

Study abroad in a wheelchair: Tough travels teach a lesson

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It is FIU's most unusual study abroad program. **College of Education** Professor Alexis McKenney took 10 students to Europe this summer *not* to expose them to art and culture. Rather, she wanted the group to encounter firsthand the hardships of navigating foreign destinations while dealing with disabilities. Although all of the students on the trip were fully abled, McKenney had them acting the roles of paraplegic and blind tourists.

A specialist in **recreational therapy**, McKenney got the idea a few years ago when using Paris's Metro subway system. She saw almost no riders with disabilities. "This class was not intended to highlight problems in other countries, but to learn about the challenges people confront when traveling," said McKenney, who asked the students to consider also the barriers faced by those with cognitive disabilities and the elderly. "Students learned to look at every place with a more critical eye. They learned to think about what they can do to help others be able to fully experience everything."

McKenney is onto something. Within days of her group's leaving Italy, an outcry over poor accessibility to public transportation for people with disabilities led to a **social media campaign** to draw attention to the problem.

Senior recreational studies major Tatiana Sadler participated in **the excursion** and described the unique experience.

By Tatiana Sadler

Traveling through Europe can be exciting, but imagine trying to do it with a disability. The difficulty starts the moment you decide to take the journey. If you are unable to use your legs, for example, you will be stuck: many buses, hotels, trains and even sidewalks—often narrow, centuries-old cobblestone paths—are not wheelchair accessible. Still willing to give it a try? Well, then expect your traveling companions to shoulder much of the burden. It won't be easy for either of you.



Sasha Maldonado, in flowered shirt, helps fellow student Manny Perez navigate the streets of Florence during FIU's "Inclusive Recreation Services" study abroad program.

Historic buildings posed great barriers. Most lacked elevators large enough to fit a wheelchair or had no elevators at all. Florence's famed **Palazzo Vecchio** did have elevators but no signage to help us locate them. And a restaurant in which we ate in France had its sole restroom on a floor lower than the dining room and only stairs to get there.

Traveling by wheelchair through Paris required much fortitude. Elevators were often not available in subway stations, so instead we took buses and trolleys. Frustrations associated with the language barrier, the complexity of the city map and the lack of ramps were compounded by the occasional rude bus driver. Seeing four of us in wheelchairs at one stop—yes, we often traveled in a group—one refused to put down the ramp for us and then tried to close the door as our companions lifted us aboard. (By contrast, the driver who stopped to pick us up on the way back behaved exactly opposite: he lowered the ramp and got out to help us.)



Flying blind: A ride on the Paris Metro

Switching gears to understand how a person with blindness might experience a trip abroad, I donned a blindfold. As a sighted individual, I found a Paris subway ride without benefit of vision terrifying. Not knowing the height of a step or the width of the gap between the train and platform was frightening. Again, I had to shift control to someone else and trust that my guide would take care and precautions to get me to my destination safely.

Throughout the trip, we all stayed in “character,” never letting on that none of us truly had physical problems that impeded us. Sometimes we had to contend with “looks” from those around us or the impatience of those who wanted to pass by us.

As a recreational studies major, I took this trip because I really wanted to understand what those with disabilities face. I believe the experience gave all of us a new perspective on what some people have to deal with on both a regular basis and when they travel.

Despite the difficulties, I would recommend a trip abroad even to those with disabilities. I suggest that such travelers plan ahead, making sure they allow enough time between the places they wish to visit, and definitely have someone along who is willing and well prepared to help.

Traveling can broaden your outlook so that you have a better understanding of other cultures, and you learn to communicate in a new way. And it serves as an escape from the everyday. I think it is important to include people with disabilities because everybody should have that opportunity.

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