

Disability Pride & World Travel
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When we travel we represent more than ourselves because we are part of a community. As a person with a disability you carry two items of unusual value – especially in combination. Both tend to surprise those you meet as you travel. The two items are money and pride.

By money I don't just mean the change in your pocket. By pride I mean the self-determination of knowing who you are beyond economic measures of worth.

The very fact that you have a disability and travel suggests something about your economic condition. It indicates that you have credit, savings, education, maybe a profession that requires travel, but most importantly the ability to make decisions about the course of your life for yourself. That combination of means and dignity are potent means of social transformation.

Leisure travel means moving beyond mere survival mode. A small but growing percentage of us have made the transition to economic stability but we are not equally distributed around the world. Travel spreads us around which is to say that it spreads around living examples of an alternate lifestyle; ambassadors of choices still out of reach for some.

With a generation of permanently disabled people having experienced increasing degrees of employment, education, and leisure, those of us with the means to travel belong to a consumer group that is only starting to be noticed. How we chose to spend those resources – even through our leisure activities – has profound impact. Not many people that you encounter as you travel, even if they are high-level executives in the travel industry itself, will know facts such as these gathered by Rosangela Berman-Bieler of the Inter-American Institute on Disability and Inclusive Development:

American adults with disabilities or reduced mobility currently spend an average of 13.6 billion U.S. dollars a year on tourism. In 2002, these individuals made 32 million trips and spent 4.2 billion dollars on hotels, 3.3 billion on airline tickets, 2.7 billion on food and beverages, and 3.4 billion on trade, transportation, and other activities. The most popular international destinations for this tourist segment are: (1) Canada; (2) Mexico; (3) Europe; and (4) the Caribbean, in that order.

Out of a total of 21 million persons, 69% had traveled at least once in the previous two years, including 3.9 million business trips, 20 million tourist trips, and 4.4 million business/tourist trips. In the previous 2 years, out of a total of 2 million adults with disabilities or reduced mobility, 7% had spent more than 1,600 dollars

outside the continental United States. In addition, 20% had traveled at least 6 times every 2 years.

A study by the Open Doors Organization estimated that in the year 2003, persons with disabilities or reduced mobility spent 35 billion dollars in restaurants. According to the same study, more than 75% of these people eat out at restaurants at least once a week. The United States Department of Labor reported that a large and growing market of Americans with disabilities or reduced mobility have 175 billion dollars in purchasing/consumer power.

In the United Kingdom, the Employers' Forum on Disability estimated 10 million adults with disabilities or reduced mobility in the UK, with an annual purchasing power of 80 billion pounds sterling. The Canadian Conference Board reported that in 2001, the combined annual disposable income of economically active Canadians with disabilities or reduced mobility was 25 billion Canadian dollars.

The economic means to determine our own futures gives us powerful leverage as consumers on the shape of the attitudes, infrastructure, and products of the travel industry. Our travel behavior is studied as a statistical tool by the industry. The meaning of disability pride is still beyond their comprehension. Community is the multiplier effect that makes our economic behavior only a small part of global impact that we exert.

When we travel we represent more than ourselves because we are part of a community. We are part of the community of people with disabilities. Woven through that community is a unifying thread of pride.

As members of a community we are a symbol. Symbols are ambiguous. They leave room for extra meaning to be attached to them as well as hidden meaning to be extracted from them. As we enter into life in another location and culture it is our foreignness, both obvious and subtle, that strains against what people with disabilities symbolize there.

We may be fortunate enough to have begun our travel from a situation where family, friends, legislation, luck, and hard work have given us a strong sense of self-confidence and a life lived among people like ourselves. A change of location might place us where our identity as a member of the disability community is only vaguely perceived as membership in some inconsequential and marginalized "community of difference." Often those meanings attached to us abroad are the very stereotypes we have worked so hard to abolish, or at least insulate ourselves from, back home.

Travel can mean separation from the replenishing sources of disability identity and pride in our lives. Loss of a community of disability pride isolates us from personal relationships, political discussions, and the artistic vitality of our culture.

Yet that very "presence of absence," that experience of "saudade" as it is called in Portuguese, is one of the privileged moments of travel. Personally it can give us

perspective on our lives. Publicly it advertises us as being a portal for others into an as yet unexperienced way of life as a person with a disability.

Travel the world today and you will find that there is a hunger for community and solidarity among people with disabilities. Wherever you go you will find unique opportunities to learn from and contribute to local manifestations of disability culture. As an exchange student, backpacker, business, or vacation traveler your identity as a person with a disability gives you access to faces of the host culture that are both positive and negative. It also provides you with the legitimacy and gravitas. It allows you to share wisdom from our disability cultural core value of interdependence in ways that challenge beyond what would be acceptable for those who have not experienced life and formulated their sense of justice by living with a disability.

The conversations you encounter along the way will vary. Regions are self-organizing around issues that will make travel easier for all of us. Asia is applying the UN Biwako documents to campaign for a rights-based approach to travel. Africa recognizes the development potential of tourism and its eco-tourism resources. Australia builds on its early lead in inclusive tourism with a gap analysis to coordinate government and industry. North and South America are in dialogue about raising the cruise industry infrastructure that links them to world class best practices. The Middle East is forging a new view of disability in dialogue with Islam while developing its luxury and historical tourism. Europe is engaged in unifying ecologically sustainable green tourism with its counterpart socially sustainable accessible and inclusive tourism.

When we travel we are ambassadors of a community beyond borders with a set of core values that the world has a chance to discover through the choices we make. Take your pride on the road and level the path for the ones who come after you.

Dr. Scott Rains is the publisher of the Rolling Rains Report, a daily source of information on travel for people with disabilities: <http://www.RollingRains.com>

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