

Caregiving on the Go

Melissa Jirovec

Once my husband was discharged from hospital, I was incredibly determined for us to live normal lives as much as possible. My husband is a traumatic brain injury survivor and has mobility issues, balance and coordination issues, swallowing and speech impairments, cognitive impairments, and fatigue is often a challenge for him. Once he was strong enough to handle significant travel, we decided we would take our honeymoon in Australia, where we'd always dreamed of visiting. It meant a lot of flight time, which went better than expected as we headed out. The staff at the airports were helpful, thank goodness, as I had him in his wheelchair, both our bags, and his walker to maneuver around. The flights went well and my husband was able to rest, which was good. After 22 hours of flight, we arrived in Australia. I think we were both just so incredibly excited that we didn't feel too tired. I was pretty surprised that my husband was able to function as well as he did.

Australia was interesting in terms of handicap accessibility. Every public washroom had a family room, which was so wonderful because it gave us some privacy. In Canada, we are often forced to use the women's washrooms for the accessible stall because my husband requires my assistance to get onto the toilet. The men's washrooms have urinals, which make it impossible for me to go in there. It is an uncomfortable and embarrassing situation for my husband. But here, we didn't have that issue. They even had accessible washrooms in the street! They looked like bus stops, but they were actually family washrooms. I couldn't believe how thoughtful that was.

However, our trip was not without difficulty. We had challenges in terms of transportation in Sydney. Although my husband used his wheelchair in the evenings and during longer excursions during the day, he was perfectly able to get into a vehicle and his wheelchair was very compact. It was easy to fold up and put into the majority of car trunks. But we quickly realized that none of that mattered. Our first dinner out, the staff at the hotel rang us a taxi. I was quick to notice that the driver was not a friendly fellow, but didn't think much of it. When we arrived at our destination, I got out of the car, as did the driver, to get the wheelchair out of the trunk. The driver was so angry that he'd had to take us that he threw the wheelchair at me right there in the street! I'd never felt such cruelty from another human being. He then proceeded to return to the car (slamming his door in the process) to wait for my husband to be out of the car so he could speed off. I stood in the street, shaking, in a dress and heels, trying to get the wheelchair unfolded and put back together so I could get my husband out of the car. But the cab driver's unrelenting glare made it so I was all thumbs and it took me several minutes (which felt more like hours) to get it together and help my husband out of the car.

I tried my best not to cry and to stay strong for my husband. I pulled myself together as we were brought up to the restaurant and we enjoyed a very romantic meal together. Unfortunately, our troubles were far from over. Once we'd finished our

dinner, we had to get a taxi to return to the hotel. I was encouraged when we walked out and there was a lineup of about ten taxis available for rides. I advanced to the first taxi and the driver told us that the wheelchair wouldn't fit in the trunk. Now, I don't know much about cars, but I do know that the wheelchair folds up enough to fit into the trunk of a station wagon. Frustrated, I went to the cab behind him. This driver insisted that we had to take the cab in front of him. When I repeated what the first cab driver said, this driver began to yell at me, saying that the other guy was lying. I told him I was well aware of that and just asked him to take us, but he refused. He quickly returned to his cellphone, ignoring me. When we started to advance towards the third cab, the driver immediately shook his head no. I now couldn't help myself and began to cry. I was so overwhelmed by the rejection and felt awful for my husband. Luckily for us, a stranger noticed what was happening and offered to call the accessible taxi company for us. She did warn us that they often don't show up when called and that their wait times are extensive. I told her to call anyway, as I couldn't use my cellphone to make calls in Sydney and we had no other options. I don't know what we would have done if that woman hadn't stopped and shown us kindness.

Luckily, that was one of our last days in Sydney, and we didn't have similar issues in Port Douglas. We didn't let it ruin our trip, but it deeply saddened me that we were treated so unfairly. Travel is really a whole other ballgame when you are a caregiver responsible for someone else. It becomes not only about enjoying yourselves, but also about making sure that things are in place to accommodate your needs. For us, it meant bringing a lot of extra equipment and mobility devices, keeping tabs on fatigue levels, inquiring about layouts and accessibility of public areas, and transportation. We are not going to let the challenges we faced prevent us from travelling in the future. But now, we are aware of the challenges that we may face and can better prepare ourselves to face them.

Melissa Jirovec is a health and wellness coach and speaker who is in the process of starting a health and wellness business in Ottawa, Ontario, called Out of the Rut. She is passionate about helping others to develop a positive perspective and live healthier, happier lives. She has been a caregiver to her husband, who is a traumatic brain injury survivor, for almost a year.



