

Secrets of an Accidental Traveler

A travel agent with paraplegia, Kelly Giannattasio shares some traveling tips she's picked up from personal experience.

By Tiffany Carlson



Kelly Giannattasio, 33, of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, didn't plan to become a travel agent while in college. "I had just graduated with my degree in Exercise Physiology four months before the injury." Giannattasio, a T-6 complete paraplegic, was injured in a Jeep rollover accident in Santa Barbara, California, back in 1998.

Knowing her previous professional goal of becoming a physical trainer would be out of the question, Giannattasio decided to answer an ad looking for travel counselors. "I figured it was a 'sitting job' and sent in my résumé," she says.

Giannattasio was hired after two interviews and is now an Emergency Specialist, helping business travelers with last-minute travel fiascos.

"And the one thing I love about my job the most is the travel discounts. The deals allow me to travel often." Since her injury, Giannattasio has flown over 70 times, including a solo trip to Paris, France. Giannattasio recommends a hearty sense of survival, knowing not to panic, and realizing that you simply can't go everywhere, when traveling overseas.

Giannattasio's US Recommendations

Giannattasio has been to nearly every major American city and has an abundance of information about accessibility. "In my opinion there are certain regions of the country that take the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) more seriously than others," she says. "Generally speaking, the West Coast is very progressive with respect to wheelchair access.

"Florida, too, offers a lot of accessibility, partly due to the large population of older people," she continues. "The more senior citizens there are in an area, the more mobility impairments there are. Consequently the need for equal access is much more apparent and probably more strictly enforced. Also, any touristy place is going to be wheelchair accessible. While I'm sure there are exceptions, I have found this to be very true. Examples are: anything in downtown Washington, DC, anything in the Disney locations, Las Vegas, stadiums, modern shopping centers, museums, etc."

Giannattasio also has a few warnings. “Worst for wheelers in my opinion are beaches,” she adds. “The beach is a natural ‘hard to break’ barrier in itself. I find there aren’t very many public beaches that provide beach wheelchairs. You kind of have to research beforehand or just stumble across the availability of beach wheelchairs, as I have in the past.

“The beach and the mountains are the obvious least accessible travel options for wheelers. However, if properly planned, wheelers can still enjoy both. I have a friend who is a paraplegic and he skis constantly in the winter in Colorado, and does so independently (on a mono-ski). There are ski resorts out there with adaptive skiing and training.”

And in terms of the best airports to have a layover in (when you consider speedy aisle-chair delivery, decent transfer assistance, and easilywheelable airports with minimal carpet) Giannattasio recommends Kansas City’s airport among others. “Generally, O’Hare aisle chair assistance is average,” she says. “I have been left on the plane for 30 minutes at Chicago O’Hare before. Dallas/Fort Worth is average or a bit below too.” Other winners include Minneapolis, Detroit, LAX, Orange County, San Francisco, Denver, and Nashville.

Hotel and Airline Recommendations

As for hotel chains that kick butt in accessibility—and it’s always wise to go with a chain when traveling to make sure your room meets ADA standards—Giannattasio likes Microtel (www.microtelinn.com), Starwood properties (Sheraton, Four Points, Westin, the W, St. Regis, Le Meridien), and the properties under the Marriott International umbrella (Marriott hotels, Residence Inn, Courtyard hotels, Fairfield Inn, Townplace Suites, and Springhill Suites).

“Microtel has a whole section on their Web site just for disabled travelers. Their CEO even goes to disability seminars to get educated and all employees go through disability awareness and/or diversity training. Some of their properties even have arm bikes in their fitness centers and the accessible rooms even have low peep holes. All I expect are the basics from a hotel when it comes to accessibility, but Microtel really gets down to the details which is refreshing!”

When it comes to Giannattasio’s favorite airlines, she prefers Northwest, Southwest, and Continental, even though she does admit that it depends on the staff most of the time. “They have proven to be the best as far as attitude and accommodation regarding my disability.

“My worst experience was on Vanguard, but they, unsurprisingly, went bankrupt, so that doesn’t matter. I have never had an experience where an airline did anything to my wheelchair either,” she adds.

She also recommends Thrifty and Alamo for reliable companies when renting cars with hand controls.

Other Travel Tips

- Book long layovers. “Remember as a wheeler, you are first on the plane and last off . . . this means you have much less time than everyone else to get from point A to point B.”

- Call ahead. “When you have a hotel reservation, call the hotel earlier in the day, the day you are supposed to check in, to make sure they pre-block you into your accessible room. Get the name of the person that guarantees it.”
- Ditto on cruise lines. “Cruise lines: same thing. Plan and do your homework, communicate your needs, write down all questions you need to ask the special services agent, and book in advance with the cruise line’s special services department.”
- Prepare! Prepare! Prepare! “Route everything in your head from the front door of your house to your hotel room. Mentally go over every detail that has to do with a ‘plane, train, or automobile’ and your plan for working it out. And don’t watch that movie Planes, Trains, and Automobiles before your trip.”
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help. “People want to help you, it makes them feel good. Is it better to make your legs freak out and start spasming by keeping that heavy suitcase on them too long or just swallow your pride and ask the aisle chair person to carry it to the taxi or shuttle area for you?”
- Communicate your needs. “Our bodies work differently so, many times, we have to explain what it is we need. Don’t be afraid to do this.”
- Know your rights. “I have asked a hotel manager to take me in a car or pay for a cab to take me to the airport. I have done this more than once, because the hotel shuttle van didn’t have a wheelchair lift. After all, I am entitled to accessible transportation per the ADA, if the hotel offers shuttle service to able-bodied folks . . . Remember: You don’t have to ever accept ‘We’ll just lift you into the van,’ if you don’t feel comfortable with that.”

Parting Words

“Traveling is stressful for anyone, walking or sitting; the flight delays, the long lines, the jet lag, and the occasional fiasco of lost luggage,” says Giannattasio. “The important thing to remember is that you can travel to any place you want to with the right amount of planning. Some places you can be independent, some you can’t. It’s almost always worth it though, to get out there and experience a new place, a new culture, and a new climate.”

Giannattasio’s next overseas travels will be London and Frankfurt in the Summer of 2007 and Australia and New Zealand for her honeymoon in 2008.

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