

9 rules to travel by!

Reader Kirsten Gregory recalls the Central Otago holiday she shared with her twin sister following Catherine's serious injury and intensive rehabilitation.

We were 18 when Catherine broke her neck and was sent to the Burwood Spinal Unit in Christchurch for rehabilitation.

A year later she returned home to our parents' house, and reintroduction to the real world began.

To help out, I gave up university and became one of my sister's main supporters.

After about a year of adjusting to this new life, we decided we needed to do something adventurous and carefree. Something to remind us of our previous 'normal' life. A winter holiday in the beautiful mountains of Central Otago would be just the answer, or so we thought.

To us novices in the world of the disabled there were certain guidelines unknown to us that one should follow for a successful holiday. We are now both 42, and hope our experiences and suggestions help other young people with support needs plan a hassle-free adventure!

1 Planning is important

This we quickly learned when planning our destinations of Christchurch, Queenstown and Wanaka.

Coordination was essential, but accessible accommodation and district nurses to help with personal cares were hard to find.

To add to the mix, bus timetables had to fit in. Yes – bus timetables. We had no car, but never mind; we had grown up on public transport.

This, however, meant we failed in Rule number 2!

RATING 7/10

2 Always travel by car and/or plane

There were two key reasons for this. The first was our large amount of luggage:

- Five pillows for placing under body parts to prevent rolling and pressure sores
- Sheepskins
- Some blankets and sleeping bags, as we were staying in a campground cabin

- Night urine bags and spare day bags
 - An assortment of toiletries and drugs (medical kind) and
 - Clothes and jackets for both of us
- We had arrived at the airport terminal before the logistics of carrying it all hit home.

"How can you push the wheelchair and manage all this?" asked Catherine.

By doing a camel impersonation!

On my back was a large backpack, on my arms I carried those cheap but useful blue and red striped plastic bags stuffed full of pillows, on my sister's lap was a smaller day pack, and we propped a sleeping bag on her feet. We carried our handbags around our necks.

We looked stupid but we made it to the airport check-in to deposit our luggage. Having a wheelchair meant we got to wait separately from the other passengers so my sister could be carried aboard first.

A ground crewman waited with us.

We shared luggage stories.

His was better.

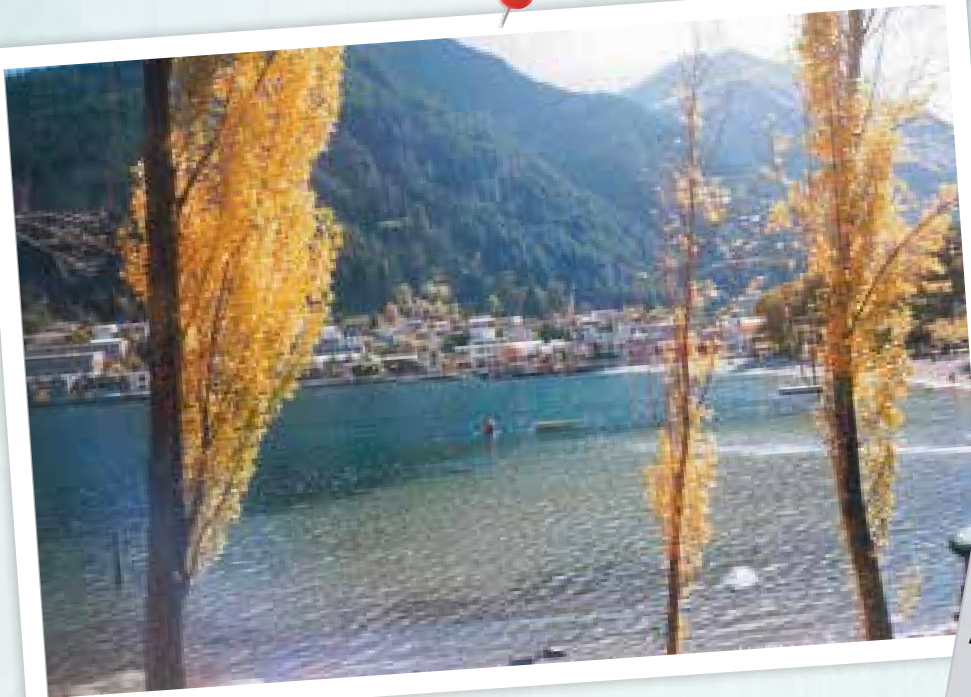
On a wet and windy day he had been transferring some boxes onto a plane when a box blew over. Hundreds of tampons spilled onto the tarmac. He tried to grab them, but the wind was too strong. Soon swollen white mice look-a-likes scuttled all over the runway as he fruitlessly attempted to retrieve them. >



Catherine spent a year at rehab following her accident.

