

Long Haul Air Travel and MS.

My own experience.

I've had MS for at least 25 years, only confirmed five or so years ago when I was hospitalised, unable to move from the waist down.

After six weeks in hospital, steroid treatment and extensive physiotherapy I regained most of my former mobility. MS now affects my balance, ability to walk any distance and fatigue. I consider myself lucky that I can stand up, move about indoors and walk (albeit very slowly).

Most of my "in-law" family live in Australia. My husband, Pete and I first went to visit them in 1999. Then, I was still working and able to live a near 'normal life'. I suffered from poor balance, loss of feeling in legs and hands and fatigue but with careful planning was able to carry on with day-to-day life. We had the opportunity to spend six weeks in Queensland, living with Pete's family during March and April. The weather was a shock. We knew it would be warm, but didn't expect constant temperatures in the high twenties and high thirties.

This holiday was uneventful and enjoyable. My MS symptoms were no better nor worse than in the UK. We were able to keep cool swimming and relaxing. It was a holiday - and easy because of that. The trip out was long, and very tiring (the same for everyone). The fabled jetlag didn't seem to affect me and the highlight of the trip for Pete was being allowed to spend over an hour on the flight deck of the 747! (Before 9/11).

On the return leg we stopped over in Bali, this was before the bombings in this friendly and peaceful country. It was easy to cope there as I was still mobile. A very enjoyable five days.

We next travelled down under to spend six months living in and around Brisbane in September 2004. This time we would be there for Christmas and the hottest part of the year, January and February. By now I needed a wheelchair to travel any distance out of doors. Pete ensured the airline (Emirates) knew that I had reduced mobility. We made our own way from the taxi at Heathrow to the check in along with our baggage, hand luggage, wheel chair and laptop computer. We emphasized the fact that we were taking our own wheelchair and were given labels to put on it. Pete wheeled me to the sky bridge and up to the door of the Jumbo. The chair was taken from us to be placed in the hold. First problem . . . well not a problem, more an inconvenience. Pete was told that any parts that could come loose from the wheelchair would be lost in the hold. He was told to carry the footrests and cushions on board. Hand luggage, elbow crutches, laptop and now wheelchair bits to stow. Pete pointed out what fine weapons the footrests would make in these days of ultra high security - but he still had to struggle with all the stuff. Biggest problem was changing aircraft in Dubai. It meant us carrying all that gubbins and trying to keep up with a jolly little porter who whizzed me through the airport in one of their wheelchairs at frightening speed. We only had an hour to find the onward flight. Airline staff arrange for people with disabilities to go aboard and leave the aircraft without causing inconvenience to other passengers. This they manage by giving individual attention to you, allowing you time by being first on and last off the aircraft. This personal attention being offered from the time you check in your luggage.

The second leg of the trip (Dubai to Brisbane) was very tiring. One of the flight attendants was aware of my fatigue. She asked a couple, who were occupying just two seats in a row of three, if they were prepared to swap with us. This they did giving us a spare seat and allowing me to 'slump' across Pete's lap and two seats to get some sleep.

Living in Oz for six months was easy. Family were concerned how I would cope with the heat (42 degrees in the shade one day in February!), but I was fine - everyone wilts in temperatures like that. Nobody walks anywhere in Australia so I found the living easy. As a nation, the Australians are very aware of problems for disabled people. There are lots of young paraplegics in Oz mostly caused by the high level of outdoor sporting activity. Wheel chairs were available in shopping precincts and concessions given to people in wheelchairs and carers. Australia Zoo, Undersea World and other such attractions giving reduced admission charges and even allowing carers in free! We spent a week away from our home base, a holiday within a holiday and didn't take my wheelchair. When we arrived at our holiday home, we were able to hire a wheelchair for just a few pounds from a chemist shop. I was told that most dispensing chemists have mobility aids for hire.

Our last trip was from April to June 2007. We travelled with Singapore Airways and had a completely uneventful trip. Pete still had to carry the footrests but has learned to leave the laptop at home. The comfort of the trip is in direct proportion to the amount of stuff you choose NOT to carry. On our return this time, a flight attendant told me that as soon as we get airborne, you could move to the centre row of seats (four seats together), as they were empty. There I could lay down but I guess I was too excited to sleep. I was pleased to be able to relax in comfort though. Did you know that the tail of a Jumbo wags quite violently in the slightest turbulence? They quite the most uncomfortable seats in the aircraft. The most comfortable ones are amidships.

After one return trip we had a problem because Heathrow baggage handlers 'lost' my wheelchair for 30 minutes. They made every effort to look after me, offering one of those little electric beep beep trucks for my exclusive use, but Pete insisted that they find 'our' chair. We now know to remind cabin staff that our chair 'must' be waiting at the aircraft door whenever we land.

We have also made many flights within EEC countries, using budget airlines. We both have nothing but good to report about these carriers (Ryanair). We are boarded last when on short flights and must wait until everyone has disembarked before we leave. Despite paying as little as five pounds to fly to Spain, we have always been shown the utmost courtesy and given all the help we need. On one occasion I was asked if I needed a lift onto the aircraft and, assuming some sort of mechanical lift, I said OK. I was then strapped into a small transfer wheel chair (more a trolley), and carried bodily up the aircraft steps by two flight attendants!

What have we both learned during nearly 80,000 miles of wasting fossil fuel and leaving massive carbon footprints all across the sky? Well, simple really, do it now while you can. We feel it will become socially unacceptable to make trips like this so they could become prohibitively expensive. (This is already happening with various charges and taxes). Travel as light as you can. Take note of, and carry out all the advice that the airlines offer about long haul flights. (Drink plenty of water and move about as much as possible etc). Most important of all, - **ask for help**, people fall over themselves to help you. We both feel like VIP's when travelling because of the consideration of all the staff at the airports and during flights.

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