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Survival Strategies for Going Abroad: A Guide for People with Disabilities

By Laura Hershey



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I want to acknowledge the important work that MIUSA has done for over two decades, promoting international exchange participation by people with disabilities. So many individuals (including some of the people profiled in this book) got their first taste of overseas travel, and experienced an unprecedented level of personal growth and confidence, as a direct result of involvement in MIUSA programs. Never content simply to offer its own exchange programs, MIUSA has continuously educated exchange participants and professionals, and advocated for inclusion of people with disabilities in overseas study, service and other exchange opportunities. Susan Sygall's leadership in this area has made a tremendous difference.

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by Susan Sygall Project Director, National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange Executive Director, Mobility International USA

In my lifetime of international travel, I have found there are few experiences as truly unique and exhilarating as living in another culture and learning about its real, day-to-day life. When one travels on an international exchange, one experiences opportunities that convey the essence of another culture. It's the moments of tasting a home-cooked meal with a homestay family near a medieval village in France, or appreciating the architecture of the ancient ruins of Uxmal in Mexico, sharing a conversation with a farmer in Vietnam, or admiring the local crafts made by an artistry collective in South Africa that remain fixed in my memory. As my personal and professional passions for international exchange have merged over the years, it has given me the greatest pleasure to see the increased inclusion of people with disabilities in all types of international exchange experiences.

Whether you are a Deaf university student enjoying an art history course in Milan, a pediatrician who uses a wheelchair devoting your vacation to working with HIV orphans in Zambia, a person with a hidden disability interning at a bank in Moscow or a high school student who is blind spending a year in Peru, you too can enhance your life through international experience. Simultaneously, you may become a catalyst for changing people's perceptions about who participates in educational abroad experiences.

This book is in many senses a culmination of several years of work by the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE), a project sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, and administered by Mobility International USA (MIUSA). Our skilled staff and consultants have produced a unique and useful publication specifically for people with disabilities, or those who have disabled friends or family members, or who work with people with disabilities. International exchange professionals who offer programs and opportunities abroad and others interested in international exchange will also find useful insights included here.

Laura Hershey, an experienced traveler with a disability herself, spent many months interviewing people with a variety of experiences and disabilities to gather tips for planning a successful international exchange experience. In this book, you will find information, strategies and resources to help you prepare to study. work, research, volunteer or teach overseas. Chapter One explores topics from choosing a program to disclosing and accommodating your disability. Chapter Two explains how to apply to a program. as well as fundraising and pre-departure planning ideas to make your experience a successful one. Chapter Three addresses issues such as packing, educational accommodations, staying healthy, tips for people with psychiatric disabilities, the pros and cons of traveling with service dogs, and working as part of a group or team. Chapter Four looks at logistical issues such as getting to your destination, transportation, safety and moving between work, school and home in another country, as well as the topic of cultural interaction. The last chapter prepares you for returning home after your international exchange experience—learning how to maintain friendships across cultures, gaining insight about the impact of your international experience and sharing your experience with others.

The wide variety of exchange experiences makes it possible to find an opportunity that matches each individual's passion, curiosity, quest for knowledge or desire to make a difference in the world. As a person who uses a wheelchair, I studied Spanish in Salamanca, Spain, and attended graduate school in Brisbane, Australia on a Rotary Scholarship; I have volunteered on a community service project in Finland and offered my services as a consultant in places such as Bosnia and Vietnam. As you read this book, you will see that my story is not unique. People with all types of disabilities are becoming an integral force in this amazing field we call international exchange.

We have only scratched the surface of what is possible to ensure that every person with a disability has the same opportunities as our non-disabled peers. The world needs the often-untapped expertise of people with disabilities—and we need to experience other cultures to increase our global understanding and appreciation so we may be successful in whatever field or profession we choose to follow. And all of us—disabled and nondisabled alike—need to have the same opportunities because international exchange is a life-enhancing experience in and of itself—for everyone.

People with disabilities can look forward to a future of greater accessibility and inclusion wherever we study, live, teach, travel, volunteer or work. It is my hope that this book will have a place in opening new doors and creating new opportunities. Remember, we are part of a great family of people with disabilities and we need to work together to share our experiences and strategies so that those who follow may have a wider and easier path to international exchange experiences.

Introduction

by Laura Hershey

In 1995, I went to the People's Republic of China to attend the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Forum, parallel to the Fourth World Conference on Women. I traveled as part of a loosely organized group of women with and without disabilities. These women, about forty in all, came mostly from the United States, but the group also included women from Canada, Mexico and Nicaragua.

We encountered our first barrier right after landing in Beijing. To get to the terminal, we were told, we must go down either an escalator or a flight of stairs. This news was brought to us by a harried American agent from United Airlines, but the directive came from Chinese immigration authorities. There were elevators, said the agent—but we learned that the one near our arrival gate hadn't worked in two years. A second elevator was located on the other side of immigration control; to get to it, we would have to go all the way around customs, descend in the elevator, and then backtrack 100 yards or so to deal with immigration and customs. The authorities simply would not allow that. Therefore, the officials told us, people in wheelchairs always used the escalator.

We all gathered around to discuss our options. We really had no options, but we acted as if we did—for a while. We decided to ask for a meeting with the officials.

We gathered at the top of the escalator to wait for a reply to our request. People coming in from the next flight had to wiggle themselves and their luggage around us. It was a bit awkward.

Eventually, officials came to speak with us. A few women respectfully voiced their concerns about using the escalator. The officials listened with hard looks on their faces, then gave perfunctory, negative replies.

