my own company back in 2015 called Accomable, which was a travel website for people with disabilities to find accessible accommodation. Airbnb acquired us in November, 2017, and I moved over last January to lead this new work within Airbnb based in San Francisco.

## Recent Airbnb trip to four cities across Asia

ALICE: You're somebody that travels a lot for work and for pleasure. And we're talking in April, 2019, and you just got back from a two-week trip to Asia.

SRIN: Yeah! It was an incredible trip. So, the purpose of the trip was to kind of roadshow and advocate for the accessibility work that we're doing to our host communities in this area. So, when I joined Airbnb, it was really important for me that in order to make the world more accessible, we need to have a very global conversation and make people more aware that people with disabilities do want to travel. And actually, accessibility is the right thing to do.

So, in these four cities—so, Singapore, Bangkok, Seoul, and Tokyo—we ran a bunch of workshops. We also met with community leaders in the disability world in all of these areas to kinda share more about our work and generally, just did everything we can to raise awareness of this area.

ALICE: During your travels throughout these four cities, what did you learn from the people that were there?

SRIN: So, accessibility means different things in different places. In some parts of the world, accessibility legislation either doesn't exist or is still a very new and developing area that advocacy leaders in those regions are still kind of fighting and campaigning for. And yeah, you have to be very, very sensitive to that. So, accessibility and people with disabilities getting out and about in some parts is still quite a novelty. And a lot of times when we were speaking to hosts in these areas, they found the talks we did on accessibility really eye-opening and really kinda gave them awareness into something that they had not really heard about before. We had a lotta people just engaging, like, "Oh, how can I improve my home? How can I make it easier to get into if you do have a disability?"

In Singapore, Seoul, and in certain parts of Tokyo, infrastructure is so new, and actually, it was so accessible. So, in Singapore and in Seoul, I was able to use the metro system just like everybody else, and I think it was really empowering just being able to use public transport like everybody else. I didn't have to worry about arranging special taxis or worrying about making special arrangements. I could just be spontaneous with my travel just like anybody else.

[cheery folk guitar music break]

## What Srin enjoys about travel and how he prepares for air travel

ALICE: As a seasoned traveler, what do you enjoy about travel, and overall, what's the value of travel?

SRIN: I do have that sort of lust within me of learning about different cultures and people and exploring different parts of the world. I often find, again, it's really good to have your assumptions challenged when you are speaking to people from different backgrounds and cultures. I think also, I find it just really sort of reinvigorating and refreshing and inspiring just to see other parts of the world that can be incredibly beautiful and incredibly stimulating. And just yeah, love the experience of being somewhere new and different.

ALICE: And before you travel with say, air travel, what are some of the things you have to do as a disabled person to prepare?

SRIN: Air travel's a nightmare. It's a perpetual challenge. Normally, even before I fly, I will in the days leading up, I probably sort of decrease the amount of food and water I have because I

can't use the toilets on a plane. I then have to be transferred to a very uncomfortable aisle chair and then lifted again manually to be on the plane while my wheelchair gets stowed within the aircraft. And again, that process in reverse once I land. And you also always have that fear in the back of your mind whether your wheelchair or any other medical equipment you travel with gets damaged. Having said that, I have been incredibly fortunate that most of my travels have gone without problems.

ALICE: That's great. I think there's unfortunately just so many nightmare experiences that people with all kinds of disabilities have with air travel. And I think that's, again, it's about design and access and just a better way to treat people who are not like a sack of potatoes!

SRIN: Yeah.

ALICE: It's also very much like this display. You know, everybody's just like staring at you, just like.

SRIN: Oh yeah. It's not a dignifying process at all. And I think like many wheelchair users, we sorta dream of the day when we could just drive onto an aircraft with our wheelchair just as if it were driving onto a bus or a train. In lots of other forms of transport like trains or coaches, we've been able to find a solution that works. I've been on some pretty small, narrow trains, but actually have pretty decent, accessible bathrooms. And so, I think there are ways forward.

ALICE: And you really feel the difference, right?

SRIN: Yeah, exactly.

[mellow acoustic guitar music break]

## Accomable

ALICE: Let's talk a little bit about Accomable. And you started it in 2015 with Martyn Sibley, and can you tell the listeners what is Accomable and why you two created it?

SRIN: I was retraining as a web developer and learning to code and looking to kinda build my portfolio of web development projects. And that summer of 2015, Martyn and I were chatting and were like, hey, you know, what could we build that we think is useful for us as disabled people and could make it easier to travel? We love travel. We know it's really difficult to find accommodation that works. Let's try and build a website to see whether we can do it better. So, I sort of basically just knocked a very simple prototype website myself in my bedroom over the course of a few weeks and just shared it out there.