Queenstown is for partying, right?





After Catherine's recovery, she and Kirsten were keen to travel.

On arriving in Christchurch, we discovered the second main benefit of travelling by car, which is that you don't have to go by bus.

The 11 hour journey from Christchurch to Wanaka is a very long one if you can't move easily.

The bus driver had reluctantly agreed to help me carry Catherine onto the bus. The other passengers looked on as we manoeuvred down the skinny aisle.

As a twin, I was used to people staring at us, but now that one of us was disabled audience numbers had increased. We felt self conscious.

The performance continued outside as I stashed and shoved our bags into the hold. The folded wheelchair was placed in the back of the bus, soon to be submerged under a pile of other luggage.

"It might be hard to get it out again," I explained to my sister once I was back on the bus.

"Great," she muttered. "Lots of pressure reliefs."

This involved rocking from side to side, and when the bus stopped and most people had hopped off I would help to lift Catherine up from behind so her bum could change position on the seat.

Another essential piece of equipment was an empty urine bottle. Unable to go to the toilet, we would discreetly empty her leg bag into it, and I would pour out the contents at the many toilet stops on our journey.

Freedom eventually came to my sister at a lunch stop at Lake Tekapo when the bus driver again reluctantly agreed to help us.

RATING 3/10

3 Have a place for everything

We finally reached our destination, the beautiful lakeside town of Wanaka, at dusk and unloaded our gear.

Our accommodation was a cabin at the campground a 10 minute walk away.

Halfway there we came to a large, empty field of grass.

"We could cut across diagonally, that'll save time," I said.

"I don't think it'll be quicker," she replied. "The ground is too rough."

"No it's not, look, it's pretty hard."

I attempted to dig my heel into the firm ground to prove my point. My sister gave in to prove hers.

With the heavy load of the bags on her lap it was difficult to tilt her back onto the large wheels which usually made it easier to cross rough terrain.

Instead, the small overloaded front wheels got stuck in every little rut and bump. The going was slow.

Thirty minutes later, amidst much

arguing over pushing and carrying strategies, we arrived at the campground, weary from our long day of travel.

After getting the key from the office, it was only a 50 metre push and shove to our cabin.

This was enough time for me to lose the key amongst all our gear. After what seemed a long time of searching in the cold and dark, my sister snapped.

"How could you lose it?"

"Easily," I said.

"You're always bloody losing things," she continued. It was true, I did always lose things. How do you reply to that one? Shut up sometimes works.

Luckily I found the key.

"Hooray, I found it," I said instead.

Inside, the spartan room seemed like luxury, and at last my sister could get off her sore bum for a bit.

RATING 5/10

I WAS ABOUT TO THROW MY BAGS ONTO THE BACK SEAT WHEN THE NURSE SAID, "AND THIS IS MY BEAUTIFUL WEE MAN". WHAT? I LOOKED DOWN AT A SLEEPING INFANT, BLISSFULLY UNAWARE OF THE RUDE AWAKENING HE HAD JUST MISSED.



4 Get to know the locals

The next day we had an enjoyable afternoon at the maze and puzzle centre a short distance from town. We got a taxi there and back.

On our return trip we met the friendliest and most talkative taxi driver we had ever encountered.

He claimed he was the local Mayor, and told us all about the merits of Wanaka.

"The population has doubled over the last... Mt Aspiring College brings in lots of outside students for its adventure course..."

Surprisingly I liked the commentary, and hearing all the facts and figures.

"I'll take you to Glendu Bay, just out of town," he offered.

