

Episode 9 - 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 9: Trouble in London. And, on today's menu, we've got an accessibility review of said city. Then we are going to travel to Madrid for our accessibility Horror Story, this time with a not so good ending... of course with some accessibility tips. And, to wrap it up, we've got a return from our news reporter and we'll finish it with some sounds of the world. Let's begin.

Welcome to London.

[Music]

A city flowing along the river Thames and its vivid green parks, London is a melting pot of cultures where British politeness and everyone speaking a second language will make you feel at home while away. Its majestic palaces, eclectic neighborhoods and back alleys full of history make it a story to remember.

[Sound]

We are on board of London's Elizabeth line to give our score on Transportation accessibility.

We are giving it 4.5 out of 5 stars. Even though underground accessibility is a bit complex to navigate for visiting wheelchair or mobility scooter users, as only around 40% of stations are step free and some of them still require a ramp to board (just ask staff in place for it), the rest of the transportation system is top notch accessibility wise. 100% of the bus network is accessible, plus free for wheelchair users and a companion, 100% of the trams, DLR light trains, the Elizabeth line and most of the river services are accessible too. Hearing loops are also common in the transportation system. Tactile pavement is still not completely widespread, but blind riders can ask staff to guide them through stations. All this would give transportation in London a 4 out of 5 stars, but the icing on the cake is that all London taxis (black cabs) are wheelchair accessible too!

[Ambulance] Next, Streets accessibility. 4 out of 5 stars. Despite some occasional cobblestone, streets in London are mostly accessible, as sidewalks are well maintained and there is tactile pavement and curb cuts on all crossings. Also, instead of audio signals, traffic lights have rotating cones under the button box that spin once the light turns green for people with visual impairments. The only drawbacks are that said button always needs to be pushed for most traffic lights to turn green, which may be difficult for some wheelchair users, and, in general, the short time given to cross.

Now, Restaurants and shops: 3 out of 5 stars. Around 50% of entrances are wheelchair accessible, which is not bad, although the oldest and most traditional shops tend to have steps to access. As for restaurants, even if sometimes main entrances have steps, look out for side entrances, as there are many that are accessible.

Hotels and accommodations: 4 stars. There are many wheelchair accessible hotels in the city. High hotel prices, in general, are the only issue. For a budget option, hostels from the Youth Hostel Association (YHA) tend to be either wheelchair accessible or have some accessibility features.

[Music] "Time after time"

This was a cover of the Time After Time song from Cyndi Lauper. It was in Covent Garden and we are here to give our score on Tourist attraction accessibility. We are giving it 4.5 out of 5 stars. Information on accessibility is easy to find online and is one of the best in the world. Among the main tourist attractions, most are fully wheelchair accessible, except for Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London that have some inaccessible areas. A special mention to park's accessibility, which is top notch, and also to hearing loops, audio descriptive guides and other features for people with hearing and visual impairments being quite widespread. The only issue is that to get wheelchair seating or disability tickets for musicals in the West End and for some museums, you need to contact by phone or through a specific online form, which can be quite inconvenient.

"...board the train immediately. Stand clear of the closing doors, stand clear, stand clear, please".

We are on board of Heathrow Express.

"This is the Heathrow Express train to London Paddington. The next station is Heathrow Central...".

To give our score on "Getting there" accessibility. It is a 5 out of 5 stars. From all London airports to the city center there are fast wheelchair accessible train connections. Some destinations may require a ramp to get off, so ask station staff at the airports and they will help you on the go. You can also take accessible taxis (black cabs) without prior reservation, although fares can get quite expensive.

With this we have reached the end of the report and our overall accessibility score for London is 4.2 out of 5 stars. Currently, London is one of the most accessible cities in the world with all its scores being above average and some of them nearly perfect. There has been a clear effort by the city to take into account people with different kinds of disabilities, specially in transportation, streets and tourist attractions access.

Remember that this is just a summary. If you want the full report, you can download it from troublewithme.com or at TabiFolk community. And now let's move on to our accessibility horror story.

[Music]

A few years ago, I was looking for a job. I wanted a position more or less according to my studies. I had already entered a few selection processes and, usually, after clearing the first interviews with human resources, I was ruled out in later interviews with my potential bosses. Upon seeing me, one meter tall and a wheelchair user, they changed to patronizing ways and ended up offering me positions that didn't even require any studies.

