

Rolling through 3 South American countries: the wheelchair diaries

By Julia Malone

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina

WHEN I SET OFF on a three-country tour of South America with my friend Pat, I didn't know exactly what to expect, and the travel agent was downright discouraging.

That's because Pat is in a wheelchair.

"Consider yourself lucky" just to find a handicapped-adapted hotel room "in that part of the world," our agent e-mailed us not once but twice before our departure.

We had reasons not to take his warnings very seriously. In the years since a car crash left her paraplegic, Pat has traveled the globe alone and visited places—including the jungles of Cambodia—that would seem remote to many able-bodied tourists.

Still, wheelchair travel was new to me. I had no idea how Pat had accomplished those feats or what obstacles lay ahead as we headed for Chile, Argentina and Uruguay.

In the next two weeks, I would discover that traveling with someone in a wheelchair required remarkably few adjustments, is never boring and can lead to rewarding contacts with people along the way.

Moreover, my travel partner proved that very little was out of reach. She swung herself into car seats, propelled herself down sidewalks and got the occasional helping push during visits to a Chilean mountain overlook in Santiago, the shops and tango shows of Buenos Aires and the giant waterfalls of Iguazu.

"Inconvenience is adventure wrongly considered, and adventure is inconvenience rightly considered," Pat announced early in the journey. She had heard the saying at a nephew's high school graduation ceremony, and it became a motto for our trip.

Just boarding planes can provide opportunities for such inconvenience-turned-adventures, especially at smaller airports that lack wheelchair-accessible jetways. In those cases, we were conveyed unceremoniously by a truck equipped with a hydraulic lift normally used to load food and drinks into the airliner.

"I feel like a refrigerator in a crate," Pat opined on one such transfer during which she had to be strapped into a tiny airport chair made narrow enough to roll down the aisle of an airliner. The upside was the airport workers, who were unfailingly friendly as she cheerfully struck up conversations with her limited Spanish.

On the ground, we found transportation to be almost trouble-free. The strong dollar in Argentina (three pesos to \$1) makes it affordable to hire private cars and taxis instead of using tour buses, which are hard to get in and out of.

Despite admonitions from our travel agent that it would take two vehicles to transport us around, we found that even the tiniest South American taxi (only slightly larger than a Mini Cooper) was big enough. The chair — its seat folds and its wheels can be easily removed — always fit neatly inside.

To be sure, the drivers usually were skeptical when they first saw us.

In Santiago, one driver refused to listen to Pat's instructions and so wrestled with the chair before he successfully stowed it in the car. Then he expressed deep doubts about our planned destination, *Aqui Esta Coco*, the city's top-rated restaurant.

"There are steps there," he said, urging us to pick a place he deemed more suitable.

We told him not to worry. With help from the hotel concierge, we had called ahead and been assured that the restaurant staff would meet us at the door and help us inside.

By the time we arrived, our driver was beginning to catch Pat's can-do spirit. He pulled out the chair, affixed the wheels with a triumphant smile, helped hoist her up the handful of steps and gave us his card so that we could call him for the return trip.

Yes, we tipped well. Pat makes that her policy. "I tip big so that the next time they see a woman in a chair they will remember the big tip and want to help," she says.

In her travels, Pat rarely tells people that, back home, she is Judge Patricia Broderick of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia.

"People see you differently when they find out you're a judge," she says. "So I don't tell unless someone asks what I do."

Even so, as a wheeler, she knows she is always "on" when traveling abroad. People are watching, especially in countries where active wheelchair occupants are an oddity. Her compact chair — made of high-performance titanium — is an oddity that draws curiosity.

Rolling into the central market in Santiago one afternoon, she was swarmed by cafe employees trying to lure her into their eateries. She cheerfully waved them off with "No tenemos hambre." ("We're not hungry.")

As with her tipping policy, she says, her goal is to leave memories of an upbeat visitor, "so others in wheelchairs will be treated better."

