

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

(Better known as the Gateway Arch)

Part 1: The Museum of Westward Expansion

11 North 4th Street

St. Louis, MO 63102

(314) 655-1700

<http://www.nps.gov/jeff.htm>

Rating of Accessibility (out of 5 stars)

Overall Rating: 2.1 stars

- Accessible by Metro's bus routes: 1 star
- Docent-led tours upon request: 0 stars (under consideration)
- On-site docents and staff: 5 stars
- Quality of experience if visiting unaccompanied: 2.1 stars
- Tactile and auditory interpretation: 2 stars (under further development)

This evaluation was last updated on June 28, 2014 by Stephen Kissel, Blind Community Enrichment Associate for the St. Louis Lighthouse for the Blind, with the assistance of Ms. Ann Honious, Chief of Museum Services and Interpretation for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.

Commuters pass it every day as they cross the Mississippi River into St. Louis. It is the tallest and the most iconic feature of the St. Louis skyline. It is the Gateway Arch, and all around, beneath, and within this famous monument rests the history of St. Louis and of westward expansion. From the 1803 Lewis and Clark Expedition to the age of the steamboat to the 1965 completion of the Arch itself, the grounds possess many intriguing stories, tributes, and exhibitions that are meant to provide a gateway into the past. The museum remains a fascinating place to visit, but the spacious grounds, layout of the museum galleries, and lack of tactile and auditory components to the exhibits present several obstacles to blind and visually impaired individuals, making it necessary to visit with a sighted companion. As the park approaches its fiftieth anniversary in 2015, many new project proposals are under development which are designed to make the exhibitions and regional history more engaging, enjoyable, and enriching for both sighted and non-sighted visitors. Therefore, it is important to note that much of the information in this entry is subject to change over the upcoming year.

Currently, the Gateway Arch and the Museum of Westward Expansion are not easily accessible through public transportation. The closest Metro stop is a Metro Link station down on Laclede's Landing, approximately five blocks from the museum's main entrance. Since crossing 4th Street and Memorial Drive can also prove more difficult for visitors with little to no vision, those wishing to independently travel to the Museum would be well advised to solicit the services of Metro's Call-A-Ride service, local cab companies, or other sighted drivers and should request to be dropped off in front of the Old Cathedral, not the Old Courthouse. Once clear walking directions have been obtained, this arrangement will provide sight impaired travelers with a much simpler, safer, and more direct route to the Museum of Westward Expansion. Although the grounds are easy to navigate, and although the walking paths are paved and well kept, the grounds are quite extensive, and it remains very difficult for a sight impaired individual to become well oriented with the layout of the National Park. A sighted companion who can accompany the blind or visually impaired individual on their visit will allow the sight-impaired visitor to navigate the grounds with a maximum amount of efficiency and would also allow them to take in the vast landscape of the grounds of this national park.

The City Arch Riverfront has recently broken ground on a Park Over the Highway, an elevated landscaped park that will span the distance between the Old Courthouse and the Museum of Westward Expansion. When completed, this new component to the park's grounds will greatly improve navigability, orientation, and pedestrian safety for both sighted and non-sighted visitors. More information on new drop-off locations, way-finding amenities, and overall layout will be made available to the general public as construction nears completion.

Before entering the museum, be sure to feel and walk around one of the massive legs of the Gateway Arch and to walk the six hundred and thirty foot span of the two legs. As the span is equal to the Arch's height, this will help blind and visually impaired visitors to take in the composition, size, and grandeur of the monument. After passing through security, one will encounter the main help desk, located straight ahead at the end of the entry hallway. Here, visitors can be briefed on the many attractions and regularly-scheduled group tours within the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, and blind and visually impaired individuals can obtain descriptive audio devices for the two documentary films and the featurette in the exhibit. As in most cases, this device may be obtained with the use of a valid state ID or driver's license.

Owing to the limited availability of museum staff for extended periods of time, it is not currently possible to arrange for a park ranger to serve as a sighted guide. Furthermore, the museum's exhibits are largely deprived of any auditory and tactile components that would otherwise enable blind and visually impaired visitors to independently explore the exhibits. These factors further necessitate the need for a sighted companion if blind or visually impaired visitors are to fully explore and appreciate the content of the exhibits. On-duty rangers stationed within the main exhibit, if alerted to a visitor's visual disability, can also enhance the experience by retrieving a small collection of available artifacts from the Education Department. These preserved items include tanned hides, animal parts, lead bullets, and a nineteenth-century rifle (not loaded) that visitors may feel and examine. By talking with these well-informed park rangers, visitors can gain fascinating insights into how these objects were valued and used by settlers and Native Americans during the nineteenth-century. A couple animatronic figures

within the main exhibition also deliver short monologues at the touch of a button which often pertain to a specific item or small collection of items on display. These features represent the few auditory and tactile components of the main museum exhibits, for, as in most museums, the artifacts on display are not meant to be touched, despite the fact that many lie within easy reach of the visitor.