For those of you who may be unfamiliar with disability policies, many countries have laws that require companies over a certain number of employees to hire a small percentage of people with disabilities (usually between a 1-2%). That is necessary because there's still much discrimination against disabled people, but, unfortunately, companies usually settle with offering low paying jobs to clear the law and don't really believe that true inclusion at all levels will, in fact, make them more successful.

Anyway, after a few of these rejections, frustration started to build and the pressing matter of getting a job made me apply for companies throughout the whole country and even abroad. A given day, I had an interview at 1pm near Madrid. At the time, I was living in Barcelona, 500km away, so I would take a bullet train early in the morning and then another local train to the town in the outskirts of the city. The interview was for a leading tech company. I had already cleared the first couple of steps online and it was time to meet the chief department in person.

That day I got to the bullet train station earlier than 8am, a bit more than 30 minutes before the departure of the train, as stated for those that request assistance. About 10 minutes to the departure time, station staff led me to the platform and a portable hydraulic lift helped me board the train. Said lifts are out of order quite often and most times they realize it when actually trying to board you, so I was relieved when everything worked smoothly, as being rush hour, the assistance crew was a bit undermanned if anything went wrong. Nothing of this would be necessary if newer trains had been built step-free, but maybe that's too much to ask...

Whatever, 2 hours and a half later, I got to Madrid, I bought tickets for the local train from a vending machine (another accessibility fight that I'm really used to) and changed platforms in the same station. So far so good.

It was 11am and the local train ride to my destination was less than 30 minutes long with a frequency of trains every 10-12 minutes, so apparently I had plenty of time, as the later walk to the company was less than 10 minutes. The only uncertainty was that not all trains serving the line were wheelchair accessible, according to the website every one in two, but actual schedules were not available until the same day. So much for planning...

That day, said website was not working and station panels didn't give any accessibility information either, so there was no way to check whether the following trains were accessible or not. I had a margin of nearly 90 minutes, so that was about 8 trains. It should have been enough, right? The first train passed, not accessible. A second one passed. Not accessible either.

On another platform, an accessible train stopped. It was going to my destination. They had changed platforms at the last minute and with the wheelchair I didn't have enough time to do the transfer. I also realized that not all cars were accessible. Only one and not even all doors at that

car were. Again, only one. So out of the 15 or more doors to board, only one was accessible and the place it stopped was not marked on the platform, as all trains were different and the position of the accessible door also varied. So much for convenience...

I started fretting that maybe I had missed the accessible door of the first couple of trains. Observing other platforms, I saw that more or less accessible doors, marked by a blue wheelchair sign, stopped within a 30 meter range around the middle of the platform. I position myself there and waited again. As the fourth and fifth trains passed, I strained my eyes trying to locate the doors. People were gathering at the station, so pinpointing the sign between butts and legs was not an easy task either. If I hadn't missed it, they were not accessible.

My leeway had shrunk to barely 30 minutes. I decided to go to the information point to tell them the situation and ask if they knew about the next accessible train. So far, only 1 out of 5 had been accessible and that one had stopped at another platform. I was worried that while leaving the boarding area a train might pass, but I couldn't afford missing any more, so I preferred having specific information. Accessible taxis were not an option either, as waiting times went up to 30 minutes and by car the way was longer than by train and I would already be late for the interview. For the taxi option, I would have had to commit to it at the beginning, just as I arrived in Madrid. Now it was a no go.

After waiting for 5 minutes for someone to appear at the info point, they told me that they didn't know if the next trains would be accessible, as the website was down, but that one out of two should be. I insisted and they made a couple of phone calls. Theoretically, the next two would be. I went back to the platform. A lot of people were waiting. As the train began entering the station, I frantically started looking for the accessible door. The first car went by, no door. The second, no door. Would the accessible door stop further behind where I wouldn't see it? I moved a bit and, just as I was going one way, I managed to see the blue wheelchair sign going the other way and stopping 20 meters away from me. People started rushing in and out of the train. I started going towards it, but I couldn't thread my way fast enough. It was impossible that the driver had seen me among so many people and with the accessible door being so many meters away from the head of the train, so the only option was for me to reach the door in time. Just as the platform cleared, the door shut and the train left. I missed it. It had not even been close.

I looked at the watch and my leeway was nearly gone. I decided to bet on the next accessible door stopping at the same place. I waited. Anxiety was bursting out my chest. The following train was getting late. With a 10 minute delay, the train finally appeared and the accessible door indeed stopped within 5 meters of my position. At last, I was able to board it.

