



Ready for takeoff: from Rellingen, Germany to the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. The wheelchair is checked in as special baggage.

Text: Birgit Heitfeld

Photos: Norbert Miguletz

By wheelchair to

New York – a dream destination for many, including Steffen Prey. As he's bound to a wheelchair, however, it is much more difficult to make his dream come true – though these days far from impossible. Special care for mobility-challenged passengers is available both on the ground and in the air. Birgit Heitfeld (text) and Norbert Miguletz (photos) accompanied Steffen Prey on his first trip to the “city that never sleeps.”







Steffen needs help, even for the shortest of distances. From pick-up at check-in and hands-on support in the cabin to special assistance at the arrival airport.



The weather report of the “New York Times on the Web” was spot on: “NYC – clear skies” it stated briefly in the weather box above the headlines. The taxi from the airport winds its way through the afternoon suburban traffic and along Brooklyn’s arterial roads. Set against reddish clouds, Manhattan’s skyline is getting closer and closer. Then all of a sudden, it disappears. When the taxi emerges from the East River Tunnel, we are immediately engulfed by the hectic buzz of the metropolis. The driver brings his cab to a halt at the corner of 32nd Street and Broadway, drags our suitcases into the hotel lobby and without a word hands us a scrap of paper as a receipt. The ladies at the front desk chat impassively about their latest dates and the trendiest nailcare studios in Manhattan – it’s business as usual in the “Big Apple.”

Until now, Steffen Prey, severely handicapped since birth, has only known New York through the media. But the web cam images on his computer screen simply cannot capture the city’s lively briskness, or show just how loud, fast-paced and colorful life really is at Central Park West or Times Square. Nor could the 21-year-old from Germany fully imagine what his first time on Broadway would be like.

It takes courage: Steffen crosses Midtown Manhattan in his wheelchair, in the midst of dense traffic, numerous potholes, honking cars and rushing crowds.

After checking in at the hotel and freshening up a bit, we immerse ourselves into the crowds of the metropolis. It was hardly two hours ago that we traded the comfortable cabin of the Lufthansa Jumbo for the rough-and-tumble concrete jungle of the “Big Apple.” Trips like ours, with a “flying wheelchair,” require sophisticated logistics on the part of the airlines. After a wheelchair-bound person like Steffen has booked his trip by telephone, the carrier needs to make sure that someone will be there punctually to help him with boarding, making connections and getting off the plane – in this case in Hamburg, Frankfurt and New York. In New York, two helpers were there right away to lift Steffen and then set him down again. However, he had to organize the transfer to the cab between J.F.K. Airport and the hotel himself.

The Empire State Building is just one block from our hotel. From a chaotic-looking heap of papers, the lady at the front

desk calmly extracts an envelope: It contains a hand-written note and the four tickets that hotel manager May Xu had reserved for us. Just a few minutes – a few star-spangled banners, one security check and two rumbling elevator rides – later the “capricious lady called New York” shows us an entirely different face. From up here, at dusk, the skyscrapers that populate the small island of Manhattan look like fragile, filigreed works of art, bathed in the pink light of the evening sky dotted with fire-red clouds. Tiny ferries mark their passage on the inky-blue Hudson River. From the bird’s-eye perspective, the sparkling lights in the orderly canyons of the streets exude something calming. We are on top of the world. A retiree from St. Louis, Missouri, also in New York City for the first time in his life, shares our enthusiasm in broadest American English: “Jeez!”

Eighty floors below, in those canyons between the high-rise buildings and on the dead-straight avenues, the urban close combat of the city jungle continues. Again, we immerse ourselves into this scene. Ingrid Prey pushes her son’s wheelchair past steaming drains and giant potholes that have been provisionally covered with iron sheets as there is no money in the city’s coffers for road repairs. We pass Yellow Cabs ready for the junkyard, busses and gleaming stretch-limousines, luxury boutiques, coffee bars and black trash sacks waiting for the daily morning pick-up. A cacophony of the most diverse sounds surges up around us, a smell of burned pizza and Chinese fast-food fills the air.

All fascination aside, most wheelchair-bound people would be put off by this city. But not Steffen. He has always wanted to come here to see how different cultures co-exist on this densely populated scrap of land. Steffen, future online journalist at a private radio station, is able to move only one arm and his head in a coordinated manner. Yet the fast pace of Manhattan has already taken hold of him. “Please step on it!” he instructs his mother, who steers his wheelchair toward the gilded Trump Tower, on the Upper East Side’s 57th Street. There, chocolate cake and coffee in Styrofoam cups await us.

Later, for dinner, we head for the swanky Country Club 21 on 52nd Street, which dates from the Prohibition era. There is no time in our whirlwind schedule for dressing up. But the “handicapped bonus” helps us pass the lobby check of this elegant Upper East Side establishment.



Rush hour in Midtown Manhattan: right in the middle of it all, by wheelchair.



A picture-perfect sunset transforms the Big Apple's concrete jungle into a fascinating work of art, decked out in shades of pastel colors. For Steffen, the arduous trip up to the Empire State Building's 80th-floor observation deck has definitely paid off.



