

## Episode 8 - Transcription

[Music] 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 TabiFolk, your accessible travel community. And now, without further ado, welcome aboard and get ready to take off.

This is episode 8: Trouble in Brussels. And, as the name suggests, we are going to visit the capital of Europe for our city accessibility review. Then, we are going to travel to New York to discover one of its most maybe unknown tourist attractions and finally we'll have our Accessibility Horror Story, this time a pretty common one, and, finally, we'll have some tips and our sounds of the world. Let's begin.

Welcome to Brussels.

[Music]

Old and modern Europe coalesce in the city, with solid glass buildings in the European quarter coexisting with airy Gothic and Baroque-style spires in the Old Town. Brussels, capital of Europe and home to the European Parliament, is known for its picturesque Grand Place, its unique Atomium and its Belgian chocolate.

We're on board of Brussels' subway to give our score on Transportation accessibility.

We are giving it 2.5 out of 5 stars. Even though, 70% of subway stations have elevators, nearly all of them have a gap plus a 15 or 20cm step to board. Assistance needs to be booked and, in most of stations, as there is seldom staff in place, you need to do it in advance, rendering the service nearly unusable for visitors, if they cannot manage said step on their own. Accessible stations underway are being adapted under this "accessible with assistance" method, which, if assistance is not available anytime, totally destroys the meaning of accessible. Fortunately, buses are nearly 100% wheelchair accessible, free of charge by courtesy for wheelchair users and, thus, are the recommended means of transport.

[Music] This rhythmic sound are the audio signals of some of Brussels' traffic lights for people with visual impairments. And, as we are on Brussels' streets, we are going to give our score on Streets accessibility, we are giving it 2 out of 5 stars. Brussels is the city of cobblestone. The older the cobblestone, the worse it is, so expect a bumpy ride while visiting the city, both on streets and on sidewalks. Uphill streets around the center, missing curb cuts every now and then, lack of tactile pavement, along with the ever-present cobblestone, make it an unfriendly walk for people with mobility impairments. Use buses as much as you can.

Next, Restaurants and Shops. Also, we are giving it 2 out of 5 stars. Few entrances are wheelchair accessible and many have more than one step to access. When the weather is good, terraces in restaurants around squares or food courts, such as WOLF, are your best bet. Anyway, with some extra wheeling, you will always find a place to eat, as there are many options around, though it may not be what you were looking for. Accessible toilets are also an extremely rare sight.

Following, Hotels and Accommodations we are giving it 3.5 stars. There are many accessible hotels in the mid-high budget range in the center of Brussels. Lower budget options are in the outskirts of the city and transportation issues make them less convenient. AirBnB apartments and the likes are mostly wheelchair inaccessible.

[Music] We're on one of Brussels parks to give our score on Tourist attraction accessibility: 2.5 stars. Most outdoor attractions, such as, the Grand Place or Mont-des-Arts, are feasible on a wheelchair (better if it is electric, has some kind of power assist or has bigger front wheels), though be ready for rough cobblestone and steep streets anyway. However, many indoor attractions are not wheelchair accessible due to steps, stairs or a lack of elevators. For instance, only the top observation deck of Atomium has elevator access. Also, few of the attractions offer accessibility for people with visual or hearing impairments. The Musical Instrument Museum is a pleasant exception.

And, finally, we're in Gare du Nord, one of Brussels major train stations to give our score on Getting there. We are giving it 4 out of 5 stars. As you will hear, announcements in the station are given both in Flemish and in French.

[Loudspeakers]

From Brussels airport to the city center there are two accessible bus lines that get you there in about 30 minutes. Assistance for other options needs to be booked in advance.

With this we have reached the end of the review and our overall accessibility score for Brussels is 2.8 out of 5 stars. Get ready for the fight with cobblestone and other mobility mishaps and for the fact that Brussels' accessibility doesn't match by far its weight as the capital of Europe. What does indeed match it, though, is its magnificent historic center that still make it a must see destination. Pretty good accommodation and "getting there" accessibility somewhat save the day.

Okay, remember, as always, that this was just a summary. If you want access to the full report, that this time contains a lot of interesting tips from Eleonora from Tabi Folk, you can visit us at [troublewithme.com](http://troublewithme.com) or at the Tabi Folk community. Okay, now it's time to move on to our tourist attraction review and we are going to The High Line Park in New York.

[Music]

The High Line Park, a former elevated railway cargo line transformed into a 2.3km long park in the heart of Manhattan, is one of the hidden gems of New York. Away from the noisy streets, it offers nature, temporary art exhibits, a peaceful walk and nice views of the city.