And the key tenets of Accomable were that if a property owner wanted to say that they had a specific accessibility feature in their home, they had to provide a photo. And secondly, we had filters and search that was a lot more granular, so it wasn't just is it wheelchair accessible? You could search for different types of things like is there a roll-in shower or other certain types of medical equipment available? We shared it on social media and with some friends, and it just sort of exploded from there and really took off. Ultimately, the best people to create things for people with disabilities is the community itself, right? Because we understand the needs, and we understand it in a very sort of intimate and empathetic way. More products for the community should be designed by the community.

ALICE: At the peak of Accomable, how many listings did you have, and also, what was the reaction of the users who booked stays at hosts on Accomable?

SRIN: Actually, we had somebody book a listing in Barcelona, like one of our first listings. And then she went there, so it was someone from Belfast in the United Kingdom. She went there and then sent a message back saying, “Look, guys. This was amazing. This completely transformed my ability to travel.” And then we had other great customer stories, and things kinda snowballed from there. And over the course of 18 months, our biggest challenge was that we could not find enough supply to keep up with the demand of users. So, our property owners were sometimes taking bookings nearly two years in advance because there was such a shortage of good, accessible accommodation.

ALICE: That’s really wonderful, and it’s also a great online community for people to kind of connect with one another. So, that’s really exciting.

### Goals at Airbnb since the company acquired Accomable

ALICE: We mentioned earlier, in 2017, Airbnb acquired Accomable, and now you work at Airbnb. So, what are some of the goals of what you wanna do at Airbnb?

SRIN: So, our goals and vision when we first joined was that look, we wanna make hosts and property owners around the world aware of this and have the resources to make it easier for disabled people to travel. And we are, I guess, at the very beginning of a long assignment. So, five years from now, I want us to have created the most trusted travel platform for somebody with a disability. I wanna create a world where somebody with a disability can, regardless of what their disability is, they can find a listing or accommodation that works for their needs. It’s not just about changing the product or adding some tick boxes. I am under no illusions that we have to also completely change how society thinks about disability and accessibility and change perceptions across the entire world.

So, normally at tech companies, accessibility or this area is often something that some employees do on the side because they really care about it. But we actually have a really large, dedicated team of over 20 people now whose sole focus is on making the platform easier to use if you have a disability.

[mellow acoustic music break]

SRIN: So, I’ve been a wheelchair user all my life due to a disability called Spinal Muscular Atrophy, and in terms of my requirements, I travel with a big powered wheelchair. I think I have the same as you, right, Alice? A Permobil.

ALICE: Yeah, yep.

SRIN: I also travel with a mobile Hoyer hoist. So, these are two really important bits of equipment. I also travel with a mobile shower commode as well. I spend a lot of time doing my research online. And wherever I’m going to stay, I always ask for photos of the accommodating and just make sure that I have everything that I need in order to travel. I often find reaching out to the community really important. So, Alice, ‘cause I guess you’ve seen, and many of your listeners have seen, I run a really big Facebook peer support group for accessible travel called the [Accessible Travel Club](#), which is something that I just do voluntarily in my spare time. It’s a public group that anyone can join. All of the admins are people with disabilities, and so it’s very much a peer support group run by the community.

ALICE: That’s awesome.

SRIN: And actually, when I last checked, we have members in 107 countries now.

## Social media and reaching the larger community

ALICE: So many people have amazing knowledge and amazing experiences and great recommendations. So, in terms of just what is the power of social media in terms of just your ability to travel and get around much more easily.

SRIN: I think it's been an incredibly empowering tool to allow people like me and you to share our knowledge and experience and allow hundreds of millions of others to share that kinda know-how and experience that may not have been discoverable on traditional media once upon a time. So, I completely agree: social media and the Internet in itself has been transformational in empowering our community to share that knowledge.

ALICE: Is there anything else you'd like to share with me as we wrap up?

SRIN: There is a major culture shift that we have to affect. There is a lot of awareness that we have to raise, so it will take time to get to my dream world of what I think we should create. But we'll get there, and I hope we can carry on doing a lot more with the wider community. And that yeah, just that there are people that care leading this work, and we'll get there eventually.

ALICE: Wow. Well, thank you so much, Srin. I just really appreciate the time you spent with me and just hearing your experiences and all that you've done.

SRIN: Cool. Thank you so much for the time, Alice.

## Wrap-up

[hip hop plays]

♪ Oh, yeah yeah  
How far will they go.... ♪

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at [DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast](https://DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast).

You can also find out more about Bani and Srin's work on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Well, thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Bye!!!

♪ Rock it to the blast off  
Stop, drop, dance off ♪