Sightseeing by wheelchair: skyscrapers, the Rockefeller bust in the Museum of Financial History, luxury boutiques on the Upper East Side and the memorial fence at the former World Trade Center. The best way across Manhattan is the subway.

Our visit is like traveling in time back to the 1930s. What a contrast to the hectic stream of traffic up and down the avenues. Ancient dolls dangle from the ceiling. During the Prohibition era, two students founded this club as a “speakeasy” — a place where liquor was served illegally at that time. After dinner, we roll over to the Schubert Theater on Times Square to see the hit musical “Chicago.”

Infrastructure of an adventure

Steffen Prey’s handicapped person’s ID is marked with a capital “B” for “Begleitung,” the German equivalent of “accompanied-only.” This means that he would never be able to go on a trip such as this one to New York by himself. When he made his reservation on the phone, the Lufthansa agent asked Steffen for such details as the extra services needed, the wheelchair’s dimensions and the type of handicap. It would not have been possible for Steffen to book his flight on the Internet. A computer screen mask would hardly offer enough space for all the extra information that is necessary to meet the individual needs of handicapped passengers. This is why the “Frequent Traveler’s Medical Card” (FREMEC) was developed for handicapped frequent fliers. This chip card is valid at all airlines that are members of the International Air Transport Association IATA. Frequent fliers can use this card for a specified period of time — depending on their particular illness, handicap or health condition — to make reservations, without having to reiterate their personal data every time.

The data stored on FREMECs is later turned into services, as happened in Stef-

fen’s case. Back at the start of our journey at Hamburg Airport, helpers from the German Red Cross turned up right on time to reseat Steffen: from his own wheelchair to an airport wheelchair, then into the onboard wheelchair and finally into his seat on the aircraft. His “permanent companion”, the wheelchair, travels free of charge, as “special baggage.” The abbreviation “WCHC” signals to airline personnel that this is a passenger who can neither walk nor stand.

Then comes the announcement: “Medics ready for preboarding,” and Steffen boards the plane. Handicapped passengers are given preferential treatment and may board first. However not all seats are available for them, something that many are not aware of and some criticize. For example, the front-row seats in Economy Class with more legroom are reserved for passengers with children. And the emergency exit rows are only for those who are mobile and strong enough to help others in case of an emergency.

Some static can be heard from the loudspeakers in the cabin, then the captain’s voice: “We’re now on our way to New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport. Please fasten your seatbelts for takeoff.” After the first round of beverages has been served, a flight attendant passes through the cabin to place color-coded stickers on a number of seats: Some passengers prefer to eat a Kosher meal, others have ordered vegetarian or Hindu meals. And there are more service requirements: A mother with a screaming baby needs the cabin crew’s attention, while another passenger has a headache and asks for an aspirin. Steffen has a very simple request: He would like to use the washroom.

Today, thanks to the responsiveness of cabin equipment makers and airlines, a Jumbo Jet with 396 seats features a toilet that can be made wheelchair-compatible in just a few moments. The lateral walls of the two washrooms in the cabin’s middle aisle are folded to the outside, creating a toilet module large enough for a wheelchair to roll in — all at a cruising altitude of 12,000 meters. In practice, the changes turn out to be a little more personnel-intensive and time-consuming than expected, which gives practiced do-it-yourselfers a clear advantage. Passengers crane their necks and watch in amazement, trying to figure out what it all means. “Looks like this thing isn’t used very often,” is Steffen’s conclusion after visiting the facilities. Purser Marianne Hoenge agrees with him. Most handicapped passengers on long-haul flights manage their way to a washroom without a wheelchair and under their own steam. In any case, the toilet module has passed muster. And everybody is back in their seats.

Highlights and minor mishaps

For someone in a wheelchair, New York’s topography is measured in terms of wheelchair ramps, handicapped-friendly busses, side entrances, hotlines and helpful people who acknowledge that someone has the courage to make his or her way in life — despite a handicap, illness or some other restriction. So it takes only a short while to learn to love the bus drivers in the Big Apple. Even during the busiest rush hours, they mind neither dirty looks nor loud grumbling. They take their time and are fully concentrated, as if lowering the wheelchair ramp and looking after Steffen Prey

were the only things that really mattered in this world.

Each time, there is a distinct feeling, as if the pulsating metropolis stood still for just a moment. We experience the bus ride down to Wall Street as a dense sequence of images, a microcosm of nationalities and neuroses all searching for the American Dream. Further south, in the Financial District, we get off the bus. After a quick coffee break at Starbucks, Steffen wants to see "Ground Zero" and gauge the reality against the images he saw on television. In addition to memorial plaques and condolences from around the world, all fastened to a construction site fence, a sign conspicuously advertises "Souvenir Sale – Everything for \$5–\$10." From here, we can reach the Brooklyn Bridge on foot. We are in luck once again, and under beautiful sunny skies manage to get up on its impressive steel construction – with the wheelchair. Beneath the cloudless blue, we have a clear view of Lady Liberty, too.

