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"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 18 July 2020 – “A brilliant time in Roto-Vagas”

It was colder than I remembered and the smell was more pungent. Mind you it's been a good couple of decades since I have been to Rotorua. We took our granddaughter last week in the school holidays, taking up the wero to support New Zealand's domestic tourism. Rotorua was pumping and I'm not talking just about the geysers: it was humming with humanity. It seems like a lot of other people had the same idea for their getaway! The drive there from Auckland was relatively easy, -the expressways put the quality of State Highway 1 from Whangarei to Auckland to shame. Our schedule was busy, as our mokopuna is a particularly energetic wee individual, who has a never ending zest for back to back activities.

When planning a holiday, as someone who has accessibility needs, it's always a bit of a lucky dip. Information on accessible features can be murky and non-committal. What is deemed as 'accessible' by a tourism operator can be a barrier-riddled experience for a disabled punter. On our first day there we planned to go on the Rotorua Skyline gondola and luge. The idea is you take the gondola up the hill and then take the luge/trolley down the hill. I was excited. I was also apprehensive. The night before I had a broken delirious sleep thinking; how will I get on the gondola? Will it slow down? Can I get my mobility scooter on the gondola? Will I get stuck half way? Will I be dangling off the side of the gondola looking down a hundred foot precipice? If I take my mobility scooter up in the gondola and go down on the luge how will I get my scooter back down the hill? As I drifted off to sleep, I resigned myself to "what will be will be".

When we arrived at the Skyline it was heaving with people, a sea of puffer jackets and over excited kids and a mind-boggling queue that nearly circled the entire building. There were no carparks in sight. I was suggesting somewhat hopefully we should return early the next day, when someone parked close to the entrance cheerfully said, "I'm going now, you can have our carpark". After a good half an hour of queuing we asked at the ticket counter about getting my scooter onto the gondola and what to do with the scooter once we were

up there. The woman at the counter nonchalantly replied, “you can drive the scooter straight onto the gondola and,” (whispering as if imparting a great confidence), “when you get there go to the photography booth and ask for the luge supervisor”. To my relieved surprise, the gondola did slow right down, and I drove my scooter into the gondola carriage with ease. It carried us all off up the hill, as we watched the drop below us increase rapidly.

Getting off the gondola was just as seamless in reverse. We then found the luge supervisor and asked whether my scooter could go back down on the gondola -thinking that we would be going all the way down on luges -and we could be reunited with it at the bottom. But how naïve I was. “The luge only goes half-way down” the supervisor announced, “what we can do is either put him in a van at the end of the luge or we can help him onto the chair lift and then we will take his scooter to the top of the chair lift” he continued eyeballing my wife. “I will be fine with the chair lift” I said, directing the conversation back to me. “Just join the queue there”, he said, pointing to another eye watering long queue. Eventually it divided into two lines –those waiting for their first ride of the day and those onto their second ride or more. We obediently chose the former and entered into a gated line of people. After what felt like an eternity of edging forward inch by inch on my scooter we were confronted by a flight of stairs! Awesome. Caged in on all sides there was no going back. I got off my scooter while helpful customers around us humped the scooter up the stairs. The other line had no stairs at all. “It would have been good to be told that before”, my wife pointed out to the luge operators, who countered with the fact that they had no idea we were there...They did their best to apologetically lift the scooter back down the stairs. We fumbled our way into the luges and trundled down the hill. They seemed to move incredibly fast. I cautiously steered my way down the ‘scenic route’ as small children and grandmothers alike roared past me at great speed. At the end of the ride the staff insisted I stay in the luge while they pushed me to the chairlift - which they did with a lot of embarrassing grunting and heaving. At the end of the chairlift I was helped back on the mobility scooter where we were ushered in front of the queue for the pleasure of doing it all over again. Which our moko thoroughly enjoyed.

The next day Te Puia, a cultural tourist village based in the Te Whakarewarewa Geothermal Valley, on the edge of Rotorua was on the agenda. They provide guided tours around their mud pools and geysers and provide Maori cultural experiences. They had a mobility scooter onsite for use and they were very accommodating pointing out the various accessible routes on the tour. They were organised and prepared. They did weaving and poi with our grand daughter while I was shown the carving school. The experience was seamless and hassle free. And heart warming. Our genial giant guide came from generations of guides who have provided tourists services for decades. His prowess for Manaakitanga and enjoyment in sharing his stories and expertise was clearly evident.

Without fail the staff that we encountered in Rotorua were very helpful and all did their best individually. The difference between the good and the great experiences for us often came down to the backing of a systematic, organised approach to accessible tourism. Tourist operators need to ensure that they have put some prior energy into developing processes for wheelchair users, scooter users, intellectually disabled people and the range of other disabilities who make up the expected tourist customer base.

All in all we had a brilliant time –full of adventure and that renewed sense of energy and life that really only kicks in with a few death defying tourist hijinks - Viva Roto-vegas!.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception. A Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.