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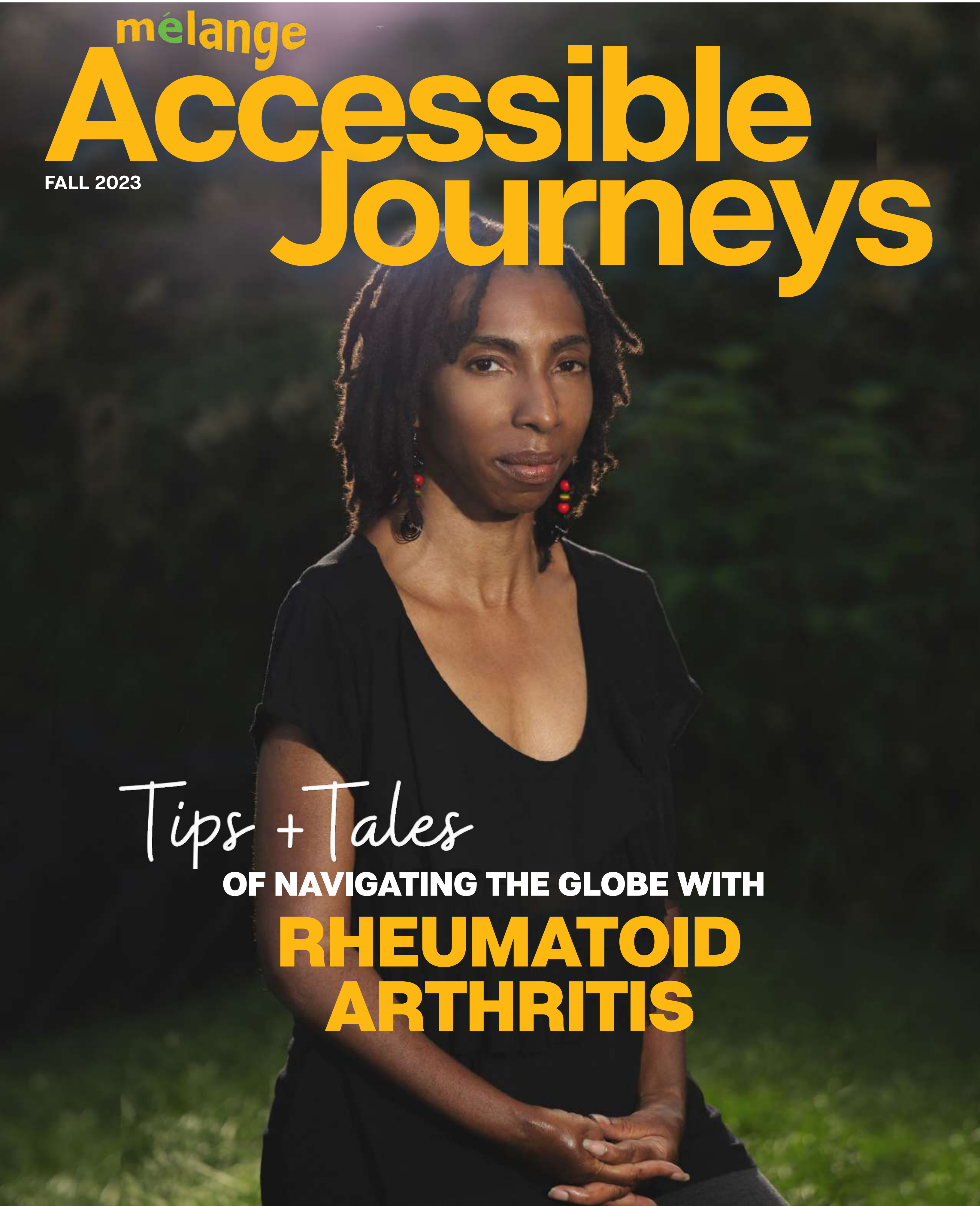
Accessible Journeys

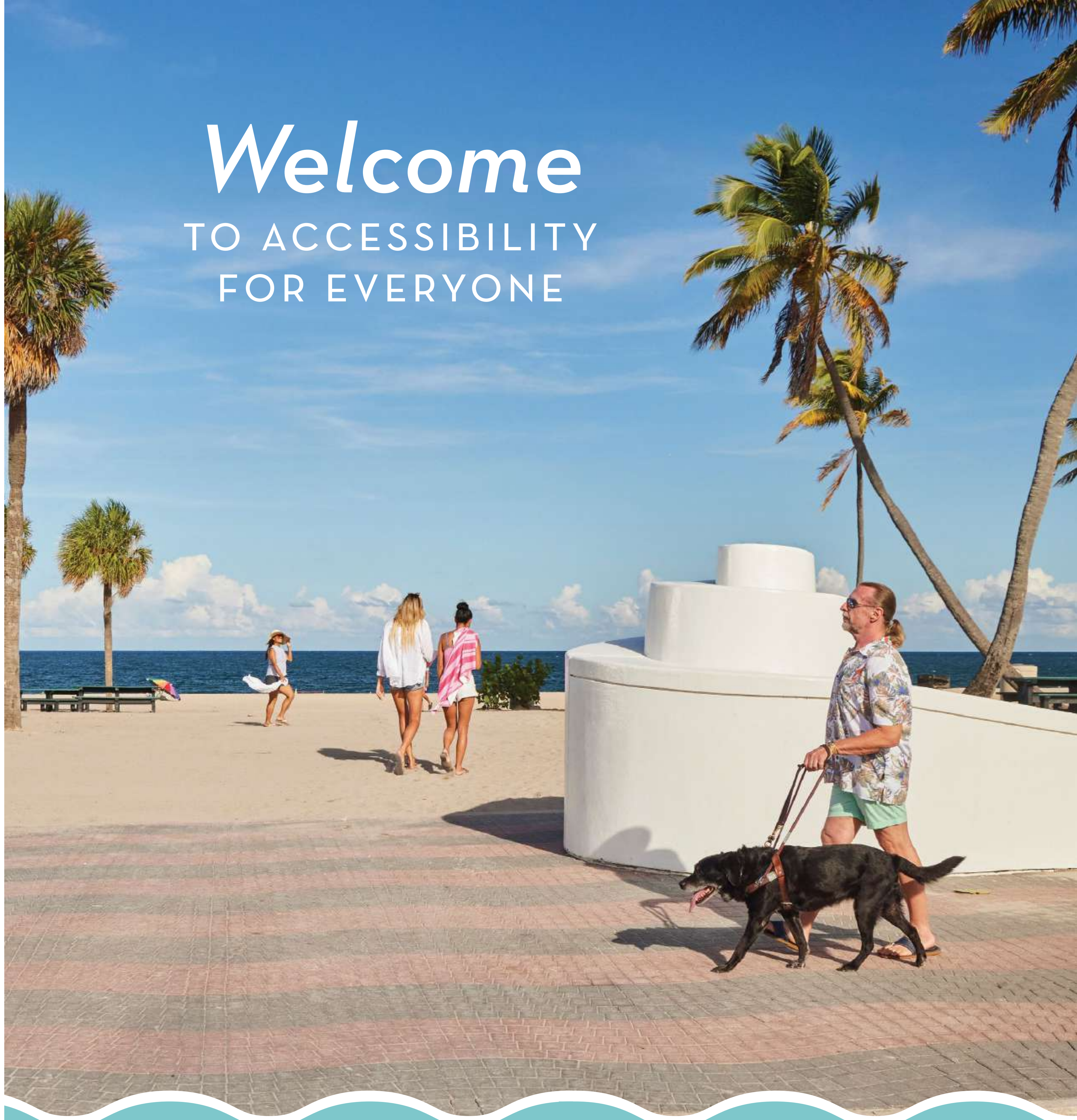
FALL 2023



Tips + Tales OF NAVIGATING THE GLOBE WITH RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

EXPLORE
ACCESSIBLE DESTINATIONS

- Mesa, Arizona
- Greater Fort Lauderdale
- Arizona
- Lansing, Michigan



In Greater Fort Lauderdale, we're excited about welcoming everyone under the sun and providing access for all, from beach wheelchairs and accessible pathways to the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program at FLL airport. Learn more about local resources and plan your trip at VisitLauderdale.com/Accessibility.

VISIT LAUDERDALE
EVERYONE UNDER THE SUN

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SPRING 2023

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ACCESSIBLE JOURNEYS

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We try to present information that is current and accurate, but errors can occur.

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Note from the Guest Editor

SAADA BRANKER

It's a pleasure to be welcoming you to the Fall issue of Accessible Journeys. In fact, it's incredible. As a writer and editor raised in Montreal and living in Toronto, I never considered myself a traveller until recently. Truth be told, I saw myself as someone living with Arthur—my pet name for my rheumatoid arthritis. Arthur had a way of upstaging most of my life experiences. Reading the stories of extraordinary people in this magazine helped me to remember that I have travelled.

By travelled, I do mean venturing off to far and remarkable places doing exceptional things. But mostly, I'm including having moved through my life's challenges to arrive at destinations that helped expand my perspective of culture, people and my capabilities. I'm not the only one who forgets what a gift travelling is. The Canadian Arthritis Society reports that six million Canadians have arthritis and we're five times as likely to have mobility problems.

When I was a teen, the travel bug first bit me when I flew to Washington, D.C. as part of a student exchange. A decade later, I moved from my parents' house to Toronto to live and study as a journalism student at the Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University). Trips to the Caribbean, U.S. and cities in Canada gave me insight into my abilities. Oftentimes, I was humbled by the kindness of loved ones and strangers who helped me manage.

Today I manage with my own business, Saada STYLO, securing assignments or projects that require writing, editing or both. Like many people working from home, I see how sedentary the writing and editing life can be. The same goes for people living with arthritis, whether degenerative or inflammatory. Push into that intersection unmanaged stress and our bodies can respond adversely. This issue looks at ways in which arthritis warriors can and have mitigated the effects of stress on their arthritis. Learn about VIA Rail and the latest achievements of their Multi-Year Accessibility Plan for travellers taking the train throughout Canada. Find out about strategies for going places including planning, yoga, mindfulness and positive thinking.

We hope the stories and tips for beating back Arthur will boost your spirit and inspire you to keep moving.

Saada Branker

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Leading Off: Travelling with Rheumatoid Arthritis

Lighting the path to limitless travel for all

By Nancy Baye

As autumn descends on the northern hemisphere and makes our days grow short, *Accessible Journeys* is grateful to have so many illuminating contributors, shining the way. Our writers might come from different parts of the globe, but they all share the love of travel and the desire for it to be limitless.

Guest editor, journalist Saada Branker lights the path through another invisible disability, rheumatoid arthritis (RA). With her intelligent insight and keen investigative skills, she unpacks what life with RA looks like and offers sage tips, notably on managing stress.

This issue includes more personal stories on RA, other chronic illnesses and invisible disabilities — providing valuable tips on life and travel strategies. Our hope is that this wealth of experience allows us to help more people, by sharing diverse perspectives. Mariah Zebrowski Leach weighs in on RA, the critical importance of support and her hard-won lesson on learning to ask for help. Many contributors echo the same sentiments, with a reminder that aid is not only helpful to the person who asks but also the one who offers.

Bringing news back from the successful TravelAbility Summit 2023, we share a study from Miles Partnership. The marketing company, focused on travel and tourism, pulls back the curtain on their recent study of travellers with disabilities—and some of the data is surprising.

Mama-bear wisdom is dispensed by Jennifer Allen on the challenges of travelling with a child with special needs. Christine Staple Ebanks tells of how those challenges change upon young adulthood, that “once-manageable option has evolved into a complex challenge, adding to the intricate puzzle of accessible travel.”






Like so many people, Norwegian Charlotte Bergslien spent decades of her life struggling with hidden challenges. She admits, “it was like the rest of the world was running on Windows but I was running on Mac OS, and I functioned a bit differently. . .” Welsh advocate Daniel Jones details how he’s learned to leverage technology in his travels and to enrich his life, outlining what he uses, how and when.

Since mental health is always key, we have Paralympic gold medalist and life coach Ryan Neiswender’s take on motivation, which begins with him asking himself the guiding question, “is that an expansive thought or a constricting thought?”

As always, social media and its content creators are the backbone of our magazine. We appreciate all the featured bloggers, vloggers and Instagrammers who work to make every journey more accessible. Lindsay Murray uses social media to raise awareness about chronic illnesses and disabilities, but also to empower her and her followers to feel less alone. And maybe at the end of the day that’s what we all need to aid our journeys, the chance to grasp an outstretched hand offering help, the illumination of lights dispersed on our path. Proof that we’re never alone. ■

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Key considerations for people living and travelling with rheumatoid arthritis (RA)

By Saada Branker

"If I could tell people with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) one thing, it's to manage your stress," says Patrice de Peiza, a registered occupational therapist, and a registered naturopathic doctor in Toronto. "There's good stress versus distress, and there are elements of both in planning for a trip."

People living with RA can probably attest to that. Research published in the *European Journal of Rheumatology* has indicated that psychological stress can cause flare ups of some people's RA. No doubt the worrying and lack of sleep associated with taking a trip can be stressful on the body.

When managing arthritis, how best to reduce the distress and ultimately the symptoms that trigger stiffness and pain? Given all that can happen on travel day, it helps to put thoughtful planning into action well before leaving your home.

1. Make a list of your essentials and go light. Choose light weight for your carryon and your luggage. If you over pack, that's more weight which is more stress on your joints, advises Patrice.

2. Inform customer service. Tell your travel provider or place of stay about your accessibility needs days before your departure. Find out early to what degree they will be accommodating.


Patrice de Peiza, OT Reg.(Ont.), ND, MScCH

3. Factor in climate and pack a long sleeved shirt, sweater, or shawl in your carryon. It may be hot at your destination, but that may mean indoor waiting areas are air conditioned. Some people with RA can feel symptoms emerge when exposed to a lot of blowing cool air.

4. Plan your diet. Buffets, foods with preservatives, late eating due to the time difference can all contribute to joints flaring up. "If staying with friends or family, let them know of your diet restrictions in advance. Be prepared to accommodate your own needs," says Patrice.

5. Get there early. There's a lot going on at the airport or station, says Patrice. "The earlier you get there the more relaxed you are at your gate. You'll be waiting and more able to speak to people about your needs."

6. Create a plan to conserve energy. "There are four Ps of conserving energy: Planning, prioritizing, pacing and positioning," says Patrice. "Prioritize what tasks you need to do and what you can delegate to others. Pace your activities. Positioning: So that's like, am I going to do this activity seated?" Sitting to do something saves a lot of energy. At the same time, Patrice advises balancing that because mobility is key, and sitting for long periods of time can trigger adverse effects. If you're on a plane, try walking up and down the aisles or tapping your feet and making circles by rotating the ankles.

7. Plan to rest daily at your destination. Have a good sense of your walking tolerance. Scan the environment for curb cuts, benches or planters to rest on. "Start on the smaller route first. You could always gradually build up if it's easier for you. "Build breaks into your day," says Patrice. "A little bit of planning on the front end, and you can enjoy your trip to the fullest." ■


Photo by Anna Shvets, Pexels

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Q&A with
Effie Koliopoulos

Effie is an American writer, author and arthritis advocate. She wrote, *Keeping it real with Arthritis: stories from around the world*.

Check out her website: risingabovera.com

How has rheumatoid arthritis impacted your daily routine and activities?

I've been living with rheumatoid arthritis for 19 years now. At 18, doctors diagnosed me with polyarticular juvenile idiopathic arthritis. For a few years prior to my diagnosis, I was experiencing a wide range of symptoms from fatigue, brain fog, night sweats, skin rashes, acne, eczema, joint pain and muscle aches. At the time, many of these symptoms were very mild and doctors didn't really think anything was alarming to the point of being an autoimmune disorder. However, these symptoms impacted my daily routine and activities greatly. I couldn't play high contact sports such as basketball, tennis, volleyball or softball anymore. My grades were affected greatly too, and I am lucky I was even able to manage graduating high school. Before graduating, I received my diagnosis and treatment plan. During college and in my 20s I felt pretty good and was excelling in school and many other areas of life such as fitness. However, I did have major flares and eventually the joint damage became severe. I have been through a lot and can write a whole novel on how RA has impacted my daily routines and activities. But the main thing I want to tell people is that the human body, mind and spirit has a tremendous gift of adaptability. If we allow ourselves to flow with the current rather than against it, we fare better on this journey called chronic illness. There are so many resources out there that have helped me cope and rise above the impact RA has had on my life. There were times when I felt like there was no hope, days when I thought things would get better. But as the saying goes, "This too shall pass." And it did.

Can you share some strategies or techniques you've found effective in managing pain during flare-ups?

Being honest with my rheumatologist is the number one strategy. When I am in a flare, sometimes my doctor can visibly see that I am not looking up to par, for example my joints look inflamed. However, she always asks me how I think I'm doing. I don't sugarcoat anything because I learned that only hurts me in the end. When I feel flare-ups, pain and fatigue come up, I tell my doctor right away. This helps to nip things in the bud. Prayer, meditation, daily exercise and eating well all have been effective techniques. Everyone is different so what may help me, may not help others. I have done a lot of trial and error to figure out what helps me during these bad days, but I am still investigating other avenues I have yet to try. I am lucky that I've always been interested in learning new things and this has aided me on my journey with RA. Also, the biggest thing is limiting stress and toxicity. Whether that be social media usage, people in your life you need to set boundaries with, or a work environment that is doing more harm than good. I know for me stress and emotional upset have been huge triggers with my disease manifestation, regardless of any genetic predisposition.

How do you address the emotional and psychological challenges that may arise from living with a chronic condition like rheumatoid arthritis?

I have a therapist I talk to once a week. It wasn't until 2021 that I sought therapy. Before then, I did a lot of the leg work on my own from reading books or simply talking to others in the arthritis community who were going through what I was. Writing and other advocacy related work brought on a major catharsis too. But ironically, RA isn't what led me to therapy. It was the end of a bad relationship turned situationship and being on the receiving end of a lot of emotional abuse. This was a blessing in disguise because it gave me the push I needed to finally understand many things that actually were connected to RA and self-worth, self-love and overall confidence.

Let's talk about travel, be it around your local community or abroad. How do you prepare for vacations considering the challenges posed by rheumatoid arthritis?

This depends on where I'm going. Within the U.S. versus overseas, there are two different types of planning and preparation. Though the first thing I do is plan out my medication schedule.

There have been instances when I've travelled with my medication and have taken it during the days

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I'm away with no issues. However, if I can avoid it, I take my medication injections before I leave or plan dates around the time I return home to take it. I also make sure to let my rheumatologist know and have any backup medications on hand in case of a flare: like prednisone (which I don't take anymore and use for emergencies). I have a ton of other pain management tools I bring with me such as Biofreeze, Green Roads CBD roll-on, ice and heat packs, bug spray (because flares can be caused by bug bites), massage rolling balls and good walking shoes and sandals. I also travel with people who understand RA and any limitations that may occur.

Travel often involves long periods of sitting or standing. How do you manage discomfort during transportation and throughout your vacation?

I wear good shoes, and easy to take off ones. I love Kizicks and other sandals that don't take forever to take off and on while going through the airport. I make sure to stand, stretch and go for walks to the bathroom. I also make sure to wake up early and get ready before others to ensure I have enough time to stretch, get dressed and have my supplements with breakfast. It's important to take care of myself when on vacation so I don't get run down which can lead to a flare and a feeling of needing a vacation after a vacation.

How do you balance the desire to explore new places with the limitations imposed by rheumatoid arthritis?

I make sure to walk and workout a lot before going on a trip. I know I will be doing a lot of walking. I also have a knee replacement, so this is something I need to be mindful of to begin with, and take measures to ensure I am strong. I have considered looking into a trek pole for vacations I want to go on where terrain may be a little rough.

How do you adapt to varying weather conditions when you travel to minimize their impact on your symptoms?

This is a good question but a difficult one too. We can't predict weather changes all the time, just like we can't always predict RA flares and pain. I think the biggest thing is to not stress about it or think about how the weather will flare you up. Out of sight, out of mind is my motto with this one. I think if we can handle the unpredictability of RA, we can handle anything. The above answers help me when weather conditions aren't always the best.

Are there dietary considerations you need to keep in mind to manage your rheumatoid arthritis symptoms while enjoying local cuisine?

The main thing I avoid now is gluten. I also don't eat dairy, even though it does not bother me much anymore. One of the first things I do when researching a place to visit or knowing I need to go somewhere, is investigate the places that are allergen friendly. There is so much awareness nowadays that I often find I am never without options.

How do you ensure you have access to necessary medications and treatments while on vacation, especially if you're travelling internationally?

I bring the medications and supplements I need with me. My doctors write notes for the airport staff in case they have questions while checking my bags. Travel and health insurance when overseas is a must. I haven't done this yet but will be planning on doing so from here on out as I've heard others in the chronic illness community have done this too and it's helped.

Travelling might disrupt your usual routine. How do you manage this while away from home?

I make sure to keep a schedule in the morning before I start my day. On vacation, I like to pray and meditate in the morning. Stretching helps and I try my best to stay on top of my supplements that help me from getting sick when travelling. I pack my supplements and medications in easily accessible travel bins and separate them by days. Though lately I've just taken the bottles.

Can you offer any advice for others living with rheumatoid arthritis on finding a supportive healthcare team and building a strong personal support network?

A supportive healthcare team is one of the most important relationships you will ever have. I know it's hard for many to find supportive health providers for many reasons whether that be insurance blocks, lack of insurance coverage, financial hardship, proximity to a provider, not having enough specialists in your area and so on. Even then you can find at least one doctor who will be willing to help by giving referrals or looking into things more with you and if not, you keep searching until you do. It can be an exhausting process, but it's worth it. Make sure to look at all the green versus red flags when you're looking for a supportive healthcare team and strong personal support network. Online support through social media has been a huge blessing for me as I've met many people through it whom I can call friends and have had many opportunities that are life changing. Though moderation is key here too and I found the dark side is that too much of one thing can affect your mental health a lot.

Connecting with people in real time whether it's friends or family and getting out there to experience life in the real world is key too. Join local support groups in your area, and if you don't have one, create a group. Look into ways to engage with others in person just as much as you do online. ■

> ". . . the human body, mind and spirit has a tremendous gift of adaptability. If we allow ourselves to flow with the current rather than against it, we fare better on this journey called chronic illness.
>
> Effie Koliopoulos

Mariah Zebrowski Leach

on how support soothes her rheumatoid arthritis

Mariah Zebrowski Leach is a wife, mother and advocate. Her life with rheumatoid arthritis benefits from the support of her husband and kids.

Her primary focus is a pregnancy and parenting website for moms and moms-to-be living with chronic illness.

www.mamasfacingforward.com

Mariah at the Koala Sanctuary in Brisbane, Australia in 2010

By Alicia Williams

Share a bit about your background

My goal is to help those living with chronic illness find the resources they need to live well.

