

Living with MS: Summer at home



Have a sensational and safe summer with these stellar staycation ideas.

by Matt Alderton

Summer can be the perfect season to travel to locations far and wide. However, health issues, safety concerns, limitations imposed by the pandemic, financial considerations and a number of other reasons might mean staying closer to home this year. A staycation doesn't have to be boring if travel isn't an option, though. And multiple sclerosis doesn't have to be an obstacle. Whether you like to spend time inside or outside, testing your body or resting it, here are a few suggestions to help make the most of your summer.

Play at a national park

Since being diagnosed with MS at age 29, accessible-travel specialist Tarita Davenock of Nanaimo, British Columbia, has been all over the world in her wheelchair. Now 53, she shares her love for travel as founder and CEO of Travel For All, a full-service travel agency specializing in accessibility. When COVID-19 took hold, she could no longer plan elaborate overseas vacations for herself or her clients. Instead, she began engineering dream vacations of the domestic variety — many of which included visits to national parks.

"There are some beautiful spots in the U.S. And depending on where you live, you can drive to many of them," says Davenock, who points out that national parks are government-run and therefore subject to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). "The beauty of the national parks, if you have a disability, is that they have to accommodate you."

There are 63 national parks across 30 states and two U.S. territories. If you don't live near

one of them, consider state parks, which also are ADA-compliant and can be just as enjoyable for socially distant outdoor activities and adventures.

“Pack a picnic, and make it a day,” advises 52-year-old travel enthusiast Dave Bexfield of Albuquerque, New Mexico, founder of ActiveMSers.org. “I’d also recommend zoos and botanical gardens, cycling and hiking trails, and outdoor walking/rolling tours — especially nighttime ghost tours, evening nature tours to take advantage of cooler temps.”

Take a swim

Michael Wentink of San Antonio loves vacationing with his wife and two children. Because he’s extremely sensitive to heat, however, he has to be strategic about where he spends his summer months. Usually, the family heads north. Because that wasn’t an option in 2020, Wentink spent much of his summer in the only place he feels relief from the blistering Texas sun: his local swimming pool.



**While not in the pool,
Michael Wentink enjoys
LEGO projects that he builds
with his kids indoors.**

“We’re blessed with a neighborhood pool that’s right down the street from us,” says Wentink, 44, author of “[A Life Less Traveled](#),” a blog about his life with MS. “We spend a lot of time there in the summer because I don’t feel the sun when I’m in the pool. It’s the most wonderful thing. When I’m in the pool, I don’t feel like I have MS.”

Kimberly Conover Dickerson likes water parks for the same reason. “Water parks are one of my favorite summer destinations because it’s something the whole family can enjoy together,” says Dickerson, 50, author of the lifestyle blog “[Winter & Sparrow](#).” “Many of the areas are disability-friendly, and who doesn’t like floating on a rubber tube in a cool stream of

water? It requires little energy expenditure, and you get to enjoy time outdoors.”

If you don’t have a pool or water park near you, consider planning a night or weekend at a local hotel, suggests Davenock. Hotels — especially those owned by large national chains — often have wheelchair-accessible swimming pools if you need the assistance of a lift, including indoor pools that provide ample protection from the summer sun, she says.

Have a ‘grape’ time at a winery

Oenophiles used to have only a few travel options: France, Italy or California. These days, however, there are prolific wine-growing regions everywhere, from Oregon’s Willamette Valley to Michigan’s Harbor Country to New York’s Finger Lakes region, just to name a few. Because many of them make imbibing accessible, these regions can be great destinations for people with MS, according to Davenock, who says wineries are among her favorite places to visit when she’s looking for a fun, convenient daytrip.

“Many of them do wheelchair-accessible tours, tastings and meal pairings,” Davenock says. “These are fantastic things for people with MS to do because we’re able to participate, but it doesn’t require a lot of physical ability.”



**Kimberly Conover
Dickerson enjoys
spending summers at
water parks with her
family.**

Don’t drink? Many regions offer artisanal food experiences instead. If you live in Wisconsin, for example, you could visit dairy farms or cheese factories. And if you live in Texas, perhaps a barbecue tour is in order. Consult with your local tourism bureau to identify public, private or

self-guided tours in your area.

Build a LEGO empire

Pool days notwithstanding, Wentink usually spends his summers inside where it's cool. That means he's always looking for indoor activities that he can do with his kids. One of those activities is building LEGO projects with his 11-year-old daughter, who collects LEGO Friends building sets — including a hospital that she built with her dad last summer.

