

[Music] [Narelle] Hello and welcome to episode 25 of The Digital Access Show. Last week, we were talking to Mark Muscat and Illese Smithwick about their special project which we sent them off on, which was basically Mark going on a holiday but reporting back about accessibility, digital accessibility, what he found with travelling. So, Illese, Mark we were talking about New Orleans. And we just finished about the Blues and Jazz Festival, which you said was just a great experience. So, what about New Orleans itself? Getting around New Orleans, doing what you wanted to do. [Illese] That's where we struggled, well that's where we got a lot of challenges to be honest, in the French quarter. And I'm specifically saying the French Quarter because it's very different there to the rest of New Orleans. The French Quarter is the touristy part. It's the tradition, the history and everything is all in that area. And of course the architecture of the buildings et cetera is just amazing. But the streets are not great for trying to navigate. [Narelle] Oh, what type of streets? Cobblestone? [Illese] No, they were the concrete pavements but often the concrete was broken. Right? [Mark] They weren't even. The paths are certainly not even. And there was obviously a lot of people, and that meant that negotiating the paths and the actual crowds itself made it difficult or challenging, in the sense, for somebody to guide in narrow spots as well. I think walking around with my cane on my own was challenging in the sense that you know, you'd, you'd were finding yourself having to move not just around obstacles but around people. And, look, it was just part of the whole experience, so. And it just meant that we, you know, had to take time out and just do things that would relax us so, yeah. [Narelle] So you enjoyed New Orleans and the Blues Jazz Festival/ And then from there you went to Vancouver. Tell us about Vancouver and your experience with there with accessibility. [Illese] Contrast. [Narelle] Contrast, yeah. [Illese] Well I was just going to say with New Orleans. [Mark] [overlapping] ... helicopter. [Illese] Just to go back with New Orleans we caught the public transport around so there were trams and buses. The bus, they had accessible tickets that you can download on your phone. I think that was quite easy. [to Mark] You found that easy, to... [Mark] Yeah, so the La Pass app was actually very nice to use. It's probably, in accessible standings, it's probably as good as something like Next There. Which is quite a nice little app to use. I wouldn't, it was definitely better than our Queensland Translink app. But it certainly had all the information that you'd required. Interestingly, there wasn't real time sort of data on that app. We had to get that through- [Illese] There was real time data but it was difficult to find. [Mark & Narelle] Ah, okay. [Mark] That was, that was, that was challenging for me to find. I pretty much relied on Google Maps for the real time stuff. To know when the buses were coming, they also got trams in New Orleans which is actually what they call cable cars. But to us here in Australia, they're trams. They felt like a tram, they pretty much were a tram [laughs]. So, um. They were, look, the whole, whole operation was quite, quite useful. And in Vancouver, we were only there for two days. But we certainly had extremely interesting experiences with the kiosks and so forth that they had. So we were at a cake shop I believe, a little cake and a coffee shop. [Illese] Yep, coffee shop. [Mark] And the kiosk there where you order your food, had accessibility. [Narelle] Oh wow! [Mark] It didn't work for us but, it was there and the person, when we reported the fact that it wasn't actually talking to us, said that they would get that looked at. But it was nice to know that it actually existed. And yeah, I thought that was interesting. And the ATMs in both the US and and Canada were obviously accessible. They had headphone jacks, they had the buttons that you could use to, you know, control the volume of the speech and all that sort of stuff. So that was all there.

[Narelle] That's interesting. Very interesting. What a contrast to here.  