I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) at 25 years old. I essentially went from being a healthy young adult to being diagnosed with a lifelong illness in just a few months.

First, my hands and wrists started hurting. At the time, I was a law school student and it was finals week. I was on my computer constantly, so I thought that explained it. Then I had trouble with some toes and thought I'd hurt a toe, maybe I should see a podiatrist. Then I experienced really intense fatigue and my knees swelled up like grapefruits. At that point, I didn't have an answer for why things were going wrong. I went to student health and got diagnosed with RA quickly because my symptoms were pretty typical.

How has RA affected your routine and activities?

It depends on how well my treatment is going. If it's working well, it doesn't impact my day-to-day too much. I pay attention to my energy and my pain levels, and try not to overdo it, or I'll pay for it later. If my treatment is not working, if it's wearing off or it's time to consider a new one, then daily tasks become a lot more difficult. Even something as simple as picking up a cup of coffee can be really painful.

What strategies have you found to manage your pain?

The best way has been a combination of medication strategies and my own. It was a real learning curve for me to go from super active, playing water polo and snowboarding to someone who has to monitor their energy and not overdo it. Now that I have learned what my body's limits are, I can get out there on the slopes and enjoy myself, just not the same way that I did before. So, it's about finding a balance. I also use things like massage therapy to help. I've tried basically everything under the sun. Splints are sometimes necessary.

What adjustments do you have to make when travelling?

Managing the medications in general is challenging. A good number of RA medications need to be refrigerated, which can make travel daunting. An injectable that needs to be kept refrigerated for instance, can I take that through the airport and what do I do with it on the plane? But I've taken refrigerated medications to China and camping all over Australia, so with a little bit of planning you definitely can do it. I just spent four weeks on the road with my family and we had to find a pharmacy halfway through to refill a couple of prescriptions because I could not get them all before the trip.

I also have to pay attention to my energy and pain levels while travelling and not take on too much. If I try to do and see everything, I'll end up in pain and won't enjoy the vacation. I try to be selective about the activities we do so that there's time to rest, recover and be ready for the next day.

Do you have different levels of pain severity?

I have some general fatigue and joint pain, but the location of the joint pain can vary from day to day. Sometimes it's my knees or wrists. This varies from person to person quite a bit. I have different levels of severity—that also depends on treatments. I was

In Hawaii with her second-born in 2017

lucky that when I got diagnosed there were quite a lot of treatments and my rheumatologist was aggressive and we started treating right away. But just before I was diagnosed there weren't many treatment options, so more damage tended to occur in patients. And even today, if you go for a long time without being diagnosed, you can end up with damage that's permanent, that you'll have to adjust to.

How do you manage discomfort?

I have a seat warmer in the car, that I use all the time. It helps me stay comfortable when we're driving for a couple of hours. We also stop relatively often—we have a 5-year-old, and she has to pee all the time. Stopping often helps because I can move around, stretch and not be in the same position for hours on end. Obviously, it's different on a plane, but still, I take the opportunity to get up, walk around. I think, at least for me, with RA, being stationary is more challenging than moving, most of the time. Sitting for long periods of time tends to make me stiff, which tends to make my joints get angry.

Travel can be is daunting. If you have a really bad flare and you can't get out of bed and you're on vacation—especially if you have kids you still need to take care of—it's daunting. But for me, I still really love to travel. So, being able to figure out how to keep that part of my life and not have to give it up because of my illness was a priority, for sure. Travel is therapeutic, it's good for our emotional well-being. I think that we don't even have to go far. One of the things I love about living in Colorado is how many things there are to explore, within a couple of hours of my home. You can find a lot of interesting things in your own backyard, and that can be a good place to start. If you're overwhelmed with the idea of a big trip start with a small one, see how it goes and let each trip be a learning experience. I think with every trip I learn how to do the next one better.

At Yosemite National Park with firstborn in 2013

In an art museum, Madrid, Spain on her honeymoon in 2011

Are there limitations on what you can and can't do with your family?

Yes. My youngest child is 5. Right now, our hiking capabilities line up pretty well. We can go a mile or two. I can handle what a 5-year-old can handle. But there have been times when my RA has not been controlled. I have used a wheelchair at an aquarium so that I could take my boys when they were little. It was too much for me, but I still wanted them to have the experience, so my husband pushed me in a wheelchair. I ended up using a wheelchair through museums on my honeymoon, because that kind of slow-paced walking and standing around was really irritating for my joints. So yes, there are limitations on what I can do with my family. I think as my kids get older and more active, I will come across those issues more and more.

We have an open dialogue in our family about what my RA means, what it's like for me. Sometimes we do alternative things like drive through a national park and pull out at all the stops to look at the view. As the kids get older, maybe they'll go off on a hike with my husband and I will stay with the dog. We try to find a middle ground where there's still some stuff we can do together as a family, but also I don't want to hold them back if there are things they really want to do.

Mariah had a lot more to say about life with RA, the support of her family, asking for help and being a patient advocate. Read the rest of Mariah's interview **here**.

> Travel is therapeutic, it's good for our emotional well-being. I think that we don't even have to go far . . . You can find a lot of interesting things in your own backyard, and that can be a good place to start. MARIAH ZEBROWSKI LEACH

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Making travel easier for those with arthritis

Practical tips and accessible yoga routines

ByJulia McNally (The RA Yogi), certified yoga teacher living with rheumatoid arthritis

When were you diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA)?

I was diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA) at the age of two years. At 16 I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. I also live with other autoimmune diseases, likely because I've lived with an autoimmune disease for most of my life and the chances are greater to have more than one. I was diagnosed with Eosinophilic Esophagitis (EoE) a few years ago, which is another challenge when I travel. In addition to managing pain, limiting walking and standing time, as well as fatigue, EoE affects my eating and drinking. EoE is an allergic/autoimmune condition that happens in the esophagus. During a flare-up the esophagus becomes inflamed and does not contract properly due to more white blood cells collecting in the esophagus. This can make it difficult to swallow, causing choking, vomiting, nausea and sometimes malnutrition.

Why are you studying to be a yoga therapist?

I am studying to be a yoga therapist because I believe in the power of yoga and have experienced it for myself. While our medical model is slowly changing towards interdisciplinary personalized patient care, there is still a gap in the medical system and yoga therapy can help to bridge that gap. Yoga therapists are not replacements for medical doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, physical therapists or occupational therapists, we simply offer something different and complementary. We work with clients through the yogic scope with the goal of assisting our clients to prevent or reduce their suffering. The professional order of International Yoga Therapists (IAYT) defines yoga therapy as "the professional application of the principles and practices of yoga to promote health and well-being within a therapeutic relationship that includes personalized assessment, goal setting, lifestyle management, and yoga practices for individuals or small groups. "Yoga therapy is well-known and respected as a healing discipline for physical health, mental balance, and spiritual consciousness." - IAYT

Yoga therapists can offer more time to their clients which is nice when a patient sees a doctor for 15 minutes or less and doesn't have enough time to communicate or explore their needs as a whole person. Yoga therapy is a holistic approach to healing including physical exercises, breathing techniques, meditation, relaxation, yogic philosophy and chanting. Yoga therapists work with a wide-range of people experiencing anxiety, depression, mood disorders, chronic pain, insomnia, arthritis, autoimmune conditions, pre and post joint replacement surgery patients, to name a few.

> Something I realized about travelling is that it can be wonderful for the soul, but not the best idea if someone's in a flare-up. I have been stubborn in the past and still travelled while in severe pain. It was really tough on my body, and I spent most of the time crying myself to sleep and not sleeping every night.

For more information about Yoga Therapy: www.iayt.org

"Travelling can be wonderful for the soul, but not the best idea if someone is in a flare-up" Can you elaborate on why that is?

If I'm in an RA flare-up the most important thing for me to do is rest, speak to my rheumatologist and other healthcare professionals to make a plan to help me get out of the flare-up. Travelling is often hard on the body and it can be stressful and disappointing if you've planned a trip and are experiencing a lot of pain and challenges with mobility and accessibility.

For instance, I travelled to Mexico to do my yoga teacher training in 2017 and experienced an RA flare-up while I was there. I told my teachers about my health situation, I spent a lot of time icing my knees, taking NSAIDS. Instead of sitting on the floor during class, I sat on a chair and got up when I needed to, to aid stiffness. I took a lot of naps throughout the day when I wasn't in class. I had to ask to be picked up after a long group walk instead of walking back with everyone. When I think of this act of listening to my body, I think of what is called Ahimsa in yoga (non-harming to oneself and others). It's a principle I come back to again and again with myself and a reminder to my students.

Asking for help or accommodations is an important part of making travelling possible while living with arthritis.

How did you come to realize that?

Travelling is not the best idea for someone in a flare-up, sometimes it cannot be helped. Another example: I had a planned vacation out of town at a bed and breakfast during an RA flare-up and didn't foresee the bedroom being upstairs in a loft until I got there. I had much difficulty walking up and down the narrow stairs to the bedroom. The ceilings were very low and it was difficult for me to bend over to get around. I had to sleep on the couch downstairs the first few nights alone while my partner was upstairs. I couldn't take the pain anymore from sleeping on a small couch, so I asked the owner of the bed and breakfast if she could accommodate my health issues by putting me in another lodging that offered everything on one floor. Luckily she accommodated me, but I was lucky she had the availability and that I had the wherewithal to advocate for my needs. I also had to reduce my activities during that entire trip. Instead of going out the first day, I stayed at the bed and breakfast and iced my body and ordered food instead of going to sit out at a restaurant. I changed my expectations of myself and the itinerary of the trip.

Tip: If you are in a flare-up travelling, speak to your doctor as soon as possible to talk about a plan and coping strategies. Bring ice packs, appropriate medication and walking aids, or call in advance to make sure the bus or airplane is accessible and that the place you are staying is accessible.

How can people with arthritis physically prepare for travelling, whether it is trip by public transportation or going abroad for a few days? And what are your suggestions for during and after the trip?

As someone living with inflammatory arthritis, I try to prepare for the mode of transportation I am taking, where I am staying, the activities planned,

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and by packing tools/accessibility aids with me. If I am travelling on public transportation, I try to get an aisle seat, so I can stretch when I need to and not have to ask the person next to me to move all the time. I always opt for preferred seating on planes for extra leg room. It is not a big expense compared to how I will feel if I don't get preferred seating. I can't sit or stand for short periods of time, so I have to get up and stretch my legs every 15-30 minutes or so, which can be adapted to the amount of time that works best for each traveller. If you are a nervous traveller, breathing exercises can really help.

On my **YouTube channel** you can follow along with some guided breathing exercises that are good for managing stress, such as balanced breath, alternate nostril breathing or ocean breath.

Meditation is another yoga tool that can support someone who is preparing for travel. Practicing meditation can help ease nerves, deal with uncertainty, and cultivate more self-love and compassion for yourself as you adapt.

Travel meditation

Close your eyes and focus on your breathing for a few minutes then repeat a mantra (a sacred sound) or affirmation (supportive words) for 2-3 minutes silently in your mind, for example, I am safe, I am calm, I am peaceful. When you are ready to end the meditation, take a moment to let go of your mantra or affirmation and come back to your breath, your body and check in to notice how you feel after practicing this meditation.

You can follow along with my free meditation series on The RA Yogi YouTube channel - A Meditation Series.

On a physical level, if you are sitting in the same position for a long period of time, it's nice to take stretch breaks, stretch during the trip as I mentioned by getting up carefully and moving around a little. Another option is a few stretches in your seat,

Fully seated yoga for arthritis during travel

Begin by sitting nice and tall and take 3 conscious breaths to connect to your breathing and present moment.

1. Seated neck stretches (flexion and extension, looking left and right, ear towards shoulder on each side x 3 breaths per side).
2. Seated flexion and extension of the feet (helps to increase the blood flow in your lower legs) x 3 breaths per side.
3. Seated circles with your ankles x 3 breaths per side.
4. Seated Flexion and extension of the knees if there is room to do so x 3 breaths per side.
5. Seated glute stretch: cross right leg over the left thigh, flex toes towards you for a hip and glute stretch. With a long spine and open chest, lean slightly forward moving from the hips until you feel a stretch in the right glute. Hold for a few breaths, release and switch sides. You should now feel the stretch in the left glute. Hold the pose for 30 seconds each side or a few mindful breaths per side.
6. Seated cat and cow - one of my favourites: gently rounding the spine and extension of the spine with your hands on your knees x 3-4 breaths.
7. Seated side bends - Mindful side to side movements of the spine x 3 breaths per side.
8. Seated gentle twists with your two feet flat on the floor x 3 breaths per side.
9. Seated full body stretch/seated arm stretches. Either stand up and lift the arms over head for a full-body stretch or in a seated upright position inhale, lift your arms over your head exhale, lower arms, feel the whole body lengthen as you reach your arms up x 1 deep breath.
10. To close this yoga practice, take 3 conscious breaths in and out, thank yourself for taking the time to stretch your body out of gratitude for your body and notice how you feel.

After travel yoga for arthritis

This yoga routine can be practiced as indicated or fully seated in a chair following along with the guided video on The RA Yogi YouTube channel under Accessible Journeys Yoga For Arthritis Series.

1. Mountain pose x 3-4 breaths.
2. Moving mountain pose: inhale arms lift up and exhale arms lower down, moving and breathing x 3 breaths.
3. Forward fold: inhale - lengthen the spine, exhale - fold from the hips, bend the knees as much as you'd like, release the head completely and hold for a few breaths.
4. Gentle backbend: hands behind the low back or interlaced behind the back, lift the heart and chin inhale and exhale back to starting position x 1-2 breaths.
5. Warrior 1: hands to the top of a sturdy chair, feet shoulder width apart, step one foot back on two separate tracks, bend into front knee, knee over ankle and gently send your back heel towards the floor. Option to lift arms and open the chest or keep hands to top of the chair x 3 breaths per side.
6. Warrior 2 x 3 breaths per side.
7. Side angle pose x 3 breaths per side.
8. Standing chair table top leg extensions x 3-4 breaths per side moving and breathing.
9. Lying twist: can be performed on a bed or yoga mat x hold the twist for a few mindful breaths x 6-8 breaths each side.
10. *Savasana: this pose is the most important: conscious relaxation for 5 minutes lying on your back. This could be in bed or a yoga mat on the floor with any pillows under the knees or head if needed for more comfort. Arms by your sides, palms facing up, legs open and relaxed, feet relaxed.

> There are other times where it might be a better time to travel, but for myself having clear boundaries if I'm travelling with others is so important.
>
> Julia McNally

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Extra Tip

Enjoy a yoga nidra practice before going to sleep in bed, to help you key down and aid your nervous system to rest and rebalance after travelling.

You can find a Yoga Nidra For A Deep Sleep on my YouTube channel titled Accessible Journeys Yoga Series.

A common experience for people living with arthritis is sometimes they can do a certain activity and sometimes they can't. What, in your experience, are the benefits of deep breathing for managing these fluctuations?

In yoga, the breath is called prana and considered one's life force and vital energy. Yogis look at prana as something that is infinite, and can be controlled through breathing exercises (pranayama). These breathing exercises may include full yogic breath (breathing into the belly, diaphragm and chest and exhaling, noticing the belly fall as you exhale), kapalabhati breath of fire which is good for increasing energy, anuloma viloma /alternate nostril breathing to help bring focus and grounding energy if you're feeling scattered or anxious and intercostal breathing to help aid depression/low mood because of its expansive nature. Placing the hands on sides of the ribcage breathe in through the nostrils notice your body expanding into your hands, try to create equal breath of each side, notice the lungs filling with air slowly and expansion of the breath as you inhale and as you exhale relax and let go of any stale energy, moving the stuck energy out of the joints and the body.

Deep breathing brings you into the present moment, so even taking 3-4 simple conscious deep breaths is such a great practice. I actually have an alert on my phone and my computer to remind me to take 3 conscious breaths every day, just in case I forget.

Takeaways

- Practice ahimsa: listen to your body, your body knows best.
- Use my yoga for arthritis travel practices to help you reduce pain, stiffness, anxiety, stress and fatigue.
- Enjoy the things you can do, and let go of what you can't do.
- Cultivate gratitude for the opportunity to travel, explore, expand, and be proud of yourself for going for it. You can do hard things.
- I hope this was helpful for anyone who is living with arthritis and loves travelling.
- Be sure to subscribe to The RA Yogi YouTube channel to discover free yoga for arthritis online and let me know how these yoga routines went for you! ■

Julia McNally
Founder of The RA Yogi

- Ex Personal Trainer and Group Fitness Instructor (2008-2016)
- Certified Yoga Instructor (Yandara Yoga Institute, 2017)
- Certified Chair Yoga Instructor (Sunlight Chair Yoga, 2019)
- Certified Yoga For Arthritis Teacher (Johns Hopkins Arthritis Centre - Yoga For Arthritis, 2020)
- Yoga Therapist in-training (Breathing Deeply Yoga Therapy, present)

Location: Montreal, QC, Canada

YOGA VIDEOS

The RA Yogi YouTube Channel

Arthritis Society Canada
- YogArthritis TV Series
- A Warrior Series

Search for more videos by Julia McNally on their YouTube channel or website.

Follow Julia:

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@therayogi

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Managing rheumatoid arthritis when travelling

By Guest Editor, Saada Branker

Saada in Remedios, Cuba, 2014

A few years ago, in a conversation with people I had introduced to my father, I listened to him describe my decision to move from Quebec to another province six hours away. To hear him tell it, his daughter was looking to do better in life by attending journalism school in Toronto, but first she had to get better. He told everyone that the decisions I made to improve my health in another place were what saved me.

My mother confirmed that years later when my rheumatoid arthritis (RA) got worse. She said, "People asked, 'Why are you letting her go? Why is she still there?'" They wondered if I could be independent in Toronto. My parents, however, believed in me and my ability to manage my rheumatoid arthritis, a chronic autoimmune disease that inflames the lining of the body's joints, causing pain, swelling and, in some cases like mine, disability.

Managing Arthur, what I called my arthritis, means reigning in the symptoms of the disease, and coping emotionally with the loss it inflicts. Barely 26 years old, I had moved to Ontario and soon after found a dedicated rheumatologist. Together, we got me registered for a biologics response modifier program to manage my very active RA. They were, at the time, a new class of drugs showing promise in immunotherapy. My body responded well to the biologic. That respite from intensely painful and swollen joints felt like clouds had cleared away from the sun. I had bright days where my mobility improved, allowing me to travel to the Caribbean, the U.S. and of course Montreal, where I visited my family twice a year by VIA Rail.

Asking for help

Travelling is a bigger challenge today. That's because the nature of my disease has impeded my mobility by damaging a few of my joints to the point of deformity. In Toronto, I was recently diagnosed with osteoarthritis, a degenerative form of arthritis affecting weight-bearing joints through wear and tear. My orthopedic surgeries, ten and counting, include full hip replacements which gave me back improved range of motion. Still, limitations remain. I've been unable to close my fingers into a fist, raise my arms above my head, crouch down, or roll onto my toes. But I can ask for assistance—something that's not easy for the average person.

Beginning in 1996, my trips by train to Montreal and back were often rushed and left me feeling fatigued. It took me a while to realize why. I was in queues with fast-moving, able-bodied passengers. For my accessibility needs to be met, it required on my part better planning and asking for help.

Adopting a travel plan that included calling VIA several days before my departure date and pre-boarding made a noticeable difference in the quality of my travel. By telling a customer service agent about my special needs, such as bag assistance or wheelchair reservation, I had a team of VIA employees escorting me to the train and/or checking in on me throughout my trip. In time, that enhanced level of customer service helped reduce my stress levels. I found I could relax.

Saada in Cayo Santa Maria, 2014

What stress does

What distinguishes an RA flare is the intense pain and swelling in the joints along and other symptoms such as fatigue. In my case, the flu-like fever with the chills and lethargy, second only to my swollen joints, is my body's way of signalling an attack is underway. Stress plays a role in triggering my overactive immune system to turn on itself and inflame the lining of joints (synovium), destroy the cushioning between (cartilage) and deform the tissue that holds them (ligaments).

Good and not-so-good stress were factors in my trip to Cuba years ago. Travelling with my boyfriend and his parents, I was supported by people who care for me. They encouraged me to seek assistance at the airports. Still, I had high anxiety about slowing down my companions or not being able.

At the start of our group tour by catamaran in Cayo Santa Maria, my boyfriend helped plead my case when the captain told me I had to take off my shoes before boarding—a regulation for everyone. When I was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis at age 12, the disease first presented in my feet and hands. In my 30s, I had surgeries that fused my big toe on my left foot and removed metatarsal bone to fix the crippling deformities. Accustomed to the shock absorbency and padding of rubber-soled shoes, I depended on the support of my Skechers. That day in Cuba, I was unable to walk with my feet bare. So, we explained my special circumstance. Not only did the captain acquiesce and allow me access, but he also kissed my fused wrist at the end of our time together.

Assistive devices

For many people living with RA, there are days when we're capable, and the next day, we're not. The fluctuation in our abilities is hard for other people to understand sometimes. It's even harder on us. The loss of independence can lead to depression and social isolation. Assistive devices can play a part in regaining some of what's lost.

When I'm away from home on an overnight trip, I ensure my daily, self-care tasks are still doable. Bathing and dressing are priorities, so I carry in my luggage my set of sticks as assistive devices. Essentially, they are reachers, meaning plastic or wooden sticks of varying size that I've adapted for putting on my tops, pulling up my pants, and washing my skin with a loofah glove attached. My sock applicator is a vinyl contraption with cord that holds open my sock as I slip my foot in. Other reachers are for picking up things I drop. A seat cushion fits discreetly in my canvas bag, which I carry places. I sit on my bag, using it as a booster cushion to help me rise from low seats.

