

TRAVELLING WITH CONDITIONS

For those living with chronic illnesses or disabilities, travelling can be a much trickier affair than for those who are in relatively good health



Text by Ming E Wong

People who are ill or disabled travel for the same reasons that perfectly healthy people do – for work, for a much needed vacation, to see family and friends, or to assuage a curiosity about a place. In fact, they probably need a break from their routines even more than healthy people. So unless you are seriously bedridden, don't rule out a brief change of scenery that might do you some good. Life doesn't stop just because we are in less than perfect condition. Here are some things for you to do and consider before busting out your passport...

GET MEDICAL ADVICE

Even long or chronic illnesses have lulls, such as weeks in between therapies and treatments. Speak to your doctor about going away. If he is encouraging, start cracking – no good doctor deliberately risks a patient's well-being. He can help by prescribing medication to last the length of your intended trip, including anti-thrombosis jabs for long flights. Get him to prepare a copy of your case history with the medications you might need, listing their generic rather than brand names, as medicine brands differ from country to country.



Bring copies of your X-rays in case you need to go to a foreign hospital. I recently broke a toe on my already broken leg, but I had a conference to attend. My doctor showed me how to do a buddy bandage and waved me bon voyage.

DECIDE WHERE TO GO

Be realistic. If you tire easily or have heart-related problems, you shouldn't scale mountains or go deep-sea diving. Modern, crowded cities can be tiring too. When I visited Penang while on crutches, I got tired out by broken pavements, kerbstones, and the ups and downs of the town's five-foot ways.

But you'll be surprised how far some companies will go to earn your tourist dollar. I had thought that seeing the Northern Lights would be out for someone in any way physically disabled, since that usually involves going out in the extreme cold and dark. But there are boats that are wheelchair

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friendly that can take you out into the Norwegian fiords at night! In Stockholm, I saw public transportation staff helping passengers in wheelchairs board and disembark. In general, the more developed a country, the more barrier-free and wheelchair-friendly it is.

USE A PROFESSIONAL TRAVEL AGENT

Medical tourism is a highly developed field and many companies in Thailand, Taiwan, India and Singapore are competing for a slice of the pie.

"We offer customised tours for people with disabilities," says Kliff Ang, executive director of Asia Travel Group (asiatravelgroup.com.sg). "Given that there are various types of disabilities, we do not offer standardised tour packages. The travel needs of someone in a wheelchair are different from those of someone with weak vision. We'll check and deal with any transportation issues, such as finding wheelchair-accessible bathrooms, making sure the lifting equipment on vehicles can handle a motorised wheelchair, and looking up accessible routes for sightseeing.

We attend to all the details to ensure a smooth journey." Because sickly or disabled travellers need more rest and time to get ready, a standardised package tour is not always convenient.

FIND TRAVELLING COMPANIONS

In my wheelchair days, I resented my dependence on others and was self-conscious about being a burden. It took time to learn to accept the kindness and generosity of family and friends and to ask for help. I suggest having more than one travelling companion so that they can take turns to go for breaks. If you are comfortable resting a few hours or watching TV in the hotel, then give them an afternoon off to do their own thing. Be cheerful and good-humoured. The trip will be an important bonding experience for all of you.

ALERT THE AIRLINE

Inform your airline of any dietary requirements or spatial needs. You may score a more luxurious seat or be whisked onto the plane before everybody else. I highly recommend any airport porter service – it can speed you through the queues at immigration and baggage check to your departure gate, especially welcome if your gate is at the far end of the airport. Tell your airline in advance if you need to bring a personal motorised vehicle on board.

CONTACT YOUR HOTELS

Write to your hotels in advance and ask specific questions: can they cater to your diet and allergies, are doorways wide enough, are switches and power points within reach, is there manoeuvring space beside the bed, is there designated handicapped parking, are there ramps, automated doors and accessible washrooms in the public areas? Get confirmation in writing. Hotels know that handicap-friendliness is discussed on sites such as TripAdvisor.

GET MEDICAL INSURANCE

Insurance makes sense even if you are fit and healthy. You'll certainly need it to cover a sudden onset of illness, unexpected visits to a local doctor or hospital or, if necessary, urgent transport home. Even if nothing dire happens, that peace of mind is indispensable for a good holiday. ☺

Ming E Wong is a guidebook and textbook author and freelance writer. An avid traveller and football fan, she believes that passion and enthusiasm for one's work, interests and relationships keep us healthy, as does drinking freshly squeezed lemon juice mixed with warm water and honey every morning.