The High Line is really wheelchair accessible. Think of it as an elevated walkway with 4 elevators along the way to access it and a couple of long access slopes, although these are not open all year long. In contrast with other parks, its pavement is smooth, as it's mostly concrete tiles or well placed and maintained boardwalks and the occasional ramps have a mild incline. Unfortunately, there is a lack of tactile pavement and many of the access stairways or steps transforming into benches have poor contrast. On the other hand, there are plenty of rest areas and, as we can hear...

...the general atmosphere is calm and relaxing. Free admission for everyone is a great bonus. For all this, we are giving an overall accessibility score for The High Line of 4 out of 5 stars.

[Music] Again, this was a summary. You can find all the information on The High Line, how to access it, where are the elevators and more, on Tabi Folk community or a [troublewithme.com](http://troublewithme.com). Before, we said that today's accessibility horror story was common. We actually meant that, unfortunately, it is too common. So now, without further ado, let's move on to our Accessibility Horror Story.

[Music]

At last, after nearly three years of, first, staying full-time at home and, then, reducing my social life to mostly none, all due to the pandemics, just getting out for medical reasons or exercising outdoors to try to keep in shape, I was taking a plane and traveling again.

To get back into the tourism business, I decided to start with a familiar place, a wheelchair friendly hotel in the south of Tenerife, where planning for accessibility and potential issues would be far easier, as I had already been there a few times. Actually, I say tourism business, but the idea was not to do any tourism at all. As I already knew the island, truth is I just wanted to relax, regain the feel for travel and see how I could manage with the new health restrictions.

Anyway, despite going to a familiar destination, I did prepare a bit beforehand. For instance, I bought a tracker for my wheelchair, so as if it got lost during the flight, as getting it broken is not the only concern when flying, at least I would know its estimate whereabouts. Once, a few years back, when going to Paris, my suitcase was sent instead to Rome and was only able to recover it two months later after they were able to find it and send it back. Imagine having a similar issue with your wheelchair...

So, with the tracker set, a backpack for luggage, my FFP3 and a week's worth medication, plus a few extra just in case, I got to the check-in counter a bit more than two hours before the flight. The process was slow, as always when traveling with a wheelchair and a battery powered assistive device. This time, though, I just showed the battery compliance certificate with all its specs and, surprisingly, I didn't have to wait for them to call a dozen times to make sure about what all the numbers meant and whether it should travel in the cabin or in the hold. Is it that difficult to know that current air regulations say that a battery under 300 watts per hour is alright and that it should be always carried with you in the cabin?

Well, as I was saying, the check-in process, as well as the later security check (also thrilling when traveling with cables, mobility devices and the likes) and the boarding process, went as smoothly

as they could. Once on the plane, I checked the location of the wheelchair and, at least, the map showed that it was near me, so hopefully it was also on board. A bit later, a flight attendant came and told me that in case of emergency I should stay in my place and, after evacuating everyone, they would come for me. It was the first time in dozens of flights that they told me something like this. I found it a bit weird. I imagined the plane burning after an emergency landing or something and me waiting in place. Sure, they would come for my ashes.

Anyway, after three hours and a half of reveling in the comforts of air travel, as comfortable as seating can get when you're one meter tall and all the curves in your body are in the wrong places, we landed. I waited for everyone to get off the plane and for the assistance to come. It took some time, so I decided to check back on the wheelchair tracker. The map showed that the wheelchair was still in Barcelona. I panicked a bit, but took a deep filtered breath, and looked again. Sometimes, data takes some time to update and, for the tracker to work, it needed a phone nearby to pick on its location. Now the map showed that the wheelchair was in Tenerife. I felt relieved, but, unfortunately, things had just started...

The assistance arrived and they led me to my wheelchair. Just as I stepped on the footrest, it fell apart. At first, I thought that its screws might have come loose, so I took the Allen wrench that I carry on it to tighten them. As I was going to do it, I realized that two out of three, as well as a few pieces, were missing on the left side. The assistance guy looked at me with a shrug. For the time being, it would have to do with the single screw. As I had to really tighten it with my bum fingers, I worried that my index might pop out -listen to the horror story on episode 5 for more context-, so I went for the custom made hand brace that I use in these occasions. It was not in the pouch under my wheelchair. Great. It had fallen during the trip. The only way that it could have fallen was if the wheelchair had been shaken upside down... anyway, my mistake, I should have taken it with me.

