

Promoting 'Devotion to Motion'

Disabled lifestyle advocate calls for laws to make Dubai more friendly to people with special needs

By Ruwani Fernando

Dubai Disabled lifestyle advocate, Scott Chesney, believes that Dubai must have laws to make sure access to leisure facilities for people with special needs is functional, not cosmetic.

Having hotel rooms with so-called disabled access should not simply mean there are wider doorways for wheelchairs to go through, but that the contents of the room make a special needs guest feel comfortable rather than trapped, said Chesney, 29, who has been paralysed since 1985 after suffering a rare stroke to his spine.

Chesney and his wife, Pratiksha, were in Dubai last week on a four-day visit at the invitation of the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing.

They are now continuing a world tour which takes them to 26 countries in 14 months as they promote 'Devotion to Motion', a lifestyle programme through which Chesney, from the United States, also looks into the travel facilities available for people with disabilities.

"What our hotel meant by having a bathroom that is accessible for someone in a wheelchair is that the doorway is wider than a regular room, but once inside Scott found that the toilet didn't have a railing for him to grab on to, and there wasn't a shower hose he could manoeuvre nor a seat in the shower stall from where he could reach the taps," said

Pratiksha, a physical therapist.

Beyond the hotel, Chesney unwittingly showed how difficult it can be for a person with special needs to even enjoy a popular Dubai attraction as a dhow cruise, when four waiters struggled to carry his wheelchair in and out of the wooden boat, along a tiny flight of stairs and a short, narrow ramp.

"At times like these, I feel like a coffin," joked Chesney, "And if they drop me [into the Dubai Creek] I become live bait."

Instead of just talking about these episodes, Chesney has been trying to make Dubai's tour operators and hoteliers experience the difficulties at his seminars.

"I tell them to imagine having a 100lb-weight on each ankle and wrist so they cannot move. Or to close their eyes so all they see is darkness and try moving around the room. In other sessions, I have asked participants to spend time in a wheelchair. When I do these exercises, you can hear a pin drop as people begin to understand what it's like to be disabled," said Chesney.

Government action

But while practical demonstrations are helpful in building awareness, he believes government action is necessary to bring effective change. "Outside our hotel there are two parking spots for the disabled, but we have only seen staff cars parked in those spots. In the United States, there are strict fines against people misusing disabled parking spots and your car would get towed away."



Scott Chesney tries to use the bathtub inside his hotel in Dubai. - GN Picture By: Joseph J. Capellan

To make Dubai more user-friendly for people with special needs, Chesney said local authorities need not "reinvent the wheel", as comprehensive guidelines exist in the American standard.

Among the U.S. specifications, hotel bathrooms must have handles on the toilet seat, mirrors low enough to see in to and sinks low enough to use. Other facilities range from elevators that "speak" the floor level to help the blind, to having one handicapped parking

pace for every 25.

In order to coax rather than coerce Dubai's tourism industry into adopting these standards, Chesney feels the tourism department should study how good the results would be for business.

"Instead of just saying there are many disabled tourists out there, there has to be specific statistics on how big the market is and its spending potential. Big business must also be made to understand that when you open the market to

people with special needs, you open it to other groups of visitors. For example, a wheelchair ramp can be used by a mother pushing a pram or an elderly person who has difficulty with stairs," said Chesney.

To further promote awareness of their lifestyle movement, the Chesneys will return to Dubai in March for the special needs exhibition, Rehab 2000. More information on Devotion to Motion is available on the Chesneys' web site www.d2motion.com.