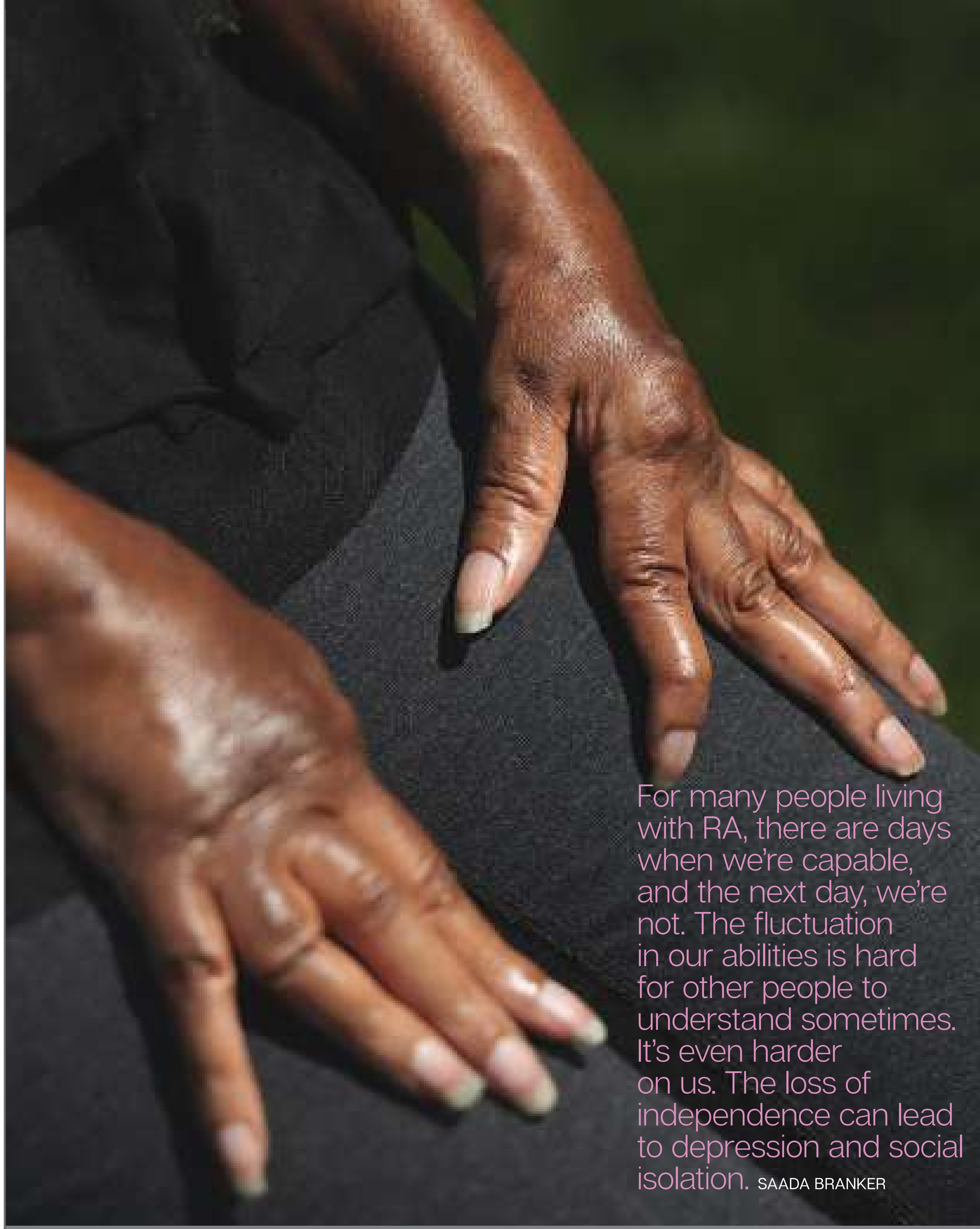
Best-laid plans

Despite my efforts, I'd be lying if I said travelling is easy once plans are in place. Even with my best-laid plans, I worry. I worry about outcomes not happening as I expect. Then what do I do? My last scheduled trip heading home from Montreal to Toronto, I missed my train by two minutes. The taxi service I called the night before was a no-show on travel day. My last-minute Uber driver took a wrong turn and delayed my arrival at the train station. He couldn't park so he left me to struggle with my bags getting into Central Station. As I huffed and puffed pulling my luggage with a scarf wrapped around my wrist and walking backwards, my train left the station.

It was the kindness of a VIA ticket attendant that calmed me. She assured me everything was fine as she booked me on the next train, only two hours later. Then she helped to carry my luggage as we walked to my gate before wishing me well. Her professionalism and thoughtfulness reminded me that I'm never alone in my travels. Asking for assistance helps people with RA form a system of supporters, able-bodied people willing to fill the gaps so we can cross over with our disability.

The day I missed my train, I was able to sit and meditate. Taking deep breaths, I waited and gave thanks for my ability to come a long way. ■

Saada's assistive devices for travel



> For many people living with RA, there are days when we're capable, and the next day, we're not. The fluctuation in our abilities is hard for other people to understand sometimes. It's even harder on us. The loss of independence can lead to depression and social isolation. SAADA BRANKER

Saada's long-standing RA in her hands | Photo by Roger Branker art + photography, Portfolio website

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How VIA Rail Canada

keeps accessibility on track

By Saada Branker and Nancy Baye

VIA Rail is Canada's national inter-city passenger rail operator, owned by the Canadian government. Its train routes help passengers reach destinations of their choice, from national scenic attractions to metropolitan hubs to coastal villages.

Vast is one way to describe the terrain of this second largest country in the world. In 2021, VIA made 1.5 million passenger trips across Canada. Most of these provided either rapid service or cross-country transportation between cities including Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City and Halifax. Their 225 weekly departures—of which 86 percent left on time—serve more than 400 Canadian communities.

VIA's accessibility mission statement and vision: "We strive to be Canada's most accessible national and intercity mode of transportation. Our vision is to be a smarter way to move people by ensuring access to a sustainable, affordable and accessible means of transportation. By promoting better accessibility, we are improving the customer experience for all our passengers as part of a barrier-free Canada."

To this end, frontline employees are trained in how to assist and interact with customers with disabilities. Disability advocacy groups review this training. Also, office staff and upper management all have accessibility awareness training.

We found further information about VIA's insight into disability in their 2021 Annual Report where Catherine Langlois, Senior Advisor, Universal Accessibility said, "The biggest barrier to travellers with disabilities and the people supporting them – whether caregivers or VIA Rail employees – is not knowing what is needed, what to expect, who will help and how. Listening to those directly affected and learning about their travelling pain points – like why is a couple with disabilities required to travel in separate cars – is the biggest motivator for positive change."

Guest Editor, journalist, Saada Branker, a frequent traveller on VIA's Corridor route from Toronto to Montreal, spoke with Catherine Langlois. Here are excerpts from that interview.

Tell us about your role and what an average day is like for you as Senior Advisor Universal Accessibility for VIA Rail.

My role is to create, in collaboration with all the departments, the multi-year accessibility plan as per the Accessible Canada Act (ACA) overview and follow up on every project with that plan. I also make sure VIA Rail complies with all requirements of the Canadian Transportation Agency, answer all internal questions on accessibility norms from vocabulary to construction standards, ensure website compliance and so on. So, there is no average day!

What have you learned about accessibility and adapted services for people with disabilities?

We, and this includes all industries, have to listen more carefully to the needs of people with disabilities in order to create products and services that fulfill their needs.

How does VIA Rail inform itself on the quality of their accessibility and adapted services to know what's working and what needs improvement?

My team receives data, and we review them monthly. We have reviews on the complaints and comments related to accessibility, we have an advisory committee, and we have a section on our website for retroaction on the accessibility plan. Meaning, people can give us their

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feedback regarding the content of our Multi-Year Accessibility plan.

What accessibility projects or initiatives is VIA currently planning for its passengers with disabilities?

Our new fleet of fully accessible trains is being deployed in the Quebec City–Windsor Corridor. This is the Quebec City–Windsor Corridor, which has the heaviest passenger train frequency in Canada. We released the first train last fall and we will continue to add new trains in 2023 and 2024. We will implement hearing loops at 37 stations this fall. We will start phase one of a project on autonomous wayfinding at Ottawa station in 2024. (Wayfinding encompasses all the ways that people orient themselves and navigate in any physical space. Wayfinding software, usually on kiosks or smartphones, helps users find a location quickly and easily. Autonomous wayfinding is navigation that can direct the user through their route without manual input or human guidance.)

Is there anything else you'd like to share about accessibility and adapted services at VIA Rail?

We believe in removing barriers so all Canadians can access an accessible, comfortable and safe way to travel. We are not there yet, but VIA Rail is working hard to be the most accessible mode of travel in Canada.

Accessibility on VIA's website and beyond

Website accessibility is critical so customers can access all the information needed for their trip. VIA Rail has centralized accessibility-related information on their Accessibility page. They also offer sign language videos. A yearly audit of the website's accessibility helps keep it compliant with accessibility standards and regulations.

Any accessibility-related feedback is welcomed. It is reviewed and prioritized by the Accessibility Team, who prescribe the best action to take. The Accessibility webpage centralizes relevant information and the site offers ways that people can share their feedback.

Catherine notes that Via Rail's web content is reviewed annually, by a digital accessibility consultant to audit any content that isn't accessible and recommend changes. They aim to have the site fully accessible and in line with best practices in digital accessibility, by the end of 2023. A new reservation system is also being implemented.

VIA Rail's universal accessibility advisory committee, comprised of people from various advocacy groups to ensure that different types of disabilities are well represented, also tests the website annually and makes suggestions. Going beyond that, VIA also works with other advocacy and accessibility groups, collaborating with people with disabilities for workshops and consultations on projects, such as the service animal relief areas and the new Corridor Fleet project.

The new Corridor Fleet

The Corridor Fleet is the Quebec City–Windsor Corridor, which has the heaviest passenger train frequency in Canada. People with disabilities will have a comfortable journey with these on-board amenities and facilities:

- Six wheelchair lifts and five mobility-aid spaces per trainset
- Spacious accessible washrooms with push-button sliding powered doors, more grab bars and generous floor space to permit wheelchair manoeuverability
- Braille and/or embossing on signage and buttons. Menus in Braille, or large print, are available on request
- Attendant call buttons at all mobility-aid spaces and in all accessible washrooms
- An updated announcement system delivers automated messages in audio and visual formats, with multiple screens showing the train's route and location
- Mobility-aid spaces with dedicated luggage racks and space for service dogs

VIA continues to push their Accessibility mission statement and vision forward. The coming year should be an exciting one for everyone who journeys on VIA, going full steam ahead.

See VIA Rail in action **here**. ■

Photos Courtesy of Via Rail

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Eileen Davidson

from rheumatoid arthritis discovery to advocacy

By Pauline McKenzie

Eileen Davidson once worked full-time as an esthetician, but at the age of 29, the debilitating pain caused by rheumatoid arthritis (RA) compelled her to cease working. Today, RA significantly impacts Eileen's daily life. Eight years have passed and chronic pain and fatigue continue to be the most challenging aspects of her life, accompanied by some cognitive dysfunction, which is part of this condition. These symptoms affect her entire body, with daily variations. "It is a full body disease which is easy to trigger," she shared, "some days are good, some are bad and some are in the middle, but I really need to watch what I do every day to make sure I don't overtire myself or aggravate my joints."

To manage her RA, exercise and medications are critical. Exercise plays a crucial role in maintaining the mobility of her body, while medication to deal with chronic inflammation during joint flare-ups is very essential. Although diet cannot cure RA, it can enhance overall health. Eileen pays careful attention to her diet to maintain a healthy lifestyle, which contributes to her overall well-being. Pacing herself and taking regular breaks as she goes about her daily tasks are vital strategies she employs to prevent strain.

Advocacy

Eileen actively engages in advocacy work related to RA, collaborating with organizations such as the Arthritis Society and Arthritis Research Canada. She reflects on her journey, stating, "I started to blog about my experiences with rheumatoid arthritis in 2017 and also volunteered with some organizations, first with the Arthritis Society and then I became one of their ambassadors. I now work on campaigns, fundraising initiatives and steering committees. I've done lemonade stands and bake sales, bottle drives and other fun things to raise awareness." Eileen also plays a vital role as a patient partner with Arthritis Research Canada, where she serves on their advisory committee, actively contributes to arthritis research, and participates in studies. In addition to her significant contributions to the arthritis cause, Eileen is a respected writer for an organization based in New York called Creaky Joints, and other publications. Her blog and social media channels have earned recognition as some of the most impactful platforms for raising awareness and sharing valuable insights within the arthritis community.

Medical advancements in RA treatment over the years, including biologic medications, have led to fewer cases of wheelchair use, joint deformities, surgeries and heart issues associated with RA. However, Eileen emphasizes the ongoing need for raising awareness about the complexities of RA beyond just joint pain.

Travel strategies

Travelling with RA poses challenges for Eileen. To minimize discomfort, she prefers travelling during off-peak hours to avoid crowded public transportation, as close contact with others can be painful. At times, she opts for Uber. She prioritizes her well-being and strives to avoid stressful situations when possible. Additionally, she plans shopping trips during less busy times, typically on weekdays.

When travelling internationally, Eileen has learned to make specific adjustments to manage her RA effectively and minimize discomfort. An essential piece of advice she offers is to pack lightly and carefully consider the necessity of items brought on the trip. "I have strained my joints and hurt myself by carrying too much," she said, "so now, when packing, I ask myself—do I really need this?"

Eileen prioritizes comfortable and supportive shoes, opts for easy-to-maintain hairstyles, and ensures sufficient time gaps between activities, especially when participating in conferences. While flying, she opts for window seats to enjoy additional leg space. Prescribed muscle relaxers or other medications to aid sleep and muscle relaxation are essential. She also travels with a neck pillow, light blanket and a foot hammock to enhance her comfort during journeys. Staying hydrated is crucial, and Eileen ensures she always has water with her.

When exploring new places that involve a lot of walking, Eileen says that comfortable footwear is a must-have. She selects wide width shoes with arch support and shock absorbing features. To reduce shoulder strain, Eileen favours a fanny or backpack over a heavy purse. Google Maps helps her gauge distances to destinations, and if a location appears too far, she may reconsider or seek alternative transportation.

To adapt to varying weather conditions, Eileen often travels

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during off-peak seasons to avoid extreme weather. Locally, she takes precautions during icy conditions, such as salting and shovelling pathways to prevent falls that could exacerbate her RA symptoms. A past fall resulted in significant trauma and necessitated medication changes, underscoring the importance of safety during challenging weather conditions.

Important too is food and beverages when travelling. Even when she's away from home, Eileen must maintain a healthy diet. While she may occasionally indulge in sweet treats, moderation is her guiding principle. It's often difficult not to try new foods but she makes an effort to stick to healthier options such as avoiding beverages that may lead to fatigue or bloating. Her focus is on making mindful choices and maintaining a balanced diet, even when sampling new foods while travelling.

Physical exercise

As a vocal advocate, Eileen attends conferences in various cities throughout the year and takes steps to ensure she is physically fit for each journey. She incorporates a blend of cardio and strength training routines to improve her endurance, balance and overall physical health. Given the fluctuating nature of her RA symptoms, she customizes her workout routine, recognizing the importance of paying close attention to her body to prevent overexertion during tougher days.

Medication

Her prescriptions are filled in advance and she keeps about one extra week's worth of medication in her carry-on luggage. This guarantees access to all the necessary medications whenever she needs it while she is away from home. Additionally, she keeps an emergency supply of prednisone, an anti-inflammatory medication prescribed by her rheumatologist, for severe flare-ups during travel. She is mindful, however, that this medication is not for regular use due to potential side effects like bone thinning, weight gain and an increased risk of osteoporosis.

Stress reduction

This is a vital aspect of Eileen's travel routine. The most challenging travel experiences for Eileen often involve tight schedules, long lines, delays, or cancellations. These situations can disrupt her carefully managed routine and lead to discomfort, especially when she is carrying heavy luggage. Scheduling extra time from a trip's start to finish is her safeguard.

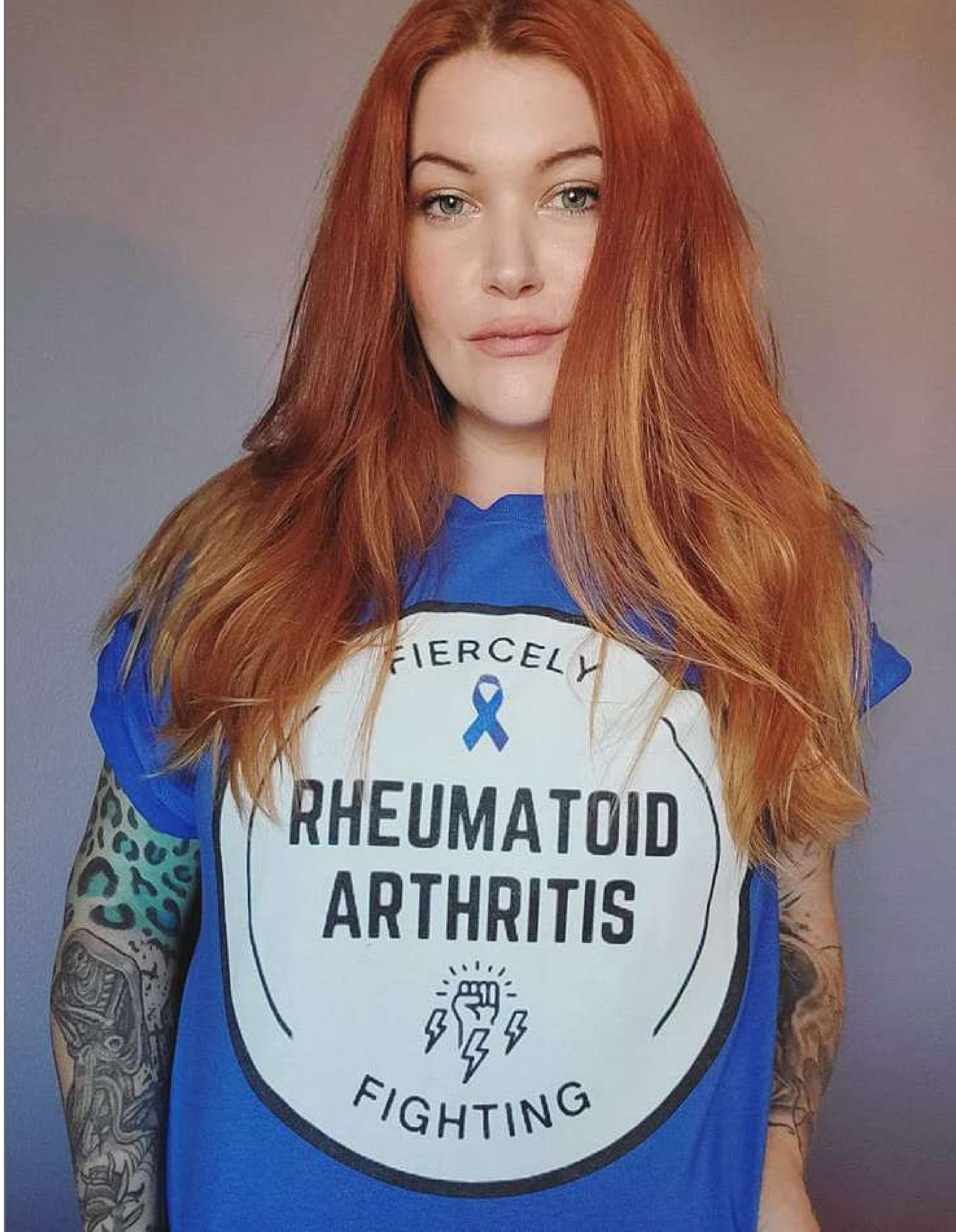
Upon returning home, Eileen maintains a minimal work schedule for about a week to ease back into her daily routines.

Mental health

An essential aspect to note is that RA is not solely about physical pain; it can also significantly affect mental health. Many individuals with RA, including Eileen, experience heightened levels of depression and anxiety, which can be challenging to manage alongside the physical symptoms. Travelling with RA sometimes involves overcoming anxiety and mental health-related challenges, underscoring the importance of prioritizing mental well-being. But Eileen said, "it's not just travel that causes anxiety and depression. So many things are difficult for us because of our physical limitations. Sometimes we fear our disease—for instance, at times, I find myself being a little bit of an agoraphobic because I don't want to go out and experience anything. This is one of the main reasons why a lot of people don't travel because they fear what might happen if they do venture out." But she shares this piece of advice, "listen to other people about how they do it, then just develop your own routine."

On the positive side, Eileen derives immense excitement from travelling. The anticipation of exploring new locations, interacting with people from diverse cultures and indulging in unique foods invigorates her, but travelling for advocacy adds a sense of purpose to her journeys.

Managing RA during travel demands meticulous planning, employment of stress reduction techniques, being acutely self-aware and having travel insurance for reassurance. But regardless of anxiety, pain and fatigue, Eileen stated, "I love to travel." ■



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News Bytes

Our roundup of notable news from around the web

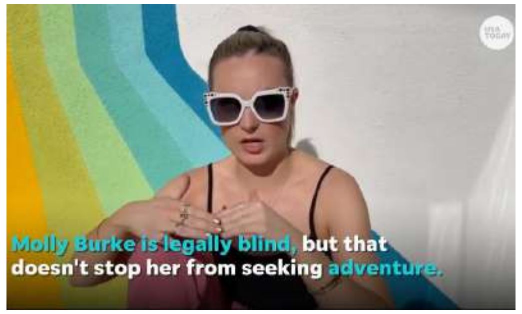
Kennedy Space Center recognized as Certified Autism Center

All people with dreams of travelling to the moon have a safe place to experience space at Kennedy Space Center in Florida. The complex is now a Certified Autism Center following several improvements including sensory guidance signage, specialized training for employees, low sensory areas and an updated sensory guide. **Read more**

AI is helping expand accessibility for people with disabilities

Artificial intelligence is transforming the lives of people living with speech and visual impairments, hearing loss and even mobility issues. **Read more**

Even though she can't see, a woman loves to travel is experiencing the world with through her other senses. **Read more**



Travellers with disabilities can be denied boarding in Europe if they don't do this

A U.S. couple flying home from Europe was shocked when they were told they could not board the plane because of a European Union law. **Read more**

The Invisible Travellers: Struggles Of Exploring The World With A Disability

A woman from India never travelled as a child. Neither did her parents until they were in their 70s and 80s. The reason, she says, is because of accessibility issues due to an inaccurate count of disabled people by the Indian Census. and more. **Read more**

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A 14-year-old girl with multiple learning disabilities is advocating for her rights as a student while fighting bullying and biases faced by her family.