"She has built an entire city with the various LEGO products she's gotten over the years," Wentink says. "She does most of the work, but I like it because it's quality time that we can spend together indoors."

If you don't have LEGO bricks of your own, other hands-on hobbies include jigsaw puzzles, adult coloring books, baking, crocheting, knitting, calligraphy and origami, for starters.

Paint a masterpiece

Hannah Garrison, also of San Antonio, typically spends most of the summer indoors. Because she's an artist, she devotes much of that time to painting. In 2020, she experimented with new techniques like acrylic pour art. The artist mixes a latex paint additive with various acrylic paint colors, then adds each color, one at a time, to a container that's subsequently poured onto a canvas.



Hannah Garrison enjoyed family time in a makeshift outdoor theater last summer.

"It's really fun and fascinating to watch because the colors just sort of mix and create a bunch of different textures," says Garrison, 31, an arts instructor at Hearts Need Art, a

nonprofit that provides free art and music lessons to people with chronic illnesses. “I also did a ton of alcohol ink art: You use a dropper to drop ink on a nonporous surface — usually a waterproof paper called Yupo paper — and then you add rubbing alcohol and let the colors mix together.”

What’s great about these techniques, according to Garrison, is that they don’t require any artistic skill. Anyone can do them. Because the result is different every time, it’s a satisfying substitute for would-be travelers who can’t take a trip but still want to enjoy new experiences.

“If you think about it, the reason we travel is that we want to get away from our surroundings and do something different,” Garrison says. “Doing artwork using mediums that you’ve never used before offers the same kind of escape.”

Dickerson agrees. Every spring, she travels from her home in Richmond, Virginia, to Washington, D.C., to see the cherry blossoms bloom. Because she had to cancel her trips in 2020 and 2021, she plans to spend this summer learning how to paint with watercolor, so she can paint cherry blossoms of her own.

“Every summer, I make it a point to try a new craft project or technique,” Dickerson says. Although watercolor will be her focus this summer, past projects have included making wreaths, pillows and body scrubs. “It keeps my mind and hands busy while keeping me cool indoors.”

If you want to learn more formal techniques, consider taking a virtual class via Zoom. Or, if you prefer to view art instead of making it, try using Google Arts and Culture to take a virtual museum tour if your MS allows.

“As someone with MS dizziness and visual issues, I find that too much of a virtual tour can make symptoms flare,” Garrison says. “It’s such an amazing resource and activity idea, but I’d recommend using it with caution.”

Host an alfresco movie night

If you avoid summer days, then you probably love summer nights. A fun and safe way to spend them is watching movies at a drive-in movie theater, according to author Elissa Dickey of Aberdeen, South Dakota, who did just that with her husband and three children last summer.

“For me, it’s crucial to have a cool place and the option of sitting down,” says Dickey, 41, who recently published her debut novel, *The Speed of Light*. “The drive-in was perfect because we sat in the car and kept the air conditioning going as needed until it got cool enough outside.”

If you don’t have a drive-in near you, consider making your own, Garrison suggests. She spent last summer watching movies with her family under the stars, courtesy of her mother,

who fashioned a makeshift outdoor theater using a projector, a Roku digital media player, a bedsheet and a box fan for when it was hot outside.

Or forget the movies altogether and use the money you would have spent on a vacation to buy a firepit. “We have a small firepit on our patio, and that was a source of a lot of fun on cool summer evenings,” Dickey says. “We would sit in front of the fire and toast marshmallows while enjoying theoretical question games (Would you rather live where it’s always dark or always light?) and having karaoke battles.”



Karen Lanzetta enjoys birdwatching, which can be done from anywhere — even from a car.

Discover bird-watching

Karen Lanzetta of Lebanon, New Hampshire, had to cancel several family vacations because of the coronavirus, including trips to Ireland and her native Netherlands. But that didn’t stop her from enjoying beloved summer activities at home — one of which is birding. All you need to partake, she says, is patience, a pair of binoculars and a burning curiosity about nature.

“I think we all secretly want to fly, especially now that we’re all stuck at home,” explains Lanzetta, 54, author of “[Our Carpe Diem](#),” a blog about living and traveling with MS. Birding, she says, is great for people with MS because it can be done from anywhere — even a car. “I enjoy the thrill of seeing new, exciting and colorful birds. I’ll take pictures of them and look them up when I get home. I enjoy learning new things, and I always find out something surprising.”

