

My adventures with travelling

Here in Australia we are very blessed with governments being very aware of all its citizens and if any public buildings are difficult to access it is usually rectified very quickly.

In September/October 2009 I travelled extensively throughout the US, several days London then back to Brisbane via Singapore. My experience with accessible hotels was varied - ranging from brilliant to disastrous. The airports were universally reasonable for disabled facilities – there is obviously an international code when the airports are designed and built but the attitudes of staff from country to country was again quite varied from the fabulous to the downright rude! Luckily I travelled the US first which did wonders for my confidence. Had I flown through London first I would have been quite demoralised and probably would have caught the next plane home. However, I was so excited about travelling again I didn't take anything personally instead I took it in good humour and being the opportunist that I am, I decided to learn and educate others from my experience.

It is ignorance that the same mistakes are made worldwide. Nobody has taken the time to put themselves in a wheelchair or be blindfolded or wears earmuffs to experience what needs to be done. Something I believe should be obligatory in the training of their profession be it - architect, town planner, builder or anyone involved in access for all citizens of society. I do know that it is obligatory for all Occupational Therapy students in Western Australia to spend a day with a disability, so that they have some understanding.

I have taken care not to mention names of hotels and people with the exception of Embassy Suites in the US – they were marvellous! The moment you are at the hotel you immediately feel at home – the room rate includes a fully cooked breakfast every day, free drinks and nibbles 5-7pm every night (and I mean any drink!), the usual hotel facilities (swimming pool, sauna & gym) and every single member of staff was exceptionally trained.

Embassy Suites should have a class of suites across all Hotel Chains/Brands that meet upper category disability requirements but that is far from the reality. Embassy Suites are part of the Hilton Group so one would think that all Hilton Hotels have the same standard but as I found out that is not the case. Not every room in the Embassy Suite is accessible for a person with disabilities but they have gone to the trouble of setting aside a number of accessible suites which allows everyone to partake in and enjoy the standard facilities.

Breakfast is a wonderful way to start your day. The Embassy Suites made fresh omelettes to order, there was a wonderful selection of cereals, croissants, Danishes and toast as well as an endless supply of teas and coffee. I found by eating a good breakfast, having a coffee around 3pm (which was generally awful in the US!), free drinks and nibbles (usually carrot and celery sticks) that I was never hungry. I spent my days exploring and not having to worry about food.

Now, the Embassy Suites were not perfect but compared to my previous experiences they were pretty darn good.

I must include a funny story about the free drinks on my last night in Washington DC – my friend and I went into the bar area, it was quite noisy so I ordered a whisky and water, the bar attendant queried ‘was that half and half or whisky with a dash of water?’ I couldn’t hear what she asked and I shrugged my shoulders and said ‘oh, just whisky and water thanks’. So I was served a huge glass of whisky with just a squirt of water. My first mouthful was delicious and I made a mental note that my next drink would be half and half. My friend and I had this unwritten rule about our evening drinks that she would carry the first round and that I would get the second. On my way to the bar for our second round I said to myself ‘half and half, half and half’ the bar attendant saw me and said ‘same again?’ and I said out loud ‘yes please!’ Needless to say I slept very well that night!

The facilities in other hotel chains leave a lot to be desired. One bathroom had the grab rails so close to the wall that I would skin my knuckles (I still bear the scars on my left hand today). Another hotel had

the bathroom sink so high that I couldn't reach the taps, spit out the toothpaste or wash my face. The worst hotel experience in the US was sleeping on the 5th floor and having to go down to the 1st floor to use the accessible bathroom! Try managing that in the middle of the night! It was only for one night; the management reduced the room rate and gave us breakfast the next morning. We then moved into the Embassy Suites which was bliss.