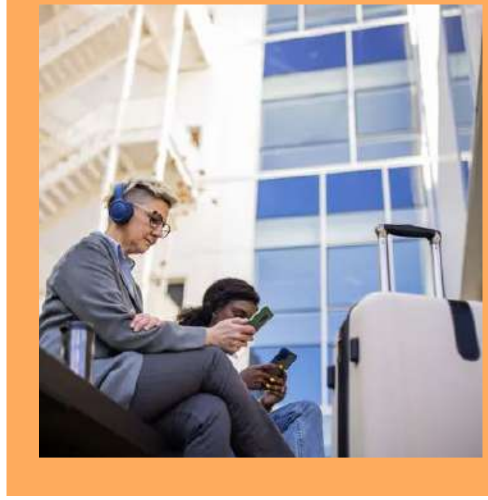
Helena Donato-Sapp is only 14 years old, but she has a strength of character and a sense of identity and purpose that many never achieve in a lifetime. **Read more.**

New federal rules require more accessible airplane lavatories

New rules from the U.S. Department of Transportation require plane lavatories to be more accessible. But we won't see some of the changes for 10 years. **Read more**

Red Sea Global wants to create an accessible utopia in Saudi

A new travel destination in Saudi Arabia, set to open in early 2024, was built with accessibility as the top priority. **Read more**



8 amazing programs for neurodivergent individuals that aim to make travelling easier

Vacationing to unfamiliar places can bring on added stress for people with autism, ADHD and learning disabilities. Fortunately, there are several programs available to support neurodivergent individuals during travel. Read more

Disability advocates say it's still too hard to go on holiday, but businesses can profit from accessibility

Being more inclusive is more than ramps and lifts, according to a disability advocate who says businesses can profit from greater accessibility. **Read more**

I can faint 3 times a day – but my invisible disability means commuters refuse to give up their seats

An invisible disability continues to cause travel difficulties for one woman who attributes the problem to a lack of understanding and stigma about conditions that are not immediately apparent. **Read more**

Best electric wheelchairs of 2023

From price and weight to portability and speed, a new list is out on the best electric wheelchairs of 2023. **Read more**

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Family Fun No Limits

Families with disabilities exploring the world together

With Jennifer Allen
Read her blog, Wonders within Reach

Different, not less

Two weeks before heading from Pennsylvania to California for Nephrotic Syndrome Camp, and what was to be an epic month-long trip up the west coast, my middle son ended up in the hospital. This isn't as uncommon as I'd like it to be, but it was clear from the start that this was going to be a long-term stay. I'd promised his brother that we would get him to camp, no matter what. So, for the first time in six years, we went on a trip without my disabled son.

Travelling solo with two children was easy. Alarmingly easy. Without the hassle of medical liquids and a wheelchair, we zipped through airport security. We shortened our trip so that we could get back to my son and husband, but the last minute search for hotels and home exchanges was simple when we didn't have to plan for accessibility. When my kids saw a roadside attraction or trail on the side of the road they wanted to try, we stopped and did it. We ate where we wanted to eat without any advance reconnaissance, and we never once had to turn around because we hit an accessibility limit.

While there was some joy in his, it was also heartbreaking for two reasons:

1. Travel should be this accessible for everyone. Shame on the modern travel industry for allowing so many barriers to remain.
2. I know I can never go back and share these same experiences with my middle son.

I'm standing by that first thought, but the second one is the start of a slippery slope that disability parents need to avoid. It's not wrong to mourn the loss of the things we wanted for our children. In fact, it's wise to acknowledge that loss so that we know how to move on. But we cannot get stuck in an ugly trap of comparisons.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." That quote has become a constant reminder for me.

Thinking about the trip we can't have often ends up keeping us home and not exploring at all. What a waste!

We can't ramble the narrow paths of Venice, climbing the countless bridges with stairs, but that doesn't mean we can't do Venice and do it well! We can travel by water, roam the plazas, tour the churches and museums, shop along the outdoor markets and dine al fresco. In fact, it may not even be a lesser itinerary... it's just a different itinerary.

When I look at our past trips, I see the same truth holds everywhere. When we visited Yosemite, I moaned that out of the endless miles of trails there were only a handful that we could do. In reality, we were only going to do a few trails, anyway. This just decided which trails we were going to do. They were beautiful trails, by the way. The same was true for accommodations. We couldn't book the rustic lodge, but the accessible lodge that we found just outside of the park (Tenaya, for anyone travelling that way!) was perfect for our family, and nicer than where we would've stayed if we didn't have extra needs to consider.

We've made several trips to places that may not be considered accessible destinations (really, no destination has proven wholly accessible). From the mountains of West Virginia and the Adirondacks to the ancient streets of Croatia, we've had accessible adventures that vary from what we would've planned before, but they've never actually sacrificed on fun or adventure. We don't skimp on fun - we have different fun. We need to go a step beyond focusing on what we can do, instead of what we can't, to realizing that those two are equal in value! Every trip has been full of marvellous discoveries, fun adventures and beautiful family moments. Our lives are beautiful. No comparison needed. ■

> **We need to go a step beyond focusing on what we can do, instead of what we can't, to realizing that those two are equal in value! Every trip has been full of marvelous discoveries, fun adventures, and beautiful family moments.**

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Navigating the inaccessible: travelling with a young adult with cerebral palsy

By Christine E. Staple Ebanks

Many of us would attest that going on a journey, whether a leap into the unknown or a familiar path, marks a significant milestone in life — a time for celebration and unfiltered joy. The power of travel is transformative and can shape our well-being by opening doors to enrichment, new perspectives and personal growth. Yet, within this narrative of exploration, a stark reality persists: individuals with disabilities, particularly those in their teens and beyond, along with their families, grapple with unique challenges that cast shadows over the potential for meaningful travel experiences. Let me share a piece of my family's story to provide a glimpse into this journey. Our son, Nathan, now nineteen years old and towering at an impressive five feet eight inches, stands tall with unwavering courage despite navigating life with cerebral palsy.

As we recently faced the anticipation of our older son's graduation, an occasion filled with pride and joy, it brought excitement and a twinge of pain. The graduation is scheduled to take place in Chicago, a distance from our home, which made driving an impractical option. This circumstance led to a difficult decision: Nathan could not attend the graduation. Although it was a decision that tugged at our hearts, it was not one we arrived at hastily. It followed weeks of agonizing attempts to overcome the daunting logistical challenges, which ultimately proved to be insurmountable. Allow me to delve deeper into this experience for you.

Right from the outset of Nathan's life, we quickly understood how crucial it was to plan out every intricate detail of our travel arrangements, especially when air travel was on the horizon. This step was non-negotiable to ensure that all necessary preparations were in place, allowing us to embark on our journeys with as few hiccups as possible. During his younger years, travelling was a much more attainable feat. His wheelchairs were adorable, compact, and conveniently foldable, making our voyages smoother. But, as Nathan grew, this simplicity gradually gave way to mounting complexity.

Now, at nineteen, Nathan (and us) relies entirely on his specialized wheelchair that provides comprehensive support—head, trunk and feet, all held securely in place by a five-point harness. With Nathan's inability to support his weight for transfers, his wheelchair has transformed into a lifeline, indispensable for moving him between spaces—whether to the bath, bed or a seat on an aircraft. Therefore, minimizing the distance that must be covered while transferring him is crucial.

Recalling our previous experiences of travelling with Nathan via airplane, it's important to note that existing aircraft regulations prohibit using personal wheelchairs on board. Consequently, he had to be carried in his wheelchair up to the aircraft door, after which my husband would shoulder the responsibility of carrying him to his designated seat. This strategy, aimed at minimizing the distance Nathan had to traverse, prompted us to secure front-row seating by paying an additional fee.

Yet, time has ushered in change. With Nathan's growth spurt—making him taller and heavier—and my husband and I navigating the aging terrain, this formerly feasible approach has gradually lost its viability. The once-manageable option has evolved into a complex challenge, adding to the intricate puzzle of accessible travel.

Upon arrival at our chosen destination, a fresh set of challenges emerges — navigating airport transportation to the hotel and arranging mobility throughout our stay. In Nathan's case, his customized wheelchair carries a weight exceeding one hundred and fifty pounds, making folding impossible. This unique requirement renders traditional transportation options inadequate. The pressing need for a vehicle equipped with a ramp becomes evident, as it's the sole means to facilitate his movement. However, despite our determined efforts, a concerning void becomes apparent. Airport transfer services, taxis and even rideshare options fail to offer the necessary accessibility, leaving us with no solutions.

In the realm of accommodations, most hotels make strides towards accessibility; however, challenges persist regarding essential aspects like sleeping and bathing. Nathan's reliance on a bed with rails, a staple of his home environment, starkly contrasts with the absence of such

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provisions in a hotel setup. Equally pressing, the absence of bath equipment poses a significant hurdle in facilitating his bathing routine. These instances underscore the ongoing disparities in infrastructure and services, revealing the continued challenges that individuals with disabilities face when it comes to travel in the year 2023.

Addressing the issue: steps towards change

Recognizing the strides we've taken owes credit to the relentless efforts of individuals with disabilities and their steadfast allies—families, communities and influential publications like this very magazine—over the course of years. While we celebrate these significant accomplishments, it's crystal clear that a substantial journey remains ahead. The reality that, even in the year 2023, families like mine continue to confront barriers to basic travel needs is, quite frankly, disheartening. Yet, our collective voices bear the power to drive transformation along this path. In light of this, I'd like to propose five actionable steps that individuals with disabilities (and their families) can consider to help spark and drive the change needed for a more universally accessible travel landscape.

1. **Share personal experiences:** When we openly share our personal narratives and experiences regarding our travels with disabilities, these authentic firsthand accounts have the power to illuminate the challenges and obstacles we face. Through these stories, we not only shed light on our unique journeys but also raise awareness about the barriers that persist in the realm of accessible travel.

2. **Engage in advocacy:** We can actively engage with disability rights organizations and advocacy groups dedicated to enhancing accessibility and fostering inclusive travel experiences. This involvement might encompass joining or offering support and participating in campaigns, petitions and events that champion the cause of accessible travel. We contribute to a collective force that propels positive change by lending our voices to these initiatives.

3. **Use social media:** Leveraging our social media platforms becomes a potent tool in amplifying awareness about the issue of inaccessible travel. By sharing posts, articles and videos that spotlight the hurdles encountered by individuals with disabilities, we spark crucial conversations.

4. **Share stories about positive travel experiences:** By showcasing these positive stories, we illuminate possibilities and, in turn, ignite inspiration for change. Through the collective reach of social media, we can foster a broader understanding of the challenges and the potential solutions that lie ahead.

5. **Collaborate with the travel industry:** Engage with travel companies, airlines and hotels to provide feedback on their accessibility services. Encourage them to improve their offerings and implement inclusive practices.

One of the fundamental truths that this century has taught us is that our voices matter. The power to drive the change we seek for ourselves and our loved ones with disabilities lies in our active involvement. Throughout my journey, I've understood that sometimes, it's not that society lacks concern, but they often lack awareness about our lived experiences. This is why our voices become pivotal. By sharing our personal stories and actively engaging in initiatives, we contribute an invaluable dimension that fuels innovation and fosters meaningful change. Through these collective efforts, we can propel the journey towards a travel experience that's not only more inclusive but also inherently accessible for all. ■

Christine Staple Ebanks is a seasoned special needs parent advocate, accomplished author, and impactful speaker passionately committed to amplifying the voices and empowering the lives of children with disabilities and their families. Leveraging a wealth of personal experience in raising her own son Nathan, who lives with a disability, Christine has directed her professional journey towards shedding light on their and other families' stories to help foster a more inclusive and understanding society.

Christine founded the Nathan Ebanks Foundation (Jamaica) and Raising Special Needs Inc. (USA) to provide training and consulting services to support parents, educators, and other childcare practitioners in the special needs community. She is also the author of multiple books that empower the voices and experiences of children with disabilities and their families. Her mission is to actively contribute to shaping a world where children with disabilities and their families are equipped with the support needed to survive and truly flourish.

You can connect with Christine on Facebook @cstapleebanks and @raisingspecialneeds
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Lead by Example

How one mom pushes her comfort zone, while teaching her daughter to do the same

An interview by Jennifer Allen

There are a lot of disabled kids in our area. I know this because we see them in the waiting room at physical therapy and in the halls of the hospital. I know there are a lot of people using our orthotist and specialists because of the wait lists to be seen. Yet, in our five years of living here, I have only once ever seen a disabled child out in public. That was at an Easter Egg hunt that was designed for people with special needs.

When I found a mom in one of my Facebook parent groups who said a few of her trips this year included a cruise, Aruba, Mexico and Disney, plus Paris and Greece in the past, I needed to know more!

Meet Terri. Terri is mom to Rebecca, now 15 years old. Rebecca has cerebral palsy, epilepsy and neuro cognitive disorder. She is mobile, and they travel with a wheelchair or mobility device. Terri's husband works in the airline industry, so they've always been big travellers. Of course, travel changed for them when Rebecca came along, but it hasn't stopped. As Rebecca gets older, they've been able to travel more and more. Here's what Terri had to say!

Travelling with a child with a disability can seem overwhelming. Tell me how you got started.

My husband and I travelled to get away. As Rebecca got older, she wanted to know why she wasn't going.

We started small, and then grew into bigger, longer vacations. We began with coming down to Mexico for a couple of days and trying it out. My mother came along so we had extra hands if we needed them. We've done the Disney thing. That was a big family trip with my whole side of the family. That was a week long thing. We had tried Disneyland for a day the previous year, but it didn't work. Rebecca didn't like the rides. Positive peer pressure from cousins on the second trip made a lot of difference.

We do Disney now, quite often. She's definitely a sensory seeking child, so the rides work much better for her than other things. As she got older, she got more stable in where she was with her challenges and what we knew she could and couldn't do. In the beginning, our travels were medical-based: how far away from the United States and our own medical care did we want to be? The more comfortable we got, the farther we went.


1st trip to Mexico

Have you always travelled this much? How does travel look different than before having a child with a disability, and what have you found helpful?

In the last couple of years we've hit our peak and we're actually travelling more. We're at a point in our careers where financially we're able to make things happen easier. We do a combination of family oriented trips, and trips where my husband and I get away, or a boys trip, or girls trip. Because my husband's in the airline industry, we're often travelling on standby. That means what should've been a five hour day can turn into a 20 hour day, which is hard for the neurodivergent.

We try to be smart about our travelling. We take our big family vacation the very first week they get out of school, so we're ahead of the vacation curve. Things like that, over the years we've learned to plan for.

There are more and more resources available. When we went to Greece recently, I researched and found a private tour group that had a wheelchair accessible van, they picked us up from the hotel and went at our pace and met our needs.

All inclusive resorts can be so accommodating. Everybody's always been super friendly and accommodating. We utilize kids clubs and just explain our situation. Kids who have food allergies, when you walk into a restaurant the first thing they do is ask you if anyone has any food needs. We've done cruises and it's the same thing. They're always very accommodating and ask about our needs.

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We've had similar experiences. It seems that even where accessibility may be lacking, it's the people who make the biggest difference in inclusion. It sounds like you've had a lot of great experiences where people work to make things go smoothly. Have you ever gotten stuck?

Paris was our first real international trip and it was hard with mobility needs with all of the stairs and trains and uneven surfaces. If we did it again, we would get a private vehicle or use a larger rental.

What did you think would be hardest about travelling with special needs, and what has actually been hardest?

We thought the hardest thing was going to be if she had a medical need. We've had one or two little things, but similar to what other families who travel a lot will experience with their kids.

When we're going to some place new I do check out forums or research the best hospitals and the quickest and easiest ways to get back, but it's never been an issue.

Incontinence has actually been the hardest - calling the front desk for a clogged toilet or the trash taken out takes getting used to. We've never had a big thing.

Paris

That's great! Are there any other obstacles that you've encountered?

We recently got a new wheelchair and we were travelling this summer. We learned a lesson with the new chair: we should have practiced taking it apart and putting it together. Every leg of the flight, the airline managed to bend parts, and we didn't have anything with us to fix it. Once we got to the hotel we asked the maintenance staff for tools to put the chair back together. Now we know to travel with tools and to bring a bag for the chair parts that you carry with you on the plane. Live and learn - you manage.

Do you have a favourite location that you would recommend? I think it's going to be somewhat dependent on the child's needs.

Disney is a favourite. There's so much stuff you can rent - even major stuff like hoyer lifts and oxygen. There's pretty much nothing you can't get delivered to your hotel or rental. Even if you can't transfer from your wheelchair, you can get private transportation to meet your needs. Even if you don't do Disney, navigating Orlando is easy.

If you're doing a resort, high rise style resorts are more compact, as opposed to spread out. There can be a lot of distance to cover in a spread out resort, so high rises are easier for getting from place to place. Reach out to people since they are often accommodating.

Cruises could be a good way to start, if your child's not an eloper. If it's more mobility challenges and food allergies, a cruise would be great. You see lots of people with scooters and wheelchairs.

I've always wondered about cruises. What about the excursions - are there any accessible options?

We haven't done a lot of excursions because we enjoy relaxing on the cruise.

A lot of seniors travel on cruises, so just look for the excursions that are mobility friendly. There are a lot of private tours available, and because so many people have needed accessible tours before you, you can get a good private tour by referral. This is great so you don't get stuck in a group with a child in a meltdown.

If you could say one thing to parents who haven't travelled because of their child's needs, what would it be?

Start small and give it a try. Even if it's just looking at a 2-3 hour drive from your home and trying that comfort level first. Then build up from there.

A lot of people think flying is a big obstacle, but there's TSA Cares, and a lot of airlines will do special practice runs or disability days. Research those things. There are so many resources that people don't know exist.

That's such a good point. There are so many tools to help. How do you find resources?

Google accessible travel groups. Facebook alone has plenty of options. Even in regular travel groups (search things like families that love to travel - travellingwith kids), because the groups are so large, you'll find someone with needs like yours. Just general travel pages that are big enough in numbers, there are going to be a few people who have to deal with the special needs aspects of travelling.

That's such a good reminder! We're not alone in this. There are loads of people who have gone before us and who have already figured out the big things. My kid isn't the first kid in a wheelchair, or with continence issues, or with dietary needs or with behavioral health issues. We don't need to figure out everything on our own - we just need to find the people who have gone before!

Roller coaster

It's more an issue of parent comfort. Travel is getting outside of a comfort zone. Rebecca loves her week at camp, but I've encountered parents who say, "Oh, they would never be ok at a camp." Why not? A special needs camp is literally made for them. They meet every need and have medical staff on hand. It's meant for them. It's the parents who need to step outside of their comfort zones.

We wanted to give our child as many experiences as everyone else has. Travel is an important part of our life and we want her to be able to experience that as well.

Anything else that you want to mention?

Give it a try! Special needs parents push their kids to try things and move outside their comfort zone, so why should we as parents not do the same thing? ■

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Better Together

Disability Parent Q&A

Q **Public restrooms are hard to find . . .**

→ **How do you meet the need for frequent accessible restrooms while travelling?**

→ **What about outdoor adventure - how do you meet bathroom needs where there is no bathroom?**

→ **What do you do for someone who can't fit on a changing table, but needs to be changed lying down?**

A These answers vary drastically by bathroom needs. For children and young adults in diapers, many people use the back of the car, parked so that the trunk faces away from the other vehicles. Outdoor blankets and pee pads are another great option if you're in a more secluded area.

For children and adults who use a toilet, there's actually a lot more flexibility. Most national parks, and many state parks have accessible restrooms - these make great outdoor destinations. If you're road-tripping, hotels and hospitals, instead of gas stations or fast food chains, are great places to stop for clean accessible restrooms.

Plan ahead so that you don't end up in a tricky situation. For example, we use a catheter before starting a hike, no matter what time we did it last, so that we're not worried about bathroom needs on the trail.

There are apps like iAccess Life and GoWhee that can be used to find accessible restrooms. Unfortunately, because they're crowd sourced, they may not turn up a lot of results in the area you're visiting. ■

Next Issue: What do you do about travel insurance? What do you need, and what's covered, for a child with a disability?

Do you have any expertise to share on next issue's question? Please submit your input, or any questions of your own for future issues, to jennifer@wonderswithinreach.com

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Kids Travel Tales

Kids with disabiities sharing cherished memories of family outings, exploration and breaking barriers

MY EXCITING SUMMER

By Codi Mendenhall

No Barriers made it possible for me to climb a mountain in a Grit chair. A Grit chair is a manual chair with handles that you pull and push to move yourself up and down the mountain. I took a dance class with J.R. Martinez. We both learned to dance together. I got to meet Mandy Harvey from America's Got Talent. I took a songwriting class with her. We learned to write songs. I was able to rock climb, by pulling myself up with my arms, a climbing chair and a rope. I took a palm reading class. I also got to ride a bike with my teacher Mr. Carmicheal. I really enjoyed No Barriers.

My summer was full of wonderful helpers. Mindy and I did crafts together. Abby went on bike rides and helped create some things on my Cricut with me. I had fun with Hailey learning the Kung Fu Fighting dance and we also did crafts. Ella went swimming with me. I played Game Pigeon with all the girls. I had so much fun with these girls who came to my house over the summer.

My mom and I went to Denver. I got to have a dance party at Ryan Seacrest's Studio before my doctor's appointment. Then, we visited the Butterfly Pavilion with our friend Tammy. I got to hold a tarantula named Rosie. Her foot felt like q-tips. I also got to touch a starfish and it felt bumpy.

My Mom's birthday was on August 15th. I wanted to surprise her. So, I made a secret plan with my friend Sandy. I was acting suspicious all day. My mom kept asking me, "Who are you texting?" I said, "No one." We made her a Reese's peanut butter squares cake. Sandy brought the cake over to our house. I went outside and mom thought I was just going outside for a walk. Little did she know, when I went outside, I was actually waiting for Sandy.

Cowgirls :)

Rosie the Tarantula

Mom came out to check on me when Sandy arrived with the cake! Mom was curious when Sandy pulled in and Mom said, “What are you two up to?” Sandy gave me the cake and I gave it to my mom. Mom was surprised and happy!

At the end of my summer I went to Phoenix to the Abilities Expo to talk about my technology. Then on the way to the airport we went to the iFly indoor Skydiving place. It was crazy and the wind was in my face. On my second fight I had a full helmet so then it was better.

My summer was so exciting!
I hope yours was too!


Codi rock climbing in Phoenix

MY SUMMER

by Ashton Dunford

First of all I'd like to say my summer was one of the best I have ever had. It all started at my Shadow Mountain Camp, a camp for only 5th graders in my school district and I went by myself for two days and loved it. We stayed in cabins in the mountains and played games. It was super cool. We hiked and had good food. I made some new friends and the camp director and the other people working there told stories. It was the first summer camp I ever went on and the best one.

One of the things that we did was go to St. George, a city in southern Utah. We stayed at a resort called Desert Cole with the biggest man made lagoon in the area. It was so fun. We paddle boarded at the lagoon and had a good time swimming and doing other stuff. In St. George we also saw fireworks and ate the best Peruvian food in the city.

I think my favourite part of the summer was swimming with dolphins in Florida. It was an unbelievable experience. There was even a blind dolphin and when I swam I held on to the dolphin as he pulled me across the water. We swam with dolphins at a place called Discovery Cove, an all-inclusive day resort in Orlando. They had dolphin trainers who helped me swim with the dolphins. They specialize in having these experiences for children with autism and with other disabilities too. It was an incredible experience and the trainers took care of everything for us. We even got to wear the coolest wetsuits.

One of the things that we saw at Cocoa beach was a hammerhead shark as a fisherman held it out of the water. It was so amazing and totally something out of the ordinary. We were walking along the beach when the fisherman told me and my family he had caught a hammerhead shark. He asked my mom to take a picture of him before he released it back into the ocean. My parents said it was a small one but I got close to try to see him. My sisters said he was moving his tail and shark fin. I really wished I could've found some shark teeth in the sand while we were there.

