

Q How did you come to establish your own travel agency?

A I've been in the travel industry for more than two decades, since 1986, but for the first few years I worked for a large agency, where I specialized in the United Kingdom. I'd even completed a course from the Wales Tourist Board to become certified as a "Walesmaster." I'm also a "Scotsmaster," as well as a destination specialist for England and Ireland. Well, an elderly couple wanted to visit Wales because they had family connections there, but they didn't want to do a standard bus tour. Instead they wanted to take their time, staying in bed and breakfasts and really getting to know the people and the place. They called the British Tourist Authority, which is now called Visit Britain, who suggested they contact me, and I sat down with them to plan a tentative itinerary. They didn't have much money, but they'd been saving up for three years to take this trip, so it was really important to them. After I'd met with them the owner of the agency came over and asked what we were doing. I explained the situation, and he said to just put them on an escorted bus tour, where they'd be driven all over England and Scotland and only spend a day or so in Wales. He said the only way we'd earn a commission was by going with the established tour operators. I told him that's not what this couple wanted, and that they'd been specifically referred to me by the BTA. "It's their trip, after all," I said to him, and his response was basically "but you're my employee." Well, not anymore I wasn't. That was in October, and in November I printed up some business cards on my own and went to the World Travel Market in London, where I saw many of the British suppliers and hoteliers I'd gotten to know over the years. When I described my situation, the response was "it's about time you do something on your own," and they all agreed to pay me a commission for any business I could send their way. I decided to give it a shot for a year, and that was 15 years ago, in 1994.

Q That's a great story, and one that I think a lot of people can relate to. How did you get into accessible travel?

A About two years after I'd started the business I got a call from one of my husband's relatives who has multiple sclerosis and is in a large power chair as a result. He used to be a high school history teacher, and his wife really wanted to visit London with him for a week. She said they'd never traveled like this before and wondered if I could help them, so I told her I'd try. I made a few overseas calls and asked some good contacts about accessibility in London, but nobody really knew much about it, so I decided to find out myself. I met with them and said "tell me about your needs from the moment you wake up until you go to bed at night, I need to know everything," and then I made up a survey sheet based on what they told me about door widths, roll-in showers, grab bars, all of it. Then, armed with my checklist and a tape measure, I set out for London to get to work. You wouldn't believe how many toilets I measured. Then I came back and said "yes, you can do it," and a couple of months later they visited London for a week and had a great time. When they got back they spread the word about their trip among the members of their local MS support group, and that's when my phone really started ringing. It was like, "We can go to Europe? Nobody ever told us that!" So it just kind of opened a door to these people that they'd never expected to be opened, and that's really how I came to specialize in accessible travel.

Q I would think that your work is quite gratifying, opening that door wide for so many people.

A It really is, and it's amazing how travel can change people's lives. I had another client who was a retired college professor and wanted to visit a small village in England where his family came



from that shared his last name. He didn't really have any family here in the States and wanted to see if he had any relations there. This was a tiny little village, and there was no information about accessibility available, so I packed up my tape measure and took off. I visited with the local people, including the deacon's wife, and she said "Send your client and we'll have him over for tea." So I had a picture taken of myself standing next to a sign marking the village, and I sent it to him with a message saying "yes, you can go," and he did! Six months later, just after Christmas, he called me and said "Annie, I've always been alone at this time of year except for my caretaker, but this year my phone never stopped ringing with calls from the family I'd just gotten to know in England, and some of them even sent me presents." That was when I just totally lost it, knowing how much that meant to him. So many of my clients have become my friends over the years, and I've got to admit that they've enriched my life far more than I have theirs. And that's really why I do my homework, so that these wonderful things can keep happening. ✍️

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