

## SUN & FUN FOR A STROKE SURVIVOR

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Face it. Cleveland is not a winter haven. To find the sun with my wheelchair-bound husband requires enormous leaps into the uncontrollable that I've avoided for almost 14 years. Herb, a massive stroke survivor, is paralyzed on his right side. Over these years we've confined our trips, primarily by car, to familiar places previously scouted. Or to separate respite breaks for me.

This time I wanted both of us to share an adventure in the sun. Online I located a travel agent who specializes in accessible travel for the disabled and challenged her with three primary criteria before further discussion: a warm, sunny destination; a non-stop flight; and all travel completed within four hours. She responded immediately, recommending Cancun, Mexico (Cleveland has one non-stop flight a week)...along with a hotel that offers wheelchair-accessible rooms, roll-in shower, and ramps throughout the main building and property. It features an all-inclusive rate well within our price range. Moreover, the agent promised bulkhead plane seating and a private car to convey us from the airport to the hotel and back, significant for us because most vans and buses are inaccessible.

My husband was shaken by the prospect of this trip. His two major objections were: How could we go anywhere without scouting it first? And would doctors be available in case of emergency?

Having the travel agent do the heavy lifting was well worth any additional cost within the bundle. I double-checked that the airline had us listed for assistance to get through the airport and onto the plane and then separately contacted the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) (the 800 # is listed on line) for support through security. Our early departure (5 a.m. from home) was another huge challenge but with the help of a friend we made it in plenty of time. Accessing the plane Herb was helped from his wheelchair to a narrower chair and rolled to his seat. Bulkhead seating provided room for him to stand and stretch at least once each

way. Since bathrooms on a plane do not accommodate both stroke survivor and caregiver we relied on Depends with a pad insert to cover additional hours.

An airline representative guided us through Cancun customs and carried our luggage outside the terminal where we were placed in a private car labeled “concierge” and driven to the hotel, a huge complex about 15 minutes away.

I had requested early check in so that Herb might rest after our hurried morning. We were led to a beautiful bedroom with veranda on the first floor, not far from the central lobby. At first glance I recognized that the toilet was positioned much too low for Herb along with small mini bars too high to be functional. It required a hard hoist for me to pull Herb up. We explained to a congenial young man sitting at the “public relations” table in the lobby that this situation was unacceptable. We needed a riser (commode) to fit on top of the toilet. After a little haggling one was ordered and installed in our bathroom late the same day. Another issue was the roll-in shower. Its built-in marble seating had a hand-held shower line that was too short to reach Herb’s left hand. We worked around this ourselves but it wasn’t easy.

But oh that wonderful sun!!! Palm trees, water, beach, pools, sunglasses, lotion, unlimited pina coladas—what luxury compared to the mounds of snow and ice we’d left behind us. Ramps, led us down to the lagoon-pool area where we found towels, shading and an absolutely beautiful panorama. Assessing the unlimited food (nine restaurants), cafes, cocktail lounges, drinks (even a liquor cabinet in our room), Herb referred to this as a “pussycat vacation.” Although tips were included we chose to give extra to show our appreciation for special service.

And yes, we had a health complication. While I had packed everything I could think of—Depends, bed pads, braces, anti-biotic, Milk of Magnesia, bedpan, etc., all in a special suitcase labeled “medical supplies,” I forgot to pack a Fleet enema. The need arose and I contacted the doctor on call who placed an order with a pharmacy. The enema cost \$20 (a \$10 delivery charge added to the \$10 cost) and was well worth my peace of mind. Had the doctor visited our room, it would have cost \$80.

Fortunately, there were no complications. But I was well aware that our Medicare

and supplemental insurances would have covered a hospital stay were it necessary along with flight insurance, arranged by our travel agent, had we needed vacation cancellation and an emergency return to the U.S.

The highlight of the trip for Herb was room service. He slept as long as he wished in the morning and then ordered a full breakfast from a vast menu, including juice, fruit, cereal, rolls (especially his favorite croissants), and anything and everything else he desired. This service was also included.

All nine restaurants were accessible—but not entirely. On our next to last evening we found ourselves in a difficult situation. Daring to be adventurous we chose the seafood restaurant located outside the main building and in the lagoon area. Leaving the restaurant around 9 p.m. everything was dark and bathed in shadows. We had difficulty finding the return ramps that wove across the lagoon. I worried that the wheelchair might trip over and no one would see or hear us. Fortunately a worker emptying pails at some distance responded to my “Por Favor”(please!) shout. He helped us weave our way back and up the many labyrinthine ramps into the hotel. This scary experience frightened us and is not one that I would recommend to others who are disabled unless the hotel provides an escort.

