Cruise Ship Accommodations for Passengers With Physical Limitations Due to Disability or Age

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Meyer (1972/1977) stated that each person has an intrinsic need for balance of work, play, and rest to attain wholesome living. Play, for adults, is referred to as leisure time or avocational activities. Leisure may encompass a wide variety of activities from sports, to gardening, to art, to travel. The U.S. Travel Data Center (1993) reported that 740 million leisure trips were completed within the United States and 45.9 million outside the country during 1993. Of those persons who chose travel as a means of leisure, 4.5 million selected a cruise ship vacation in 1993 (Cruise Lines International Association, 1995). Unfortunately, no information is available on how many of these 4.5 million passengers had physical disabilities.

The Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA, Public Law 101-336) assures persons with disabilities equal access to many social areas of life, such as transportation, public accommodations, and recreation. Titles II and III of the ADA prohibit discrimination of these areas by privately owned entities and require that all areas be "readily accessible" (Commerce Clearing House, Inc., 1990, p. 15). These accommodations would allow the person to enter and use the facility with the expense for such modification the responsibility of the private entity.

Those cruise ships that are registered in foreign countries (e.g., Honduras, Panama, Liberia) do not need to comply with the ADA. For them, accommodations to improve accessibility are not required. Only one cruise line, Royal Caribbean, reported that it is providing accommodations in accordance with the ADA on each new ship. In addition, it has conducted sensitivity seminars in the area of disabilities with ship management and employees.

Method

We conducted a telephone survey of eight cruise lines regarding the types of accommodations available for passengers with physical disabilities and for elderly passengers. One of these cruise lines is the day cruise named Discovery, which is Miami-based. The other cruise lines and ships, Carnival, Dolphin, Royal Majesty, Norwegian, Windjammer, Queen Elizabeth II, and Royal Caribbean, are nationally known and offer both short-term and extended-term cruises. We requested written responses, but only three cruise lines, Royal Caribbean, Norwegian, and Discovery, complied. The remainder responded that all written information was internal and referred us to a designated employee from guest relations or the sales-service department to answer questions.
Results
Carnival

Registered in Liberia, Carnival requests notification of the disability when reservations are made. Passengers must bring their own wheelchair because none are available on the ship, and the wheelchair must not be wider than 22 in. (standard width is 28–30 in.). Older ships (before the Sensation in 1993) do not have entrance ramps to public areas, and staff members are not required to provide assistance; however, in the newer ships (including the Sensation, Fascination, Imagination), all areas are accessible. Approximately 15 cabins in each of the newer ships are accessible with wider doorways (31 in. for entrance, 24 in. for bathroom), built-in shower seats, remote control for the television, and a lower peephole in the door (cruise line was unable to determine the exact height but stated that it would be accessible from the wheelchair).

Passengers with visual or hearing impairment must be self-sufficient or accompanied by a companion without disability. Guide dogs are allowed. Passengers in need of dialysis must bring their own machine because there is not one on the ship, and no supervision is provided. Women must be less than 8 months pregnant because no medical services are available for this condition. Passengers requiring oxygen must notify the cruise line when reservations are made. Information about the quantity, quality, class type, and manner in which the oxygen is contained must be provided when reservations are made. An oxygen concentrator can be used in the cabin, and the passenger is responsible for supplying the oxygen and backup.

Dolphin

Registered in Panama and Liberia, Dolphin stated that of its three ships, only one, the SeaBreeze, has all floors accessible by wheelchair via the elevator. However, on that one ship, not all cabins or areas on all floors are accessible. All cabin entry ways can be adapted by adding a temporary ramp to allow wheelchair accessibility, but cabins do not include any accommodations (e.g., larger bathrooms, grab bars) for passengers with disabilities. A companion without disability must accompany the passenger, and all passengers with physical disabilities must sign a consent to release the cruise from liability in case of emergency. All doorways are 22 in. wide, so wheelchairs must be less than 22 in. wide and must be collapsible. No guide dogs are allowed.

Royal Majesty

Royal Majesty is a sister cruise line to Dolphin and is registered in Panama. All levels of its ship are accessible by wheelchair. Four cabins on the ship are available to passengers with physical disabilities, with wider doorways (29.5 in. wide compared with 26.7 in.-wide doorways for the standard cabins), wider bathroom doorways (37.4 in. wide, no threshold), and larger bathrooms with grab bars and tub benches. No guide dogs are allowed on the ships.

Windjammer

Registered in Honduras, Windjammer has no accommodations for passengers with physical disabilities. It stated that a recent passenger had hearing impairments and enjoyed the cruise, but no accommodations were made.