I decided to spend the 25 minute trip, rechecking the route from the station to the company. The area was an industrial complex and street accessibility, as per my previous Google Street view investigation, left much to be desired. Uneven sidewalks, missing curb cuts and the likes. I was ready for it and memorized again the route with a small detour to avoid the worst parts. On the way to my destination, the train stopped at several theoretically accessible stations with either a huge gap or step, or both, to get off. So much for accessibility...

Luckily, when the time came, I was able to get off without much trouble. I rushed out of the station and wheeled as fast as I could to the company, jumping kerbs and riding on the road several times. As I got to the main entrance, there were a few steps, so I did a detour and entered through the parking lot. I got to the interview 5 minutes late. I was unnerved. They were already waiting for me. I tried to briefly explain, but I dreaded that no one unfamiliar with accessibility would believe such a surreal story.

The interview wasn't bad, they were not patronizing, so it might have been a nice place to work. Unfortunately, the initial situation had probably decided its outcome. Who would hire someone that was not even on time on their selection process? They didn't contact me again.

By chance, the next day I had an interview also in Madrid. That time I was early and, two months later, I was moving to live in the city. But that's another story...

[Music]

Well, that was quite intense. And with this, we've gotten to our tip of the day.

But before, I would like to do a small rant. Okay, people! Half-assed accessibility is not accessibility. If you are supposed to do something that's accessible, please, consult with accessibility experts and do some accessibility tests with real real users. Anyone could have told you that, well, a door that does not stop in the same place is not accessible or that schedules that are not available beforehand are useless because you cannot plan at all. So it rends the whole train, well, inaccessible. Anyway that's it for the small rant. Sorry, sorry... and, let's go to the tip of the day. Okay, if you're not sure of accessibility, don't go on an exploration type of trip when having an event to attend, a train to board or a plane to catch. Rely on accessible taxis, if there are any, even though, well, they are more expensive. And, if the exploration is unavoidable, go way way way in advance and don't mind wasting some time if you are too early. In short, don't plan with a tight schedule when traveling, it's both more stressful and it increases the chances of something going wrong. And, as an extra tip, well don't hesitate to ask. Don't hesitate to go and ask for information if you need it or ask for a help. In general, it is the fastest solution, so don't be shy, don't be stubborn, don't hesitate to ask. If afterwards they are rude or they don't want to work, well, maybe you can try to insist a little bit and, if you are not successful, at least you tried.

Okay, and now it's time for a section that's been missing for a while. Let's try to connect with our news reporter to give our latest on accessibility around the world.

Thank you, thank you. Here is your forgetful news reporter, well, so forgetful that I even forgot about this section for several episodes and I'm probably going to forget about it for the rest of the season... sorry, sorry. Today I'm reporting from the floor. It's a really nice floor, tatami floor, really comfy, so don't worry about me, I'm fine fine. Okay, so today's news are first bringing us to New York. Let's go! Broadway is bringing theater to a neurodiverse audience. the theatre Development Fund has worked with Broadway's theaters and producers to organize 6 performances a year that are autism-friendly. The producers alter their shows by decreasing the auditory and visual stimuli, either reducing or eliminating loud or sudden noises and avoiding or removing sudden light changes, bright lights and any strobe effects. The auditorium lights are dimmed and the

auditorium is never in total darkness. The theaters also provide quiet break out areas where people can go if they need a quiet break from the show. These performances are only open to neuro diverse people and their families.

Next. Wheelchair accessible taxis to be in service in Hong Kong. SynCap Taxi company in Hong Kong has announced a trial project that will last from 4 to 6 months that will deploy 2 wheelchair accessible taxis in the city. The models will be Nissan Serena e-Power adapted taxis with convertible seats and an adjustable ramp. After the trial period, a total of 100 vehicles are expected to be introduced.

Thanks a lot forgetful reporter. We really needed to know the details about your floor. By the way, if you want to read the full news, you can find the links on our podcast notes that are at troublewithme.com or at TabiFolk community. And just a small heads up, for our following episode we are going to be visiting Tokyo. With this we have reached the end of the show and, as always, we'll say goodbye with some sounds of the world.

[Train tracks]

For today's sounds, we are going back to London.

“100 to Saint Paul's...”

The first one is a kind of bumpy bus ride near the area known as The City of London. Don't worry, bumpy but safe.

“...Alight here for Liverpool Street Station.”

Pay attention because we are going to hear the deployment of the accessible ramp.

[Music]

For our second sound, we've got the unmistakable opening of The Lion King.

This is one of the musicals in London's West End.

And with this fantastic sound, we are going to say goodbye, have a good day and see you next time, fellow travelers.

[Music]