Tips for Traveling With a Disability

by ABIGAIL BUDD

How to Travel With Mobility Issues

For many people with multiple sclerosis (MS), fatigue and mobility problems make any sort of travel difficult. Getting from home to work requires monumental effort, so any kind of longer trip can seem like an impossible task.

It's so much easier to stay at home than contemplate traveling anywhere further. Curling up on the sofa is a more attractive prospect than venturing out into the world — but what effect does this kind of attitude have on us? How does it feel to stay in one place all the time with no new experiences or perspective?

They say a change is as good as a rest and I would think this is as good a reason as any to start planning that trip!

Explore Your Own Country

I have two young children and we live in England. The thought of traveling anywhere by plane until they're old enough to sit quietly and entertain themselves fills me with horror. For this reason, all our vacations take place within a five-hour drive of our house.

There is so much to explore and the children don't really care as long as they're on vacation! We usually rent a house, which is a good, stress-free option with small children and my mobility issues to consider.

Using a travel company specializing in disability, we made sure the home was accessible and could accommodate my needs. It was so nice knowing my needs were taken care of so I wouldn't have to worry. I've arrived at places in the past and had horrible surprises that ruined the trip; one house had four bathrooms that were all upstairs, and another had four steps up to the front door without a handrail!

Plan Your Route Before Traveling With a Disability

One year we went to The Isle of Wight, a small island off the south coast of England. It's only a couple of hours from where I live, which is perfect for the children.

The last part of the journey is a car ferry that takes you across the channel to the island. I panicked in advance about how I was going to manage getting out of the car and up to the passenger deck, so I contacted the operator who assured me I would get special assistance when I arrived at the terminal.

This was only partly true! They were very good when we arrived and directed us to a special line of cars so my scooter could be accommodated on board, but no one communicated this to the staff working inside the ferry allocating spaces. We found ourselves in the middle of six lanes of cars with no way of changing our position without evacuating the entire ferry and starting again!

Luckily my husband was able to carry my scooter over all the cars and put it down next to the elevator. I had to get there as best I could, leaning on cars for support and grabbing hold of the walls till I reached my scooter — not dignified or particularly safe, but I did it!

The return trip was much better! I was allocated a spot just next to the elevator, so everything went much smoother. Planning every aspect of the journey is essential so you don't have any surprises you can't manage.

Airport Assistance

The last time I went on a plane was when my husband and I went to Ireland to watch horse racing on the beach with some friends. I had only just been diagnosed with MS but still worried about the potential marathon I'd have to walk at London Gatwick airport.

I was far too proud in those days to contemplate asking for airport assistance and just about managed to disguise my foot drop and constant tripping from those around me. I made it without major incident but would never attempt it now.

A friend of mine used airport assistance recently and she said it was wonderful. Staff collected her and pushed her in a wheelchair all the way to the plane so her scooter could be stored in the hold. She was given priority boarding so she got on before everyone else, and although she was last off the other end it was still a stress-free experience.

Plan, Plan, Plan

Those of us with mobility problems can do what other people can as long as we plan everything in advance and don't leave anything to chance. Luckily, travel operators are much more aware of our needs these days so I would make contact well in advance, explain what you need and see what they can do to help.