

CRUISING AFTER A STROKE

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Considering a cruise? Ben and I took a seven-day cruise with some friends last March. We had taken many cruises before Ben's stroke, but stroke survivors have many issues to deal with beyond, "Will my flight be on time? Ben is in a wheelchair but can walk very short distances with a hemi-walker. Our experiences on our first post-stroke cruise ranged from excellent to poor. here are some issues we faced along with suggestions that might help future cruisers.

We took this vacation with three other couples with whom we have traveled for years. One of the other couples booked the trip on a large cruise ship. They had traveled on this line for many years so had access to a particular agent from that line who handled all of our reservations. If I had booked the cruise myself I would have used a travel agent. A good agent could have handled some of the tasks I handled myself.

Suggestion #1 - use a good travel agent - someone who has lots of experience with cruises.

Check the expiration date on your passport. It may not be as valid as you think. Be sure it doesn't expire for at least six months after the cruise. Depending on your destinations, some countries and cruise lines will not accept your passport with an earlier expiration date.

Suggestion # 2 - If you don't have a passport, apply for one early. Applications take several weeks to process. If you have a passport be sure it doesn't expire for at least six months after the return date of your cruise

We purchased cancellation insurance through the cruise line. There are dozens of reasons why anyone might not be able to travel.

Suggestion # 3 - Definitely purchase cancellation insurance. Policies are available through many sources, not just the cruise line. Check the terms carefully. Policies do vary.

We arranged a ride to the airport so we did not have to deal with transporting ourselves and our luggage from a parking lot to the terminal. A time-saver too!

Suggestion #4 - Arrange a ride to and from the airport.

We booked our flight to Orlando through the cruise line. The fare was slightly more than we could have found on our own, but if the flight had been delayed, the cruise ship would have waited for us. Cruise lines contract with another company to book passengers' flights and the flights often involve a change of planes. We wanted to avoid that if possible so I spoke directly to the booking company agent . She not only put us on a direct flight, she booked the first row of the economy section, aisle and middle seat, right next to the bathroom. We did not have to pay extra even though first row economy seats often have an upcharge. (If you can afford first class seats, that would be even better.)

We booked the return flight on our own. It was direct and less expensive than if we had done it through the cruise line.

Suggestion # 5 - If you are flying to your departure city, book your outgoing flight through the cruise line. Work with the booking agent to get a non-stop flight and seats with extra leg room near the bathroom. For your return trip call your airline directly and explain why you need seats close to the entrance and the bathroom. (Or pay slightly more and have the cruise line's booking agent take care of both flights.)

Another advantage of booking your outgoing flight through the cruise line is that they will arrange transportation from the airport to the cruise ship. Be sure to indicate that you need handicapped accessible transportation. For our return trip home, we booked our own flight so we had to arrange our own transportation from the cruise line to the airport. We booked a van with a wheelchair lift from a private company and the van never showed! After a long wait the company sent an SUV with a ramp through the back and a device to hold the wheelchair in place. Not really acceptable but at that point we didn't have much choice.

Suggestion # 6 - Upon our return there were plenty of taxis available at the port and if you can use one, don't bother with a private service. We might have been better off having the cruise line book round trip flights and then they would have taken care of airport to cruise port both ways. But be sure they know you need handicapped accessible transportation.

For our departure from Cleveland, our driver stopped at the outdoor check-in and stayed with Ben while I checked our bags to Orlando. We entered the airport with Ben in his travel wheelchair and the hemi-walker hooked on to a handle of the wheelchair.

Suggestion # 7 - If you're taking your own wheelchair and you want help getting to and through the security line, ask the check-in agent to call for assistance. There's no charge for this service, but it's nice if you tip the person assisting you. If you don't want to take your own wheelchair, call the airline in advance and indicate you want a wheelchair waiting for you. Tell the check-in staff that you have made those arrangements. The person bringing the wheelchair will assist you to the gate if you wish. Again, there's no charge for that service. (If you don't call in advance you can still request a wheelchair and assistance. It might take a little longer to get it.)

You can take your wheelchair right up to the door of the plane. It will be tagged for gate check-in baggage area and be waiting for you on the jetway at your arrival city. Ben used his hemi-walker to walk down the aisle to his seat. I stored it in the overhead compartment.

Suggestion # 8 - If you cannot walk down the aisle from the jetway door to your seat, you can use a special wheelchair that which will fit in the narrow the aisle. But you must request this special wheelchair in advance with the airline.

Our only carry-on luggage was a fairly small bag filled with all our necessities. It also served as my purse - one less item to carry. Ben held the bag on on his lap.

Suggestion # 9 - Take as small a carry-on bag as possible. If you're dealing with a wheelchair, and you must take a larger pull-type carry-on, definitely ask for assistance.

We have a TSA pre-check pass so we went through the security "fast line" quickly and easily. If you don't have a TSA pass, you might consider purchasing one if plan to take more flights in the future. . It's an easy process and there are many locations where you can apply, including the airport. (You have to apply in person.) But don't wait till you're ready to leave. As I recall it takes at least a week to process the application. There is a one-time charge and you can use it for all future flights.