Getting over it, I did as I could and screwed the screw trying not to screw it. It barely held with the footrest tilted and unable to bear any weight on it. I managed to hold my feet high, resting them a bit on the sides of the wheelchair frame. An unridable position while going downhill, uphill or while crossing a mere curb cut. It could only work for a short while in the smooth pavement of the airport. If I couldn't fix it, my vacation was over before having started.

I spent the next hour going to the airline booth and filling complain forms. They told me that the next day I could leave the wheelchair on a repair shop of their choosing (your extra common wheelchair repair shop that you can find on any run of the mill small town...) or that I could wait until I went back to Barcelona, fix it there and send them the budget. I would not spend my relaxing vacation going back and forth to said repair shop that for sure would be in the capital, a 100km away from my hotel, waiting for them to repair my custom footrest and, at best, wasting a couple or three days, plus precious energy in the process. I told them that I would do the second and started thinking how to solve it on my own. Actually, I'm very bad with my hands, but I usually don't lack on crazy ideas. I had a bit more than an hour on the way to the hotel and, by the time I got there, I had a plan in mind.

As I got to the room, I did my best impersonation of MacGyver. I took a better look of the footrest and realized that one of the two missing screws was in fact broken and stuck inside the frame of

the chair. How the hell do you break the shaft of a nearly 1cm wide screw in half? By throwing the wheelchair from a few meters high? By ramming a 100kg suitcase into it? Whatever...

I spread my emergency kit tools on the floor, the Allen wrench, a multipurpose star with different size screwdriver heads, a few velcro strips, duct tape and some cable ties. I decided on the cable ties, as the screws were missing or unusable, and the velcro and the tape would not hold well while bearing weight. Thus, I took three cable ties and looped and chained them to make a cord with open ends. Then, I threaded it into a hole onto the side of the footrest and looped the other end to the wheelchair frame near the seat. Little by little, I tightened it and carefully redid the remaining screw. I stepped on the makeshift footrest and it held. I stood on it, as I always do to reach hotel sinks (even accessible ones), and it held.

Actually, it held for the whole week and, after a good night's rest, I was able to enjoy my relaxing holiday and rekindled my love for travel. When I came back, I indeed went to my wheelchair shop and they were able to properly fix the thing. By the way, after nearly six months, I'm still waiting for the airline to pay for the repairs. It doesn't look that they will... but that's another story...

[Music]

We've reached the end of the story and, with this, we've gotten to our tip of the day.

Wheelchairs getting broken, mobility devices getting broken or even getting lost or whatever. Airlines not paying or paying way less than the real cost are, unfortunately, common issues for, well, disabled travelers. So, what are our tips for today with this complicated issue that we are facing. Well, our first tip is to always carry with you some kind of emergency toolkit. As you saw, I was able to more or less repair the damage with some cable ties, but other tools are also very very useful, such as, velcro strips or, such as, duct tape. You should also carry different kinds of wrenches or screws or screwdriver heads because, if the whole screw is longer than 6 centimeters, it won't be allowed on board and I usually prefer to carry everything on board, just in case, you know, the suitcase also gets lost.

So, you have to carry the tools that fit your wheelchair or mobility device, specially screwdrivers or wrenches are quite specific to some wheelchairs, so check it in advance.

Also, another important thing is, if your wheelchair does get damaged, you should fill, always always fill, the complaint at the same airport. Sometimes that may be an issue, if you've got a connection flight, but you should least take the form to fill afterwards, but if you can do it like in place, it's... your options of getting paid are quite higher. So, also another thing that you should do, you should not take too long to send them like the budget or the repair cost because I took a little bit of time to do it... well, my wheelchair shop is not the fastest... and, afterwards like the company decided not to reply to me anymore.

So, this is the second tip, be as fast as you can and fill the complaints there at the airport. If the airline doesn't reply, don't despair, you can still send your complaint to the organization in your country for air passenger rights. Usually, it's the same that deals with air security. Okay, so they will get in touch with your airline and they will deal with it and, if your airline doesn't pay, they will

fine the airline. Okay, so, well, usually airlines, if you go to this kind of organization in your country, in the end they do reply.

That's it for today. As a heads up for our next episode, we are just saying that we are going to be visiting London. And to wrap it up, let's move on to our sounds of the world.

[Music]

For today's first sound, we are back in Brussels hearing some rolling wheels.

But these are no wheelchair wheels. It may be a bit difficult to guess with those that are not familiar with the sport. Today's sound is a treat for my nephew Marc. This is a skate park in the outskirts of Brussels.

[Music]

And our second sound is the carillon from Mont-des-Arts, also in Brussels.

[Music] With this lively sound, we say goodbye, have a nice day and see you next time, fellow travelers.