

Cruising with Special Needs - Part 2: Wheelchairs: A Disney Cruise Line Planning Article

by Carol Yeh, PassPorter Guest Contributor

□ Traveling can be stressful; traveling when you have special needs doubles that stress.

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□ Although disabilities vary significantly by individual, I want to share some of my family's experiences. I hope this article helps other special needs travelers plan their Disney cruise and alleviates some of the stress that comes with planning a vacation.

□ In April 2015, my family enjoyed a 7-night Western Caribbean cruise on the Disney Magic with my parents. It was my family's first cruise ever and my parents' first with Disney Cruise Line (DCL). Our party had a wheelchair user (my mother) and a child with autism (my son).

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□ This article focuses on my mother, who has mobility issues. Although she uses a walking cane for short distances, she needs a wheelchair for moderate and longer distances. (A separate article, "[Disney Cruising With Autism](#)," focuses on my son's experience.)

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□ Before our trip began, my parents took three key steps to ensure Mom would be comfortable: they requested an accessible stateroom; they rented a wheelchair to use on board; and they completed a Special Services Information form (available online at

<http://disneycruise.disney.go.com/ships-activities/ships/services/guests-with-disabilities/>). The Special Services form allows guests to document their medical needs with DCL. To Mom's great surprise, someone from Special Services called her shortly after she submitted her form. They discussed her needs in detail and reviewed her onboard activities and Port Adventures to ensure Mom could participate safely in everything we had chosen. We hadn't even set foot on the ship and already, we felt like Disney was taking care of us!

□ At Port Canaveral, a cast member at curbside luggage check-in procured a wheelchair for Mom to use in the terminal and to board the ship. During check-in, DCL offered my parents boarding assistance; a cast member pushed Mom in her wheelchair through the crowds at the gangway so we could pass smoothly and safely through. Once on board,

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my parents took the terminal's wheelchair to Deck 6, near the mid-ship elevators, and exchanged it for their onboard wheelchair, which their travel agent had rented through [Special Needs at Sea](#).

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□ On the Magic, the accessible staterooms are aft (the back of the ship) on decks 6, 7, and 8. In my parents' Category 6A stateroom, all areas -- including the closet, bathroom, veranda, and all the interior doorways -- were large enough for a wheelchair to turn around. Although the bathroom was spacious, it was not a split bath. It had a roll-in shower with a seat and grab bars but no tub.

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□ One feature we loved about my parents' stateroom were the auto-door openers, mounted both inside and outside the stateroom. On the outside, swiping our Key to the World card against the opener triggered the door to open and remain open for about 20 seconds. On the inside, the opener was a metal push plate. During our cruise, Disney also installed doorbells on the accessible staterooms, which played the Big Ben chime.

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□ Although the accessible staterooms themselves are spacious, the stateroom corridors are not very wide. They can accommodate a standard-sized wheelchair with about 2-1/2 feet to spare. That's just wide enough for the wheelchair and a piece of luggage or the host/hostess's cart. If you require a wide wheelchair, you may need to allot extra time to get from your room to the main areas to move possible obstacles out of the way. (Our hosts were always nearby if our way was blocked.)

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□ The main dining rooms on the Magic (Animator's Palette, Carioca's, and Lumi`re's) are all wheelchair accessible. At Animator's Palette and Carioca's, the accessible entrance is the same as the main entrance; at Lumi`re's, the accessible entrance is at the back of the restaurant. Guests can choose to transfer to a regular seat (which is what Mom prefers) or use their wheelchair at the table. Once Mom transferred to her seat, our servers whisked away her wheelchair to store it safely. At the end of our meals, they often wheeled her out of the dining room to help us get around all the tables and diners.

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□ The only eating area that was problematic with a wheelchair was Cabanas, the buffet-style restaurant on Deck 9. The tight seating, busy crowd traffic (especially on embarkation day), and balancing plates of food made it difficult for Mom to enjoy her meal there. My parents preferred the table service at Lumi`re's for breakfast and lunch.

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□ Transferring off the Magic for Port Adventures was easier than expected, especially with help from cast members. At our first stop, a

Port Adventures cast member escorted us from our onboard meeting location to the gangway, staying a few paces ahead of us to call the elevator and hold doors. In Grand Cayman, the gangway from the Magic connected directly to the top deck of the tender boat. Both the tender crew and Disney cast members made sure Mom safely made it from boat to boat.

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□Port Adventures vary in their ability to accommodate wheelchairs. For our two Port Adventures, Mom had to transfer from her wheelchair to a vehicle. However, we knew about these transfers, thanks to Special Services' phone call to Mom before our trip. Accessibility on Castaway Cay was equal to what we experienced on the ship. The wide pathways across the island are paved; sand wheelchairs are available to borrow; and the trams had wheelchair seating, typically in the first car.

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□Returning to Port Canaveral was chaotic. Whereas during embarkation, my parents were told exactly where to find their rental wheelchair, during debarkation we had no information about how or where to return our rental. We ended up getting a new wheelchair in the terminal, leaving the rental with a cast member.

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□By far, the most stressful part of our journey was getting through U.S. Customs. We didn't have enough hands to manage everyone's luggage plus a wheelchair! Thankfully, Mom was allowed to wait on the sidelines, while we wheeled our luggage through the long (but fast-moving) lines. She joined us at the Customs Desk; after that, it took a bit of juggling to get our belongings out the building and to the parking garage.

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□My parents are seasoned travelers on other cruise lines, and in their 10 years of cruising, Disney was the only cruise line to reach out to them before their trip to learn more about my mother's needs. Throughout our Magic-al trip, we marveled at how well Disney took care of Mom. We communicated our needs early with Disney, and they made sure my mom had access to everything the cruise offered.

About The Author:

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