

German iPhone app guides handicapped around cities

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Berlin resident Ingo Stoecker poses his iPhone in the Alexanderplatz Train Station in Berlin, Germany, Saturday, Jan. 15, 2011. When the going gets tough, Stoecker pulls out his iPhone and makes a note of it on Wheelmap, an application by the non-profit Sozial Helden, or Social Heroes. The application and its website Wheelmap.org allow users to rate the accessibility of everything from street corners to train stations in real time, much like a Wikipedia page. Wheelmap works off of an open-source map that allows users to rate accessibility with red, yellow, and green flags, and allows them to add commentary. Stoecker says he uses Wheelmap mostly when he is in unfamiliar parts of Berlin or when traveling outside the city. (AP Photo/Shane McMillan)

(AP) -- Raul Krauthausen, who has used a wheelchair since childhood, has always been uncomfortable with the services Germany provides for the physically handicapped, like special taxis and grocery delivery - saying they feel patronizing and further isolate him from the able-bodied world.

So Krauthausen took matters into his own hands and launched wheelmap.org, an iPhone application and website in German and English that allows users to share ratings and tips on how accessible shops, bars and other places are.

"Sometimes I feel I'm treated like a child who isn't allowed to decide specific things by myself," said the 30-year-old who suffers from a genetic disorder that makes his bones brittle. "I want to remain flexible and not be dependent on when a driving service has time to pick me up."

It turned out he wasn't the only one who felt that way. With some 300 new user-ratings daily, wheelmap.org now has details on 30,000 locations. Around 80 percent of tagged spots are in Germany, but site ratings for cities like London and New York are slowly growing, Krauthausen said.

"Wheelmap.org wants to help show people with mobility impairments everything that's achievable," he said.

Krauthausen attributes Wheelmap's success to its availability as an iPhone application and the "Wiki principle" - the idea that anyone, anywhere can contribute. Users rate locations without registering, but must log in to add specific comments.

Ingo Stoecker, a regular user and beta tester for the app, said he hopes the site will encourage often reclusive handicapped urbanites to explore surroundings they see as potentially perilous to navigate. Some 4.5

million of Germany's 82 million people are physically handicapped.

"Most or many wheelchair users are rather introverted - they'd rather not go out," said Stoecker, who suffers from a birth defect resulting in incomplete spinal development.

"I think if they knew of such an app, they would maybe get out more."

Stoecker, 30, can navigate very short distances on crutches and drive a special car. He uses Wheelmap to find bars or cinemas for weekend nights in Berlin or traveling outside the city with friends from his wheelchair basketball team.

"It's helpful when our team is on the road to unknown cities where we have games," he said on a recent day, using the app to pick out a not-yet rated sandwich shop in Berlin's Alexanderplatz. "We can see how to get around and what there is to do."

On the [iPhone app](#), locations are tagged as either green, yellow or red - totally, partially and not at all accessible. Unrated locations are gray.

Stoecker rated the sandwich shop yellow. It had a curb about four inches (10 cm) high - low enough for him but prohibitive for more disabled urbanites.

While many large cities from San Diego to Vienna offer guidebooks for handicapped visitors, Anette Stein, an education researcher at the Bertelsmann Foundation think tank, and other experts said they were unaware of any other application that allowed users to add instant comment.

"I find the Wheelmap project highly exciting and can well imagine that it could spread through social networks and consequently see enormous

growth," Stein said.

Beyond helping the handicapped, Krauthausen said he hopes Wheelmap will persuade more business owners to make their stores barrier-free, something Germany legally requires, but in reality is often not implemented.

"Often it's simply a matter of one or two steps preventing you from getting in. For that, there's a cheap solution," he said.

Stein said change will come if businesses see themselves losing customers or developing reputations as handicapped-unfriendly.

"Wheelmap generates a type of pressure on proprietors and establishments and will arguably cultivate an interest for them not to be shown as gray or red, but as green" Stein said.

To finance wheelmap.org, Krauthausen has relied on both private donations and a governmental stipend.

Though he welcomes the public funds, he worries the government might be trying to "buy its way out" of the problem of making handicapped Germans more independent.

"The whole reason there are organizations like ours is because the government has failed to do anything themselves," he said.

Krauthausen and Stein both pointed to a 2007 United Nations study rating Germany as one of the worst industrialized nations for handicapped accessibility.

The Labor Ministry said things are improving, and that the U.N. study has been a catalyst for improving federal initiatives to aid the disabled;

the Cabinet is expected to pass an action plan, written with a focus group of handicapped Germans, in March.

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