Go on a 21st century scavenger hunt

Another summer activity Lanzetta enjoys is geocaching, a high-tech treasure hunt where you

use your phone or a GPS device to explore the outdoors and find hidden “geocaches” — miscellaneous trinkets and sundries that fellow geocachers store and stash in containers for you to find. You can get started using the official Geocaching app, which provides GPS coordinates for geocaches in your area that you must find using a combination of navigation, intuition and observation.

“It’s local and tied to real places, so it’s a fun way to explore [your hometown],” Lanzetta says. “You don’t always find the geocaches, but that’s OK. It’s about the experience.”

Commit to fitness

If you can’t exercise your passport, you can at least exercise your body, Lanzetta says. After she was diagnosed with MS, she joined MS Fitness Challenge Gym, a charitable organization serving people who want to battle MS through fitness and nutrition. Every month, it poses a different exercise challenge, such as planking or wall-sitting. In a private Facebook group, members share their progress and give one another support and encouragement. While she was stuck at home during summer 2020, Lanzetta participated in an eight-week pushup challenge and raised \$600 — she did one pushup per \$1 donated — for the MS Fitness Challenge program.

“It’s nice to be part of a community where physical fitness is stressed, even for people with MS,” Lanzetta says. “Even without leaving the house, you can have human contact with other people who keep you motivated to exercise and have the same challenges as you.” She recently discovered a fun new activity to do at home this summer, independent of the MS Fitness Challenge Gym: hula-hooping. “Every morning when I wake up, I blast music while hooping and dancing for 10 or 15 minutes. It’s really fun, and it’s good exercise.”

5 tips to manage summer symptoms

Backyard barbecues. Fourth-of-July fireworks. Ice cream trucks. Lightning bugs. Fresh strawberries. Kids running through sprinklers. These are just a few of the things worth smiling about in the summertime.

Unfortunately, summer has a way of quickly wiping that smile off your face when you have MS. Heat intolerance often exacerbates symptoms like fatigue, numbness, blurry vision, tremors, incontinence, imbalance and weakness. However, with forethought and planning, you can make summer a lot more comfortable — and a lot more fun.

Wear a cooling vest: Cooling vests can do wonders in warm weather, according to Dave Bexfield, founder of [ActiveMSers.org](https://www.ActiveMSers.org), where he regularly reviews cooling gear.

“My best advice: Purchase what you’ll actually wear,” he says. “In my experience, vests that are lightweight and attractive get worn. The rest just get buried in the closet. Inexpensive cooling wraps also are a favorite.”

Drink cold, caffeine-free beverages: Dehydration causes an increase in body temperature, so it's essential to drink lots of water, according to Michael Wentink, author of the MS blog, "[A Life Less Traveled](#)," who never leaves home without a bottle of water.

In the summertime, frozen drinks like slushies and snow cones also hit the spot — as long as they aren't caffeinated (or too sugary). "Caffeine can irritate your bladder, which may lead to more incidents of urinal urgency and incontinence," says Kimberly Conover Dickerson, author of the MS blog, "[Winter & Sparrow](#)." She recommends wearing a urinary protection product and carrying extra pads, liners or underwear — just in case.

Call ahead: If you have mobility challenges or need other accommodations, call ahead to hotels, attractions and tour operators to ask about door widths and thresholds, restroom availability and accessibility, shaded areas or other concerns, suggests Tarita Davenock, founder and CEO of accessible travel agency Travel For All, who says a little legwork ahead of time will ensure your comfort later. "Do not go online because the information might not be correct," she says. "Call them directly ... I even ask them to send me pictures to confirm."

Schedule around the sun: Ultimately, avoiding the heat is easier than managing it, according to Wentink. "Because the heat is so hard for me, anything my wife and I do outside is done, for the most part, either before sunrise or after sunset," he says.

Know your limits: If you venture outside in the summer heat, be realistic about how much of it you can handle, and be prepared to retreat when you've hit your limit. "Set a timer for outdoor activity," suggests Elissa Dickey, author of the new novel, *The Speed of Light*. "I love working in my flower garden in the summer, so I set a timer for 10 to 15 minutes to make sure I take frequent breaks."

Be aware of your limits indoors, too, Dickerson advises. "I'm still able to walk short distances, but if I'm going to a place that covers a lot of distance, I'll rent a scooter or bring my own to conserve energy," she says. "I find that I enjoy myself more when I do this."

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based writer and editor.

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