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Hadley Presents

Tips for Fun and Accessible Travel

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, certified accessible travel advocate, Melvin Reynolds joins us with tips on keeping travel fun and accessible. Welcome to the show, Melvin.

Melvin Reynolds: Thank you for having me, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: It is so great to have you here. I know that you're passionate about travel and you've actually gone a step further and decided to help others with their travel needs as well. And we'll get into that in just a bit, but before we do that, I'm wondering if you can just give us a quick intro, tell us about yourself and how you came to just fall in love with traveling? Where does your passion for that come from?

Melvin Reynolds: In 2010, I graduated from Youngstown State University with an associate degree in hospitality management. Before that, in 1997, I had graduated from Youngstown University with a bachelor's in geography. And I wanted to figure out some way to combine the two, geography and hospitality. In early 2020, I saw an ad on Facebook for Cruise Brothers, and I thought, "Well, what better way than to become a travel agent?"

I became a certified travel associate through the Travel Institute. It was a year ago this past April, that I received that. Went one step further and actually got a certification through a special needs group as an accessible travel advocate. Fell in love with traveling when I was just out of high school. My sister and I took trips all over the eastern United States, up into New England and down south into North Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia. We went everywhere, every summer we were on a road trip, my sister and I. And from that, I kind of developed the love of travel.

Ricky Enger: I think you make some amazing memories like that, just going with family or friends and figuring out a new place to go that you just haven't experienced yet. And I think being with people that you enjoy, whether it's people that you don't know well yet, but you're getting to know better, or somebody like your sister. Where it's something that you can talk about for years to come. That's really awesome.

I think one of the first steps to traveling is figuring out where you want to go. And that's true regardless. If you are traveling as someone who has 20/20 vision, or if you're traveling as someone who's blind or low vision, you want the same things out of a trip, right? You want to have fun. You want to get the most out of the trip. You want to go somewhere that you will enjoy. Like, "Hey, I hate the cold. I probably shouldn't go to the snowy mountains necessarily." Are there things beyond just, I guess the standard questions that you might ask yourself, are there considerations beyond that, that somebody who's blind or low vision should think about when they're figuring out where they should take a trip?

Melvin Reynolds: One of the biggest ones, I think, is what is the public transportation like? Do they have buses? Is there taxis available? That sort of thing. So, you kind of know what you're getting into when you get to wherever you're going. Whereas a sighted person probably doesn't have to think about that as much. Also, what are the accessibility issues you're going to face? Is there elevators? Will I be able to understand the Braille that's on signage if there's Braille on signage?

The whole world doesn't use Unified English Braille, unfortunately. I took a Spanish class and I had to learn Spanish Braille. Do I have enough basis in that language that I can at least communicate that I'm blind or low vision and I need help? Those kinds of things also go into figuring out where you want to go when you travel.

Ricky Enger: That's a great point. And it actually kind of dovetails nicely into my next question, which is figuring out how to get there. That can really be a challenge. You mentioned public transportation. There are also things like, I guess, thinking about what your technology needs are or what your level of technology is. So are there tips for, say making travel arrangements for a tech-savvy person? And then how might somebody who's not really in love with the technology still do something like being able to arrange travel? Whether it's Uber or Lyft or airlines, or what have you. Are there ways that somebody who's not in love with technology can still do this easily?

Melvin Reynolds: Even as a travel advisor, I have issues with a lot of the technology sites. They don't read well with screen readers, that sort of thing. So even I need help, sighted help, from time to time. If you're really super uncomfortable with using technology and you want to book something like a flight or a cruise, I would suggest calling a professional, calling a travel agent. And they are more than happy to help you do whatever it is that you need done. Some of them do charge fees, especially if they're booking flights only. I personally do not book flights only. I do book them in combinations with hotels and cruises, that kind of thing. Travel agents make no money off of flights because they pay no commission. A lot of agents won't book flights only, but some of them, if you explain what your situation is, they may say, "Okay, I'll do it for you." It can't hurt to call someone to ask.

Ricky Enger: Right. And I think for some people there's just no substitute for having a human on the other end of the phone to talk to, whether it's a travel agent or even the air carriers themselves, you can arrange flights by phone. Although, some of them I think do have fees and for some of them you might be on hold for as long as your flight is, in order to get that arranged. But it's a possibility, right?

Melvin Reynolds: Even the cruise lines also have phone numbers, if you would rather work directly with the cruise lines. They have phone numbers that you can call. Airlines have accessibility specialists; cruise lines, Amtrak. They all have accessibility specialists that are more than happy to work with someone.