Restaurant staff, tour guides and the museum guard who led us through a basement into the ancient elevator at the National Museum of Decorative Arts in Buenos Aires all responded to her approach.

Travelers have many contacts with other people. "I get to see their souls," Pat says, recalling those who at first seemed nervous about the wheelchair and unsure how to deal with her "and then later find out I am just a human being."

Although often she needed no special help, at one point we hit an "inconvenience" that could have been a tour-stopper without some welcomed aid. After a day of touring on particularly bumpy sidewalks in Buenos Aires' upscale Recoleta neighborhood (site of a celebrated cemetery where admirers still leave roses at Evita Peron's grave site), Pat discovered that one of her tires was losing air. What's more, we had no time to make repairs before flying to our next city, Montevideo, Uruguay.

Our hotel's maintenance worker re-inflated the tire for our flight. Upon arrival at our Montevideo hotel, we found a team of staff members enthusiastically tackling our problem as they took turns examining the ailing wheel. While Pat waited in the lobby, they took the wheel to a bike shop and returned with a new tire.

Soon we were off on a walking-wheeling tour of the city.

Even without the Americans with Disabilities Act that has made U.S. cities more accessible, the South American downtown areas we visited often had ramps. Where these were lacking, it required only a little tilt to help Pat wheel her way from block to block.

If sidewalks were not always ideal, finding handicapped-accessible restrooms was a frequent inconvenience waiting to become an adventure. Often, the doorways were too narrow. The quest for workable facilities took us to various places, ranging from chic hotels to a McDonald's, where we discovered something called "McCafe," serving gourmet coffee and pastries, on the pedestrians-only Florida Avenue shopping street in Buenos Aires.

The last and most remote stop of the trip provided some of the most handicap-friendly surprises, however.

In the jungle parkland of Iguazu on the border where Argentina meets Brazil and Paraguay, more than 275 waterfalls converge into one of the natural wonders of the world. Here, a huge system of catwalks makes it easy for walkers or wheelers to come so close to the torrents of water that anyone without full rain gear will get soaking wet.

From here we were able to take a taxi across the border for lunch and more astounding views from the Brazilian side. The day trip also added one more country to the list of more than 40 that Pat has visited.

Explaining her zest for travel despite the obvious difficulties, she says, "It invigorates and refreshes me." But another factor drives her. "Some parts of it — specifically when I am doing it alone — are scary," she says. "Overcoming fear is where you progress."

Soon she will be heading out West for her regular ski vacation.

Wheelchair travel tips gleaned from a veteran world-wheeler:

- Plan ahead. Finding accessible hotel rooms often takes research and requires explicit confirmation that they will have the proper facilities, such as roll-in showers.

- Find a reliable travel agent. Do-it-yourself wheelchair reservations can be difficult. On-line hotel reservations rarely guarantee that an accessible room will be available.

- Alert airlines in advance of special needs. Call ahead and show up early at the gate so agents will be prepared to help with boarding.

- Prepare for a pat-down at security. That's a disadvantage for wheelchair users who cannot walk through metal detectors. The advantage: They are often waved to the front of the line.

- Tip generously. You never know what future wheelchair traveler you will benefit.

- On the Internet. For more hints on accessible travel, check out Global Access at <http://www.geocities.com/paris/1502/> or Accessible Adventure Travel at <http://www.able-travel.com>.

Rules of the road: For a travel companion, a few simple rules of wheelchair etiquette will make the road — and sidewalks — roll smoother:

- Don't push unless asked. After all, you both want the exercise. Wait until your fellow traveler is pooped enough to ask or facing a steep incline.

- When giving a helping push, always remember (as this pusher sometimes did not) that it would be rude to groan, even in jest.

- Don't give a big shove and let go without informing your friend that she's back in charge of the steering, especially on a downhill slope. (All right, so I made that mistake once or twice, too.)

-When the going gets tough, don't be shy about asking for a little help. People are quick to respond and often volunteer without being asked.