One of the other interesting things was baby sea turtles hatching. The same day we saw the shark, my sisters spotted baby sea turtles coming out of the sand where their eggs had been buried. We got closer and my mom told me there were lots of them crawling into the ocean. We had never seen anything like this and lots of other families stopped to look at them too. My mom took lots of videos and we made sure all of them made it into the water. It was very remarkable watching them as they made their way across the beach into the ocean.

Ashton Dunford lives in Utah. He loves skateboarding, skiing and cycling. His message is simple: blind children are just capable as sighted children. Find Ashton and his mom Hilda on Instagram @ourblindside

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Ryan Neiswender:

I'm not your inspiration, I'm your motivation!

Paralympic gold medalist, corporate keynote speaker and life coach

By Alicia Williams

Who is Ryan? How would you describe yourself?

Ryan is just someone who wants to maximize his life. I fell in love with sport and the freedom of mobility through a wheelchair and it's taken me all over the world. I recognized pretty early that I had a talent and if I put the time in, I could maximize that into opportunities to be able to play professionally, to be a Paralympian and go to the Paralympic Games, to go to college and to get an education. I think if we're humble enough to prepare and we're confident enough to perform, the possibilities are endless. So, I'm someone who loves adventure. I've done skydiving and love the thrill of adventure, of just seeing the world from above. I recently got back from a scuba diving trip in the Cayman Islands where we taught disabled people how to scuba dive and got them certified.

I want to make a change for good. I'm always excited to explore new things and do it in a lot of different areas. And through corporate keynotes, I love to use the knowledge that I've learned from the vast experiences that I've gained to help people, teams and organizations reach their untapped potential.

I love to explore and to see what's out there. I love to learn, but then I love to reflect and really pull out the key nuggets that I think can help other people on their journey.

What one thing has helped you along your journey?

I think one of the things that's really helped me along my journey is the question: is that an expansive thought or a constricting thought? I can look out at the water and I can see it's expansive, it's open, it's freeing. But if you've had a really bad experience with water, you would look at water and say that feels constricting. I do believe in slowly but surely overcoming fears. We can't fill our life with fear-based things. We need to be able to look at life and say, "For me, that's expansive." What I see with my two eyes may be different than yours. And that's why life is beautiful because we're different people with different passions.

"The world won't always adapt to us," you say. Share your thoughts about this

I'm part of an organization called Stay-Focused, a nonprofit that has certified over 140 plus disabled people in scuba diving over the last 20 years. They raise funds and have all expenses paid for the people with disabilities to go down to Cayman Islands, have a week there and get certified in scuba diving. I did it in 2008 and then I became a mentor and got involved a little bit more from a leadership perspective with the organization. What we do is actually quite amazing. For example, on the most recent trip there was someone who previously had a stroke and half of her body didn't really function properly. When you're underwater doing certifications, nothing's modified but like everyone else, she had to take her mask off, put her mask back on and clear the mask. It's hard to do that with two hands and she had the use of only one. I remember hearing her story that she sat for five to six hours and just practiced that skill over and over again and never wanted to quit. There's a lesson in there, the world's not always going to adapt to us people with disabilities. In her case, she had a disability, but she was floating underwater and doing what's necessary to get certified just like anybody else.

How accessible is the Cayman Islands for scuba divers with disabilities?

We went there to scuba dive, but every beach is not wheelchair-friendly and wheelchair-accessible. I think it depends on, first, what hotel you're at.

I was at the Ritz Carlton, and they had some beach wheelchairs. I got on one of those. Then someone carried my chair onto the boat. I then transferred to my chair, and I was good. The biggest thing with adaptive scuba diving is just communicating early what your needs are. It's a very unique environment but there is opportunity. I would not say it's 100% accessible. There are unique challenges with everything but there are ways to overcome them. For example, we had a guest there with very limited sight and someone was wearing a really bright pink shirt underwater so there was something she could see. So, there are always adaptations that you can make.

As a wheelchair user and a Paralympian, how has your personal experience influenced your perspective on travel?

I think one of the biggest things is that we're not asking for special accommodation. We're asking for equal accommodation. When I ask for what may be considered a special accommodation while travelling, it makes me seem I'm being extra, like I'm asking for something above and beyond what anybody is asking for. And when you look at it at its core, maybe that's true, but if we look at it from the perspective that I'm just trying to experience and do and see everything that everybody else is seeing then it looks different.

The one thing about travelling throughout the world is that we realize lots of things were built a long time ago and they weren't built with accessibility in mind. Recently, airlines pledged that they're going to make accessible bathrooms within the next 10 years. In my opinion, that's a very ableist mindset. In one sense, that's a win. In another sense, I'm like, why is it taking 10 years? Why do I have to wait that long to go to the bathroom? The people who are making the decision probably aren't disabled so they don't see or think of it as a big deal, that the person with the disability maybe has to pee in a water bottle because they can't get to the restroom and use it comfortably.

As humans, we adapt to the environments that we are put in. For instance, if I lift weights, my muscles get stronger. Why? Because I put them in a different environment. But I don't think we're asking for anything crazy when we want more accessible accommodations. My wife, who is able-bodied, and myself can experience the same thing and I won't have to go around the back to enter a building. I'll walk through the front like she does. But overall, we adapt. I've been able to travel all over the world and see some incredible things. But the fact that when I hop on a plane, I'm not 100% sure that my chair is going to be there when I get out and that it's going to all be in one piece is not a comfortable thought. But this has almost become normalized, which is pretty sad because people get mad when they lose their luggage. My wheelchair is my mode of transportation. That's how I'm going to get around!

Do you usually seek out adaptive adventures when you travel? And if so, which ones are you usually attracted to the most?

I definitely enjoy things that involve exploration and adventure and so does my wife. We will be going to Park City soon. I looked up the National Ability Center and we can rent equipment so we're going to ski. When we go to national parks, we look for the trails that are mostly accessible because I can get up and walk a little bit but I'm not going to climb over rocks and carry my chair miles to get to the next flattest place, so we definitely look at those things before and plan. I like skydiving and we actually did that on our honeymoon.

What are some benefits of adaptive activities that you have identified?

One of the things about adaptive sports and activities is that they open up the eyes of the world to something they never thought a person with disabilities could do. Oftentimes, when someone sees someone with a disability, they see all the things that they can't do. It's not that we can't do a lot of things. It's that we just need the right equipment and it's never been shown to us that that equipment exists. I love going on adventures, I love adaptive activities, and those have helped me as a basketball player, as an individual and as a husband. When I want to do something, I no longer say I can't do it. Instead, I think about what I would need to be able to do that because I know that it's possible and that someone has probably done it before. So how do I figure that out? Research. That's the biggest lesson that I've learned, and it's impacted my life. Activities show opportunity and possibility, which doesn't feel constrictive. They open up the world and make it feel very expansive.

Adaptive activities empower individuals with disabilities and help with their mental and emotional well-being. Number one— there are lots of factors that go into one physical activity and in general it helps stimulate our brain in ways that are good for our mental well-being. Number two —every person comes with their own background and you have no idea what they've been told they can and can't do for so long and when the lid of possibilities is opened and they see what they can accomplish, it's magnificent. Also, when you're doing adaptive activities, you're around people who are like you so there's a sense of belonging, a sense of "they get me" more than anybody else.

What got you into advocacy?

For a long time, I tried to ignore my disability and just tried to be like everyone else. I just I wanted to fit in and not be different. But when we start to embrace the things that perhaps we hate about ourselves, on the other side of that is the fact that there's so much untapped potential. I spent so much time hiding the thing that I hated about myself rather than exploring all the things that could be on the other side of that. And I think, for me, what it allowed me to do is open up to see what other people needed to see for themselves and now it's almost my obligation to educate others. I think I have been gifted with the ability to communicate and speak effectively. I have life experiences that position me to be a very great advocate for a population of people who are marginalized and under-represented. And for a world that isn't really set up for us to be successful, we can still be successful. However, we have to understand that many times the answer we get from others may be no, but we just have to figure out how to do it, because we can.

At what point in your life did you come to that realization?

I think when we talk about mental health, anxiety, depression, we either try to ignore it or tolerate it. But neither are effective. We don't have to love it, but when we accept and acknowledge it, it no longer holds the same impact on our lives. For myself, I think it was really in my college years. I got to

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a point where I said, this is silly. I'm just trying to prove to people that I can versus living in who I am. I do have a disability and I'm just going to go out and attack the opportunities in the world. We think about all the things that people are saying about us, right? I really believe that people, not just people with disabilities, operate at about 2/3 of their capacity and with the other 1/3 they're trying to hide things they hate about themselves rather than opening up to see like what's on the other side of that and figure how to attack new opportunities.

How do you view the notion of self-acceptance?

I think self-acceptance is definitely a major part of everything and it's speaking the thoughts in our head, saying them out loud and seeing that they're not as scary as they actually are. But self-acceptance is different than self-embracing. Acceptance is just accepting that I have a disability. Self-embracing is that I have to love my disability because there may be things about it that I don't love. But I can't argue that I have a disability, and once I accept that, then I'm no longer letting that just linger, I've moved past that. I've seen it, I know it, I'm going to move past it. I have self-acceptance of the situation, the person, the way I was born.

What about the power of outside influences?

We can only control ourselves and our emotions. What we each deal with might be different, but at its core, individuals with disabilities are not the only marginalized people that have ever walked this earth. The way we make changes is through education. It's hilarious to me how many people walk up to me at the gym and just tell me how inspiring I am that I'm at the gym today. Why should I be inspiring because I'm a Paralympian? You think I'm a gold medalist not because I decided to show up at the gym today but because I have a disability? I'm not your inspiration, I'm your motivation.

There's a lot of good intent, for example, someone who sees me in a chair doesn't think that I can open the door and so rushes from the back of the parking lot to open it for me, but I can open it myself and get through. And then I go in the grocery store and there's a kid who says, "Mommy, why does he walk funny or why is he in a chair?" And instead of educating their kid, they say, "stop that." And why are they doing that? Because they weren't educated about disabilities. So now if I'm not confident with myself I won't want to go to the grocery store because every time I go, I'm seen like an alien walking through the aisles. So, we have to educate. We have to! I'm at the beach. There's no walkway that goes all the way to the ocean. The only way for me to get there is to crawl. It makes you not want to go to the beach. Why? Because the system is not set up for me to succeed.

We've made so much progress, but we have so far to go. Advocacy is not about making you feel bad. It just makes you see the world through my eyes. I think when people see individuals with disabilities doing the same things that they are, especially when they have the proper equipment to be able to do those things, adaptive activities and adaptive sports can be a huge vehicle to change the course of what's possible for people with disabilities and also to change how the world perceives us.

> “One of the things about adaptive sports and activities is that it opens up the eyes of the world to something they never thought a person with disabilities could do.
>
> Ryan Neiswender

Give these adventures a try . . .

Skydiving

U.S.A.

Start Skydiving
Middletown, Ohio

Long Island Skydiving Center
Shirley, New York

Wisconsin Skydiving Center
Jefferson, Wisonsin

CANADA

Skydive BC
Northern B.C.

Scuba Diving

U.S.A

Stay-Focused
New York

Dive Heart
Chicagoland, Atlanta, Florida

Dive Pirate
Wellington, Colorado

Malta

Disabled Divers International
Gozo

Malaysia

Dive Heart
Kuala Lumpur

Surfing

Australia

Disabiity Sports Australia
Sydney Olympic Park

U.S.A.

Disabiity Sports Australia
Sydney Olympic Park

Portugal

Surf Addict
Carcavelos

Climbing

U.S.A.

Adaptive Climbing Group
New York, Massachusetts, Chicago

U.K.

Able 2 Adventure
Inverness, Aviemore, Grantown on Spey
Newtonmore, Kingussie

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Explore the Outdoors

Fresh picks for international accessible activities

By Lisa Guthrie Deabill


Envato Elements

AFRICA

Desert & Delta
People with mobility issues shouldn't take an African safari off their bucket list. Yellow Zebra has planned accessible adventures for children with disabilities, visually impaired travellers and wheelchair users, finding the best overnight accommodations and vehicles for wheelchair access.

ANTARCTICA

Philip Island Nature Parks
From watching little penguins waddle from the beach to their burrows, to getting up close with a koala, Philip Island is making these experiences easier to navigate for people with disabilities. There are wheelchair accessible treetop boardwalks, hard-packed gravel paths and more. Philip Island is also a certified sensory-inclusive site with professionally trained staff and designated quiet zones. Sensory bags containing noise-cancelling headphones, verbal cue cards and fidget toys are also available.

ASIA

Singapore Zoo
Singapore is home to an award-winning zoo with more than 300 species of animals. For those needing assistance getting around, the tourist destination offers many options. Trams with special slots for wheelchairs provide a comfortable way for people to tour the safari grounds. The zoo has electric scooters for rent. And complimentary wheelchairs are available for use too.

CANADA

Humber Arboretum & West Humber River Valley (Ontario, Canada)
Ornamental gardens with more than 1,700 species of trees and flowering plants are what you'll find at the Humber Arboretum in Toronto. The trails vary in accessibility. The paths near the entrance are level and made up of interlocking stone and hard-packed gravel. The adjacent Discovery Walk takes visitors on a tour of the West Humber River Valley. It is a bit more difficult to traverse with a mix of paved, hard-packed and grass trails.

EUROPE

Fjellheisen cable car
One of the best places in the world to experience the Northern Lights is Tromsø, the largest city in Northern Norway. A popular attraction there is the Fjellheisen, a cable car taking visitors to the top of Mt. Floya. It is wheelchair accessible, but someone does have to accompany wheelchair users on the cable car. At the top, an accessible platform allows visitors to take in the spectacular views.

NORTH AMERICA

Stagecoach Guest Ranch
A ranch in the southwestern United States was designed and built with disabled guests in mind. The Stagecoach Trails Guest Ranch in Yucca, Arizona features fully accessible guest rooms and bathrooms that are larger than accessibility codes call for. The lodge and dining area are spacious enough for wheelchairs. The ranch also provides accessible riding equipment, allowing guests to experience the desert on horseback.

SOUTH AMERICA

Machu Picchu, Peru
The most visited tourist destination in Peru may be hard to get to, but it's not impossible, even for people with mobility issues. The Machu Picchu Museum and Inca City are wheelchair accessible, however assistance may be required in some areas. The upper parts of the Machu Picchu Mountain are restricted to people in wheelchairs for safety reasons. And be sure to look for discounts for Machu Picchu tickets for people with disabilities.

AUSTRALIA

Kings Park and Botanic Garden
Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, Kings Park and Botanic Garden outside of Perth is a must see. It is considered one of the world's largest inner city parks and features manicured gardens, picnic and play areas, educational centers and restaurants. And it's highly accessible for people with disabilities. There are hard paths, plenty of bench seating for breaks and accessible restrooms. Communication boards and Braille signage can also be found throughout the park.


Photo credit to www.klook.com


Photo credit to www.norway.nordicvisitor.


Photo from www.lonelyplanet.


Photo from www.visitarizona.

AbleVu
Know Before You Go

5 Tips
To Make Autism Travel Easier

AbleVu
Know Before You Go

- ✦ Pictures, videos, virtual tours, and available accommodations on website in one easy-to-find place for planning
- ✦ Additional training provided to customer-facing-employees on autism and disability awareness
- ✦ Social stories, sensory maps, and sensory backpacks available for checkout upon request
- ✦ Offer a quiet space or sensory room for visitors to use if feeling overstimulated or anxious
- ✦ Offer lower sensory options, sensory hours, limit automatic flushers and dryers, label loud areas

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Journeys with Autism

Navigating the world with autism.

Autistic traveller credits technology and preparation for reduced anxiety on trips

By Mel Padmore

Growing up in the 1990's in Wales, United Kingdom, Daniel Jones displayed behavioural patterns that were an enigma to his parents. Despite seeking help from multiple doctors and therapists, they were unable to determine the cause. This lack of clarity led to years of challenges, which continued until Daniel was 26 when an incident at work triggered a severe meltdown, resulting in his dismissal and a recommendation to seek therapy. During this critical period, professionals suggested evaluating David for autism. Subsequently, he received diagnoses of Asperger's syndrome, ADHD, OCD and dyslexia, presenting him with a unique combination of conditions to manage.

Knowing little about Asperger's syndrome, he sought out YouTube videos. However, he found a lack of informative content, prompting him to create his own videos to educate and entertain viewers with stories of his own experiences. His first video, although filmed on an iPad in a poorly lit room, received unexpectedly positive feedback, leading to a growing audience that eagerly requested more content. In 2017, he won the YouTube Next Up award, designed for channels with subscriber counts ranging from 10,000 to 100,000. This victory took him to YouTube's London headquarters, where he received valuable guidance and some funding to purchase better equipment. Encouraged by the opportunity this presented, in 2018 he took a leap of faith and transitioned to full-time advocacy via @TheAspieWorld.

Daniel's engaging voice, unique perspective and ability to communicate complex ideas in a relatable, lighthearted manner endeared him to his audience. His commitment to honesty and transparency was also a huge factor—he was unafraid to openly express himself, even if it meant admitting to having a bad day. Moreover, remembering his childhood, Daniel saw value in sharing his personal experiences to offer support to parents encountering similar difficulties with their children.

Today, Daniel is a successful entrepreneur who boldly acknowledges the important role technology plays in his life. From his discovery of YouTube as a lucrative avenue through which he can reach millions with his invaluable message, to embracing the exceptional functionalities of digital devices as an aid to his daily life, he admits to having found a way to live comfortably with his unique combination of conditions.

Travelling

As a person with Asperger's syndrome, travel is one aspect of his life that benefits significantly from technology. He revealed that the Tesla car has revolutionized local travel for him. As a father of two, Daniel said, "Tesla has set me up for being able to take my family on vacation with a lot more ease." He continued, "Before, I was so anxious about driving and navigating, but the car is so smart that it takes a lot of pressure off me which significantly reduces my travel anxiety and allows for more enjoyable family vacations." Previously, a family member would accompany them with the sole task of being the driver. Now Daniel is in the driver's seat. He also shares that going to the gas station was a source of anxiety—

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because he preferred not to interact with anyone, but his Tesla does not require those trips which is a huge relief! Daniel recognizes Elon Musk's shared neurodivergent perspective in the creation of Tesla and admits that the smart car has positively impacted his life.

Apple devices, on the other hand, are his lifeline and are exceptionally helpful in international travel. "My life would be in chaos without my iPad and iPhone to keep things organized," he disclosed. His phone contains everything he needs for travel, from flight tickets to wallets and even passport backups. Booking cabs or Uber and checking in at the airport are seamlessly done through his phone. He believes in optimizing technology to its fullest potential and appreciates the way his iPhone caters to his specific needs. He emphasizes the importance of him having to manage transitional stages during travel and shares his strategies for making unfamiliar spaces comfortable, which is absolutely necessary to avoid chaos. To reduce anxiety, he needs to "own" the space he's in, whether it's on an airplane or in a hotel room. In order to travel comfortably and confidently, he explained that a few things needed to be done.

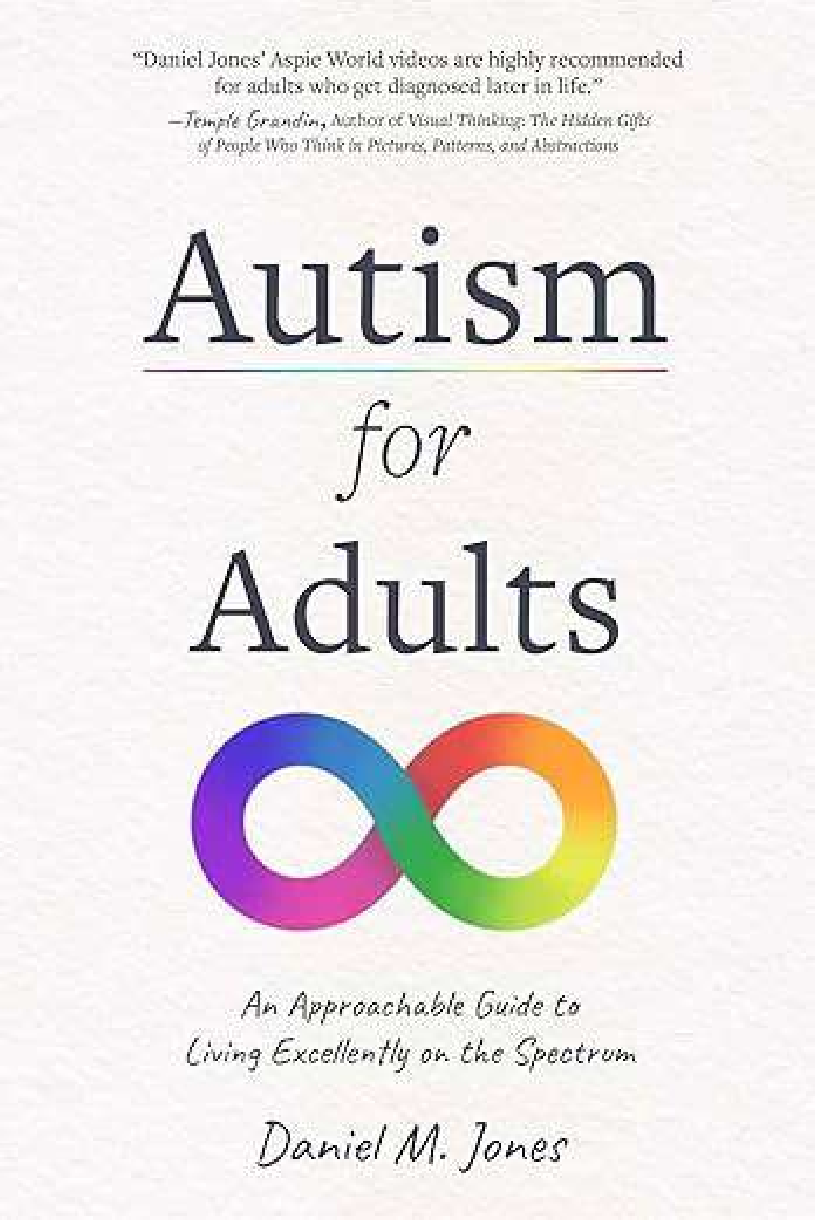
First, his international travel preparations are meticulous, from planning meals to having a backup plan for various scenarios. His travel assistant, Alex, plays a crucial role in handling logistics during these trips, ensuring everything runs smoothly. "In the past, during airplane travel, I'd be tense because I'd be so anxious about everything," he shared, "not that I feared the airplane would fall apart but because I may have to talk to someone, take cab rides, the smells!" Will he have the right food—he's vegan—and a myriad of other thoughts will run chaotically through his mind. But with Alex taking care of logistics, he can focus on other things.

Daniel explained, "when I'm travelling, I'm in a transitional stage but I need to own it. I may leave home and head to the airport wearing a pair of jeans, but I don't wear jeans at home so when I get to the airport, I change into my pyjamas. I get on the plane, take my shoes off and I make that space my own." He continues, "I'm going to sit and watch movies, listen to my audio book and chill out, because I am going to enjoy this time as I would if I was sitting at home in my pyjamas."