Before we reach our highlight that evening, a concert at the famous "Blue Note" jazz club, we stroll through China Town, rolling past Asian supermarkets, shops filled with cheap splendors from Korea and Chinese restaurants. In Little Italy, just a few blocks down the street, Steffen signs the first traveler's check of his life when he invites us for cappuccino and cheesecake.

The Blue Note opens at 6 p.m. Up on the second floor, in a minuscule mix of shop and bar, some of the musicians are chatting over drinks. Their band leader, trumpeter and pianist, Arturo Sandoval, will only appear in the club when the concert begins. We have seats right up close to the stage. The exile Cuban and Grammy laureate, whose life story was turned into a movie starring Andy García, plays a distinctive kind of Latin Jazz, which effectively adds to the flavor of our Cuban cocktails. Steffen Prey is visibly enjoying himself. The next morning, over a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs, muffins and orange juice, we are still talking about the concert and the Greenwich Village club. And then it's time to head home again.

Our short trip to New York is drawing to an end, but not without a few complications. We check out. The lady at the reception desk seems to be having another "bad hair day." We had originally decided to take the express bus to the airport. But the bellman, a concierge in European parlance, suggests that we take a limousine instead. This would be so much more comfortable, he assures us. We're convinced. A little while later, a Chinese driver enters the lobby. Will the wheelchair fit into the trunk? "No problem!" Outside, he pushes and shoves, tries to slam the trunk lid shut and starts to curse. If he had asked us in the first place, he would know

that Steffen's wheelchair measures exactly 89x59x93 centimeters and does not fit into his black Lincoln Town Car. In the end, he closes the trunk lid with a string attached to the exhaust pipe. As our departure has been delayed, the price for this shuttle has gone up by 10 dollars as well. A classic case of rip-off. This "wheelchair-compatible" taxi is good for just a few miles; then the driver asks us to keep an eye out the back until we get to the airport, just to make sure we do not lose any luggage. The string has come off the exhaust pipe – as was to be expected. As we emerge from the tunnel under the Hudson River, our unusual line of vision gives us last glimpses of the sparkling Manhattan skyline – past the open trunk lid. The driver deposits us at the terminal, right on time.

Of course, one should never speak too soon in the context of assessing cultures. We have just been discussing the German love for precision when it comes to transporting handicapped people – as compared to the American "anything-goes" attitude, which is often passed off as a talent for improvisation – when we find ourselves in a bind shortly after landing in Hamburg: Someone in "Handling" obviously neglected to check Steffen's travel data, folded up his wheelchair and then reassembled it again incorrectly. Steffen has to call the breakdown service. But all's

Traveling without barriers

From dedicated check-in counters and special care lounges to specifically equipped washrooms: The new Terminal 2 at **Munich Airport**, of which Lufthansa financed 40 percent, was designed from the ground up with handicapped travelers in mind. Ramps have replaced stairs, and all areas can be reached by elevators or escalators. Optical and acoustic orientation aides, as well as signposting in braille at key points, help to make this a terminal without barriers.

The "heart" of Lufthansa's Special Care Service beats at **Frankfurt Airport**: 250 employees help people in wheelchairs – as well as blind, deaf, sick and elderly passengers, unaccompanied children and those with speech handicaps – find their way from gate to gate. When passengers with special care requirements book a Lufthansa ticket anywhere around the world, their personal data is forwarded to Lufthansa in Frankfurt, where it is translated into requests and services. In 2002, almost 350,000 passengers, including those from other airlines, took advantage of Lufthansa's special service. In a dedicated lounge, special care guests may have a coffee, relax or read, before special care staff punctually escort them to their gates for takeoff. These caring helpers look after passengers with special needs at other key Lufthansa stations, as well.

→ www.lufthansa.com

→ Lufthansa Services → Special Services → Traveling without Barriers

→ www.flughafen-frankfurt.de

A **free brochure** with detailed information on services and facilities for handicapped travelers at German airports is available from the Committee of German Passenger Airports (ADV). You can order your copy from: ADV, Fischer Insel 16, D-10179 Berlin, Germany. Tel. +49 30/31 01 18-0.

→ www.adv-net.org

For Steffen, New York was just the beginning. To get even more from his future trips, he now has a Miles & More Card.

well that ends well. The damage is paid for by Lufthansa's Baggage Service without any problem. Mishaps cannot be ruled out, even during the most meticulously planned trips taken by handicapped people.

For Steffen Prey, this unpleasant surprise at the Hamburg terminal is no reason to abandon future travel plans. For him, the trip to the banks of the Hudson River was an enormous pleasure – including all the unforeseen situations. The next destination on his wish list is Vienna. "This trip has shown me what is actually possible," he says. "Before, we would never have taken such long-distance flights," adds Steffen's mother, Ingrid. Following his NYC trip, the 21-year-old is now a proud Miles & More Cardholder. In a salute to this spirit, "Old Frankie Boy" himself would likely belt out his familiar hymn to New York: "If you can make it there ..."



Improvisation is part of the game: whether someone visits a city in a wheelchair or plays jazz on the trumpet – like the exile-Cuban Arturo Sandoval is doing here at one of New York’s cult jazz clubs, the Blue Note.

