

New Orleans by Wheelchair

Once a year my family and I sit down to decide where to go for our next family trip. Planning a trip for my family is a bit tricky, because my father is a dialysis patient and a wheelchair-bound double amputee who has also lost the use of his left arm due to a stroke. Even in this condition, my family and I have travelled extensively. Some of the places we have visited include London, England; Edinburgh, Scotland; Doha, Qatar; twice to Las Vegas; twice to San Francisco, California; San Antonio, Texas; Port of Spain, Trinidad; Cancun, Mexico; Los Cabos, Mexico, and Panama City, Panama. We have also been on a Mediterranean cruise on Holland America's M.S. Rotterdam. This time around, my cousin who lives in New Orleans suggested we come visit as there is a lot to see and do. The destination was set – we were going to go see “the Crescent City”. This article will describe the issues, details, and experiences one has to handle when planning and going on a trip with someone wheelchair bound.

Once a travel destination has been chosen, an appropriate dialysis location needs to be found. There are a variety of methods one can use to find such a site such as to ask your social worker or to check on the internet (globaldialysis.com has a lot of useful information). On many of our trips to the USA, we have used Davita as the dialysis provider for my father. In preparation for this trip to New Orleans, I contacted the head office and was told that they would accept my father at the Upton Dialysis Clinic in Touro Hospital. The rate to be charged would be what Medicare would pay which is similar to what the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (O.H.I.P.) pays in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Finding a caregiver is always a challenge as the majority of companies require a minimum of 2 or 4 hours continuous service. My father's requirements are quite minimal at an hour in the morning and an hour at night. We have been very fortunate, with our previous vacation destinations, to find companies that are able and willing to meet my father's needs at a reasonable hourly rate. These companies have been found using the internet; and then perusal of their website and talking to their staff. In New Orleans, A First Name Basis, was the company that we were able to get to meet our needs, even though it was more expensive than we have been used to. Since the two most important requirements had been accomplished, we then were able to book the flights, hotel and tours.

My father uses a power wheelchair for mobility, but sometimes this poses extra travel challenges to watch out for. When determining which wheelchair to take (power or manual), the means of transportation can be the deciding factor. For example, the door to the airplane's cargo hold may not be large enough to put the power-wheelchair in upright. On our trip to San Antonio, we travelled on a plane whose cargo hold door was too small to accept the power wheelchair upright. The ground crew had no choice but to tip the chair over and load it sideways. Unfortunately, they tipped it onto its joystick and damaged it. This was a lesson for us to always check with the airline for the size of the plane's cargo door in order to take the appropriate wheelchair or to alter the air route accordingly. The airlines are helpful, but need to be involved in the planning process right from the beginning.

At the destination, the transportation to and from the airport can be a challenge as many locations do not have wheelchair accessible taxis, buses or shuttles. When we booked our Mediterranean Cruise, we discussed the fact that we would be bringing the power-wheelchair as it would provide my father with flexibility of movement on the cruise ship. However, when we arrived at Venice airport the van had no ramp for the 400 pound wheelchair. Therefore, my father was physically lifted onto a seat in the van and then 4 men were required to lift the wheelchair on and off the van. Transportation to and from dialysis, for tours and just getting around the vacation spot all have to be researched. This is predominately done through the internet and emails or phone calls back and forth to the various

companies. We booked a direct flight to the Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport through Air Canada. The airplane was a Bombardier Regional Jet 705 and, therefore, the cargo hold was not large enough for the power wheelchair to fit vertically (or at all!). So, the decision was made for us as to which wheelchair would accompany my father. For our trip to and from the airport in New Orleans, we registered with the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA), which is similar to the Wheel-Trans service that we use in Toronto. Basically, one can make a booking up to five days in advance for a fixed-route bus to be picked up and dropped off at a particular location. We were able to book the RTA for our round trip to the airport, for dialysis, to restaurants and a couple of sites that did not require a tour bus. The fare is \$2.00 per person per trip (except for the airport which was \$15.00 per person).

Once all the basics were out of the way, we moved on to our favourite part of planning – food and tours. Normally, we book private tours because we have not been able to find tour buses that are wheelchair accessible. This has been fairly expensive. However, in the “Big Easy”, we were able to book three tours with Gray Line Tours as the company has wheelchair accessible transportation which can be provided with three day's advance confirmed booking.