It seems like such an old cliché but the Yanks got it right, travelling in the USA was such a pleasure – they have obviously gone to a lot of trouble making sure everything was accessible and I mean everything, even the people were accessible. The UK was a different scenario as everything is so much older - buildings especially. If a building was 'heritage listed' nothing could be changed for a person with disability and as it seems everything in London (especially) was 'heritage listed' so not a lot was done for a person with disability therefore the average person on the street thought you were invisible! There was even a marked difference in airlines. In Australia and the US they always seated you first on the plane but the British wouldn't do that so just got 'cranky' when you took a bit longer getting seated on the plane. Customs in Australia and the US knew how to deal with a person in a wheelchair whereas in London you got yelled at for not standing up to use the eye recognising machine and then with much huffing and puffing having to deal with you manually. In America, people would offer assistance to cross a street whereas in England they would walk over the top of you because you would seem invisible. Luckily I flew to the US first so I knew my 'rights', my human rights, by the time I got to London.

Sadly the Embassy Suites are only in the US. The hotel in London was another adventure and this is a hotel which prides itself in their accessible facilities! I was quite upset by the lack of thought that didn't go into making their facilities work – obviously no-one had spent any time in a wheelchair trying to access these facilities. The room was on the third floor but when the doors opened on the elevator the room was up a ramp and around the corner, the door would lock immediately after you unlocked it so it required both hands to operate it (I only have use of my right hand), the bathroom door was too heavy to open and there was a 3cms ridge entry into the bathroom, when one finally got into the

shower, the water pressure was so great that the flexible shower rose would flick out of its holder and spray water over the entire bathroom, making it very dangerous and slippery. I took the manager on a tour of my experience and he reduced the account. He arranged for the hotel maintenance man (from Portugal) to remove the hinge from the bathroom door and adjust the water pressure so for the next two mornings I could successfully shower myself. The reducing of the account is a nice gesture but one wouldn't mind paying the full price if the room was accessible – like closing the stable door when the horse had bolted!

To cap of my experience in this hotel I used the disabled toilet in the foyer – the emergency alarm cord was looped up as it wasn't connected but where it was looped up was right where I stood to transfer onto the toilet and it slipped right around my neck!! Only having one hand that worked, I spent a good five minutes trying to get it off my neck as well as hanging on to the grab rail! I reported the incident to the front desk and was able to demonstrate what happened. What was really frightening was that if I couldn't get the cord from around my neck, I would have been left hanging and choked (to death probably) all because some-one had carelessly just left things without thinking! I say to my carers to try and imagine being in a wheelchair before they put things out of my limited reach. Mind you, I have one carer (she has been with me for 14 years), who is concerned for my health so anything that is not good for me, she puts out of my reach, all in the name of love!

Just to finish off my time in London I thought I would tell of another experience – I wanted to go on the London Eye and was pleasantly surprised that it was accessible for me so I thought that I would quickly go to the toilet first. So I followed the signs to the accessible toilet which were like a maze (England is famous for its mazes) only to find that there was a 20cms step down into the toilet area! If another person would use the excuse that the buildings are 'heritage listed' therefore no changes could be made for the sake of accessibility – I would scream!!

I am pleased to say that the 'heritage listed' excuse can no longer be used. The Allgood Company in the UK have 'thought outside the

square' and come up with a really innovative idea for steps in these iconic buildings making them accessible for all. Please take a look at this website.

<http://www.allgood.co.uk/news.asp?info=Sesame+stairs+from+Allgood+Trio>

Accessing these stairs in the rain and relying on staff to be on hand all the time takes a little bit of shine off the idea that it is accessible but it is a start.

One of the reasons for access is so a person could be independent and dignified as much as possible. The person with disability does not want to rely on someone to help and certainly does not want to be considered a burden.

I would really like to see an Embassy Suite style chain of hotels throughout Australia, offering the same standard of service as in the US. I get quite offended at the Australian attitude of everything at a cost to the consumer. It costs absolutely nothing be friendly, respectful and helpful. The average standard of service in Australia is disappointing. If I find it disappointing – imagine how an overseas person feels?

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