



"The Travel Industry Comes Around"

By Adam Lloyd

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It has too often been the case that companies in the travel industry have had to be dragged, against their collective will, into making travel accommodations accessible to everyone. So, when some of these businesses, of their own initiative, enact measures to make things better for disabled travelers, it is our duty to shine a spotlight on their efforts. Three such companies currently deserve our acknowledgment: Delta Airlines, Holland America Cruises and Microtel Inns.

Delta Airlines

Delta Airlines has taken the forefront in addressing two of the more problematic areas of flying with a disability - getting proper information and physically boarding the plane.

For those in the deaf and hard of hearing communities, it is impossible to hear flight announcements, gate changes and boarding calls in a noisy airport. Traditionally, requests have had to be made to airline personnel so that they will come inform a hearing impaired traveler of any announcements. However, with airports busier than ever, getting each announcement in a timely manner is a rare occurrence.

Enter Delta's new, 42 inch, gate information screens. Currently being deployed in major airports, and eventually system wide, these easy to read screens not only display gate numbers and flight times, but also provide information on boarding times, connecting flights, bathroom locations, in-flight movies and more.



Of course, getting to the gate on time is only half the battle for wheelchair users. Getting on the plane is the real chore. Sadly, plane aisles aren't wide enough for a wheelchair to pass through. As a result, a wheelchair user must be transferred from their chair, to a narrow "aisle chair," and then again into the plane seat. This can be difficult and precarious, both for the traveler and the airline employees who are assisting. Being dropped or banged into an armrest are common worries for the passenger, as are straining one's back or accidentally hurting the traveler, for the employees.

Delta's answer was to design a hydraulic aisle chair. Now, the aisle chair can be raised or lowered to the height of the wheelchair or plane seat, allowing a traveler to slide from seat to seat rather than being lifted.

Holland America Cruise Line

For some time now, Princess and Royal Caribbean have been the names most commonly associated with progressive accessibility in cruising. However, it is Holland America, which has leapfrogged all others in regard to shore excursion accessibility.

While it is true that most cruise lines are now building bigger, more accessible ships - often featuring a dozen elevators and upwards of twenty accessible staterooms - it is the very size of these ships which causes shore excursions to be inaccessible. Especially in smaller Caribbean ports, large cruise liners cannot enter the shallow waters surrounding the docks. Instead, ships anchor further out and employ smaller boats, known as



"tenders," to bring passengers ashore. Boarding of tenders is most often done via a flight of gangway stairs, and the boats themselves offer no accessibility features.

Holland America and Cap Sante Marine, Inc. tackled this issue, developing the Shore Tender Accessibility Project. Deployed on its first ship this year, with the remainder of the fleet to come, the system uses a wheelchair lift to traverse the gangway. A ramp on the adapted tender allows the chair direct entry, where it is then locked down to another lift. That lift can be raised to give the passenger a view through the tender's windows.

Microtel Inns

For those disabled travelers who feel fortunate when they find a hotel room with grab bars in the bathroom, lowered light switches or Braille room numbers, they are going to be quite impressed with Microtel Inns.

Microtel has recently decided to take by the horns, the accessibility issue at its properties. Promising that every Microtel Inn will meet ADA standards, they are not only incorporating the typical accommodations - wide doors, roll-in showers with hand-held showerheads, bathrooms with rails, Braille or raised room numbers - but are also implementing what they call "attitude accessibility" by undergoing disability etiquette training. Aimed not just at customer "sensitivity," but practical knowledge, the training includes employees spending time in the hotel while simulating a disability using blindfolds or restricting them to wheelchairs. Understanding the barriers faced by disabled guests, Microtel hopes to learn ways to remove them.

Additionally, recognizing the growing importance of the Internet for researching disability travel, Microtel is starting to integrate icons for travelers with disabilities at the bottom of each hotel's listing in their on-line directory. Icons will indicate the availability of roll-in showers, hearing-impaired guestroom kits and properties whose employees have completed their etiquette training.

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