He explained that he wears noise cancelling headphones, which is crucial as he wants as little interaction with people as possible until he gets to his destination. And when he arrives, the iPhone comes out and because Alex took care of logistics, they now have a list of vegan-friendly places to eat, emergency services number, contact details of the hotel, cabs and everything else. Using Uber is the most convenient travel option, "I pay for it on my phone, sit in the back of the car, put on my headphones and because there is no exchange of money, interaction with the driver is avoided."

He continues, "When I get to the hotel, I go to my suitcase which has everything in there that is like home to me, take them all out, clothes go into the drawers, alarm clock comes out—I'm British and we can't live without tea, so I've got my teabags. Then I have my books. I make the hotel room my own. If I don't own that space, I won't become familiar with it. Owning the space builds confidence." Chaos is averted. Daniel can now sleep comfortably, wake up and as he declared, "attack the day, because everything is taken care of. Failure to plan is planning for failure."

Although air travel requires such detailed preparation, Daniel admits that for him, it is unavoidable, especially now that his work takes him overseas. One of his best travel experiences was his visit to San Francisco. "When I travel, even in airports, people recognize me and I get asked for selfies, they want to talk to me and stuff because they see my videos. In San Francisco, everyone's so busy going about doing their own thing that no one bothers you." He loves the Bay Area and Chrissy Field Beach and recommends San Francisco as a great place for neurodivergent people to visit safely.


"Daniel Jones' Aspie World videos are highly recommended for adults who get diagnosed later in life."
—*Temple Grandin*, Author of *Visual Thinking: The Hidden Gifts of People Who Think in Pictures, Patterns, and Abstractions*

Autism
for
Adults

An Approachable Guide to Living Excellently on the Spectrum

Daniel M. Jones

Autism for Adults

This is the name of Daniel's book, which he wrote and edited in two weeks! *Autism for Adults: An Autistic Adult's Guide to Work, Play, and Everything in Between* can be found on Amazon. Published just recently, the book focuses on ways adults can live excellently on the autism spectrum. He explained that it provides actionable tips and advice, aiming to serve as a practical guide for readers. He chose a conversational writing style to make the content relatable to autistic individuals, considering their unique perspectives and needs.

Daniel's busy mind is always seeking knowledge, which drives him to tackle various interests, from completing a chemistry degree during a spell in his life when he was "bored," to business and marketing. He is highly intelligent, values learning, relishes intellectual, meaningful conversations and finds solace during his downtime in activities like running and listening to educational books.

Overall, Daniel emphasizes the importance of planning, preparation and technology to manage his autism and ensure smooth travel and life experiences. He acknowledges the numerous challenges autism presents but also appreciates the opportunities to learn, grow and share his knowledge for the benefit of all.

Follow Daniel:

YouTube

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You don't have to look a certain way to be autistic

By Mel Padmore

Charlotte Bergslien, TheSpectrumGirl who lives in Norway, is a late-diagnosed autistic woman whose journey to true self-discovery began at the age of 38. For most of her life, she navigated the world grappling with hidden challenges that seemed insurmountable. She describes it as follows, "it was like the rest of the world was running on Windows but I was running on Mac OS, and I functioned a bit differently. But I didn't know that I was a Mac and all the other people were Windows! My life was confusing because I tried to use the same keyboard commands made for Macintosh but with Microsoft. I tried to use what I thought were the same social codes as everyone else—Command + Option + Esc buttons—and I didn't know that I was using shortcuts and commands from a Mac operating system so there's no wonder it didn't work on the keyboard of the Windows system which has completely different words: Control + Alt + Delete."

This led to untold stress and isolation from her years at elementary school continuing all the way into her workplace as an adult. These struggles, unrecognized and unsupported, took their toll, leading to burnout, rejection and isolation that cast shadows over her social life, education and career.

The journey to understanding and embracing her neurodivergent identity was nothing short of transformative. With her autism diagnosis came the recognition that she also had ADHD and Hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (hEDS), a connective tissue disorder that added further complexity to her life. But these labels, these words, were not chains to bind her, instead she viewed them as the stepping stones to her awakening.

As she received treatment for depression and began to address the intricacies of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, she made a courageous decision— to share her experiences with the world through the powerful medium of social media. She adopted the moniker, The Spectrum Girl, a name that encompasses her place on various spectrums, from autism to ADHD, and even her inner child. To her, the Girl in her name is not just a label, it's a symbol of her determination to embrace her inner child, to nurture and protect the innocence and curiosity that reside within her, especially now during her period of self-discovery.

Charlotte's decision to share her journey on social media, while therapeutic, is not without its challenges, particularly the distraction that results from ADHD. But the rewards far outweigh the difficulties. The most precious gift of all has been the connections forged with individuals from around the world who share similar conditions. These online friendships are a testament to the power of community and the lifeline that many neurodivergent, sometimes socially isolated individuals, have been seeking.

The impact of her late diagnosis still reverberates through various facets of her life. It echoed in her work, leading her to resign from her job to protect her mental well-being. Her social interactions suffered irreparable damage throughout her life. She knows all too well the feeling of trying to fit into a world that is not designed for neurotypical individuals, a world that often feels alien and unwelcoming. These struggles led to the development of comorbid conditions like anxiety and social anxiety, wounds inflicted by a society that too often

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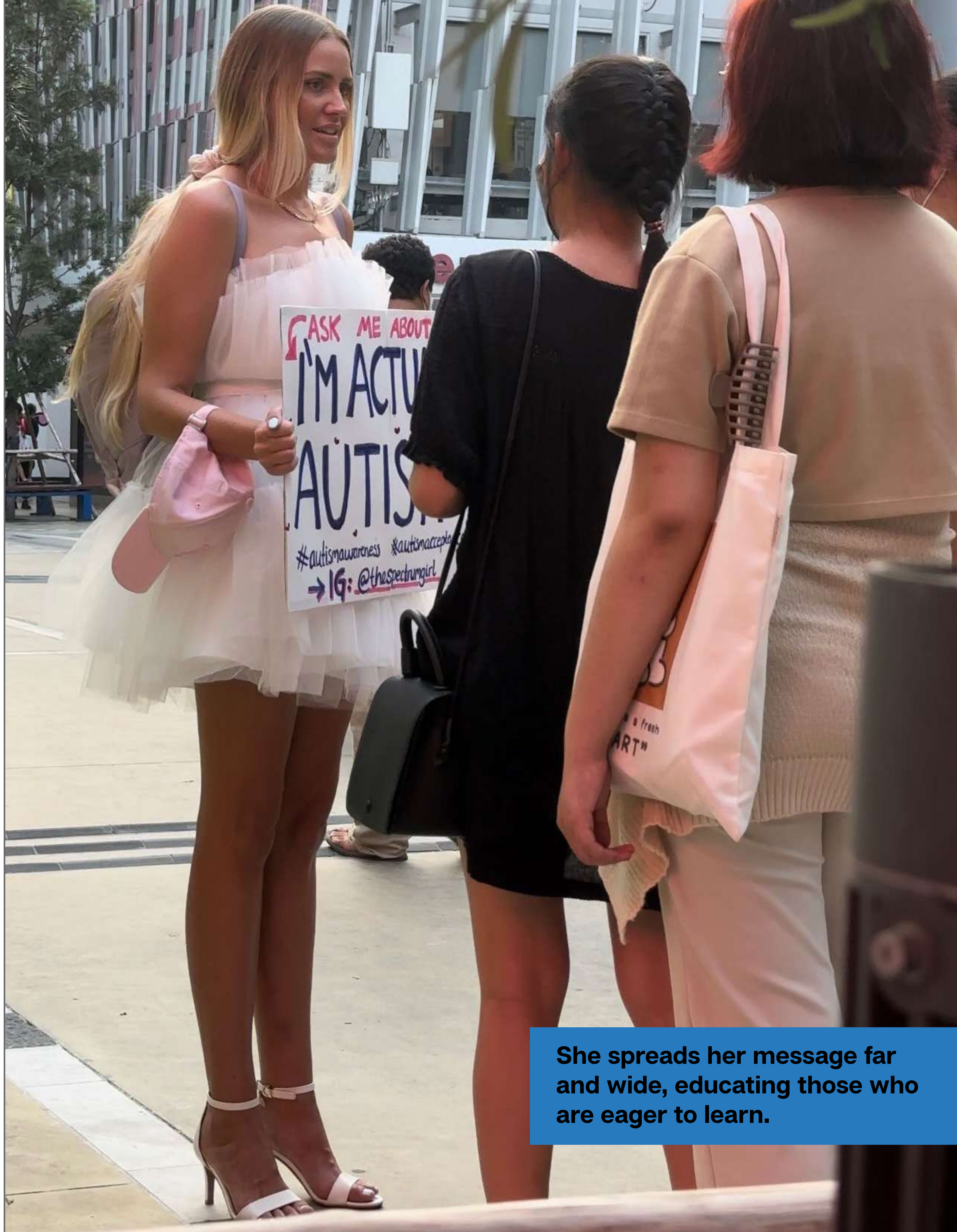
misunderstands and marginalizes neurodiversity.

But she refuses to accept the status quo. Advocacy and raising awareness have become the twin pillars of her mission. On platforms like Instagram, Facebook and TikTok, she spreads her message far and wide, educating those who are eager to learn. She champions the cause of empowering individuals to embrace their unique needs and navigate a world that should accommodate all its inhabitants, neurotypical or not.

As Charlotte became a public advocate, something extraordinary happened. A couple individuals from her past reemerged, requesting interactions ranging from reconciliation to heartfelt apologies for past misunderstandings. Yet, there are those who remain silent, perhaps haunted by their contributions to her struggles. It is a stark reminder that societal change, though slow, begins with brave voices like hers. She, like others who share her journey, is the torchbearer of change, the champion of empathy and understanding. But her story does not end with advocacy alone. It transcends boundaries and extends into the realm of travel. As an autistic individual with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, every journey is disturbingly fraught with unique challenges. Sensory sensitivities and physical limitations are constant companions, but they do not deter her. In fact, they fuel her determination to explore the world.

Travel, for her, is not spontaneous. It demands meticulous planning with tailor-made solutions to accommodate her unique needs. Sensory sensitivities can turn crowded transportation hubs into overwhelming experiences, but she has an arsenal of tools – caps, sunglasses, earplugs and noise-cancelling headphones – that allow her to find solace amid the cacophony. Airport lounges offer a respite, but even these spaces can become noisy, threatening to disrupt her equilibrium. It's a reminder that airports could benefit from designated quiet zones—spaces that cater to the diverse needs of travellers.

Mobility is another challenge. Her hypermobile joints require careful consideration. She often relies on airport mobility assistance or a wheelchair to prevent injuries



She spreads her message far and wide, educating those who are eager to learn.

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during her journeys. It's a small price to pay to ensure her health remains intact. Charlotte travels in business class but this is not a luxury for her, it is a necessity. The 90-degree angle seats in economy class could spell agony for her slipped disks and chronic hEDS pain. The cost may be high, and she spends months searching for affordable deals, but she views it as an investment in her well-being, a way to ensure that her ability to travel remains. However, the most significant challenge she faces is encountering those who fail to understand or respect her needs. It can be exasperating when airport staff doubt that she needs assistance. "You don't have to look a certain way to be autistic," she said, and in such moments, advocacy becomes her shield. However, it's not always easy to articulate her needs when exhaustion and emotions weigh her down. To navigate these obstacles, she carries a letter from her physician written in both English and Norwegian that outlines the issues she faces. This comes in handy when she is too overcome with emotions to clearly communicate her needs.

There have been many times when she was attempting to explain a situation to someone and her message would not get through to them. For example, once when her luggage was lost during travel, she was so distraught about not being able to get her message across that she had to rely on her physician's letter to speak to the airline attendants on her behalf. Now, in addition to the letter, she has a Hidden Disabilities Sunflower lanyard and card, a simple yet powerful tool that silently communicates her conditions to airport staff (at least to those who are aware of its significance). The card is a bridge between her world and theirs and it makes her travel excursions more comfortable to navigate. It's a confirmation of the progress that can be made when the needs of neurodivergent individuals are recognized and respected.

Yet, travel for her is not just about getting from point A to point B. It's about the experiences she gains along the way and the advocacy and activism that are an inextricable part of her journeys. She considers herself to be a mental health and autism activist. While in Thailand, for instance, she made a placard and stood on the street, presenting herself as a source of information to people with questions about autism. Many people would approach her and some would share their own experiences.

One specific incident has stuck in her mind. In Thailand, when she was about to end her placard-on-the-street stint, a man came running up to her, laptop in hand. He had composed a letter for her, sharing his personal story, then used Google Translate to render it in English before passing her the laptop for her to read it. In the letter, he discussed his challenges with mental health, including battles with depression and bipolar disorder, and commended her for her courage to openly share her own struggles. He thanked her for giving him hope. He shared some of the sad circumstances he has endured and still endures in his life, praised her activism and said now he does not feel so alone. Charlotte considers this to be one of the most impactful moments of her life. "I felt even more certain that my life's purpose is to help people. By doing such a simple thing as just saying it right out as it is, showing people that there's nothing to be ashamed of. . . imagine if the whole world did that about all the things people feel ashamed about, we would be rid of all problems."

In her journeys, she has discovered not only the world, but also herself. Charlotte's passion for travel is unwavering. Through careful planning and adaptive strategies, she has learned to navigate the complexities of her conditions. Travel, for her, is a source of joy and self-discovery, a way to break down barriers and connect with people who embrace and accept her for who she is. As she journeys around the world, both physically and virtually, her mission remains clear – to break the stigma surrounding neurodiversity. This is strengthened by her unwavering belief that change is possible.

But Charlotte's journey extends beyond geographical and digital boundaries. It delves into the realm of human connection, understanding and empathy. Her advocacy knows no limits and as her message reverberates across social media platforms, its positive results are irrefutable proof of the power of advocacy through storytelling. It also demonstrates the ability of one voice to inspire and educate countless others, proving that many voices, collectively, can have monumental results.

In the end, Charlotte's story is not just about one woman's journey. It is about countless individuals who walk a similar path. It's about the hope that, with understanding and acceptance, the world can become a more inclusive and compassionate place for everyone, regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of neurodiversity. ■

. . . her mission remains clear: to break the stigma surrounding neurodiversity.

@TheSpectrumGirl

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Comparing apples to pears

still bears fruit for Miles Partnership

By Nancy Baye

Miles Partnership is an American strategic marketing company focused on travel and tourism, from the point of view of visitors first. They use independent research to inform decisions, shape changes and drive improvements.

Two of their executives, Kim Palmer and August Erickson, shared enlightening presentations at the 2023 TravelAbility Summit. Here's a recap.

It was amid the gentle southern charm of Savannah, Georgia, that TravelAbility held their annual summit in August 2023. Miles Partnership was there, offering two presentations. The first session, How Has Disability Travel Changed? 2021 vs. 2023: An Apples-to-Apples Comparison, was led by Kim Palmer, Destination Optimization Program Director at Miles Partnership. Before unpacking research highlights from a recent State of the American Traveler report, she shared that Miles Partnership recently released a Destination Stewardship Model to serve as guiding principles and offer a decision-making filter for destination organizations. Those principles include:

- Community wellbeing and inclusion
- Economic value and prosperity
- Protection of and respect for heritage and culture
- Environmental preservation and
- ecological balance

Kim narrowed her focus to community well-being and inclusion in tourism, to ensure equal opportunities, access and benefits for everyone. She posited that this goal will only be achieved through meaningful community participation, understanding biases, eliminating discrimination, promoting diversity, ensuring resident empowerment and elevating minority voices. The bigger aim is to create a vibrant inclusive visitor experience which promotes a sense of belonging for all individuals.

The State of the American Traveler research is conducted by Future Partners (formerly Destination Analysts) in partnership with Miles and began as a quarterly survey more than 15 years ago. It is now a monthly tracking study of demographically and geographically representative group of adult American travellers with more than 4,000 unique completed surveys each month. The most recent Traveler Segments Edition included a segmentation of travellers with disabilities and specific questions asked to this group.

Before Kim could unpack differences between the two studies, 2021 versus 2023, she spoke about how travel issues and concerns evolve over time. And never have these evolved more quickly than post-Covid. Their July 2021 survey, looking specifically at travellers with disabilities, was the first post-Covid summer. Revenge travel was in full swing, and the survey focused on service and safety. The emphasis wasn't on travel planning resources, but issues such as service, places being open or well-staffed, etc.

However, the next study looking specifically at travellers with disabilities, in July 2023, happened in a time when revenge travel was on the decline, the travel environment had changed, with fewer Covid issues and staggering inflation. This all means that comparing the two sets of data is like comparing apples to pears.

She proceeded to reveal four highlights of the 2023 research:

1. Travellers with disabilities are big dreamers but are often more limited by financial concerns and constraints
2. Social acceptance and support was rated as the most difficult travel challenge
3. Although information for travellers with disabilities is perceived as being good, specialized websites have space to grow their reach

4. Travellers with disabilities have much higher reliance on social media and special resources than other travellers

The second presentation, Deep Dive: Research, delved into the 2023 data. Kim began by detailing the survey, The State of the American Traveler, which is a representative sample of adult American travellers in each of the four regions of the U. S. This survey was fielded in July of 2023, rendering 4000 fully completed surveys.

When these participants were asked if there were, "physical, mental or emotional difficulties or issues for yourself or anyone you regularly travel with," 16% of that group of 4000 replied that they did, amounting to about 670 respondents. Further details on impairments revealed that 47% were for people with mobile and physical impairments, about 34% with psychological issues and 23% had invisible disabilities. She expressed surprise at not seeing more baby boomers in this response, but a higher mix of millennial and Gen Z with a median age of about 44.4, a higher incidence of LGBTQ A plus at 14%, 40% more likely to travel with children, and with a lower household income of around $75,000 versus $80,000 of other travellers.

Participants were asked to assess their most challenging issues when travelling. At the top of the list was visiting attractions or events at 34%, using transportation hubs at 31% and social issues at 30%. But, when asked to rank their top three, 46% said the leading challenge was social issues, stigma and lack of empathy. Empathy remains the biggest challenge, Kim reiterated.

More data showed that these travellers with disabilities reported travelling about as often as the other participants with 3.3 trips on average versus 3.2. Kim also pointed out the 45% incidence that, "traveller travel guides do not reflect people like me," adding that the sentiment had been voiced a lot during the TravelAbility Summit.

She called travellers with disabilities big dreamers, having

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daydreamed this week about taking a leisure trip, at 59%, compared to 46% of the others. She contrasted this with the higher cost constraints which create a barrier for these daydreams. The recent rise of inflation and consumer prices was next addressed, with the survey asking if these factors had led anyone to cancel an upcoming trip, 46% of the travellers with disabilities affirmed that, compared to only 30% of all other travellers. When asked whether high travel prices kept anyone from travelling in the past month, 59% of travellers with disabilities agreed, and that is higher than the others.

Travellers with disabilities also had a lower mean budget of $2,957 versus $3,614 mean budget for other travellers. Spending priorities also differed; travellers with disabilities rated travel as a high priority at 47% versus 54% of others. Kim added, “So certainly costs and price are a big factor for our travellers with disabilities.”

Data assessing quality of online information for disabled travellers also had Kim admitting surprise. Where she expected to hear that the quality was lacking, based on, “things that I’ve seen or the lack of detail available on a lot of the major travel planning platforms for travellers with disabilities,” the survey showed that nearly 50% of respondents considered online information to be good or excellent. When drilling down into data about certain accessibility specific websites, asking participants if they used them in travel planning, only 20% or less of respondents had and 58% admitted using none of them. She pointed out that there lies an opportunity for growth in reach for specialty websites.

Kim turned the stage over to her colleague August Erickson, Accessibility Program Manager of Miles Partnership, who said that his job is to ensure websites and digital products the company runs are fully accessible to those with disabilities. This led him to unpack how families with disabilities conduct research citing that today’s travellers are hyper-informed and use many and varied resources to plan their travel. Travellers with disabilities take this to a whole new level across all online resources, with the exception of travel apps. This points to the need for high quality visual content catered to travellers with disabilities.

The fact that this segment also uses traditional media –print, TV and radio more than other travellers suggests, August said, that the travellers with disabilities allocate more time and resources to travel planning than all other travellers. Offline resources such as travel or lifestyle magazines were used by 19% of travellers with disabilities and 13% of others. Free destination guidebooks or pamphlets were used by 16% of travellers with disabilities but only 12% of others.

August noted that, although Facebook, YouTube and Instagram rank as the top three, travellers with disabilities use Facebook at a substantially higher rate than all other travellers, with 36% ranking this their top pick. Nearly the same percentage of others ranked websites found through search engines as their top choice. DMOs in the crowd were pleased to hear that official destination websites are the most used official source for travel planning across both groups. All participants were receptive to the same type of online mediums but ranked them in different order. August said that this is a reminder of the importance of ensuring all websites and digital materials are accessible to those with disabilities. He reiterated the importance of using the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines WCAG, unpacking details on all that requires, and showing solid examples.

All in all, the lucky TravelAbility Summit attendees garnered much valuable information from Kim and August of Miles Partnership, and the State of the American Traveler research report, which you can find here.

> Travellers with disabilities rated travel as a high priority at 47% versus 54% of others.

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Seattle-Tacoma Airport
A LEADER IN ACCESSIBILITY

Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in Washington is working to become the most accessible airport in the nation. And it’s well on its way. SEA has implemented several programs over the years to improve the travel experience for all people.

SENSORY ROOM

A squeeze chair, acoustic panels, dimmable lighting and a starry night ceiling are just some of the features of SEA’s sensory room. The airport opened the sensory room in 2021 for travelers in need of a quiet, calming space to decompress. It is located on the train level of the A Station.

THERAPY DOGS

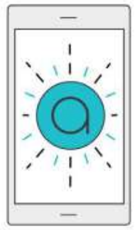
Traveling can be stressful for everyone. But don’t fear. SEA Pups are near to ease travel jitters. The team of certified therapy dogs and their volunteer handlers can be found at the airport for people in need of a furry face. SEA Pups like Gracie, Samee and Duke love to lend a paw to calm travelers and are more than willing to accept a pat on the head or snuggle in return.

SUNFLOWER LANYARDS

Seattle-Tacoma International Airport provides a discreet way for travelers with invisible disabilities such as hearing loss, PTSD, dementia and autism to indicate they may need extra help, patience, or flexibility. Passengers can get a free **sunflower lanyard** at the pre-security information desk or post-security information desk. In 2019, SEA became the first airport in the United States to introduce the Invisible Disabilities Sunflower lanyard program.

