



Getting up close enough to see the daily parade through DisneyWorld's Magic Kingdom can be a neat trick for handicappers.

# Ernest, 1, 'Magic Kingdom', 0

By Dan Acosta  
special writer

Perched on a mooring in the Seven Seas lagoon, a pensive policeman was overseeing the loading of the Magic Kingdom II.

People of all ages from all over the world crowded around the ferry. We were united by fashion — straw hats and a camera as a necklace — and the common desire to explore the futuristic and fairy dust wonders of EPCOT Center and the Magic Kingdom — Walt Disney World near Orlando, Fla.

I exchanged a long silent stare with the pelican and admitted a sense of concern bordering on dread. I'd been to Disney World before and as a wheelchair user knew it to be rather accommodating.

Accessibility wasn't the source of my concern, rather my traveling companion, Ernest.

"Hey, mister, Mister, why is your friend sitting in that?" asked a child, wrinkling Ernest's pantleg.

Ernest, as if chasing away an annoying insect, turned away from the persistent tyke.

Finally, his mothers told him: "That's a wheelchair, Johnny. It's just an inconvenience for the man."

That's the last straw for Ernest, who over the years has seen me endure numerous paroxysms of "inconvenience."

"Hey, lady, it's a lot more than an inconvenience," said Ernest.

My worries materialized. Taking a W.C. Fields type to a kid-infested kingdom is an ill-conceived idea. I lectured Ernest about tolerance as we made our way to Tomorrow Land, our first stop.

THE MAGIC Kingdom was built 15 years ago when there was little awareness or legislation regarding equal access architecture for the physically handicapped. But the disabled guests' guide book says several attractions like Mission to Mars and the 360-degree theater were designed for wheelchair users.

"Let's head for Fun in the Future."

"Bumpp," registered Ernest, using a totally different word. "Anything important as fun should never be deferred to the future. Let's get a drink right now."

No one goes thirsty or hungry at Disney, a cornucopia spills out of every corner. But many of the snack shops have railed queues too narrow for wheelchairs, so some assistance is necessary.

Ernest and I consulted our guide book and go to a restaurant that has table service.

"Gimme a Benito Juarez," said Ernest.

"What's that?" asked the waitress. (Ernest likes to think himself a revolutionary and Juarez, the 19th century Mexican, is his favorite from history.)

"One Jigger of grapefruit juice, two of Mexican and..."

"What's Mexican?" asked the waitress.

"Forget it, babes. Just gimme a beer," said Ernest.

The waitress explained that no al-

coholic beverages are available in the Magic Kingdom, only in neighboring EPCOT.

"Absolutely magical," grunted Ernest, who's suffering the wounds wreaked by a battalion of Benitos encountered the previous night.

BUT WE both had world passes that also allow entry into the more adult-oriented (and more accessible) EPCOT, so Ernest took the next boat over.

I had little trouble getting around the Magic Kingdom by myself. Most of the sidewalks have curb cuts and buildings without level access are ramped.

A good number of the rides are open to the physically handicapped, but require boarding assistance, which the Disney staff is unable to provide. So, if amusement rides are what you're after, visit Disney with someone who can help you.

Perhaps the biggest problem with Disneyworld is the crowds. Kids run amok even when tethered to a parent. And many adults have a tendency to read a guide book while walking and make unexpected turns or stop in mid-stride.

If you don't want to buy liability insurance against crashing into a sea of wayward Achilles' heels, visit on a Sunday, Thursday or Friday, when crowds are the lightest.

The Magic Kingdom becomes a maddening crowd every afternoon when Mickey Mouse and friends go on parade. Some viewing areas are reserved for strollers and wheelchairs in front of Tinker Bell's castle, but they're not shaded and crowds are the thickest there.

You'll find comfortable, non-claustrophobic views in Frontier Land toward the end of the parade route. Sure, Mickey will have been cavorting for 15-20 minutes by then, but he won't be so tired as to be goofy.

A MONORAIL connects the kingdom with EPCOT. Unlike Detroit's People Mover, it is not truly accessible, but Disney hosts willingly offer the little lift that's needed and the ride is a natural delight — wildlife views from ground-grubbing armadillos to soaring red-tailed hawks.

Ernest I reunited after nightfall, when EPCOT becomes an unlikely phantasmagoria of science fair, foreign intrigue and romance. We met under Space Ship Earth. Bathed in lunar blues and sunset hues, the magnificent geodesic sphere claimed a place in the sky — Venus and Alpha Centauri on either side and Orion hunting on its most heavenly surface.

"A Night on Bald Mountain" was reverberating through the EPCOT sound system.

"Better than hearing 'super-califragilistic-expliadostious,'" said Ernest, who was in a considerably better mood since leaving the disenchanted kingdom.

He insisted on going to the World Showcase's French pavilion where he'd already consumed a bottle of Beaulieu, served by a petite and lovely sommelier.

"Very foxy," said the lip-smacking Ernest, and I didn't know if he was

referring to the young red wine or his youthful French server.

EPCOT's World Showcase highlights the culture of several different countries, while its corporate-sponsored Future World focuses on science and technology. Both areas are completely accessible to wheelchair users as are most of the rides and attractions.

BUT THE rides and exhibits had

to wait until tomorrow as Ernest that night exhibited an uncommon flair for the cosmopolitan.