Great, I thought, it's supposed to be really pretty. However I soon changed my mind. I wasn't so keen on his driving skills. He kept taking his eyes off the road to turn right round to chat to me in the back seat.

I tried to will my sister in the front seat with our nonexistent psychic twin powers to take over the conversation, thinking it would be safer.

It didn't work.

She was busy thinking, we don't know this man. And he's taking us down this country road.

We eventually convinced him to return us to the camping ground.

He returned five minutes later.

I had left my wallet on the back seat.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow," he called out

the window as he departed again.

"I'll show you the new subdivision on the other side of town. Before you catch the bus to Queenstown."

We had told him we were leaving the next day. (We enjoyed that tour too.)

Our run with hospitable locals continued on our bus trip to Queenstown.

One kind woman passenger offered to pick us up the next morning for a drive up the Remarkables range overlooking Queenstown. Unfortunately we had other plans.

RATING 6/10

5 Go with the flow

The next day was a bowel day. Usually this would involve the manual evacuation of number twos using suppositories, and required a number of hours of sitting on the toilet.

This was not part of my job description, thankfully for both of us; we had arranged a district nurse to help in the bathroom.

Lack of an accessible toilet was a problem. On the first bowel day the nurse relied on a bucket, cloths and towels, but when she returned a few days later she asked my sister if she'd like a decent wash and use of an accessible toilet.

"Um, yes," replied Catherine hesitantly, not sure where the conversation was going.

"I can drive you to the Lakes District Hospital in Frankton. There's a wheelchair bathroom we can use, if you want?"

My sister didn't hesitate this time, already relishing the thought of something more

substantial than a quick wipe down.

We speedily gathered all the necessary gear and followed the nurse to her car.

The back door was open, and she gestured us inside.

I was about to throw my bags into the vehicle when she spoke.

"And this is my beautiful wee man."

What?

I looked down at a sleeping infant, blissfully unaware of the rude awakening he had just missed.

The nurse turned around.

"Can you look after my baby while I'm with your sister? You can take the car if it's easier."

I was a bit taken back by her trust in me. I had only been in her company for about 10 minutes.

"He's a good sleeper, he should be no trouble."

I quickly thought about it. My driving skills were new. I didn't feel confident driving someone's precious baby. And my baby skills were even more basic than my driving skills: no experience whatsoever.

"I'll just hang around in Frankton," I said.

Staying close by seemed a good idea.

Five minutes later we arrived at the hospital car park.

"I have a new idea," the nurse said.

"There's an antique pram on display in the foyer. We'll use that."

She disappeared into the building, returning with a metal and cane contraption that proved comfortable enough for the sleeping baby, but which I found difficult to steer.

Luckily the streets in Frankton are pretty straight, but back then, other than admire the nice view, there wasn't much to do.

After an hour I was bored.

Time to head up to the airport, where I reasoned the pram would be easier to push.

Up and down the small airport terminal we went. And up and down, and up and down.

Finally the good little baby began to cry and my pushing wasn't enough to placate him.