TRAVELING WITH SERVICE DOGS

Pets and service animals are welcome at SEA. The airport has gone out of its way to provide pet relief areas inside and outside of the terminal. All animals must be leashed or in a travel carrier inside the terminal except for service pets that are helping their human companions with disabilities. Contact your airline with questions about service animal policies on flights.



VISION ASSISTANCE

Seattle-Tacoma International Airport is helping people with vision impairments to safely navigate the airport. Travelers who are blind or have low vision can connect to the **Aira** Airport Network for free. An app connects people to live agents who can see their environment in real-time and guide them through the airport.

INTERACTIVE MAP ACCESSIBLE ROUTES

Navigating SEA has gotten easier thanks to the **FlySEA app** available for free on iOS and Android devices. Interactive maps are available on the app. Users type in where they want to go, and the app will give directions and the distance to the desired location.

To ensure a smooth travel experience from arrival to take-off, SEA suggests that people in need of special assistance contact their airline before their departure date.

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Amazing,
accessible Portugal

By Fred Maahs, Jr.

Fred J. Maahs, Jr. was invited to join Tourism for All's trip to Portugal in March, 2023. This is the second part of his article about that trip. Find the first part in the Summer 2023 edition.


Fred outside the Monastery of Batalha

We left Cabo da Roca to head to the Hotel Villa Batalha, situated in Batalha and literally a short walk from the magnificent Monastery of Batalha. The Monastery was built to commemorate the victory of the Portuguese over the Castilians at the battle of Aljubarrota in 1385. We checked into our rooms which were quite accessible and very modern and then met for dinner in the hotel. Once again, the food was a delicious array of seafood and vegetables.

The next morning, we met in the restaurant for a fulfilling breakfast and then met with the hotel manager to take a tour of the hotel's accessibility features, including accessible guest rooms and the spa. In order to serve guests with disabilities, the massage tables in the spa could be raised or lowered and the hotel had access to Tourism for All's hoist in the event someone with a disability wanted to use the hot tub or indoor pool.

We left the hotel on our accessible tour bus and drove to the Interpretation Center of Aljubarrata's Battle. The parking lot was stone and could be a little bit difficult for people using a wheelchair, cane or walker. But once we got to the sidewalk of the museum it was very accessible, including accessible entrance and clear pathways throughout the entire museum. There were a number of tactile displays in the museum as well as a short 3D audiovisual presentation of the battle. Each of us were given headsets that provided translation into English for us to enjoy the presentation. After the presentation, we were able to explore the rest of the museum and its grounds to fully understand the significance and actual location of the battle.

After we left the museum, we took a short drive to a local restaurant and once again enjoyed traditional Portuguese food. After lunch we were free to explore the local area on our own. I wheeled over to the Batalha Monastery and toured the magnificent structure. That evening we enjoyed dinner in the hotel restaurant as a group.

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Gazing into the gardens at Alcobaca Monastery

After breakfast the next morning, we checked out of the hotel and drove to the Alcobaca Monastery, one of the first Gothic monuments built in Portugal in the 12 century and founded by King Alfonso I. The Monastery is 120 km north of Lisbon. We entered the monastery through a man-made ramp and then, once inside, found much of the structure to be accessible with ramps and wide doorways.

Once our tour of the monastery was finished, we got back on our accessible tour bus and started our drive to Nazare, a traditional Portuguese fishing village. The seaside village was filled with shops and restaurants alongside its beautiful beach. During spring, you won't find many people in the water or tanning on the beach, but nonetheless the cliffs and the view were absolutely stunning. Unfortunately, none of the hotels were accessible for people with disabilities and the only restaurant that was accessible for us was the Restaurante Afinidades. Our meals and drinks were amazing – the freshest seafood caught just off the coast! Nazare is also famous for its 100-foot waves where surfers from around the world come to try to conquer them during surfing championships.


Street in Alcobaca

We left Nazare to return to Lisbon to visit Praca do Comercio, one of the largest plazas in Portugal, in the middle of the city, and check out the shops and restaurants. There were visitors from around the world and many gathered along the Tagus River as the sun was setting. After our visit to the plaza, we left to check in at the Vila Gale Opera Hotel, again. We gathered as a group and enjoyed our last meal together while sharing our thoughts about the trip and our host, Tourism for All.

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Fred overlooking the Tagus River in Lisbon

Overall, I was surprised at just how accessible the areas of Portugal I toured were. It's not perfect and it's not what you will find in the United States. Portugal is a much older country with a rich history of battles and wars, and where older and historic structures are revered. This puts enormous burdens on trying to make these structures accessible given budgets, etc. Sidewalks are primarily made of 3" by 3" square stones, almost tile-like, and many of them are not even, which will give anyone using a mobility device a bumpy ride. Many ramps are made of wood and are not permanent structures made of concrete or steel. There are curb cuts at many corners and crossways, but it is rare that you ever see anything like truncated domes or anything tactile for people who are blind or low-vision. In more modern buildings you will see Braille signage in elevators, but I didn't see it anywhere else. I was not aware of any type of accommodation for people who are deaf or for those on the spectrum. Beds in many hotels are single twin beds. If you want a larger bed, the hotel will move two twin beds together. I did not see any accessible taxis but I did hear from a colleague on our trip that the train and platform were accessible – but the accessibility from station to station varies. Another thing to keep in mind is that the ticket counters at the airport open at 4:30 a.m., so if you have an early flight, there is really no need to arrive before then as I did.

If you have a disability and you want to experience the richness of Portugal's history, people, food and culture, I highly recommend planning your trip with Tourism for All. They have a trained and capable staff. They have a fleet of 34 accessible vehicles - from smaller accessible vans for a single wheelchair and guest, all the way up to two full-size accessible tour buses with side lifts. And their tour guides are amazing.

Another thing to consider is the weather. Our trip took place during the first week of March. Average temperatures were low to mid-50-degrees Fahrenheit with nights dipping into the 40's. A couple of days were sunny, some were cloudy, and we even had a couple of days of cold rain showers. Just be prepared to dress warmly and bring rain gear. There are plenty of sites to see indoors should you get rain.

Thank you, Jose, Carolina, Susana, Ricardo and our amazing tour guide, Pedro! ■

Fred along the beach in Nazare

Our group in Nazare

Hotel Villa Batalha indoor pool

Decorative sidewalk in Nazare

The Plaza at Praca do Comercio in Lisbon

Navigating life with invisible disabilities

and a loyal service dog

By Pauline McKenzie

> I kind of felt alone. No one could really see how much I was struggling because the symptoms were increased heart rate, fatigue, brain fog, tachycardia—nothing was visible. I felt really alone in that journey going from living my life as like a healthy person to becoming chronically ill and fully disabled. It was a big transition, and I wanted to share that journey so that when other people go through similar things they won't feel alone. It really encourages me to share my story with others.
>
> LINDSAY MURRAY

Lindsay Murray, a vibrant 24-year-old, has embraced social media, using it as a platform to chronicle and share her personal odyssey through life. Her online platforms not only allow her to connect with a global audience but also serve to raise awareness about chronic illnesses and disabilities. From college-oriented content, her engagement on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok has evolved into a disability advocacy tool. She shares her perspective of living with Hypermobile Ehlers Danlos Syndrome (EDS), postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS), epilepsy, vasovagal syncope, gastroparesis, cyclic vomiting syndrome and superior mesenteric artery syndrome (SMAS), connecting with her audience and providing glimpses of her life's ups and downs.

While motivating others to not give up, Lindsay's experiences offer insights into how her invisible disabilities impact various aspects of her life. Even simple tasks

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like grocery shopping require meticulous planning. She carries a med bag stocked with emergency medications and supplies for her PICC line, which she relies on due to her gastroparesis. But Lindsay continues to navigate everyday activities with a positive spirit despite the challenges.

One remarkable figure in her life is Simon, her furry companion. He is a Labrador mix who has proven to be a lifeline and extraordinary friend. Her service dog accompanies her on all of her outings, ready to lend a helping paw whenever needed. Simon's capabilities extend beyond being a loyal pet – he's a skilled medical alert dog trained to sense changes in Lindsay's body. He'll lick or nibble her right hand when he senses her blood pressure is running low, a crucial alert for Lindsay. He alerts her to the necessity of sitting down to avert harm, recognizing the approach of a fainting spell or impending seizure. Simon's signals provide Lindsay with precious moments to take necessary actions. The bond between them is a testament to the profound impact service dogs can have on the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Lindsay's travel narrative weaves together both moments of triumph and challenges. Among her cherished memories, the standout is the summer of 2017, a time when she embarked on a remarkable journey across Europe, an adventure that preceded her awareness of her illness. This voyage encompassed Spain, Italy and a captivating cruise to France. The voyage proved to be a crowning experience, allowing her to immerse herself in diverse cultures and marvel at the splendor of architectural masterpieces. Currently, Lindsay's travel horizons have shifted to domestic destinations within the U.S., relinquishing international voyages but she hopes to be able to do this again.

While the thought of excursions to the beach fills her with delight (the beach is her happy place), visits there are coloured by the trials of heat sensitivity and health concerns, sometimes necessitating unplanned hospital visits. Nevertheless, Lindsay's spirit remains unyielding, as she embraces life with determination and endeavours to make the most of every instance of exploration that comes her way.

Her advice for travellers with similar conditions underscores the importance of being prepared. She recommends wearing compression socks during long journeys to improve blood circulation. Staying hydrated and ensuring an adequate intake of salt are crucial strategies. She believes it is important to understand your body and be prepared to advocate for yourself, even if it requires approaches like carrying emergency salt packets or firmly holding your ground when someone insists that you do not look sick and therefore should not use the accessible parking spot!

Through Lindsay's words and experiences, we gain a glimpse into a world that often remains hidden but is rich with strength, courage and hope. She advises,

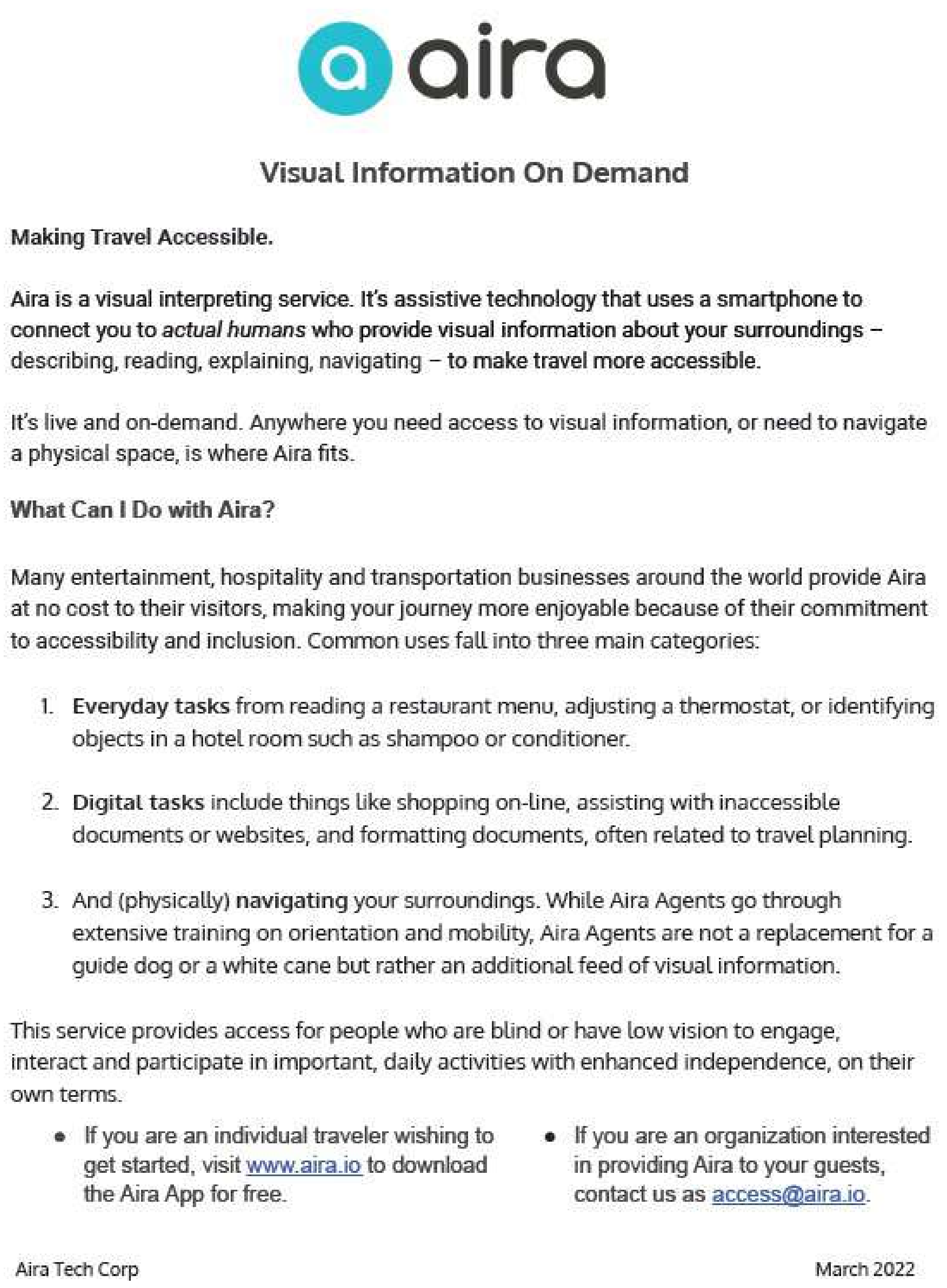
"You will be able to do everything you want to do, even if you have to do it differently. Life's journey may take unexpected turns, but with determination and resilience, one can adapt and find joy in the midst of adversity." ■

FOLLOW LINDSAY:

@chronically.lindsay

@chronically.lindsay

@ChronicallyLindsay



Visual Information On Demand

Making Travel Accessible.

Aira is a visual interpreting service. It's assistive technology that uses a smartphone to connect you to *actual humans* who provide visual information about your surroundings – describing, reading, explaining, navigating – to make travel more accessible.

It's live and on-demand. Anywhere you need access to visual information, or need to navigate a physical space, is where Aira fits.

What Can I Do with Aira?

Many entertainment, hospitality and transportation businesses around the world provide Aira at no cost to their visitors, making your journey more enjoyable because of their commitment to accessibility and inclusion. Common uses fall into three main categories:

1. **Everyday tasks** from reading a restaurant menu, adjusting a thermostat, or identifying objects in a hotel room such as shampoo or conditioner.
2. **Digital tasks** include things like shopping on-line, assisting with inaccessible documents or websites, and formatting documents, often related to travel planning.
3. And (physically) **navigating** your surroundings. While Aira Agents go through extensive training on orientation and mobility, Aira Agents are not a replacement for a guide dog or a white cane but rather an additional feed of visual information.

This service provides access for people who are blind or have low vision to engage, interact and participate in important, daily activities with enhanced independence, on their own terms.

- If you are an individual traveler wishing to get started, visit www.aira.io to download the Aira App for free.
- If you are an organization interested in providing Aira to your guests, contact us as access@aira.io.

Aira Tech Corp

March 2022

Access Locations

Dining

- All Starbucks locations in the US

Entertainment and Hospitality

- Dickies Arena, Ft. Worth, Texas
- Grand Rapids Public Museum, Michigan
- Irish Architecture Foundation, Dublin, Ireland
- Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Massachusetts
- Museum of Science Boston, Massachusetts
- Natural History Museum of Utah
- Nova Scotia Museum, Canada
- NRG Stadium, Houston, Texas
- Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
- Rhode Island Historical Society
- Shedd Aquarium, Chicago, Illinois
- Smithsonian Institution Museums
- Space Center, Houston, Texas
- The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

Destinations

- City of Houston, Texas
- City of Mesa, Arizona
- City of Miami Beach, Florida
- City of Minneapolis, Minnesota
- Sedgwick County, Kansas

Building

- San Francisco Public Library, California

Parks and Rec

- Broward County, Florida Parks & Recreation

Transit

- Houston Metro, Texas
- Metro Transit, Minneapolis St. Paul, Minnesota
- Milwaukee County Transit System, Wisconsin
- State of Connecticut

Aviation and Transit

- Austin-Bergstrom International Airport
- Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL)
- Baltimore Washington International Airport
- El Paso International Airport
- Columbus Regional Airport Authority
- Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport
- Dallas Love Field
- Dane County Regional Airport, Madison, Wisconsin
- Denver International Airport
- Edmonton Regional Airports Authority, Canada
- Gatwick Airport, United Kingdom
- General Mitchell International (Milwaukee Airport)
- Greater Rochester International Airport
- Green Bay Austin Straubel International Airport
- Houston Airport System
- Indianapolis International Airport
- New York JFK International Air Terminal LLC
- Boston Logan International Airport
- Los Angeles International Airport
- Manchester-Boston Regional Airport
- McCarran International Airport
- Memphis International Airport
- Miami International Airport
- Minneapolis-St Paul International Airport
- Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority
- Omaha Airport Authority
- Orlando International Airport
- Philadelphia International Airport
- Southwest Florida International Airport
- Salt Lake City Department of Airports
- San Antonio International Airport, Inc.
- San Diego County Regional Airport Authority
- Seattle-Tacoma International Airport
- Sonoma County Airport
- Spokane International Airport
- St. Louis Lambert International Airport
- St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport
- Sydney Airport, Australia
- Syracuse Regional Airport Authority
- The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey - LaGuardia, Newark and JFK
- Toronto Pearson International Airport, Canada
- Tucson Airport Authority
- Vancouver International Airport, Canada
- Wichita Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport
- Winnipeg Airports Authority, Canada

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The critical role

of specialized travel agents for disabled travellers

By Ken and Cheryl Edmonds

Cheryl and I are no strangers to the world of travel and through our numerous adventures we've encountered a myriad of unforeseen challenges. This led us to launch our YouTube channel Travelingwithachair, recognizing the struggle many face in finding pertinent travel information.

Our deep dive into this space was triggered by a specific incident involving a cruise we were keen on. The cruise line claimed their private island was equipped with beach wheelchairs. However, that simple statement left us with more questions than answers. What type of beach wheelchairs were they referring to? How would one access them? Were there any associated costs? And importantly, what possibilities did these wheelchairs open up for their users?

This glaring information gap inspired us. We identified a pressing need for comprehensive, nuanced details to aid travellers like us. Over the past five years, we've crafted over a thousand pieces of content aiming to answer these very questions.

Navigating travel pitfalls: DIY and general travel agents vs. specialists

Even for seasoned travellers like Cheryl and me, who also serve as travel agents for the disabled community, unexpected hurdles are all too common.

Reflect on our recent journeys for instance. On one trip, we made a reservation for an accessible room with a renowned hotel chain at one of their timeshare resorts. But what greeted us was far from our expectation. Though the room did feature a roll-in shower, it was so cramped that it seemed improbable for a standard wheelchair to fit. Furthermore, the bathroom lacked the necessary space for smooth transfers, rendering the label accessible rather misleading.

On another adventure to the Dominican Republic, despite having reserved an accessible room, we arrived to find none were available. While the staff made efforts to remedy the situation, we still found ourselves in a non-accessible room for three nights. While we managed to adapt, it's not a situation travellers should ever need to grapple with. To add to the ordeal, many of the resort's amenities, including pools and entertainment venues, were devoid of any accessibility features.

This highlights the pivotal difference between DIY or using a general travel agent and the benefits of specialists who truly understand the nuances of disabled travel.

The perils of relying on non-specialized travel agents

Within my professional circle of over 2,000 agents, only a handful truly specialize in catering to the needs of travellers with disabilities. Consequently, many peers often approach me with their questions and I always strive to provide the best guidance.

Consider a recent scenario involving an agent organizing a group trip to Cancun, Mexico. They had coordinated with one of the leading tour operators. However, complications arose when it was revealed that a member of the group, an individual who had lost both legs, was part of the trip. The challenge? The tour operator could not assure him of the availability of an accessible room at the resort.

By the time this concern reached me, the trip was already booked and paid for. Given the circumstances, the best I could suggest was directly reaching out to the resort for any possible accommodation and a clearer understanding of their accessible amenities. To further complicate matters, this was a resort I hadn't personally experienced, so my knowledge of their facilities was limited.

I empathized deeply with this situation, having faced a similar challenge myself. Once, while booking through a tour agency for Cheryl and me, we discovered upon arrival that the resort's definition of accessible was simply providing space for a wheelchair. To add insult to injury, none of these rooms were available during our stay. Such predicaments underscore the imperative need for specialized agents in the travel industry.

Laying the groundwork: your pre-travel checklist

Kickstarting your travel planning begins at home, by understanding the essentials you rely on daily and ensuring they're available at your destination. Perhaps you require a Hoyer lift or similar amenities. To streamline your travel process, it's a great idea to start creating this checklist now. This way, when

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the time comes to embark on your adventure, you'll have a detailed list at the ready. It's an invaluable tool for discussions with travel agents, tour providers and especially your specialized travel agent.

Moreover, crystallizing your vacation expectations beforehand is equally crucial. Are you picturing a laid-back escape, indulging in resort dining and potentially accessible entertainment? Or do you envision immersing yourself in the local waters or seeking active and accessible adventures? Identifying these desires upfront ensures that any discussions or bookings align perfectly with your dream getaway.

Navigating the search: finding the right specialized travel agent

Discovering an expert travel agent who understands accessibility needs isn't as daunting as it might seem. Here's how to start:

Industry magazines: Publications dedicated to accessible travel or disability awareness often feature articles, listings or advertisements spotlighting specialized travel agents or agencies. So, keep an eye out when flipping through these pages.

Facebook groups: The digital age brings a wealth of resources to our fingertips. Facebook, in particular, is home to myriad groups concentrating on accessible travel. These communities cater to a broad spectrum of disabilities and can be treasure troves of information. Beyond sharing experiences and tips, members often recommend travel agents who have proven their expertise in accommodating travellers with specific needs.

Embarking on this search with the right strategies ensures that you'll find a travel partner equipped to craft your ideal, accessible adventure.

Why a specialized travel agent is your best travel companion

When planning a trip, especially for those with accessibility needs, specialized travel agents can prove to be invaluable allies. Here's how they can elevate your travel experience:

Exclusive access and information: Travel agents aren't just savvy navigators; they often possess unique insights that aren't readily available to the average traveller. From hidden deals to insider knowledge, they know the ins and outs of the travel industry.

Global connections: Equipped with a network of contacts spanning across continents, agents can liaise directly with suppliers worldwide. These relationships often mean they can secure vital information or offer assistance that may not be easily attainable by an individual traveller.

Exclusive deals: On top of their knowledge base, travel agents often have the scoop on special fares, promotions and packages that you won't find advertised to the general public. They're always on the lookout to ensure you get the best bang for your buck.

No extra costs: Contrary to some misconceptions, many travel agents receive a commission from suppliers, which doesn't add any additional cost to your trip. While some might charge an initial fee, this often gets applied to your trip's final cost or is a one-time non-refundable payment for their specialized services.