[Mark] Oh know. We've got them here in Australia, but [Narelle] Oh, okay. I've never found them. [Mark] Yeah, it was interesting. I mean again, like in Australia if you wanted an accessible ATM, you needed to go to a bank, you couldn't use any of those third party ATMS that just. They weren't accessible which is rather sad. But banks all had them. And ahm, And I think the most interesting part, which we'll come to in Japan, was the fact that they would do different languages which is obvious. But, yeah. [Narelle] So Vancouver was really good. You had a, you didn't have many troubles there with getting around trying to find what you wanted Mark? And Illese, you could be just the partner? [Illese] [laughs] Yeah, I think the streets were a lot more, you know - after having been through New Orleans and feeling the frustration and the stress of trying to navigate the streets there, going to Vancouver was a real relief, because the streets were wider. They were even-paved. There were no worries, so. I didn't feel like I was walking with my eyes down all the time to navigate. We were actually able to walk around and look around. We caught public transport around. We caught the ferries. We went across, y'know. So, their system, however, their public transport system was more ticket based. So I had to go for a walk to the local shop to pick up tickets. [Mark] Whilst I was washing the clothes. So. [All laugh] [Narelle] But that's good to know. Now, what about the cruise itself The cruise ship, what was the accessibility? What was navigating that like? Illese, were you again able to be the partner and not the support person, necessarily? [Illese] The first day on the ship, Mark took advantage of a orientation. [Illese, to Mark] You could talk about that. [Mark] Yep, so, we travelled with Norwegian. So that's the first time for me on Norwegian. [to Illese] I don't know if it was the first time for you, too? [Illese] Yep. [Mark] So, we - I've only been on P&O Cruises which are completely different. So, this is the first time. Norwegian have an access team in their organisation. And pretty much there's a survey that you fill in. I was disappointed with their survey because it had all the, all the questions. So there was questions about, everything from ranging from incontinence to vision impairment. [laughs] So it was like filling in an NDIS form. [Mark laughs] But the reality was that once you got through that, they would send you back an email saying "Yep, we acknowledge it." They thought I had a guide dog there for a while. So they were chasing me up. Even when I was in America, they were chasing me up about my guide dog. And I said look, I have no guide dog, I don't know how that happened. But anyway, that sort of made them quite relieved because in having a guide dog there was a whole lot of processes we all know about. So, they said to me that they'll arrange the orientation which happened. And it was actually done by one of their senior staff. Who was, I've got to say, who was actually very well trained in orientation mobility. They knew all the key things to look for landmarks, directions, that sort of stuff. So much to the point that I was telling other passengers which way to go through casinos and all that to get to theatres and stuff like that. So, ships are great for a blind person because basically, you, once you work out where things are, you, um, It's always the same. Nothing changes. So, for me. [Narelle] What about wayfinding? Was there wayfinding tools on the ship that you could use? [Mark] No, no, you don't need wayfinding tools as such. Just a good understanding of what port and starboard is. And what's the front and what's the back? And just really getting an idea of various landmarks on the ship. Stairwells, lifts. All ships have what they call an atrium which can throw people around a bit in terms of orientation. I didn't have a problem with this particular ship, which is the Spirit by the way for anyone's info. I had no problems with that. I was able to go up and down the stairs. I preferred the stairs, the lifts

didn't talk [laughs]. So you didn't know what deck you were on. So, I tended to use stairs on my own. [Mark, to Illese] I think when you and I travelled up and down the lifts, we used - I was with Illese. But most of the time I would just walk up and down the stairs. And um, you got the usual sort of problems like the buffet type stuff that you'd normally find on any cruise. [Narelle] But everyone has those issues anyway. [Mark] Yeah, absolutely, that's not.. Most staff are pretty helpful. [Narelle] Yeah. What about when you were doing the excursions off the cruise? So for those that don't know, they went on a husky, traveling by husky. You went to glaciers. What was the accessibility like for those things, Mark? Did you? Was it very different? Was it really considerate of people with disabilities? [Mark] I had no issues at all with the excursions. But I, we planned them before. So that, I think, is the most important thing. Because by planning it, we were able to tell them that, you know, that I was vision impaired. [Illese] Not that that information always got through to the people running it. [Mark] No, that was interesting. [All laughs] [Mark] It was, you know, the