For us the challenges required flexibility but were surmountable. The biggest blessing from the trip is that it allowed us time to rekindle our relationship away from the daily pressures and routine, And it showed my reluctant husband that these new adventures are do-able and fun.

Since our return to the frigid northeast Herb has been emailing friends and family sharing his adventure. His email concluded, “Maybe we'll return next year?” What could be better?

Photos:



The much needed commode adjustment.



The spectacular Moon Palace lagoon



Herb enjoying the sun and fun

Note: the yellow id on Herb's left wrist allowed us carte blanche throughout the facilities



An elaborate maze of ramps led throughout the property

### Sidebar 1: **A TRAVEL AGENT WHO UNDERSTANDS DISABILITY**

Debra Karper, of Easy Access Travel, is a Certified Accessible Travel Advocate™ who specializes in meeting the needs of disabled and mature travelers. In business for over 22 years, she offers a personal understanding of disability. Diagnosed with lupus at the age of 20, she has undergone numerous surgeries, including amputation of her right leg, and spent a number of years “learning to live life in a wheelchair.”

This experience, coupled with her urge to see the world, led her into this special travel niche. In doing her own research she has visited “over 30 countries and 100 cruises” and become one of the foremost experts in this field. Debra, who arranged our Cancun trip, kindly agreed to provide a few guidelines for others in the stroke community.

***Q: Why should a stroke survivor rely on a travel agent when so much information is available online?***

A. My clients tell me that I save them a lot of angst, time and frustration by simplifying the planning process and making it much easier and more cost efficient.

***Q: How difficult is it to match a person’s disabilities to a means of travel?***

A. Each person in a wheelchair is unique with different requirements, both physical and cognitive. My job is first to find out as much about them (and their caregiver) as possible, identify their needs and capabilities, and match my recommendations to these. My bottom line is to provide wheelchair accessibility for those who need it.

***Q: What type of vacation is easiest for many of your clients?***

A. Accessible cruise ships have done the best job in catering to people with special needs. For example, these ships actually have and know which cabins have grab bars, both right and left, positioned when sitting on the toilet—a rather common need. Furthermore, some ships provide accessible shore excursions. While you may see 70-80% of what you’ve

hoped for, that's considerable. It's my responsibility to know which ships and hotels do the best job.

***Q: Was I your toughest client because of all the questions I asked?***

A. I try to educate my clients to be proactive and to advocate for their needs especially if there is some confusion. A successful vacation endows you with the sense of "yes, you can!!"

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#### Sidebar 2: **10 TIPS FOR TRAVEL WITH DISABILITIES**

1. Find a travel agent who works with disabilities
2. Identify and list your specific needs and requirements
3. Request support from both the airlines and TSA
4. The airlines will not charge for a suitcase that carries braces, pads, Depends and other medical needs and is properly labeled
5. Label all parts of your wheelchair including wings and cushion and be sure it is packed in the same plane
6. Carry a walker with you onto the plane but don't use it if you need assistance
7. Carry backpacks for both stroke survivor and caregiver with all meds, Depends, and any thing else that must remain with you; include a small blanket because planes can be chilly, especially on the return trip
8. You don't have to carry each of your meds in a separate bottle; meds partitioned in one or two-week containers should be sufficient if a list of these is printed on letterhead from your physician or medical center; always carry extra meds in case your plane is delayed or cancelled .

9. At hotel registration double check your handicap-accessible room accommodations—first floor, roll-in shower, bathroom railings; and if not, insist that you get what you need
10. If restaurants are separated from the main buildings check that access is well lighted and if not request an escort both coming and going.

**HAVE FUN!!!!**

Berenice E. Kleiman is the author of two books: **One Stroke, Two Survivors** and **Lessons Learned, Stroke Recovery from a Caregiver's Perspective**, published by the Cleveland Clinic Press. Both books are now being readied for free download at her website: [www.onestrocketwosurvivors.com](http://www.onestrocketwosurvivors.com). She can be reached at [BEK@onestrocketwosurvivors.com](mailto:BEK@onestrocketwosurvivors.com)