

Walt Disney World in a Wheelchair: A Walt Disney World Special Needs Article

by Joyce Deen, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Recently, we returned from an early-December trip to Walt Disney World and Universal Orlando having experienced something new: Walt Disney World in a wheelchair.

□ My husband has a degenerative bone disorder and his specialist was going to do a procedure to address pain in his back, but had to put it off until the week AFTER we were due to return. Making a long story a little shorter, we had to consider last minute options, as canceling the trip wasn't something we wanted to contemplate. Our choices came down to renting a wheelchair or renting a scooter. After consulting with several websites, and our travel agent, we opted for the wheelchair, as we'd been assured that my husband could get a disability access card and all the walking areas are smoothly paved concrete. Almost all the waiting lines were fully wide enough for the chairs Disney rents, so how hard could it be?

Renting a wheelchair at the parks is fairly easy -- \$12 a day, or \$10 a day if you go for length of stay, which is what we did. You decide how many days you want, and the cast member at your rental site will give you coupons for that many rentals. DON'T lose the coupons; Disney will flip over backward to help you with lost items, but it certainly throws a kink in the day to have that to deal with, first thing in the morning.

□ The folks are very friendly and the rental process is fast, so you don't lose much time that first day or any of the subsequent days. The access points are near the front of the parks, and you are provided with a name tag to identify your chair for the day.

□ You need to understand that rental chairs must stay in the parks; if you decide to leave one park, just hang onto your receipt, and you can pick up another chair at no cost in another park. Your person must be able to transfer from gate to gate: although there are a few 'loaners' outside the gates that you can use to get to the buses or trams, they may not be in the spot where you are. Since my husband is mostly mobile (standing and walking longer distances was painful), this wasn't so much of an issue for us.

We were wonderfully pleased at how simple everything was - attraction queues are all wide enough for the chairs, even in the places where you turn corners. If there are stairs involved, the parks have installed handicap-access pathways or shortcuts for the chairs, and cast

members are more than happy to help you out. Shows, such as Festival of the Lion King, Monsters Inc, or Muppets 3D all have special places to park chairs inside the theatres. If your person can walk, and prefers a seat in mid-theatre, you are free to fold up the chair, park it and take a seat like everyone else. No stigma, no fuss, just welcome and cheer.

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□We spent one day over at Universal Orlando (both parks), and had a similar experience there. Chairs were easy to rent, easy to get on or thru the rides, and not all that expensive.

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□The biggest hurdle had nothing to do with the cast members, or the rides, or the type of pavement in any of the parks -- it was gravity! My husband is 6'3" and nearly 300 lbs. None, and I do mean NONE, of the parks are 100% flat. There are rolling slopes with which to contend, and some of the inclines are significant. My husband had the foresight to bring motorcycle gloves (fingerless leather gloves) to help him grip the wheels without getting blisters, but believe me, there are some inclines in every park that no one in a wheelchair could manage without help. After 5 days of playing Sherpa/sled dog, I was exhausted from pushing those chairs up slopes that were barely perceptible to the eye. And I had been hitting the gym several days a week to prepare!!

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□The flip side to the slope coin is almost as bad: you know that old saying about what goes up, must come down? Same thing applies to wheelchairs. If you are coming down one of those steep inclines, the person behind the chair had better be prepared to drag with their whole weight, because otherwise you're going to run over some hapless tourist who's rubbernecking rather than watching out for runaway wheelchairs. There were a few places, such as leaving The Land in Epcot, that could be scary.

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□Don't get me wrong -- Disney does everything they can to make the park experience magical no matter how mobile the guests may be. Cast members are wonderful, and most guests are very considerate (notice the emphasis on most). But until they discover a way to manipulate the physics of gravity, if we have to do that again, we'll be renting a scooter.

About The Author: Joyce is a first-time contributor to PassPorter News.

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