Ricky Enger: That's fantastic. I am not currently a guide dog user, but I have been in the past. And it was interesting for me because it was, number one, one of the most freeing experiences I've ever had to travel with a guide dog. And number two, one of the most logistically challenging at times experiences that I've had. For someone who is perhaps a new guide dog user, or maybe they've been a guide dog user for a while but haven't traveled in a bit, what kinds of logistics does somebody need to think about when they're going to take a trip with their guide dog, that doesn't really come up with a cane?

Melvin Reynolds: A lot of countries don't have... like we have the ADA. A lot of countries don't have something like that. You cannot take your dog into a store, or a restaurant, or even a hotel in some countries. Short story, I was in Martinique on a cruise, and we were doing a walking tour of the city. At first, they weren't even going to let me take my dog off the ship. We finally agreed that we could bring it along. And if after she met the dog, she didn't like it, I could take her back to the ship.

We went on our tour. The strange thing is, people were jumping, literally jumping over car hoods to get out of our way because they just were not used to a dog in the city. Dogs were not a city thing. They're a country thing in Martinique. I had no issues getting her into any of the buildings, but it's just that people aren't used to it.

So, there is that. There is the paperwork that's involved, because every country that you go to has their own requirements for you to enter their country with your dog. They have their own paperwork. The U.S. has its paperwork. There's tests that need to be done. There's all of that paperwork that needs to be done, not only for the countries, but also now for the airlines as well. There's a form that you have to fill out and submit to the airline, and they send you back a code and it's kind of a hassle.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. So, it sounds like a lot of doing some research, asking a lot of questions ahead of time and planning for a number of different possible contingencies before you go?

Melvin Reynolds: Yes. And someone who is an accessible travel advocate or maybe not even necessarily an accessible travel advocate, but they specialize in travel for blind or low vision people can help with that paperwork. They know where to go to get the paperwork. They know what needs to be filled out and that kind of thing. That's a possibility too, is working with someone like that.

Ricky Enger: That's fantastic. And we'll talk a bit more about what an accessible travel advocate is in just a second. Before we do, I am curious about one thing that comes up a lot traveling as a blind or low vision person, and you're with your friends and family and they're like, "Let's go sightseeing." And for a lot of people, just even the name of that, that phrase is, "Oh really? This is not going to be fun for me at all."

But I think there are probably ways that sightseeing can be made accessible in some way. You can still get something out of the experience. Are there ways that you can kind of plan ahead for so that everybody is having fun with kind of the sightseeing aspect of traveling?

Melvin Reynolds: Maybe doing reading on the place where you're going, I think gives you a little background. Say you're visiting Mount Rushmore. If you read a book on the history of Mount Rushmore, you understand a little more how it was sculpted and carved and that kind of thing and the time that it took. Also, having a family member who is a good describer, not someone who just says, "Oh, there's a purple flower." What does that purple flower look like other than a purple flower? Try to describe it. If you have someone who can describe really well, helps a lot. When I do short excursions or even guided tours of historic homes here in the U.S., if I speak to the tour guide prior to taking off on the tour and say, "Hey, I need a little more in-depth discussion, a little more in-depth detail on things." They tend to do their best. It's not always perfect, but they do their best to describe something.

And I've actually been really surprised that there have been times that I've actually been able to touch things, that most people don't get to touch. One really cool place we went was Monticello. Got to feel things at the Monticello, which is really kind of cool, got to feel a sample of the wallboard and got to feel a sample of buffalo hide. And it was fascinating, the stuff that I got to feel at Monticello when we took a tour of it. That was really kind of cool. So, if you ask upfront, especially the tour guide or a family member that you're with, they can help.

Ricky Enger: So just being willing to advocate for what's going to make things a little more fun and enjoyable for you and just seeing how far that takes you? That makes a lot of sense, actually.

Melvin Reynolds: It's surprising, even the Ryman Theater in Nashville, I got a private guided tour, me and my partner got a private guided tour of the Ryman, because we called and said, "I’m totally blind. Is there anything you can do for me?" The director of the museum said, "Sure, come on down. Ask for me when you get here. I'll give you a private tour." Paid no extra for it. It's something they did just because, and it was really kind of neat.

Ricky Enger: That's fantastic. So, you've talked a lot about cruises. We've mentioned that several times. I love cruising and I know you do as well. Are there tips for taking a cruise that a blind or low vision person might really benefit from, just to make the trip that much more fun?