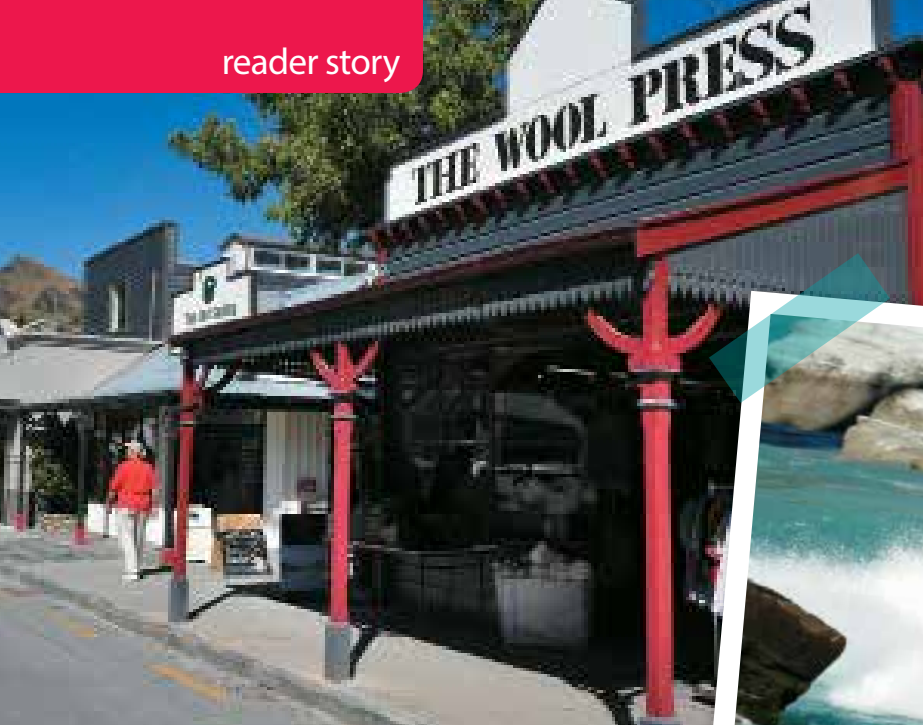
Time to head back. >

RATING 9/10



Wheelies' Van Rentals
www.wheeliesvanrentals.com.au

**Wheelchair accessible
 vehicles for hire in
 New Zealand & Australia**



6 Allow space, and compromise

Queenstown is full of lots of interesting, beautiful places to see. Unfortunately our appreciation of them sometimes got overshadowed by our arguing.

Being joined at the hip, so to speak, made it difficult to decide where to go, what to do, and how to do it.

From my point of view, there wasn't much down time. From my sister's point of view, being in a foreign environment magnified her support needs, and she worried about relying on one tired person.

Once I felt cooped up and wanted to go for a walk, but Catherine felt vulnerable being left on her own.

So instead I strode up and down the motel hallway feeling quite grumpy, then guilty about being grumpy.

Nowadays one of us would just go for a walk or a push. It's not a big deal.

And I've come to the conclusion that feeling guilty over such things is not useful so it is best avoided if possible.

Occasionally we did manage to work out the art of compromise and were thus exposed to rule number 7.

RATING 4/10

7 Wheelchairs are drunk magnets

It began like this.

"No!" said Catherine firmly, "I don't want to go out."

"But we have to go to the pub at least once," I wheedled. "This is a party town. Partying is what they do in Queenstown."

I envisioned a vibrant, rocking pub with friendly foreign and local patrons.

It would be much more glamorous than the smoky shed of the local dart club I belonged to back home.

At the time Catherine was still a bit self-conscious about new social situations, and our experiences going out with friends since her accident had found a strong correlation between wheelchairs and drunken encounters.

It was a bit like moths to a light.

Some of the drunks were friendly, but they could be annoying, emotional, and hard to get rid of.

I knew Catherine's vision of a night out was not quite the same as mine. And I could understand her reluctance. But I pressed nonetheless; I wanted to go out like other young people.

"You might get to talk to someone other than me," I pointed out, hoping this would be an incentive.

Catherine screwed up her nose in indecision, but I knew she was now thinking about it. Finally she agreed.

We were surprised that the pub alongside the promenade might have been any public bar in New Zealand, with its tall bar stools tucked under high tables.

The locals, mostly men, were huddled in small groups, beers in hand. I could make out only a smattering of possible tourists. The rest (judging by their haircuts, accents, and clothes) appeared to be Kiwis.

We bought our drinks and made our way to a table in the corner.

I pulled out a brochure featuring

Queenstown's attractions. Pictures of paragliding, skiing, bungee jumping and jet boating jumped out at us.

None of the activities looked mobility friendly.

"I guess we could go up the gondola," I said. "And there's a bird park nearby."

Catherine screwed up her nose again.

"How about jet boating?" she suggested. "At least that sounds a little adventurous."

I went to the bar for another round of drinks, strategically placing myself next to a young guy sitting on his own. I wanted at least one conversation with someone young and male; the baby earlier didn't count.

"Hello," I said.

There was no time to dillydally, I thought. He looked a bit aback by my friendliness.

"Hi," he replied, not super keen but not disinterested either.

The barman delivered my drinks all too efficiently; thinking the conversation was about to be over, I raised a glass as if to say goodbye.