Suggestion # 10 - Airport assistants who help with your wheelchair can usually get a wheelchair-bound traveler (and generally one caregiver) through the security line very quickly even if you don't go through the TSA line.

Ben used the bathroom just before and just after our flight, so we did not have to make use of the small airplane bathroom. Remember, you won't have access to a wheelchair on the flight. It wouldn't fit in the bathroom anyway. Two of us with a hemi-walker could probably have squeezed in.

Suggestion # 11 - Plan plenty of time to use the airport bathroom before departure.

The cruise line recommended two companies to rent an electric wheelchair or scooter. We wanted to do that so Ben could have more independence and go places on his own. We chose to rent an electric wheelchair and the company had it waiting for us in our cabin when we arrived. First problem - Ben's right side is the affected side but the controls were on the right, not the left as I specified. Fortunately, the company sent someone to the ship to change the controls before the ship left port. I suppose we could have figured out how to do that if we had to.

Even so, renting the electric wheelchair was a mistake. Ben had never used one before and the "slow" speed was too fast. After a day of bumping into furniture and practically mowing down people, he gave up the chair. I pushed him everywhere in his travel wheelchair for the remainder of the cruise - not as much fun for either of us. We could see that the scooter, though bulkier, was easier to maneuver. The only downside of a scooter that I could see is that one would have to transfer to a chair for meals, but that would not have been a problem for us.

Suggestion # 12 - If you bring a manual wheelchair that requires your caregiver to push, consider renting an electric wheelchair or scooter for more independence. But if you're not accustomed to using an electric wheelchair, opt for the scooter.

When we arrived at the port the cruise staff was incredibly helpful in getting us through the registration process. We didn't have to wait in any lines, got our on-board documents quickly and were soon on the ship.

Suggestion # 13 - Complete as much pre-registration as possible online. It will shorten your time at the port check-in.

We booked a handicapped-accessible cabin. The room was large with a great bathroom - grab bars, roll-in shower, low accessible sink - everything we needed. But - we booked the cruise too late to get an outside cabin. So of course our inside cabin had no window or balcony. An inside cabin is less expensive, but many stroke survivors must take extra time to dress, toilet, shower, etc. We spent many waking hours in our cabin and wish we could have had a view of the ocean and a sliding door to a balcony so we could have enjoyed the tropical breezes and the warm Caribbean temperatures. Also, ordering breakfast through room service (no charge) would have been much nicer if we could have eaten it on a balcony.

Suggestion #14 - book early and book an outside handicapped accessible room with a balcony if affordable. The extra cost of an outside room is definitely worth it.

The cruise line offers various tours at each of the stops. There may be some stops on your cruise where the ship cannot dock at the port and uses a tender to take the passengers from the ship to the port. The tenders cannot handle wheelchairs. This was the case for one of our three stops.

Only one of our stops had land tours which could accommodate wheelchairs. We had already visited our stops several times in the past so we weren't too concerned. There were several activities available on the ship while other passengers were on land. But had we wanted to tour those cities we would have been very disappointed.

Suggestion # 15 - Check the cruise ship's land tours ahead of time. If there is nothing that interests you or you can't get a handicapped-accessible tour, plan to arrange a private tour with your travel agent or with the ship's tour agent as soon as you get on board.

The entertainment on board was wonderful. The main auditorium had very good handicapped seating, but other venues did not.

Suggestion # 16 - It pays to get to the entertainment early.

Ben had one major disappointment on this cruise. When taking a cruise in the middle of winter he likes nothing better than lying back on a deck chair enjoying the sunshine and warm weather. After we settled into our cabin we headed for the deck and found that the deck chairs were so very low that he could not get into them, even with my help and the help of others. And even if he could, he definitely would not have been able to get out of them, even with all our help. This particular ship had no other kinds of chairs available on the deck level.

Suggestion #17 - I should have found a ship officer and explained the problem. Surely there must have been a comfortable chair, even if it wasn't a recliner, somewhere on the ship that could have been moved to the deck for Ben. But just in case we run into that problem again, I have been on a hunt for a deck chair cushion that's as thick as possible and I'll figure out some way to pack it with our luggage for our next cruise.

All cruise ships now have a wonderful service in which they will take your luggage the night before departure and ship it to your destination airport. You can avoid the hassle of searching for your luggage among hundreds or even thousands of bags at the port and taking them through customs.

Suggestion # 18 - Be sure to tag your luggage with the special tags for this purpose (available the night before your departure). You won't have to handle your luggage again until you're back at your home airport. Of course you will have to keep a small bag for your clothes and necessities for the next day.

And finally. . .

Suggestion # 19 - as with any trip, it's inevitable that something will go wrong whether you're a stroke survivor, caregiver, or anyone else. So just smile and enjoy all the wonderful times that go right!