First taquitos and margaritas at the Mexican pavilion, then sushi and sake at the Mitsukoshi restaurant, followed by Guinness Stout and Scotch eggs at the Rose and Crown Pub.

I went off in search of Rotoids and Ernest returned to Au Petit Cafe in

the altruistic pursuit of international relations.

If you go: The free disabled guide book is distributed at Disney parking lots or can be requested in advance by writing Walt Disney World, Guest Relations, P.O. Box 10040, Lake Buena Vista, Fla. 32830.

More than a half dozen hotels on the Disney grounds offer wheelchair accessible rooms.

However, moderately priced accommodations are available at the main gate on U.S. 192. My favorite is Larson's Lodge Maingate (1-800-327-8074), which can arrange wheelchair transport for the 10-minute shuttle to Disney.

Complete package tours or local transportation can be arranged through Wheelchair Wagon Tours at (305) 646-7175.

Jim Boyd is a racer. He competes in marathons around the world, which means he frequently must race about airports — you know, the O.J. Simpson dash.

As with other frequent fliers, Boyd — not necessarily a betting man — knew the odds that he and his luggage would on one excursion or another show up at different airports.

The Farmington Hills man should have placed a bet on his return trip after competing in the Long Beach, Calif., Half Marathon.

"All my baggage went to New York," Boyd said. "They (the airline people) felt pretty bad about it."

So did Boyd.

His baggage snafu created more inconvenience than merely waiting for a wayward toothbrush and a jogging suit. It left the traveling athlete without his wheelchair.

Boyd, a quadriplegic (paralysis of all four limbs), is one of millions of disabled travelers in the nation. According to Rehabilitation International, USA, up to 5 million disabled people book passage every year. And all of these folks — on land, sea or air — face a number of additional difficulties when on the move.

Nearly every physically impaired traveler has a favorite horror story.

ONE WHEELCHAIR user made a Windsor, Ontario, to Cancun, Mexico, trip from airports without skybridges. Two burly Canadians carried him up the steps in a boarding chair better suited for moving major appliances. But the disembarkment crew in Mexico was one young man, who cradled the traveler in his arms and huffed blindly down the steps.

He had visions of a second broken neck," said the young man who now vacations mostly by van.

A disabled business traveler, who always makes barrier-free hotel reservations in advance, recently found that his "handicapped room" was indeed handicapped. The bathroom door opening was too narrow to allow wheelchair entry.

The national hotel chain was apologetic, but that did little to ease the demands of nature.

And I once spent a midnight hour in the Milwaukee airport going in circles. Literally. While waiting for the return of my lost wheelchair, I was given an airline loaner,

which had a rubber tire on one side and just the bare metal rim on the other side. That was a lot like a solo canoeist paddling only on one side.

Travel always involves new surroundings and a disruption of daily schedule and habitual ways of doing things. That's why it's fun; travel is a welcomed breaking out of the mold.

But for physically impaired people, many of whom rely on a very particular routine to accomplish mundane tasks like dressing, bathing or simply switching on a lamp, new surroundings can mean new hassles.

FREEDWAY restaurants may be easy-on, easy-off to get to, but impossible to get into. Just a single step at the entrance is enough to thwart an electric wheelchair.

Motels, even those with a level entrance, can hold a host of potential problems. Room temperature controls may be out of reach, faucet handles may be unworkable for those with a poor grasp, bedside space may be limited for an easy transfer, or entrance doors may be so heavily spring-loaded as to make entering an exercise and an exit a catastrophe.

All these problems are commonly encountered in rooms designated as wheelchair accessible. Another example is one economy hotel chain that's notorious for mounting the television five feet up the wall in its handicap accessible rooms. So much for "Cheers."

Such incongruities are not incapacitating, rather they create the disabled person's frequent nemesis — dependence — or frustration. A lengthy struggle to move furniture blocking a wall socket takes the joy and spontaneity out of a simple pleasures like listening to a portable radio.

Fortunately, a growing awareness within the travel industry and the general public is easing the way for the disabled traveler.

Some travel agencies make special arrangements for the physically impaired. Major cruise lines like Starline now have limited accessibility on some cruise ships.

AND WITH advance notification, the larger rental car companies will install hand controls at no extra charge.

"Advance notification" is the essential passport for the physically disabled traveler. Airline, hotel and other travel personnel almost invariably wish to be helpful. However, they need to know the person's particular needs.



Dan Acosta found some shade and as a result a familiar face at DisneyWorld — Walt Disney's most famous character, Mickey Mouse.

## When in need . . .

There are some travel agencies that specialize in travel arrangements for the physically handicapped. A good place to start is the FARM Assistance Center in Lansing. The center produces a single directory of information for disabled travelers, "Travel Is For Everyone."

It's a great investment at \$2. It can be obtained by writing the center at 601 W. Maple, Lansing 48906 or by calling 1-800-426-7426 or (517) 371-5897.

The premier agency, specializing in travel for the physically impaired, is Flying Wheels Travel Inc., based in Owatonna, Minn. It handles group tours and independent travel anywhere in the world.

Flying Wheels can be reached by writing it at 143 W. Bridge St., P.O. Box 382, Owatonna, Minn. 55060, or by calling 1-800-833-0363.

Closer to home is Robert Reed Travel in Framingham. The travel agency plans barrier-free group tours and cruises and arranges additional assistance, when needed.

For information, call Robert Reed Travel at 478-5800.

## Handicapped people cope with problems of traveling by plane

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