
published in The Hippocratic Post,
06 January 2017

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Wheelchair travel by land, sea and sky; easier would it be that a camel pass through a needle's eye. The holiday companies cheerily name themselves 'Accessible Travel' and 'Can Be Done' to tempt the disabled traveller, and, to be true, they do provide an exceptional service. Beyond their control, however, are the planes, trains and boats where wheelchairs are not welcome.

We've found a holiday haven on the shores of Lake Grienerick in Brandenburg, Germany: travel by hand-bike, flat-bottomed boat and even by horse-drawn carriage makes this a truly 'barrier-free' setting. Elsewhere, however, limitations announce themselves in a loud voice.

The aeroplane

"Is he a carry on?" asks the sullen staff member at the airport check-in, the wheelchair having apparently impaired the user's ability to hear and speak. The British films "Carry on camping," "Carry on cruising" and "Carry on abroad" come to mind, but I am not in the mood for any comedy sketch. I confirm that my husband does indeed require two people to help lift him into the aisle chair (something we confirm when booking the tickets).

We've waited a long time for the carry on: we've waited on the tarmac and we've waited on the plane long after the last mobile passenger has departed and the cleaners have arrived. On one occasion the carry on arrived but the wheelchair did not (it had been left at Kuala Lumpur whilst the passenger arrived in Australia). On another occasion, the carry on successfully deposited my husband in the aisle seat only then to announce in a loud voice that he should be moved to the window seat, since he would have no chance of escape in an emergency anyway, so it would be best to be out of the way. What a carry on indeed.

The train

"Shoot for the moon, even if you fail, you'll land among the stars". Believe me, we've tried this and it didn't work. Having experienced some terrible train journeys in standard class (the wheelchair sharing its designated space with suitcases and standing passengers on unbearably overcrowded trains, or even left to travel in the doorway when the carriage isn't wide enough to fit the wheelchair), we treated ourselves to First Class Travel, aiming for higher

standards.

Looking forward to our big day out, we were stunned to discover that the train had no First Class carriage, and never did. The journey was run by two different operators. We had bought the tickets from GWR but they failed to recognise (or inform the customer) that for 3 of the 4 travelling hours we would be travelling with Arriva trains who “don’t believe in class separation” (as the gruff guard later informed us). Yet the full First Class price had been paid. Squashed in squalid conditions again, the toilet door wouldn’t close on this journey. Oh, and for the one hour in which we could enjoy First Class travel, the seat assigned for the companion of the disabled person was at the opposite end of the carriage to the wheelchair space. Separated by circumstances yet again.

Spontaneity is a luxury denied to the disabled traveller: train times must be set in stone 24 hours before travel in order to request disabled assistance. My husband is a cricket fan, and British weather (and batting collapses) cause the length of cricket matches to be very unpredictable. With no crystal ball, we are still forced to decide when the match is likely to finish the day before travel and answer a long list of questions in order to arrange for the person with the ramp to meet us on the platform. Having played by the rules, it is not uncommon for us to be met with a look of surprise by station staff uninformed of our travel plans; I’ve also had to run the length of several train platforms seeking the person with the ramp once we arrive at our destination.

The Cruise Liner

With a sense of foreboding, we attempted to travel by boat. We had been warned that several of the ports might be inaccessible owing to our inability to board tender boats in places where the boat has to anchor offshore rather than alongside the port. We accepted that this could not be helped. We were, however, unprepared for further setbacks.

We had paid in advance for a couple of disabled excursions and looked forward to exploring new places. On the day of each excursion, we were informed that the trip had been cancelled because numbers were too low: we were confined to the cruise ship. After much altercation, an expensive tour by taxi was arranged, all in Spanish.

The cruise ship having become not much more than a luxurious ferry boat, we have since decided to save money and resort to sea travel by ferry rather than by cruise liner. This has been an enjoyable experience, though not always shipshape.

On one occasion, we dutifully flashed our hazard lights and displayed the upside down letter A in our front windscreen to warn all and sundry of the hazard that was boarding and followed the directions to our specially assigned parking space in the centre of the empty ship. Upon reaching the other shore, passengers raced to disembark. Our car was now tightly packed in amongst the others, rendering it completely inaccessible to wheelchairs. Silent we stood as cars inched around our marooned vehicle, wondering at the wisdom of parking where we had.

Would we fare any better on a Duck Boat (a purpose-built amphibious tour bus)? As we marvelled at the engineering that allowed a bus to sail, we reasoned that the clever design must surely extend to allowing wheelchair access? We were stranded again, the gangway being too narrow. “If only he could walk, you could get on” persisted the kind ticket seller. Thoughts of “if only I could walk” do not generally darken my husband’s thinking, as he leads an active and successful life. When travelling by land, sea or sky, however, a wish to walk is foremost in our thinking.



Links

[1] <http://www.hippocraticpost.com/lifestyle/wheels-of-misfortune/>