Partaking in one of the museum's regularly scheduled group tours of the various exhibits offers a more interactive method for both sighted and non-sighted visitors to learn more about a specific exhibit or theme of the museum. The rangers excel at weaving the collections of artifacts and murals together into a larger and fascinating narrative that seeks to immerse the group members in the human experience and diverse landscapes of such historic ordeals as the 1803 Lewis and Clark Expedition. There are plenty of opportunities during and after the tour for asking further questions, and, if given proper advanced notice of a visitor's visual limitations, the rangers can ensure that additional verbal imaging and tactile components are integrated into the tour. Visitors should check with the museum prior to their visit to confirm which group tours (if any) will be offered on a given day of the week.

The *Monument to the Dream* documentary on the construction of the Gateway Arch, the IMAX film on Lewis and Clark, and the Lewis and Clark featurette in the main exhibit room are all well worth the visitor's time, and all three films offer descriptive audio through a wireless headset which may be obtained at the front help desk. The professional descriptions, put out by the WGBH Media Access Group in Boston, Massachusetts, are of a very high quality, but the headsets, for reasons unknown, are not always able to pick up a clear signal from within an easy viewing distance of the picture. There also seemed to be some confusion at the front desk as to which headsets were for audio description (for the blind or visually impaired) and which ones were for audio enhancement (for the hearing impaired). Luckily these films are shown at regular intervals throughout the day, and if technical difficulties arise, the museum staff will work to remedy the problem before the visitor's departure. As background noises can make it difficult to hear the Lewis and Clark featurette within the main exhibition gallery, visitors with an interest in viewing a movie on Lewis and Clark would be better off to check out the IMAX film, which provides a more thorough overview of the expedition and is shown in a more sound-proof environment.

The trip to the top of the Arch is something not to be missed, even for a blind or visually impaired individual. If additional navigational assistance is required, it is possible to have a park ranger on the ground floor alert the on-duty staff at the Arch's summit who would then meet the visitor at the top of the Arch, helping them to safely navigate the upper passage and to take in the impressive panoramic view. Even when traveling with a sighted companion, the guides on duty at the top of the Arch are well worth engaging in casual conversation, for they can provide detailed and informative descriptions of the view, and they can also relay intriguing facts about the Arch's size, architecture, and construction. The chief point in the Arch ride where the blind person is at a significant disadvantage is while he or she is waiting in line to ride the tram to the top. The walls in the passage way leading to the trams at the southern leg of the Arch act as huge canvases, being covered with pictures and cutouts that depict St. Louis' levee during the age of the steam-powered riverboat. There are even a couple of hands-on objects such as the rope to a steamboat's whistle and a replica of a set of levy scales which were used to weigh cargo. Similarly, the passageway leading to the north leg also contains a life-sized replica of the

monument's keystone, the top-most section of the Arch which visitors may feel and examine, allowing them to grasp the size of the Arch and the manner in which it was constructed. Yet, a sighted companion will prove essential in exploring and appreciating these tactile components and visual décor that are otherwise completely hidden from blind and visually impaired visitors.

The Museum of Westward Expansion will close temporarily in the fall of 2014 for an extensive make-over and renovation. The newly accessible museum will reopen in the fall of 2016, showcasing a universally accessible experience. Everything from the architecture to the facility's layout to the design of the exhibits has been carefully evaluated to present a more universally accessible and engaging experience for all visitors. Thanks to the efforts of the newly-formed City Arch Riverfront Universal Design Group, painstaking attention has been awarded to improving the experience of visitors with a wide variety of physical and mental disabilities. The design teams involved in the 2015 renovations have been working tirelessly to create an immersive, interactive, and multi-sensory experience that brings the museum's history out of the glass display cases and into the hands (and ears) of the blind. When completed, this newly renovated museum will offer blind and visually impaired visitors a truly enriching experience as they journey through history. More information will be made available to the general public as plans and timelines are finalized.

The National Park Service's website for the Museum of Westward Expansion provides a good summary of the attractions and basic visitor information that should be consulted when planning a trip to the Arch's grounds. Though not organized by headings (the site's one shortcoming), the site is very compatible with both screen reading and screen enlarging software.

For any further questions, please contact:

Ms. Ann Honious, Chief of Museum Services and Interpretation for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.

Phone: (314) 655-1634

E-mail: ann_honious@nps.gov