

Episode 4 - Transcription

Welcome back, fellow travelers, this is Trouble with Me, your in... accessible travel experience podcast.

If you enjoy the show and would like to be a part of it by sharing about your cities or telling us your accessibility horror stories, you can visit us at troublewithme.com or at Tabi Folk, your accessible travel community.

And now, without further ado, welcome aboard and get ready to take off.

This is episode 4, Trouble in Paris, and, as the name suggests, our main course for today's menu will be an accessibility review of the city of Paris. Afterwards, we are going to jump to Japan for a freezing night in the Nagano fireworks festival where our Horror Story will take place. Finally, we'll have some tips of the day and we'll wrap it up with some sounds of the world. Three, two, one, we're ready to go.

Let's soak in the waters of La Seine.

Welcome to Paris.

Paris, the capital of France, is both known as the city of light and as the city of love. It has no peer with its unique charm and romance, a city threaded by the Seine River and flooded with history with its majestic palaces, world-renowned museums and unmistakable monuments. If you visit, Paris will sweep your heart away.

We are going to descend from an accessible bus to give our score on Transportation accessibility.

We give it 2 out of 5 stars.

[Merci]

And, why is the low score? Well, subway accessibility is nearly non-existent. Fortunately, buses are a 100% wheelchair accessible and are also free of charge for wheelchair users. However, they can get crowded and are not the fastest means of transport. RER train lines A and B, which are mostly accessible, may be useful to cross the city, but the assistance service needs to improve speed wise. Accessible taxis are also available through website or app booking.

We are on the streets of Paris, hearing one of its traffic lights after pushing its button, to give our score on streets accessibility.

We are giving it 3.5 stars. Aside from the area of Montmartre, which has really steep slopes and is entirely made of cobblestone, the rest of sidewalks in Paris are quite good, especially on wider streets, with concrete pavement and curb cuts everywhere. However, the garage exits made from cobblestone and the common works on the street and sidewalks make it a must to watch your

step or your wheels! Having pedestrian promenades along the banks of the river is a great bonus. Also, visual accessibility is good with consistent tactile pavement on all crossings and accessible traffic lights, like the one we just heard, with audio cues saying the name of the streets on the junction, on around 50% of them.

Looking around for an accessible place to eat near Bastille, we are going to give the score on restaurants and shops. We are giving it 3.5 out of 5 stars. Even though many entrances are not wheelchair accessible, the sheer amount of options plus the common cafe and restaurant terraces make up for it. If you don't want to look too much for an accessible food option, street corners are your best bet. On the other hand, accessible toilets are hard to find.

Next, hotels and accommodation. We are also giving it 3.5 stars. Despite many hotels not being wheelchair accessible, there are also many that are. Nevertheless, accommodation is expensive all year round and lower budget options in the outskirts may take a lot of time to get to the city center due to poor subway accessibility. Being near an accessible RER A or B train line stations maybe an alternative.

To give the score on tourist attraction accessibility, it couldn't be any other way, we are on board of the Eiffel Tower elevator to its second deck.

[Second floor, you have to change lifts for the top... everyone gets off, please.]

We are giving it 3.5 stars. Despite cobblestone in Montmartre and outside Versailles, and some other monuments, and inaccessible observation decks in some attractions, all of them offering discounts, such as the third floor of the Eiffel Tower, all major tourist attractions are wheelchair accessible. There is also free admission for people with disabilities and a companion in Versailles and the Louvre and Orsay museums, among others. Available visual and hearing accessibility tends to be only for French speakers or French sign language signers, although it's true that audio guides are indeed available in different languages.

And, finally, getting there. We are giving it 4 out of 5 stars. All arrivals have accessible connections to the city center or get you directly to the center, if on a high-speed train, like the TGV that we are on at the moment. However, if you get to Paris by plane, aside from shuttles, taxis and buses, all train options are not direct and require doing transfers.

[We are arriving at destination. Please make sure you take all your belongings with you...]

We have reached our destination and the overall accessibility score of Paris is 3.3 out of 5 stars. As we have seen, accessibility doesn't stand out in any area, but it is not bad either. Except for the terrible subway accessibility. Nevertheless, most tourist attractions are accessible with free admission or huge discounts for people with disabilities, and one of their companions, and also rides on the bus are free for wheelchair users.

As always, remember that this is a summary. For the full report, you can go to troublewithme.com and check today's episode notes. And now, let's travel to the Nagano fireworks festival for an accessibility Horror Story made possible by humans instead of buildings.

I love fireworks. During my one year stay in Japan, they were on my bucket list, as the country is known for its spectacular fireworks festivals. For various reasons, I was nearly at the end of my stay and I hadn't had the opportunity to attend one. My last chance was the winter fireworks festival in Nagano, 500km away. Three months before, I had already booked a hotel. Unfortunately, all hotels in the city, except for two, were sold out (the festival was that popular), so I had to settle for a run-of-the-mill non-accessible hotel with three steps at the entrance. I called and, at least, I was able to secure a room on the ground floor.

The day before, I got to Nagano station and went to the tourist information center. I wanted to buy tickets for a reserved sitting area, to ensure that I'd be able to properly see the fireworks from my wheelchair. Otherwise, I'd see nothing if people stood up. They asked me if I was going alone. I was. Then, they hesitantly told me that it would be really crowded. I said that it was ok. Finally, they told me the alleged place to buy the tickets and to be there one hour in advance.

I crossed the city, got to the hotel, painfully managed the steps and checked in. The room was freezing. I turned on a lamp. As the light warmed up, a few humongous bugs came to life and started flying around the room. After a little bit of wrestling (little bit understood as more than one hour), I caught four of them on a cup and threw them outside, along with the cup. As I was falling asleep under the covers, just in case, I felt bad for the bugs and wondered if they'd survive outside. Hopefully, they'd go back to their hibernation state.

