

## **TRAVELING WITH IMPAIRED VISION**

**By  
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**Two years ago I was passing through the Newark International Airport and stopped to look at a monitor to confirm the departure time and gate number for my flight to Berlin. To my consternation I couldn't read the information and had to ask for help from a stranger nearby. For the first time I realized that my impaired vision was going to be a problem while traveling.**

**What I'm dealing with is age-related macular degeneration, a condition of the eye which impairs one's vision that is located in the center of the retina, or macula. Living with this condition has required many life-changes, such as having to give up driving and getting used to difficulty reading. It has also meant having to take public transportation, reluctantly asking for rides, and hiring a cleaning woman to vacuum up the dust I can no longer see. One of the positives, however, has been that I am getting more exercise from walking.**

**I am not alone. According to the National Institutes of Health, about 1.75 million Americans over age 40 suffer from advanced macular degeneration. Another 7 million Americans have symptoms of macular degeneration and are at risk of vision loss.**

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**Travel has been an important part of my life since 1956 when I drove with a friend in a VW Beetle from Oslo, Norway to Delhi, India, a four-month, 11,000-mile journey that opened my eyes to the world. My next big international adventure was to join the Peace Corps after I retired and taught English in a high school in Poland from 1997 to 1999.**

**Naturally, one of my worries when I began to develop macular degeneration several years ago was whether I would eventually have to give up traveling altogether. Would I never see the Taj Mahal again? Would I never make it to South America? Fortunately, it hasn't come to that, at least not yet, but traveling with vision loss has definitely created new problems and required new adjustments.**

**I have done a lot of traveling alone and have learned to negotiate airports fairly well by asking for assistance in getting my boarding**

passes and reading the monitors. On a trip to Thailand in the spring of 2010, for the first time I had to ask a flight attendant for help in filling out the custom forms. Once I arrived, members of my travel group were always willing to give me a hand if necessary. One man quipped, “You’re blind and I’m deaf, so we should stick together.”

What appealed to me most in Thailand, besides its beautiful countryside, were the magnificent Buddhist temples. Safely negotiating the hundreds of steps required constant vigilance. My vigilance failed me once, however, but not in a temple. It was our first night after leaving traffic-choked Bangkok. Our accommodations were in a rustic but modern complex of cabins with thatched roofs amid lush tropical flora. The restaurant where we were to meet for drinks before dinner was at the end of a winding path, and walking there alone I didn’t notice at the entrance that among all the greenery you had to step over a narrow channel of water. Before I knew it, my left leg was wet up to my knee. I was helped out by a smiling Russian tourist.

Last December I spent the holidays in Mexico visiting Oaxaca, Puebla and Mexico City. By this time I was having more difficulty reading, even with my magnifying glass, so I overcame my resistance to all these newfangled gadgets and bought an iPod on which my son downloaded two audio books and several music CDs. It was a lifesaver during the flights and waiting in airports. Mexico has splendid colonial architecture that includes many ornate, colorful churches. To my delight I found that with my small pair of binoculars I was able to clearly see the rich interior details. When visiting museums, however, though I could easily see the objects, I was unable to read labels and had to ask for assistance.

A trip in February took me to Nicaragua for a week with a local church group to do volunteer work. With all the travel arrangements having been made, it was a relief to just follow along. And as I anticipated, once we got there my visual impairment was of little consequence because our mission required mostly physical labor. Still, living in a poor neighborhood with unpaved streets and no streetlights, I had to be especially careful where I walked at night. Fortunately, there was no traffic.

**My most recent trip was in March, a weekend jaunt I took with my daughter to attend a family memorial service. With her making all the travel arrangements, the trip was almost painless. It is a reminder that having a companion along can reduce a lot of travel frustration for the visually impaired.**

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**Actually, I can see everything around me, but what I see is blurry. It's almost like looking through thin white gauze. Though I don't have difficulty getting around, I have to be careful, for example, crossing the street with a signal. If I look directly at the light, I don't see the color. Instead, I use my peripheral vision (which isn't affected) to see if the light says it is safe to cross.**

**If I am out in public, like at the grocery store, I have to remember not to look at anyone directly unless the person speaks to me because from a distance I don't recognize even people I know. I don't want them to think I'm being unfriendly if I don't wave from the other end of the aisle.**

**I have a certificate from the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind that verifies my status as being legally blind. As a result, I have made use of a variety of services that the commission provides, including being introduced me to Zoom Text, computer software that makes text larger. It has been extremely helpful. (It is not compatible with a Mac, however.) I also have a video magnifier, a large device that sits on my desk, which enables me to read anything.**

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**In spite of my limitations, I remain optimistic about future travel. I'm thinking of seeing India again. And perhaps a return visit to China, where I was born. After all, I'm only 80. I think I have a few years left yet.**

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