



TRAVEL BUG

Older adults navigate travel with mobility issues

By Kathryn O'Shea-Evans

Call her a globetrotter extraordinaire. Sarah Campbell, an 84-year-old Chicago resident, has been on 100 international trips and counting. And despite her newest travel companion — a cane, which she started using last year due to back problems — Campbell isn't slowing down.

"I'm having to pick and choose my travels now that I'm using a cane [full-time]," she says. "Since that started, I have taken three trips — to Costa Rica, Key West, and Europe."

More than 46% of people internationally aged 60 and up have disabilities, the United Nations reports. But many still travel, checking places off their bucket list. The trips just require more research and planning.

Comfort in numbers

To help with the preparation and on-the-ground experiences, travelers with disabilities may opt for group excursions with local guides. Some companies even specialize in assisting people with disabilities, such as Easy Access Travel, Wheel the World, and Iceland Unlimited.

Campbell says she sees the benefits of group travel for other reasons, too. "I only go on group trips now because I want a guide and a driver to be available if something should happen," Campbell says.

One of Campbell's go-to resources is the nonprofit Road Scholar. Founded in 1975, the organization offers 5,500 learning adventures across the globe. Each trip lists its activity level — from easy going to challenging — and participants can disclose any special needs. After the participant picks a program, a staff member reviews their profile and ensures that it's a good fit. And the group has been able to help clients with various disabilities visit jaw-dropping places.

"We had a blind participant that wanted to go on a hiking program in Cinque Terre, Italy," says Matt Faucher, Road Scholar's senior director of participant experience. There, ancient fishing villages hug coastal cliffs along the Riviera. "There are sheer drops, and sometimes really only space for one person to pass at a time."

The client wanted to bring her guide dog. After many discussions with Road Scholar's operators in Italy and the client, who assured them she could handle it, they decided to proceed.

"She ended up having a wonderful time, with no incidents," Faucher says. "Of course, her guide dog ended up becoming basically a mascot for the whole group, beloved by all. It was such a happy ending."

The experience illustrates Road Scholar's mission. "We are here to inspire adults to learn, discover, and travel — and that's all adults, with all ability levels," Faucher says.

Pre-flight prep

From years on the road, Campbell has learned lots of tips for itinerant travelers with disabilities, like herself. She often travels with a friend, also 84, whom she met decades ago. "One thing we always do now is take wheelchairs," she says.



SARAH CAMPBELL IN ICELAND, 2019

"I'm having to pick and choose my travels now that I'm using a cane [full-time],"

"We request wheelchairs when we make flight reservations. That makes a huge difference, because you never know in an airport how far you're gonna have to walk."

Campbell also recommends being clear from the outset about your needs (like, for example, a walk-in shower).

Another tip: Schedule a check-up with your doctor to ensure that you're ready to depart. "I had my wellbeing checked with my physician several weeks

ago because I wanted to make sure I'd be all right to go on the trips that are coming up," Campbell says.

And with that, before traveling, keep your strength in mind.

"Understand what you can handle in terms of lifting, either on your own or with someone you'll be traveling with," says Geoff Hanson, owner and general manager of Morton Grove-based Midwest Mobility, which rents, sells, and repairs mobility equipment. "We've had customers that use a travel scooter, but they can't lift it."

Once they find assistance, however, there's little stopping them, Hanson says, mentioning customers who have taken scooters to the cobblestone streets of Europe. "They've had a lot of good things to say about it, and it allows people to keep up with younger family [members]."

It's not all work and no play, though. Campbell says that having a disability comes with unique benefits — like taking the time to slow down and enjoy where you are.

"Things happen that wouldn't happen [otherwise]," she says. On a trip to Costa Rica, Campbell recalls wanting to sit quietly in the woods by herself while the rest of the group went on a hike. "There was a bench, and I just said, 'I'll sit here until you come back,'" she remembers. She found the lush, dense forest very soothing. "The absolute peace and quiet was so nice, because I live in downtown Chicago. We don't have peace and quiet here."

The important thing, Campbell says, is seeing the world as long as you can. "I'm trying to do as much as I can right now because I don't know how long I'll be able to do anything. I'm just packing the trips in."

Her next journey — to Turkey — is already booked. And she has her cane ready. 