

Traveling with Mobility Aids

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Experienced traveler and polio survivor, Grace Young, author of *Air Travel with Mobility Aids* (Polio Network News, Vol. 16, No. 2), offers additional advice excerpted from her forthcoming book, *Help Yourself! Living Well with a Chronic Condition*.

Accommodations

Even if a hotel claims to have accessible rooms and bathrooms, remember that "accessible" means different things to different people, especially outside the USA. When you make reservations, be very specific about your abilities and what you need. Do not use lingo that may be meaningless to hotel personnel. Before my trip to Israel I made hotel arrangements via e-mail with an Israeli travel agent. In frequent e-mails I kept stressing my need for a walk-in shower. Although she assured me that the hotels had walk-in showers, all three hotels she booked had only over-tub showers. When I complained after my return, she said she did not understand what a walk-in shower meant and thought that since I could walk into the bathroom, there would be no problem.

Create a list of what specific accommodations you need, such as a higher bed for easy transferring, a free-standing bed for a lift, wider doorways, a roll-in/walk-in shower, grab bars, lowered sinks, a raised toilet seat, lowered closet bars, wheelchair-height peepholes and light switches, and whether you can exit the room by yourself. Ask about electrical outlets – how many and where they are located. Also ask about emergency situations: if the elevators were shut off due to a fire, who

would assist you if you were not on the ground floor?

Outside the USA the first floor is up one level, so request a room on the ground floor. If you take a room above this level, check that there are no steps to reach the elevator and that the elevator is large enough to accommodate your chair. Also, make sure there is a flat or ramped entrance from the outside into the hotel.

In the USA, do not use 800 numbers when inquiring about accessibility. Phone reservationists are not familiar with the individual hotels. Contact the hotel directly and ask to speak to someone who can provide you with details about the rooms they consider to be accessible. Ask the person to write down the details and call you back. Outside the USA, do your research by fax or e-mail. Send a form and ask them to complete and return it to you, or ask them to hold it and arrange to call them in three days.

Accessibility is not an idea that is understood by most nondisabled people. Even when well-meaning hotel managers truly believe that their accommodations are "state-of-the-art accessible" the reality can be very different and sometimes even humorous.

At one Norwegian hotel advertised as "accessible" the bathroom was up 6 inches and opened into a narrow hallway that led

to the bedroom. The hotel had placed a small platform in front of the bathroom entrance to eliminate the step; however, there was a short, very steep ramp on each side of the platform. My roommate, a wheelchair user, would have had to push herself up to the platform with such force that the chair could not be stopped before it continued down the ramp on the other side, which could have resulted in her being thrown from the chair to the floor. There was also not enough room on the platform to turn the wheelchair to enter the bathroom door.

Another charming, little hotel had a large roll-in shower, but the hand-held showerhead was attached so high that a seated person could not reach it. In a Belgium hotel, the roll-in shower did not have a shower bench to transfer to. Even if you think you have pinned down all the details regarding accessibility, you may be surprised when you get to your hotel.

Charging Your Equipment

Most American hotels have several electrical outlets in each bedroom. Many European hotel rooms have only one electric outlet and it may be located where your wheelchair or scooter cannot fit, so take a long extension cord.

You will need to convert voltage from American 110 to European 220. Also, their wattage is 50 instead of our 60. The standard converter used for hair dryers should not be used for the long slow trickle charge required by wheelchair batteries; it can burn out the charger.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to get accurate information about

what you need. Before my first overseas trip with my scooter, the service manager at the Electric Mobility factory in New Jersey said that I could charge my Rascal with the small converter used for hair dryers. I felt uncomfortable with this advice and called the Electric Mobility factory in England. They recommended a separate transformer (which weighs about ten pounds) or a dual voltage battery installed inside my scooter. I did the latter, and it just takes a screwdriver to switch the voltage from 110 to 220. On my recent trip to Ireland, one lady in the group was given bad advice by a salesperson at a nationally known electronics store. He sold her a wattage converter instead of a voltage converter and did not advise her to buy an adapter plug. So even advice from trusted sources can be incorrect.

You will need adapter plugs for the foreign outlets. Adapters come as a set of four or five which accommodate the different outlets throughout the world. Even if you plan to visit one country, it would be wise to take the whole set. Some years ago I unexpectedly spent two weeks in Ireland when my husband had a heart attack on the plane coming home from Europe. Electrical outlets are different in Europe and Britain, but fortunately I had taken the complete set of adapters.

Travel with Accessible Tour Companies

Several links to Web sites are listed (see box) for companies specializing in tours for people with disabilities. Many people have chosen this travel option,

Air Carrier Access Act: Common Questions and Answers About Air Travel for Wheelchair Users. Order from Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association. (800-444-0120; info@epva.org).

General Guide to Accessible Travel: Resources for Travelers with Disabilities. (D15697). Available from AARP Fulfillment, 601 E Street NW, Washington, DC 20049.

Project ACTION Accessible Traveler's Database. A comprehensive database of accessible transportation services in the United States. Includes rural and urban public transit operators; accessible van rental companies; private bus/tour companies with accessible vehicles; accessible taxis; airport transportation services; hotel-motel shuttles; national 800 numbers for domestic airlines, Greyhound, Amtrak, and companies with accessible car rentals; major hotel chains (www.projectaction.org/paweb/index.htm).

Global Access. A comprehensive Internet resource of accessible travel information that links to many other sites (www.geocities.com/Paris/1502/issue.html).

Access-Able Travel Source. A Web site providing free information to disabled travelers. Includes travel agents around the world, cruise lines, accessible attractions, lodgings, access guides, transportation, van rentals, and equipment rental and repairs (www.access-able.com).

Society for the Advancement of Travel for the Handicapped (SATH). Clearinghouse in contact with organizations in many countries. Provides information on air, rail, and bus travel, hotels, and services worldwide for various medical conditions and impairments. (212-447-7284, SATHTRAVEL@aol.com).

Directory of Travel Agencies for the Disabled by Helen Hecker, RN. Twin Peaks Press, P.O. Box 129, Vancouver, WA 98666-0129, USA (800-637-2256). Excellent directory divided by U.S. States, Canadian Provinces, and countries.

Travel for the Disabled: A Handbook of Travel Resources and 500 Worldwide Access Guides by Helen Hecker, RN. Twin Peaks Press, P.O. Box 129, Vancouver, WA 98666-0129, USA (800-637-2256).

Fodor's Great American Vacations for Travelers with Disabilities (2nd Edition). This comprehensive guide covers 39 of American's favorite travel destinations, listing a huge array of facilities and services for the disabled (www.amazon.com).

Wheels Up. Wheelchair travel specialists web site (www.wheelsup.com).

The Boulevard. A comprehensive site linked to products, resources, and publications related to travel for people with disabilities (www.blvd.com/travel.html).

The Oxygen Traveler for those who require oxygen and other durable medical equipment arrangements for domestic, international, or cruise travel (937-848-7100; www.oxygentravel.net).

Breathing Easy: A Guide for Travelers with Pulmonary Disabilities. Articles, tips, and advice about traveling with oxygen, including all the regulations for the safe transport of oxygen (707-252-9333; www.oxygen4travel.com).

including me. You will want to ask the company how long they have been in business and get names and phone numbers of people you can call for references. Ask to be given names of people who travel with the same type of equipment and have the

same level of ability as you. This is especially important if you will be traveling without a companion.

With advance planning, you can enjoy the rewards of new sights, new friends made, and new experiences. Bon Voyage! ■