Round-the-clock support: Perhaps the most comforting aspect of working with an agent is the assurance of having someone on your side, come what may. Whether you're faced with unexpected challenges like health issues mid-journey or changes in plans, they're equipped to provide solutions and support. For instance, when a recent client of mine contracted Covid during a cruise, I was on hand to liaise with all service providers, ensuring her needs were met and making her subsequent travels as seamless as possible.

Travelling is meant to be enjoyable, and while unforeseen challenges can arise, having an expert in your corner can make all the difference. Here's to exploring the world with ease and confidence, knowing you've got a specialized travel agent guiding your way. ■

> "Kickstarting your travel planning begins at home, by understanding the essentials you rely on daily and ensuring they're available at your destination.

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Vlogger Spotlight

The impactful voices of vloggers with disabilities

Danielle Connolly

@daniellevates

Your best travel experience

When thinking of my best travel experience, some wonderful memories pop into my mind. My best experiences are about the little memories and laughs and less about the destination. Sometimes even playing tourist in your own area can be great because it's easy to go back again and reminisce. The people you are with make all the difference - good or bad! Sometimes, just taking in a sight or experience on your own is powerful if it speaks to you in a unique way. I do like to believe that the best is yet to come in many ways because I'd like to think that I'm more at the beginning of my travelling journey! I went to Walt Disney World (which I love and will elaborate on further later) a few times, but other than that I didn't experience travelling too much in my childhood. It took me a while as an adult to put aside the what ifs and start initiating travel plans. I'm so glad that I did!

Your worst travel experience

Luckily, I haven't experienced any really bad travel disasters. I would say that I've had a few close calls / scares. For instance, on my latest trip I thought for about a half hour that my scooter battery was broken. In actuality, the restaurant's plugs weren't working! That experience made me appreciate my scooter even more! My worst travel experience was probably more stressful for my mom. In third grade we went to Florida, and before the trip I had pneumonia. When we got there, the pneumonia came back. With my specialists in Massachusetts, my mom wanted to bring me home. However, airfare was astoundingly high because tickets were barely available. It was a waiting game whether to visit a doctor that wasn't familiar with my complex medical history, to see if I felt better, or to go home. Well, I love vacation, so I rallied and stuck out the trip, but it's a good reminder to know your healthcare options at your destination.

Your must-return-to places

As I mentioned before, I'm a Disney adult. I can't help but want to experience all of the new things and old favourites that Disney has to offer. I recently took my first cruise, and of course chose Disney, and I had such a great time! The experience made me really want to go on a cruise again. While I would go on another line, I imagine that it would be hard to beat the Disney experience. There's so many qualities that I love about the Disney parks, but one constant that it matches with the cruise is non-stop fun. As someone that has spent their fair share of time in the house sick or not feeling well, I love to soak up every minute of vacation. Even if you are just resting by the pool, Disney finds a way to add a little magic to that whether it's with the big screen on the cruise or the special themed pools and music. Although there are many places that I haven't seen that I would love to visit, I could keep going back to anywhere Disney related again and again because I feel like it would be impossible to experience it all!

Travel and/or equipment advice

When it comes to packing, anyone that has travelled with me thinks I am over the top, so I don't know how valuable

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my advice is! I separate everything by category into their own bags so that my suitcase doesn't become one big pile. I then put some of the bags in the hotel drawers and it feels like a filing cabinet! Vlogging requires packing extra equipment, so if you plan to document your trip in this way, I recommend doing a day trip nearby with all of your equipment and see what you really use. Sometimes tripods, extra lights and other accessories seem great in theory, but it becomes a hassle to actually use them. I recently got an arm attachment to put on my scooter for my camera, and while I am still playing around with how to get the footage to be more stable, I think that this will help my arm from getting tired holding up the camera all the time.

I also learned the hard way to bring a cushion on the plane if you have any chronic pain. I thought that wearing the comfiest and most versatile outfit imaginable for all temperatures was enough to get me through any flight, but I still had a lot to learn after experiencing runway delays! Also, now that I have my scooter, I have become a certified bag lady. I took off the basket in the front since I heard that those can get lost during flights. I then attached a bag on the front which actually provides more storage, and I used a velcro strap to secure my backpack on the back of my scooter so that it doesn't fall off or potentially get stolen easily.

Advice to your younger self

While I have plenty of advice for my younger self, who knows if I really would have acted on it! When you are in specific environments, routines or ruts, it is hard to listen to good advice! While I always tried my best to make the most out of every moment, when you grow up disabled you can't help but feel like you are looking from the outside in at times. I would tell my younger self that in the future you will be more confident in yourself, and you will find a way to go on the adventures even if it isn't the typical study abroad, backpacking or hiking adventures that you see other kids your age being a part of.

I would also say that while having a burden complex is common among people with disabilities, it is not something that you have to hold onto. While not everyone will feel comfortable being friends or going on adventures with disabled people, the people that aren't are missing out! I would also encourage myself to get involved in the disability community sooner. My final piece of advice would be to not be afraid to put yourself out there, meet new people, and be adventurous! ■

Having been born with a (still) undiagnosed muscle disease, my life has been interesting to say the least. While I have always been an ambitious person who strives to make the world a better place, at times this was at the expense of what was fulfilling and healthy for me. I have always loved creativity, and especially editing videos. After taking my first trip as an adult with friends, I realized that I am more capable of travelling than I realized! Once I got home from the trip, I swiftly got my own mobility scooter and started planning more adventures. Then I thought, why not document this? I started filming some local trips, and then I started thinking of short-form content ideas based on experiences in my life, and I realized that I had something unique to say!

Then, Daniellevates was born! Daniellevates is a play on my name combined with elevates because the content is all about elevating ideas about disability and rare disease. YouTube features vlogs of my adventures in the Boston area and beyond, including my trips to Walt Disney World and the Disney Cruise. These vlogs feature accessibility reviews and also serve as an example of someone living with a disability who can adapt and have fun! On Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube shorts, I post short-form content that is humorous, educational or thought-provoking. I am excited to continue my adventures and be an advocate for the disability and rare disease communities and I invite you to follow along!

@daniellevates

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Bucket List Accessible Destinations

Being able to travel with my family is a right, not a privilege

Canada

- Alberta
- British Columbia
- Ontario
- Prince Edward Island
- Newfoundland & Labrador

U.S.A.

- Connecticut
- Maine
- Massachusetts
- New York
- Pennsylvania
- North Carolina
- Florida
- Indiana
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- Arizona
- Colorado
- Utah
- New Mexico
- California
- Hawaii
- Oregon

Enjoying the wheelchair-accessible outdoors!

Visit **www.travelability.net** for more accessible destinations

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Blogs & Vlogs

These bloggers and vloggers put the accessible into Accessible Journeys. They have blazed trails for people of all abilities and fill in critical gaps of the accessibility puzzle.

Read the travel perspectives of our thoughtfully curated selection of influential bloggers with disabilities from around the world

Blogger: Naomi
Home country: the Netherlands
Blog: Probe Around the Globe

What and where: Road tripping with Chron's disease, anywhere.

Living with Chron's disease hasn't stopped Naomi from travelling. She admits that her main struggles are fatigue and frequent irregular toilet visits. Some trips have been really tough, but she perseveres because she loves the freedom of road trips and how they lend themselves to seeing out-of-the-way gems. Here are her tips on how to survive a road trip with Crohn's disease.

"To dare to go on an adventure is to dare to live," Myriam and Pierre say in Wheeled World. Injured in the Paris 2015 attacks, Pierre is a paraplegic who offers practical tips on his physical travel challenges. The couple also confronts psychological limits, aware that what lies ahead is unknown and scary. Visiting the red city of Bologna, they reported on good accessibility with level passages at most monuments and piazzas. But who needs to stroll, when Bologna is the ideal place to try every pasta recipe?

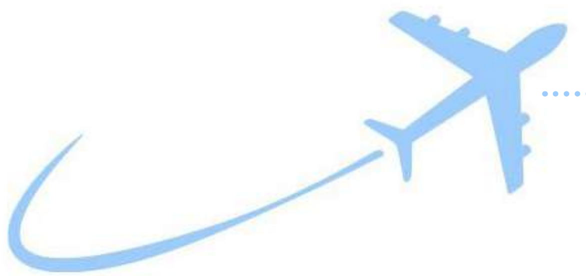
Blogger: Myriam and Pierre
Home country: France
Blog: Wheeled World

What and where: Exploring the red city of Bologna

Blogger: Laura Lowles
Home country: U.K.
Blog: The Invisible Disability and Me

What and where: Travel packing for a cochlear implant, anywhere

Laura Lowles started the blog The Invisible Disability and Me, in 2014 after being diagnosed with sudden sensorineural hearing loss in 2014 and finding a lack of resources to help her. Her blog offers insight, advice and support, as Laura raises awareness of SSHL and her own journey with a cochlear implant. She unpacks a surprisingly long list of what you need to pack when travelling with a Cochlear Implant.



Blogger: Bradley Williams and Cazzy Magennis
Home country: U.K.
Blog: Dream Big, Travel Far

What and where: Backpacking with type 1 diabetes, The Philippines

Travel fanatics Bradley and Cazzy started the blog Dream Big, Travel Far in 2016 while in university. They share their nomadic travel experiences to help other couples to travel, plus to inspire and motivate Cazzy's fellow type 1 diabetics to travel while coping with the challenges the illness presents. Here they offer useful detailed resources to help anyone travelling The Philippines with type 1 diabetes.

"Live well and travel widely," is the slogan for Sarah's blog Endless Distances. Living with multiple chronic illnesses, Sarah aims to empower everyone to travel well and in a way that supports their health. The former occupational therapist turned full-time travel blogger writes about her travels with multiple chronic illnesses including bowel endometriosis and celiac disease, which makes a gluten free diet necessary. She offers well-researched, personally vetted resources on gluten free travel here.

Blogger: Sarah
Home country: U.S., moved to U.K.
Blog: Endless Distances

What and where: Gluten free travel, everywhere

Blogger: Ali Ingersoll
Home country: The Bahamas
Blog: Quirky Quad

What and where: Wheelchair airline travel, anywhere

Ali Ingersoll has somehow managed to combine vulnerability with dark humour in her blog, the Quirky Quad. She knows first-hand how tough it is to travel in a wheelchair, having been paralyzed from the chest down in her late 20's, the result of a broken neck from a shallow water dive. She shares her insights about airline travel as a person with a disability, along with a call for airline reform, in the post Wheelchair Airline Travel as a C6 Quadriplegic.

Blogger: Nic Bakes
Home country: U.K.
Blog: Nic's Adventures

What and where: Horseback riding day trips, U.K.

Nic began blogging years ago to show off her baking creations, but when type 1 diabetes hit, the baking stopped and her focus shifted to travel. Although eating on the road can be tricky, Nic's autism, language and social difficulties combine to make it even more challenging. She's had to find ways to cope, and shares them in her blogs. Get some tips on a day of horseback riding in her blog about the Top 5 day trips with horses.

Hayley left Wales in 2008 for two months of volunteering in Tanzania. There she met and married Reagan, started a business and a family. Today the couple and their two sons split their time between the U.K. and Tanzania. When their second son was 6 months old he was diagnosed with Down syndrome. Mum Hayley blogs to show the world that Down syndrome can be difficult and worry-filled, but it's nothing to fear, "in fact it's pretty amazing." Read Travelling with a child who has Down syndrome.

Blogger: Hayley Balozi
Home country: Wales to Tanzania
Blog: I Am River

What and where: Travel with a Down syndrome child, U.K. to Tanzania and back again

Blogger: Pippa Stacey
Home country: U.K.
Blog: Life of Pippa

What and where: Discovering Brighton by wheelchair, Brighton U.K.

Pippa acquired a debilitating chronic illness in her 20s, which altered her life's trajectory. She began writing and speaking about life as a student with a long-term condition, learning to find humour in tough times. When friends affectionately dubbed her insights as, "life of Pippa" moments, her blog was born. Long wanting to experience the magic of Brighton, known to be welcoming and inclusive, she visited to see how true that was. Read the post on Brighton by Wheelchair.

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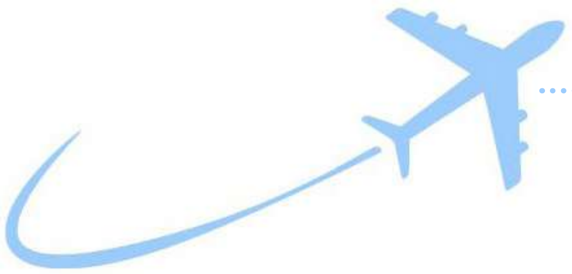

Blogger: Dave Bexfield
Home country: U.S.
Blog: Staying Active with a Disability

What and where: MS travel guide, anywhere

"Be active, stay fit and keep exploring!—regardless of challenges," is Dave Bexfield's motto. A multiple award winning writer, Dave founded the site ActiveMSers.org to inspire those with multiple sclerosis to stay as active as possible. The largest and longest-running personal MS website has helped hundreds of thousands of people; with its breadth and depth of information, it's easy to see how. Check out the stellar resource, Travelling with MS, the Ultimate Guide

Facing a void upon completing his Masters degree, Alex began blogging. The Life Quadriplegic shares his journey as a disabled person in a powerchair, connects with others and offers a wealth of access reviews including festivals, local and international travel. During a mere week in Sicily, Alex visited UNESCO world Heritage site Ragusa, Mount Etna, bustling Catania, the quaint fishing village of Marzamemi, 2700 year old city of Syracuse, seaside town of Pozzallo and a stay at four-star fully accessible Kikki Village. Read the sizzling post on Sicily.

Blogger: Alex Squire
Home country: U.K.
Blog: The Life Quadriplegic

What and where: Eating and touring in Sicily, Italy

Blogger: Melanie
Home country: Denmark
Blog: Little Miss Turtle

What and where: Scenic tour, Lake Schliersee, the Bavarian Alps

Travel is life! Since 2015, the blog Little Miss Turtle has shared helpful advice with other disabled travelers. Melanie's limb-girdle muscular dystrophy has put her in a wheelchair, but it also affects her cardiac and respiratory muscles, so she must not overtax herself, despite her restless traveller's spirit. She found Lake Schliersee, in the Bavarian Alps, to be the perfect scenic day trip. Less than an hour from Munich, at a low, respiratory-friendly altitude of 777 meters, the lake also boasts a fully wheelchair accessible trail. Read all about it in Lake Schliersee in a wheelchair.

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Vlogger: Brian, Diane and family
Home country: U.S.
Vlog: Live Your Someday Now
Experience: Life on the road, U.S.

For the past few years, Brian and Diane, along with their three teenage kids and two rescue dogs have been travelling the U.S. Those years have brought them to amazing people and places. They are often asked how they manage life on the road with one child who uses a wheelchair. Their vlog, Live Your Someday Now, raises wheelchair awareness while the family inspires viewers and reminds us all, don't wait for someday to start living your dreams. Get a taste of the vlog with this highlight reel.

"When life gives you a wheelchair . . . find a skatepark." Aaron was born with spina bifida, yet he always kept up, hitting all his developmental markers on schedule. When he saw his brother race BMX off-road bikes, Aaron wondered what he could do with his wheelchair. Over time, he developed increasingly tough stunts, inventing a new sport that merges skateboarding and BMX, called WCMX. Since 2005 he has mastered a mid-air 180-degree turn; landed the first wheelchair backflip, double backflip and front flip, ruling competitions along the way. Watch this edit of his 2020 WCMX, if you dare!

Vlogger: Aaron WHEELZ Fotheringham
Home country: U.S.
Vlog: Aaron Fotheringham
Experience: WCMX stunts, Las Vegas and California, U.S.

Vlogger: Kevin and Kassandra
Home country: U.S.
Vlog: Kevin and Kassy
Experience: Assessing accessibility, Catalina Island, California

American interabled couple Kevin and Kassy vlog and podcast openly about their life, journey to love and parenthood, and current events. They aim to motivate others to keep striving for their dreams, "no matter what life may put you through!" Here they take a trip to Catalina Island and report on its level of accessibility.

Kathryn became paralyzed from my chest down (T3) in a car accident that took the life of her best friend when they had been out shopping for prom dresses. She now treats every day as if it's her last, taking nothing for granted and remembering the love and laughter of her best friend, to help her through the tough times. She shared her experience and insights about flying with her wheelchair for the first time in this video.

Vlogger: Kathryn Granger
Home country: U.S.
Vlog: Kathryn Granger
Experience: First plane trip with a wheelchair, L.A., California

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Vlogger: Samanta Bullock
Home country: U.K.
Vlog: Samanta Bullock
Experience: The Guinness Experience, Dublin, Ireland

Londoner Samanta is passionate about inclusive fashion and leading a healthy active lifestyle. A wheelchair user since 1992, she proves that a wheelchair doesn't need to be an obstacle to achieving your goals. She took time off to enjoy a trip to Dublin, where she visited the home of Guiness.

Thinking about taking a cruise? Don't get taken for a scam instead. Gary has travelled for 25 years, taken 95 cruises (and counting), posted 900 videos and routinely runs Q & A livestreams. He knows that the best cruises are those made with thoughtful, well-informed choices throughout the full process of planning, booking and sailing. He knows a scam when he smells one and we want you to also. Watch Scams Cruisers Are Falling For Before Even Leaving Home.

Vlogger: Gary Bembridge
Home country: U.K.
Vlog: Tips for Travellers
Experience: Don't get cruise scammed, anywhere

Vlogger: Josh Crickmay
Home country: South Africa
Vlog: Josh Crickmay
Experience: Reenacting history with whimsical adventure, Zululand (South Africa)

In 2013 Josh was diagnosed with Aspergers, handed a pair of binoculars and flown off to Ecuador. His passion for wildlife and exploration saved his life. Now he uses his skills, passion and unique way of seeing the world to bring the wonders of the natural world alive. His observations educate and promote conservation, but it all starts with engaging the audience in his unique genre - Indiana Jones meets National Geographic. Check out his first episode, The Dorothea.

Instagrammers

Disability on the 'gram: captivating Instagrammers you need to follow

These Instagrammers capture a moment in time of an accessible journey. Like our bloggers and vloggers, they are pushing the boundaries of travel without limits.

Instagrammer: Grace Maniquis
Home country: Philippines
Instagram account: @gracee.maniquis

Smiling in the face of defeat in Boracay, Philippines >>>

Grace Maniquis, who also goes by the name Deafinitely Beautiful, is an 18-year-old deaf Filipina, who was diagnosed with severe deafness at eight months old. With help from her hearing mother, Grace teaches Filipino Sign Language (FSL) on Tik Tok. FSL is different from American Sign Language (ASL), reflecting the grammar, syntax and idioms of Filipino culture. But it was the photo of Grace freshly thrown off a windsurfer that caught our eye, along with her reminder to us all, "just enjoy it anyway."

Daniel King has been a paraplegic since birth, due to a hungover doctor. The Swede, and former athlete, took some time out for a spin in the snow in this reel, where he showed off his ATV wheelies on a frozen lake.

Instagrammer: Daniel King
Home country: Sweden
Instagram account: @danne9king9

<<< ATV wheelies on a frozen lake in Sweden

Instagrammer: Jessica Cummin
Home country: U.K.
Instagram account: @thechroniciconic

Love and gratitude in Barbados >>>

Artist Jessica Cummin describes herself as, "Just another autistic & mad Cripfluencer™ Jewess with ADHD." When the Londoner developed symptoms of chronic illness as a young adult, her lifelong love of art became less about expression and more about frustration. But she persevered, creating an iconic t-shirt labelled: Not getting well soon. It became a symbol of empowerment to others in the disabled community. But it was her vulnerability we loved when she posted about a trip to Barbados, grateful to "be around someone you love so deeply it hurts."

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Instagrammer: Marissa Iavecchia
Home country: U.S.
Instagram account: @marissas.medical.chronicles

Summering at home in the U.S. >>>

Marissa Iavecchia shares her life with chronic illness, promoting the need for the public and healthcare industry to become educated so that symptoms of chronic illness are identified faster. And so the patient can get the right care quickly. In this post she reached out to the community to discuss how "potsies" can manage the heat, whether when travellingto warm locales or summering in your backyard.

American Instagrammer Dani, has Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. Her Instagram offers tips on accessible travel, with a focus on safety for travellers with disabilities. We loved the purple sky over her alert for how to stay safe while hitting the festivals.

Instagrammer: Danielle
Home country: U. S.
Instagram account: @the.dani.adventure

<<< Safety tips for festival-goers with disabilities, Arizona

Instagrammer: Tamara Mena
Home country: U.S.
Instagram account: @tamaramenaofficial

Celebrating her Mexican heritage in L.A., California >>>

American speaker, content creator, model and advocate, Tamara was paralyzed in a terrible car crash. The accident took the life of her boyfriend, Patrick Riner, who died after saving her life. Tamara became committed to honouring him by living life to the fullest. She also honours her godmother on her birthday along with a photo of her celebrating her Mexican ancestry.

Brazilian Aline de Oliveira Cabral is a competitive badminton player, among other things. International competitions take her far and wide. We wanted to share her proudly posing at the Thailand Para-Badminton International in May, 2023.

Instagrammer: Aline de Oliveira Cabral
Home country: Brazil
Instagram account: @alineolica

<<< Para Badminton competition, Pattaya, Thailand

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Tech-Enabled

Innovative technologies to support and enhance the lives of people with disabiities

Purple Lens

A web accessibility toolkit that combines automated and human remediation

Spoke

An app that ensures that deaf travellers never miss out on important public announcements at airports or public locations

Dateability

The only dating app designed to help the disabled and chronically ill community find love

Vacayit

Helps the blind vicariously experience in-destination tours through professional audio description

Lisnen

An app that allows the deaf and hard of hearig to hear sounds like alarms, telephones and door knocks

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EnChroma

Glasses that enable people with colour blindness to see vibrant colors

Centaur Robotics

Power wheelchair that fits into the space of a dining room chair and elevates the user up to eye level.

Be My Eyes

An app that provides blind users with audio descriptions of what they are seeing using AI via ChatGTP4 or Live Volunteers

Three Play Media

Audio description, live captioning, automated transcription

TranslateLive

Provides closed captioning, live captioning, translation, audio description, accessibility compliance

Picture Live

A photobook that uses QR codes to activate audio descriptions or ASL interpreters for each page

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Take our Survey

We invite you to take part in our survey and share your valuable insights to help us improve.

CLICK HERE

Click here to read Mélange Accessibility for All

TRAVELABILITY

THE INTERSECTION OF TRAVEL AND ACCESSIBILITY

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One click can help you find all you need to know about:

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- accessible transportation
- medical equipment rental
- and more . . .

where available

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Don't waste valuable time. Go to:

WWW.TRAVELABILITY.NET/ACCESSIBLE-DESTINATIONS/