"Are you not from here?" came my companion's unexpected response. He was wanting to keep the conversation going.

"Just here on holiday with my sister."

I looked over at Catherine, thinking she would be giving me 'the look' to hurry up.

But she was talking to two men in their late 50s. One was standing, shuffling from one foot to another, looking uncomfortable. The other man had taken my seat and was

leaning towards my sister, staring at her intently. He seemed upset.

What on earth was going on? I couldn't resist returning to the table to find out.

The man standing, relieved, tapped his friend on the shoulder.

"C'mon mate, the lady wants her seat back."

Once they'd departed, I asked Catherine what had transpired while I was at the bar.

She gave a deep sigh.

"I always attract the good ones. I think they took pity on me when you were up at the bar. Especially the older one. He got really upset about me being in a wheelchair."

We had encountered upset drunks before. But this one had looked distraught.

"It was mainly the thought of me missing out on the enjoyment of sex that did it. He was very worried about whether I could feel my clitoris."

"Really!"

I was shocked, both that the man had been near tears on Catherine's behalf, and had asked such personal questions of a stranger.

Then I remembered he was drunk.

"What did you say?"

"I lied and said yes, I could feel it, just to make him happy. I didn't want him to cry."

"Aww, you're so nice."

"I know."

And we burst out laughing.

RATING 8/10

8 Don't go pulling people's legs

The next morning we planned to race along the Shotover River in a jet boat, our final holiday activity before parting

company. My sister would fly north that afternoon, while I would travel up the West Coast by bus.

"I love this scenery," I said to Catherine, breathing in the cool, crisp air when we arrived beside the fast-flowing river amongst the towering cliffs and steep tussock-covered mountains.

"Yeah, same."

But she sounded distracted. She was staring at the boat rocking in the icy water.

"Where do you think I'll sit?"

Catherine's trunk muscles are weak, so positioning on the seat was important.

"Where's the best place for Catherine?" I asked the driver.

"Behind me, positioned in the middle with people on either side," he reckoned. "She should be OK there."

I wasn't convinced, but Catherine didn't seem too bothered. Unfortunately, she was placed directly behind the boat's brake, which the driver used often in his manoeuvring.

After one impressive swerve around some massive boulders, he reached down to pull the brake, but grabbed my sister's rigid, extended leg instead.

"S***!"

He looked down, confused and not initially registering the problem.

I looked too.

"It's my leg," said my sister helpfully.

Frantic movements followed as he roughly shoved her leg out of the way to snatch up the brake.

Luckily it ended well.

We narrowly missed a rock, but no one else seemed to notice the near calamity.

To be honest, we were both secretly glad when the boat ride finished (not that we admitted it to each other at the time).

Young people are supposed to love

living life on the edge and be adrenaline junkies.

But not us.

Not anymore.

We had discovered that the thrill of throwing yourself at rocks at high speed diminishes when the consequences of accidents are with you constantly. We felt like cautious grannies before our time.

This was to be one of the many new learning experiences that we discovered about ourselves and others on our southern holiday.

Another was the surprising generosity and kindness that some people showed, and the efforts they made to help us.

RATING 4/10

In time, our travel rules proved useful when planning future trips. Along with a final one:

9 Two's OK, but three is much better!

A third person gives everyone a bit of a break. You can share support tasks (and, if you're sisters, the extra company ensures 'breathing space').

For holidays longer than a weekend, Catherine now travels with three or four people. Sometimes she pays for another carer, or a friend and I have joined her for trips and helped out. Luckily, an older neighbour who didn't work and liked to cook was keen to have trips away, too.

RATING 10/10

Catherine and I learned our travel lessons well on that first youthful trip: we haven't had another holiday together without extra help since! **FC**



Holidays in Australia

Enjoy a great holiday in Australia with convenience and safety. Our wheelchair accessible vehicles are easy to load and give complete freedom to experience the many theme parks, National Parks, sights and attractions around Australia. Vehicles available in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Gold Coast and Hobart.

Explore & Enjoy!

Wheelies Van Rentals
Wheelchair Accessible Car Hire
www.wheeliesvanrentals.com.au