Queen Elizabeth II

Registered in England, the Queen Elizabeth II reported that wheelchair-accessible cabins are available. Passengers with visual impairments may be accompanied by guide dogs and are responsible for the dog in the cabin. A kernel is available on the ship but is not wheelchair accessible. Guide dogs are not allowed in the restaurant.

Royal Caribbean

Royal Caribbean ships are registered in Liberia, Norway, and the Bahamas. Four of the Royal Caribbean cruise ships, the Nordic Empress, Viking Serenade, Monarch of the Seas, and Majesty of the Seas, have wheelchair-accessible cabins. Both the entrance and bathroom doorways of these cabins range in width from 30 to 33.25 in. compared with 23 in. for the standard cabin, and the cabins allow for wheelchair turnaround. Portable or extendable-cord-length telephones, bathroom hand rails, fold-down shower stools, and raised toilets (heights range from 17.5–18.5 in.) are also provided. Assistive listening device kits are available on the Viking Serenade, Monarch of the Seas, Sun Viking, and Song of Norway and include a strobe light for a knock on the door, an alarm that vibrates, a strobe light if the telephone rings, and a telephone hand-set amplifier. All ships provide sound-enhancing devices for use in the showrooms. Public restrooms with wider doorways and equipped with strobe lights for the general alarm are found on the Nordic Empress, Monarch of the Seas, Majesty of the Seas, Sovereign of the Seas, and the Song of America.

This cruise line requires advanced notice regarding the type of disability and, upon arrival at the ship, the steward must be informed. Alternate ground transportation is available for passengers that are unable to board the buses. It is recommended, but not required, that a
passenger with physical disability be accompanied by a companion without disability. The crew members have been trained to assist in cases of emergencies.

Passengers requiring Continuous Ambulatory Peritoneal Dialysis, intravenous feedings, or insulin must have the solutions or medication sent to the ship at least 3 days before sailing. Insulin injection may be given by the ship's physician at an additional cost. Passengers requiring oxygen must provide their own liquid oxygen portable tank, which may be kept in the cabin, and mother tank, which is kept locked on the open deck, or compressed oxygen gas in cylinders. An oxygen concentrator may be used unrestricted in the cabin. Women who will be 6 or more months pregnant at the time of sailing must provide a letter of approval from her attending physician. Guide dogs are allowed.

Norwegian

Registered in the Bahamas, Norwegian stated that in all new ships the public areas (e.g., dining room, casino) are accessible by wheelchairs or motorized scooters, as are certain designated cabins. For the Seaward and all ships built since 1993, cabins have wider doorways (cabin and bathroom entrances are 38 in. compared with the 25-in. width of the standard cabins) and larger bathrooms that include shower stalls that wheelchairs may roll into, shower benches that are built into the wall, grab bars, and hand-held shower heads. These ships also include cabins for passengers with hearing impairments that are furnished with a panel of three lights to notify the passenger whether the telephone rings, there is a knock on the door, or there is an emergency on the ship. Guide dogs are allowed if the passenger is completely (not legally) blind.

Discovery

Registered in Panama, Discovery specializes in 1-day or 2-day cruises from Miami to Freeport, Bahamas. Parking for passengers with disabilities is available at no charge. Passengers with physical disabilities must bring their own collapsible, 22-in, wide wheelchair and have a companion without disability, who is needed to assist in entering public rooms and restrooms because of thresholds and to carry the passenger with physical disability on exiting the ship at Freeport because the gangway is not wheelchair accessible. Passengers with visual impairments must also be accompanied by a person without disability. An elevator is available to the main decks but not to the top deck. Two cabins are accessible by wheelchair. Passengers with crutches must sign a liability release form.

Implications for Occupational Therapy

The cruise lines could, through the removal of physical barriers, present an ideal vacation package for passengers with physical disabilities and for elderly passengers, thereby increasing their markets. A cruise ship offers a self-contained environment where meals and countless activities are scheduled throughout each day and night. The need for off-ship travel is eliminated except at the various destination sites where sightseeing tours or other activities may be planned but not required.

Although cruise lines with foreign registry do not need to comply with the ADA, many, as our results indicate, have completed or are completing modifications to their newer ships to enable easier accessibility in the cabins and throughout the public areas on the ships. Such improvements are positive, but more are needed. On the basis of their experience in evaluating and adapting environments in home and industrial settings, occupational therapists could consult and educate cruise lines on modifications and adaptations for various diagnoses to accommodate passengers with various types of physical disabilities and the special needs of elderly passengers. Such adaptations could include door knob extensions placed on all doors of modified cabins and in public areas to allow for increased leverage, replacement of chrome bathroom fixtures with white fixtures to decrease glare from lighting, and removal of doorway thresholds to improve wheelchair mobility. Occupational therapists are ideal candidates to educate the cruise lines for future, increased markets. ▲

References