The next day, I got to the place two hours in advance. Apparently, it was another information point. I asked them where was the ticket place actually. They made a phone call and told me to wait. I told them that I could go on my own, but they told me that it was dangerous for me to go alone and wouldn't tell me its location. I didn't want to cause any trouble, so, although I was growing restless, I waited patiently. More than a half an hour later, someone from the organization came. Again, they told me that it would be dangerous for me to be within the crowd when the festival ended and that they wouldn't be able to help me. I said it was alright, I would wait the crowd out and leave a bit later. After more than 20 minutes of going around the being alone dilemma, they told me that ok, but that most probably tickets were already sold out, as they had opened a few minutes ago, while we were talking. They asked me if I wanted to go anyway. Of course I wanted to go!

The ticket place was just a 5 minute "extremely dangerous" walk along nearly empty streets. We got there. There was a large queue and I waited at the end. A few people had gotten there just right before me. When it finally got to my turn, they hung the "sold out" sign in front of me. I was not having it.

I checked the reserved seating area and saw that there was plenty of space at the back. I explained the ticket sellers the situation, that I was delayed, due to them being extra careful (I was trying to be polite actually) and that I didn't need a seat, as I already had my wheelchair. I only needed to be inside the reserved area, otherwise, I wouldn't see anything as the rest were grass slopes and other places for people to stand up. They told me they couldn't do anything.

I, then, addressed another person from the organization. I explained again the situation. They told me it was dangerous and that it was better for me to go home. I told them I had travelled 500km just to come to the festival and, actually, 10000km more from my country. All alone, so I knew how to take care of myself. I asked how come there wasn't reserved seating for wheelchair users, as in most events. They told me that no wheelchair users came, as, when they called inquiring, they told them it was dangerous and that it was better for them not to come. Cultural translation: it meant "don't frigging come". Like hell! I told them I wouldn't move, until I got my ticket.

Nearly an hour went by discussing in Japanese. I was at my wits end. The organizer had made a few phone calls and each time came back telling me they couldn't do anything. In the end, I lost it. I run out of patience and my Japanese ingrained "don't cause any trouble" mindset went away. I started speaking loudly in English, telling them that I had had enough of being treated like a child. That it was their fault that I was late, because all along they didn't want me to buy a ticket. That it was discrimination. That I could take care of myself. That who cared if there weren't any seats, as I had my own already. That I wouldn't budge. That... that... that... the same all over again.

Five minutes later, the organizer came back and told me "ok", but that I would have to pay like everyone else. Of course I'd pay! Who said anything of wanting to get in for free? After finally buying the ticket, we made amends and both apologized for our behavior. Nevertheless, I felt like shit for the next hour and thought that the festival was already ruined for me.

An hour later, doors to the reserved seating area opened and I entered. It was freezing. 0 degrees Celsius. I had already been out for 4 hours and there were still at least 4 more to go until I got back to the hotel. I wore an extremely thick coat, a pair of trousers and 6 heating pads on me, but I was still really cold. An organizer saw me and gave me two extra heating pads that I stuck directly on my skin, despite the safety warning on its wrapping, on my chest and on my belly. I felt a bit better and the festival began. The best one in my life. The whole sky was alight with it. Two hours and a half later, it ended with a bang.

Then, I waited, until the dangerous mob of calmly marching people had mostly cleared. Another staff member came and I told them that it was alright, that I was waiting out and that I'd be going soon. I did so and, 45 minutes later, I reached the hotel. All my limbs were numb. The heating pads, supposed to last at least 8 hours, were already dead cold, as my skin had absorbed all its heat and lost it to the weather. I stripped and went to the bath. After an hour in extremely hot water, I started feeling my body again. I imagined being one of those bugs and coming back to life with the heat from the lamp. The next day, I found one outside getting closer to a nearby plant, but that's another story...

We've reached the end of the story, this time it was quite intense, and, with it, we are getting to our tip of the day.

Well, today's tip is a little bit of you've got to stand up for yourself. If you are discriminated against and you have, of course, the energy, the time and the mindset, well, you have to complain really. I'm not much of a person that speaks out, but when there's really something that I feel that it's not

just, or where you face a situation of ableism, you should speak out, you should complain and make yourself heard. In the most respectful of ways, of course. Also, something else that might have helped, in this case... so, our bonus tip, our second tip, would be to call in advance to check for accessibility. A bit for concerts, festivals or for hotels, you should always call in advance. Even if there's information online, well, if the information seems reliable and you feel sure that your needs will be met, then, it's fine. But, if you're not really sure, just call, just in case. In today's story, maybe, that would not have helped at all because they would have told me to... that it would be very dangerous and that I would be better staying at home, but, if instead, if I'd had asked around some locals or some friends, they would have told me that I could buy such tickets at convenience stores. So, I had just one around the corner and I would have avoided all the hassle and the situation. As always, if you like the show and you don't want to miss the following episodes, don't forget to subscribe. Also, if you are going on a trip, when you're going to one of our destinations, you can check troublewithme.com or Tabi Folk community for our full accessibility reviews. You can download them there and you will find lots of useful links that will help you in the preparation of your trip. With this, we have reached the end of the program and we are going to our final section. Let's hear some sounds of the world.

We're on line 14 of the Paris subway.

It is the only line that's partially wheelchair accessible.

According to the website, all of it is accessible, but there are still some stations where there are works underway,

For instance, one of them is Gare de Lyon, where there is no elevator yet.

By the way, this was a one stop accelerated ride.

And now, we're on one of the bridges that crosses the river Seine near Notre Dame. For a relaxing jazz live performance.

With this, we've reached the end of the episode, we say goodbye, have a nice day and see you next time, fellow travelers.