

TRAVEL TALK

The MS traveler

by Maxene Kupperman-Guiñals

Diagnosed with MS in 2003, I had to retire from teaching teachers in 2004. I was mostly exhausted, and I could no longer walk very well, even with a cane. Dizzy spells, balance problems, inability to remember details, constipation, leg spasms. I began to think my life would consist of sitting on my living room couch, if I could get to it from my bed. Travel? My self-injectable medication required full-time refrigeration. Even though I was pretty sure that MS would not shorten my life appreciably, I did believe it would curtail my joy.

I should tell you that I am a widow. I was 60 when I retired. I am fat, and I don't like to be told that I cannot do things. ("Stubbornly independent" might be the phrase for me.) My husband and I loved to travel, but since his loss I had no one to travel with. So what kind of traveling would I be able to do?

There is a tradition among teachers about retirement: Do not be in town that first September after you've retired. On the first day of school, be somewhere else!

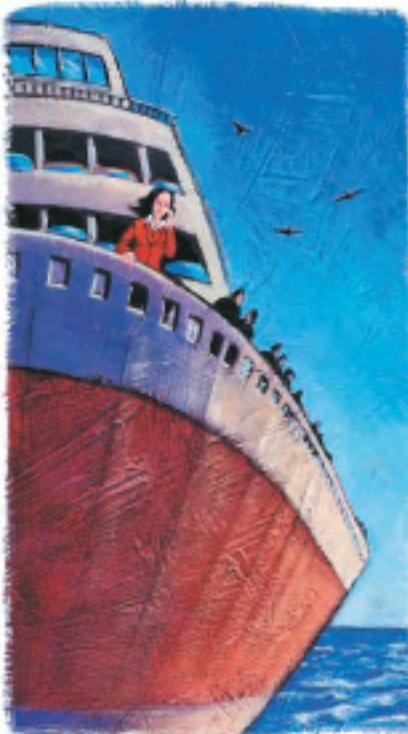
My dream had always been Italy. (Well, of course: Italy is a top destination spot in the world.) So I went ahead and planned my dream. At the end of August 2004, I left for a two-

month trip around Italy—by myself, with no itinerary.

Here is what I learned: I can do it!

The next year, I went for six weeks to Patagonia, Argentina—again by myself. Since then I've been on three cruises to the Caribbean, an excursion to Belgium, and an expedition to Cape Horn.

I think you can do it, too. Friends of mine who have MS and use walkers, scooters or wheelchairs have been to China, France and the Grand Canyon, alone or with partners. They are rich or they live modestly; they need a lot of medication or they take just a few pills. Some have distinct dietary requirements, and some can eat anything. But they all share the first rule of traveling: Trust that your abilities are stronger than your disabilities.



It starts with a dream

Although I took off with no itinerary, I would definitely recommend cruises if you don't get seasick. Almost every cruise line in the whole world has some adapted rooms. Most can meet dietary requirements. Many have scooters for rent or wheelchairs available for the asking. Each ship has to have a physician and nurses, and you will be asked to fill out a pre-boarding document that outlines your personal medical needs.

And every cruise ship in the world prefers to leave port with a full roster of guests, so the closer you get to a sailing date, the cheaper the state-rooms may become. Best of all, from the time you leave for the dock until your return to the home port, you don't have to carry anything.

Check out the cruise lines in the travel section of your local newspaper. It costs nothing to get on a mailing list. It's even easier to research on the Internet. If you search for "discount cruises" you'll get a huge number of sites to check out. You'll discover that some are party ships and others are very upscale and quiet. Be sure to ask plenty of questions. Whether you want to attend lectures or hang out in a sports bar, you deserve your dreams!

Maxene Kupperman-Guiñals is off again: A wedding in Belgium, a search for family history in Germany, and a cruise to Halifax are on her itinerary.

MS keeping you from your dream vacation? It might be time to start planning.