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"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 1st March 2025 – “Navigating Accessibility challenges on family trip to Fiji”

We had a fantastic time! Yes, it was hot, mindbogglingly so. My distant childhood memories, of my country of birth- Fiji, returned. We just had a five-night family holiday there and while we all had a beautiful time, international travel always throws up challenges and pleasant surprises when accessibility is involved.

Starting at Auckland airport, we were proactive in notifying Fiji Airlines that I was taking my mobility travel scooter as check-on luggage. They replied by asking a barrage of questions about the specifications of the scooter which we duly responded to. Lo and behold at check-in they started to ask exactly the same questions. Luckily (and here is a good tip for anyone traveling with a mobility device), we had the foresight to have a copy of the scooter specifications with us, which we were able to produce with a flourish. I was then asked to hop on an airport wheelchair which was for some reason branded with ‘Breast Cancer Awareness’. It was bright pink with a double parachute type of seatbelt arrangement which the airport assistant insisted on buckling me in with. The moment the seat belts were buckled on I could feel the dignity and mana leaching out of me. After a couple of hours of being pushed around the airport it was time to board. Because the gate was the furthest away (at least 2km) in the whole airport, we were offered a ride in a multi-seated buggy with a flashing light and a loud siren- like warning system which ferried my wife and I to the gate. From there it was back into a pink wheelchair, back on with the parachute seat belt, down 30 meters to the aircraft and then I shuffled sideways and upright down the aisle to my seat.

At Nadi airport when I was reacquainted with my mobility scooter, I relished the independence of being able to scoot around mindlessly until we clambered aboard a mini bus for a 2-hr trip to our resort. As sugar cane fields, coconut palms and the occasional wandering livestock flashed past us, things became subtly familiar.

The resort was huge, somewhat older, with spectacular gardens, towering coconut palms and enormous frangipani trees everywhere. The accessibility was okay, and while sometimes I needed to take the long way around in order to access a lift, to circumnavigate stairs, the vast majority of things were within reach. After five nights of eating and drinking and celebrating my moko and wife’s birthday it was suddenly time to go home. The grim reality of going home started with waking up at 2.30am to catch the 2hr bus ride at 3.30am to get to the airport by 5:30am.

I was just about to relinquish my mobility scooter into the check-on luggage and resort to an airport wheelchair (not pink this time), when an Airport Supervisor appeared. He asked if it would be easier for me to use my mobility scooter right up to the aircraft and have it checked on at the last minute. What a relief! I was able to saunter around duty-free freely. When we went to board the plane there were six other people in wheelchairs. Apparently there was a cruise contingent coming on board the flight.

When we arrived in Auckland we were asked to wait by the plane while they retrieved my scooter from the luggage. Forty minutes later we were the last people waiting and an alien scooter was brought up to us. Lo and behold, (again!) I didn't have the only red scooter on the checked in luggage. Another half an hour later my trusty steed arrived.

Travels always have their hiccups and curve balls. When one has access needs one has to be somewhat more resilient and patient. You will get there, try and enjoy the ride, even if it is in a bright pink Barbie style wheelchair!

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