

CAC Corner: Our European Vacation With A Wheelchair | CPD Blog

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07/17/2019



I have always loved to travel! Lucky for me, my husband loves a good trip at least as much as I do and over the years we have been able to get away, just the two of us, without our kids a few times. With our last big trip several years behind us, and our youngest child in high school, the thought occurred to us: should we take our kids on our next big trip? What would we love to show them? Could we go to Europe?

Our kids have been to Disneyland, Mexico and Canada with us and we've had a great time. However, our oldest daughter, Sarah, has special needs that can make traveling a challenge. Born with a partially deleted chromosome, Sarah has a mild intellectual disability, wears glasses and hearing aids, and has orthopedic abnormalities that limit her mobility. She generally uses a walker for every day and a wheelchair for long distances. That said, she has also been blessed with an easy disposition and a love of travel, so she really wanted to go. Taking our other two kids and leaving her with grandpa and grandma wouldn't have been OK with her.

In choosing our European destination, we decided it would be best to take our kids someplace we had already been. If we were going to invest in a big trip, we wanted to minimize the unknowns to increase our odds for a successful trip. We settled on Paris and London! The only completely unknown part for us was taking the Eurostar train through the Chunnel. It turned out to be a great experience, and overall, our trip was fantastic!

There was still some trial and error involved and we learned some lessons that may be helpful for traveling with a wheelchair.

Michelle's tips for traveling in Europe with a wheelchair

Tag your wheelchair

Before you go, tag your wheelchair with your name and cell phone number. Be aware of how the phone number will change depending on the country you are visiting, and list it both ways. We used a label maker to stick this information on Sarah's wheelchair plus used the hanging tags available at the airport. This was good because Sarah's wheelchair did not arrive in Paris for three days. Luckily, the airline was happy to give us a loaner to use in the meantime and delivered our wheelchair to the hotel when they received it.

Check accessibility

Also before you go, check out wheelchair accessibility for the attractions you want to see. In Paris and London we noticed that because the buildings were old, the entrance for wheelchairs was usually different than for the general public. Elevators could be difficult to find, so be prepared to speak up and ask an employee. We found a few sites that just didn't work out for Sarah, such as the Catacombs (far too many stairs), the top level of the Eiffel Tower (wheelchairs don't have access past the second level), and much of the Tower of London. In most cases, people were very willing to try to accommodate us. For instance, the Crown Jewels exhibit and the White Tower were what Sarah really wanted to see at the Tower of London. So we did what we had to do to get her there, helping her with stairs, and an employee graciously helped us take a short-cut exit out when she was tired of walking.

Check for discounts

Sometimes it's a good idea to buy tickets to popular attractions in advance online. But before you do, check for discounts! We were pleasantly surprised that in France, people with disabilities and up to one caretaker are admitted to many major attractions free of charge! This included museums (the Louvre, Versailles, etc.) and Saint Chapelle among many others! Kids who are student-age are also free or given discounts. Just be sure to bring proof of disability (we brought a letter from our doctor) and student ID for our two other teenagers.

Double-check accessibility

When choosing lodging, look on Trip Advisor and Expedia, but also contact the property directly to confirm accessibility. We had to cancel one hotel reservation based on a follow up contact with the hotel because they didn't have an elevator.

We found a way to make a tiny bathroom more accessible

European bathrooms are generally micro-sized and don't usually have bathtubs. Sarah uses a bathtub at home instead of the shower because her balance is poor and falling is a hazard. So we bought a little boxed shower stool online that is easy to assemble. It fit right in our suitcase and solved that problem!

Transportation tip for Uber

We found out the hard way that an Uber XL in one country can mean something slightly different in another country. For example, In France an Uber XL would accommodate five people, luggage and a wheelchair without a problem. In London, an XL is a bit smaller and you would need two vehicles to load the same amount of cargo.

Keep critical things with you

Pack any special medications or other important items in your carry on and keep them with you. On our way home, all four of our suitcases were lost. All we had was what was in our carry-on bags. Thankfully, all of our bags were delivered to our doorstep four days later.

Prepare for a rainy day

Be prepared for weather. We packed rain jackets and umbrellas plus an extra rain poncho for Sarah's legs and shoes. This worked out well, as it rains in London a lot.

Regarding wheelchairs, cobblestones and curbs

In some instances, a manual wheelchair is preferable to a motorized one. My husband did the majority of the pushing and noticed the cobblestone streets are very bumpy and sometimes a wheel can get stuck in between the stones. There were times when he found it easier to lift the front wheels up and just push with the back wheels. Sometimes curbs were cut out in spots for wheelchair access but not always. Having someone push the wheelchair can prevent the wheelchair from tipping over and falling when there is a steep curb, for example.

Advantages to traveling with a wheelchair

Having a wheelchair is sometimes actually a plus. Our family was often ushered into museums and other attractions ahead of the long lines, especially in Paris. And it was a pretty convenient place to hang our backpack and jackets.

Travel for people with disabilities is not only possible, it has surely never been more accessible and enjoyable if this is something your family really wants to do. We found it is best to do a little homework a few months in advance of your trip.

A bit of planning will save you time, frustration and money. We will always cherish the memories we made as a family on our European adventure!

Michelle Hoggan lives in Smithfield, Utah with her husband, Steve, and three kids. She has a bachelors degree in journalism from USU and is the current co-chair representing families on the CPD Community Advisory Council. Michelle enjoys reading, trying out new recipes, traveling, and visiting the dinosaur museum in Vernal, where she grew up.