Each woman now had only to look at her own individual options—stairs or escalator—to decide for herself how to handle this situation. Those with lightweight chairs balanced them carefully, and glided backwards down the escalator. Some women walked down awkwardly, holding onto stronger shoulders for support. Others scooted down one step at a time, on their butts. I let myself be bumped down the stairs, tipped far back on the rear wheels of my wheelchair.

We moved forward, haltingly down the stairs or—terrifyingly—down the escalator. We realized that we were no longer in the United States, and that things were different and challenging for us.

As we went to collect our luggage, digital-light signs greeted us inside the terminal:

WARMLY WELCOME WOMEN DELEGATIONS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD

MAY THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN BE A BIG SUCCESS

MAY OUR FRIENDSHIP BE LONG LASTING

During the rest of my three-week stay in China, I encountered more barriers and aggravations; but ultimately, the trip provided more than enough positive experiences to make overcoming the obstacles worth the effort. I attended the first-ever International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities, which drew over 200 disabled activists from dozens of countries, a milestone in disabled women's organizing. I befriended my assigned volunteer, Lucy, a delightful, bright young student from the Beijing Language and Cultural Institute who would eagerly engage in conversation about a variety of topics including Chinese history and American novels.

I even made it to the top of the Great Wall of China, my wheel-chair frame gripped by strong men working for tips. Several of my friends took the same route, and we all lined up for a photo. It's a joyous, symbolic snapshot—a group of grinning disabled women, proud of our willingness to take a risk and surmount one of the largest physical barriers we would ever face.

Most exciting of all was the NGO Forum. I was surrounded by thousands of women, from every community on the planet—every nationality, every ethnicity, every religion, every culture, every class, every everything. I saw Japanese women courageously refusing to let the world forget what happened to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I saw Tibetan women insist bravely on their tiny but visible presence at the Forum. I sang along with Sweet Honey in the Rock, the a capella African-inspired gospel/folk/protest vocal group from Washington, D.C. I watched an English woman mix torn strips of paper and water in a blender, spread the pulp on a screen, and thus make textured paper. I sat on a panel discussing economic justice with a Native American health worker, a prisoners' rights advocate and others. I marched with lesbians, proclaiming pride and the freedom to love.

In Beijing, women taught each other how to organize politically, how to speak up about issues, how to make videos, how to access

the Internet. Women forged connections that will live on in short-wave radio broadcasts, exchanges of e-mail, newsletters and mailing lists, stories and poems, and lifelong friendships.

For me, Beijing will stay in my memory as a place of many Great Walls, and many reasons to climb them. The experience expanded my horizons globally.

Following Your Dreams

If your dreams, your work or educational goals are urging you overseas, you are probably wondering whether you should follow those urgings. If you decide to take that leap into the cultural unknown, what will you find there? What can you expect from your international experience? What benefits can you expect to gain? What lessons might you learn? What kind of problems should you endeavor to solve, in advance if possible?

The answers to these questions vary widely, depending upon the purpose of the sojourn, the locale, and your personality, philosophy and approach to the journey. There are, however, lessons to be learned from those who have been there, and are happy to tell about it.

That is the purpose of this book—to draw on the wisdom and experiences of people with disabilities who have ventured overseas in pursuit of work, study or other exchange opportunities. They went for different reasons, took with them different sets of needs and skills, faced different kinds of challenges and took advantage of different opportunities. They all came back with new knowledge, experiences and strategies which they have generously shared with other disabled travelers.

As you begin to plan your overseas adventure, probe your own expectations. As a participant in international exchange, how do you see your role? Will you be an ambassador for your country? A teacher, a mentor, a role model? An advocate for social causes? Or a learner, seeking new insights and alternative perspectives?

What obstacles are you likely to face in another country? Will the barriers you face in your own neighborhood at home be magnified? Will you encounter completely new, unforeseen problems? Is it possible that some things will be easier for you in a foreign land than in your own hometown?

To what extent are you willing to adjust your expectations regarding accessibility, accommodations and independence? In the West, civil rights legislation and sophisticated technology make possible a high degree of access and equity. That possibility is not always realized, but people with disabilities have a sound basis for expecting a range of equipment, support services and legal protections. If you are traveling to the United States or another developed country for the first time, are you ready to investigate and navigate these new laws and support systems?

The situation may be quite different in developing countries. In much of the world, few technological solutions are available to people with disabilities. For this reason, many veteran travelers with disabilities emphasize the importance of adaptability and flexibility when venturing into this type of foreign territory. Where access is lacking, personal relationships and/or the kindness of others may represent the best possible barrier removal plan.

That was certainly Anatoli Ilyashov's experience. The historian traveled to Russia as a Fulbright scholar. He wondered how he would manage, given his mobility limitations caused by multiple

sclerosis. He walked with a cane, and had to deal with old and inaccessible transportation systems. "The Russian people were great in accommodating me under the adverse conditions they were living in," reports Ilyashov. "They were conscious of my situation and often helped me into buses, trams and trolley cars."

In this book, you'll meet many disabled people who have done what you are considering now, in the spirit of seeking new experiences and perspectives. You will hear their stories, both funny and profound. You'll learn how they adapted to foreign environments, how they shared in the cultural richness of their host countries and how their lives were enriched as well. You'll find many practical tips related to access, accommodations, navigation, support and much more. By the time you finish, armed with the knowledge gleaned from other disabled people's journeys, you'll be better equipped to undertake your own journey—which will be uniquely yours—and to make the most of it.