All the arrangements made, we were ready to fly on Thursday, March 28. Some may wonder how people who are unable to walk get on a plane and where they sit. An aisle chair is used to help people with mobility limitations board the plane. It is a specially designed wheelchair capable of fitting down the narrow aisles of a plane. The aisle chair has multiple straps used to secure someone to the narrow chair. Trained personnel are available to help a person transfer from the wheelchair to the aisle chair and from the aisle chair to the plane seat. When making the flight booking we told the airline that we would need assistance and an aisle chair to board the plane.

We arrived at the airport in New Orleans and were pleasantly surprised to find the RTA waiting for us. One of the things we found most beneficial with travelling with the RTA fixed-route bus is that the whole family (5 of us in total) were able to travel together. When checking in at the Hilton Riverside New Orleans, I asked if the daily rate (\$31.25 plus tax for self parking) could be waived for the caregiver coming for my father. Upon discussion with the manager on duty, the lady at the check-in desk said they would charge a flat \$20.00 for the week. We were very relieved and grateful that the personnel at the hotel were so understanding and compassionate. The hotel room was really a wheelchair accessible room as the room and the bathroom were both large enough to maneuver a wheelchair easily. After freshening up we went for dinner to try a New Orleans delicacy – Charbroiled Oysters at Drago's - “The Single Best Bite of Food in New Orleans”.

Our vacation was off to a great start!

The next day the RTA picked us up at the appointed hour to take us to Café du Monde. It is a coffee shop on Decatur Street in the French Quarter in New Orleans, Louisiana. It is best known for its café au lait and its French-style beignets. In the New Orleans style, the coffee is blended with chicory. We then walked around Jackson Square, St. Louis Cathedral (the oldest Cathedral in North America), the French Quarter with the world famous Bourbon Street and the French market. Many of the streets and sidewalks are very old with cobblestones, bricks and flagstones. This makes it hard to manoeuvre a wheelchair and uncomfortable for the person in the wheelchair.

For our tours, the RTA was booked to take us to and from where the tours started. The tour bus was wheelchair accessible for the city tour. The custom built swamp boat for the tour through part of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park – Barataria Preserve and the Steamboat Natchez, the last authentic

steamboat on the Mississippi River, both had ramps for easy access. We took the RTA to Mardi Gras World which is an attraction offering tours of parade floats and the float and prop building process. The Audubon Aquarium of the Americas was within walking distance of our hotel. The curbs at the intersections have ramps to make it a bit easier but they have nodes which make it bumpy for the wheelchair user.

We, also, found that certain street car lines were wheelchair accessible. We visited the New Orleans Botanical Garden, City Park using the Canal Street streetcar. The New Orleans Botanical Garden, the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Sculpture Garden were all wheelchair friendly.

We did not have any trouble getting in and out of restaurants as the ones we wanted to go to were all wheelchair accessible. Some of the ones we went to were Mulate's, the original Cajun restaurant; Cafe du Monde, Cafe Adelaide, Oceana Grill, Lucy's Retired Surfer Bar and Restaurant, Grand Isle and the Ruby Slipper Cafe. Each had it's own delicacy which we enjoyed from raw oysters, charbroiled oysters, turtle soup, a variety of gumbos and jambalayas!

As mentioned previously, over the past few years, my family and I have travelled extensively. For many of these trips, my father has been physically transferred in and out of vehicles. This has been hard on his body and on us having to lift him frequently. However, this was not necessary on our trip to New Orleans.

In fact, our vacation to New Orleans was fantastic for many reasons. The use of the RTA which had wheelchair accessible fixed route buses as well as streetcars that were prompt with staff that were professional and helpful. The RTA was very accommodating when we had to make a couple of same day changes which they normally do not accept. The entire family was able to travel together on the fixed route buses. Gray Line offers wheelchair accessible tours. The friendly staff at the Uptown DaVita staff ensured Dad's dialysis treatments were conducted in a timely fashion allowing us to meet our RTA commitments. The restaurants and tourist sites are wheelchair friendly.

In addition to New Orleans being so wheelchair accessible, with the assistance of DaVita Inc. reducing the cost of the dialysis treatments, Hilton New Orleans Riverside waiving the parking fees, A First Name Basis providing a caregiver, and Gray Line's wheelchair accessible tours, the trip was affordable.

Upon our arrival at Toronto Pearson International Airport while waiting for the aisle chair we were told by one of the ground personnel that the wait for the aisle chair was longer as there are more people travelling who require the use of the aisle chair.

More disabled people are travelling - music to our ears!