Melvin Reynolds: One of the coolest things though, I think, is some of the technology that the cruises are coming out with now. And you can actually use an app on your phone to find your way around the ship. And there's only certain cruise lines that have it and it's not necessary the cruise lines with the biggest ships that have it either. It's some of the smaller ships that have it. But it makes it really nice.

On the opposite end of that big ship, you have the smaller ships and sometimes those are easier to navigate than the big, gigantic ships. The 2,000-2,700 passenger ships, those are nice because they're small. They're a little more intimate. They're easier to navigate. Asking the crew. The crew's there to work for you and they're more than willing to help you out. However, now granted, they're not going to take you and guide you someplace, because that's a liability issue for the cruise line, then if you were to get hurt while they were guiding you.

They will give you electronic menus. If you contact them prior to sailing, at least 30 days prior, they will send you menus in electronic format that you can look at either on your phone, in an email or on your computer, whichever. There is Braille signage everywhere on the ship. All the staterooms have Braille signage. The elevators have it. The elevators talk, tell you what deck you're on. The servers at the main dining rooms, once they know, they will do anything for you. They set the plate down in front of you and they tell you your steak is at six o'clock, your green beans are at two and your potatoes at nine or whatever.

They've had some training in it as well. But once they realize that that's what you need, that's what they'll do. They do provide relief areas for the dogs. If you do travel with a service dog going on a cruise, they will provide a relief area. There is paperwork again, that needs to be filled out for the cruise line. It's required so many days before, that certain paperwork needs to be sent in and proof of rabies, vaccine, and proof that they're actually a service dog. People are going to say, "Well, the ADA says they can't." Well, they're not based in the U.S. They're based usually in The Bahamas, so they don't necessarily follow the ADA when it comes to requiring documentation, that it's actually a service dog.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. And I guess that's a good point just in general, is and I think we kind of alluded to this earlier, is just to be aware that laws may be different elsewhere. So that actually does bring up my last question, which is we've talked a lot about some dos and don'ts, and things to research and think about before you go. And for a lot of people, it's a lot and it may become really overwhelming.

So, I'm wondering how much of that can a certified accessible travel advocate help with? What kinds of things are you able to do, so that somebody who's booking a trip just thinks about, "Oh, I'm going to have so much fun. It's going to be great. Everything's going to be taken care of." what are those things that you or someone like you can help people figure out before they leave?

Melvin Reynolds: We can help with making sure that your paperwork is in on time, making sure you have the correct paperwork because it changes. It can change what I fill out today, may not be what I need tomorrow. It can change that quickly. We take care of submitting all the paperwork to, say the cruise line for you. We take care of all the arrangements, as far as letting the ship know that you have a service dog coming, or the hotel, or whatever, wherever you're going. We can help with actually booking the trip and taking you from start to finish, from picking where you will go, to follow up when you come home. Things like that. We can help with pretty much anything that you need to do to make your trip pleasant and fun.

Ricky Enger: That's excellent. So, for somebody who's looking for a certified accessible travel advocate, how do they go about finding you or somebody like you?

Melvin Reynolds: Unfortunately, there's no published list of certified accessible travel advocates. Google is probably your best friend. Calling your local travel agency and saying, "Hey, do you have someone there that's a certified accessible travel advocate or that is familiar with working with someone who is low vision, possibly traveling with a guide dog?" However it is that you travel. And if not, ask if they can recommend you to someone who is. They may or may not know someone. It just really depends.

Ricky Enger: That makes sense. And Google's your friend and sometimes word of mouth is your friend. We will have a link to your Facebook page in the show notes here, so that'll be at least one place that people can go. Any final thoughts that you want to leave the listeners with before we wrap up here?

Melvin Reynolds: Don't be afraid to step out there and travel and have fun and experience the world. If you just stay at home and don't put yourself out there, you're missing a lot. Not just the travel itself, but the cultures you get to experience, the food, the friends you'll make. I have made friends that we've been friends now for six, seven years, that I met on a cruise, and we still keep in contact. We still have lunch and dinner at each other's house every once in a while. You make lifelong friends when you travel and there's nothing like it.

Ricky Enger: Love it. Thank you so much for that, Melvin. I would like to stop the recording and head out to the beach right now, so I'm feeling inspired. Thank you for dropping by and for sharing your experience with us. Really appreciate it.

Melvin Reynolds: You're welcome. Thank you.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.