dog sled one was actually quite interesting. "Oh, we weren't told." [All laugh] [Mark] But they didn't seem to have any problem with it. They, They were, they were meant to be told and they, they knew that that should have happened. But it didn't. And that's, more, and that' was more Norwegian's fault than anyone else's. Because we booked it through Norwegian. [Narelle] Yeah. [Mark] And, yeah. I think after we got through all that, there was pretty much, you know, straightforward. Yeah, it was, I mean, to the point where I was talking to one of the, what are they called? The, the, one of the guides who do the sleds and he was telling me, [Illese] Musher. [Mark] Musher, that's it. [Mark] And we were having a good chat about the steering and, I had no problems with that at all. [Narelle] Yeah. [Mark] So, accessibility wise, Yeah, you know, the other one that, we did was the gold mine. And um, [Mark] And, the train that went from Alaska into Canada. That was quite, quite interesting. And the person that we had was actually quite descriptive. [Illese] The tour guide was very good. [Mark] Very good. [Illese] And story telling. [Narelle] Oh, fantastic. [Illese] So she did a lot of that on the train ride up, which, you know, occupied our time and our thoughts, obviously. [Narelle] Yeah, excellent. [Illese] And I think just going back to the ship, I was going to say, the Spirit, I can't speak for all ships, but they actually had all the lifts facing the same direction. So, when you got out of the lift, you were always facing the back of the boat. [Mark] That's right. [Illese] And so you know whether you have to turn right or left. [Mark] To port or starboard. [Illese] And all the doors had braille on them as well. So you knew what number - you could go through and feel, what number you're up to. [Narelle] That's good. P&O didn't do that from memory. [Mark] Well, the last one I was on was P&O, the braille was actually falling off some of the signs. [Narelle] Yeah. [Mark] And remember, the cruise that I was on, I eventually ended up spending half the day looking at their signs. [Narelle] Yeah. [Mark] Reporting them back, which they gave me a nice free meal for. [Narelle] Awesome. [Mark] Yeah, but the thing is, the, the signage was actually quite decent. And they had signage on, not just the numbers of the rooms but they also had it on the toilets. And, um, they even had it on some of the, um, some of the other important, like the, the cafes and the doors for the balcony, [not the balconies of the rooms] but the decks, the doors to the deck, yeah. [Narelle] Fantastic. [Narelle] Okay now, Japan. Tell us about Japan. [Mark] Oh, Japan is, Japan is the, ultimate in accessibility, I've gotta say. You can learn so much from the Japanese. After all, they invented the, TGSIs that we all use around. They also invented the taut harness for our guide dogs, but, that's okay. The Japanese think through everything. And every, like in an

open area, like, some of the train stations are, like Southern Cross in Melbourne is the same. So I think Southern Cross should learn from, the Victorian government should learn from the Japanese. Um, The, they got braille trails everywhere. It's just not a problem at all. But the thing that really got me, um, is if you put your hands on the stair rails, there's braille at the beginning of the, at the top of the bottom of the stairs, whichever way you're looking at. [Narelle] Oh my, that would be awesome!. [Mark] On the braille label, it has the platform that you're going up or coming down from. [Narelle] Oh, wow. That would be so awesome. [Illese] Just that simple thing of knowing which platform, which stairs, you're at the bottom of, I mean, you know, I don't understand why that's not an international thing personally. [Mark] A great little tip for anyone that's doing accessible signage and - [Illese] Apparently, also underneath, there was, um, underneath those handrails, there was Japanese braille, well, braille in Japanese. [Mark] Yeah. But it also told you what line that was as well. [Illese] So, the Yamanote line or the, you know, whatever train line you were going to. [Mark] Yeah. [Narelle] So Japan was fabulous then for you. [Mark] Oh, yeah [laughs]. [Narelle] You were able to relax, be confident in being able to get around. [Mark] We definitely want to go back there. We're looking at Osaka or something next year. So, yeah, look, [Illese] I found going through Tokyo Station, Tokyo Station is just chokkas with people and it's hectic at the best of times. It was probably the first station where I actually pushed Mark in front. [Mark] [laughs] [Illese] Because I got him to just follow the braille line or the, lines on the ground. [Mark] Just the cane helped. [Illese] And as soon as people saw that cane, they just split like [gestures a split]. [Narelle] Oh, wow. [Mark] I mean, sighted guiding worked but it was just easier for me to go in front in some situations. [Narelle] It would be easier for an unsighted guide. [Mark] Yeah, yeah. [Narelle] Illese was dependent on you. Isn't that wonderful? [Mark] The other thing about Japan was, um, the, um, again, they're, I mean, they're obviously technical as well. So, there's a lot of stuff that I would've liked to explore a bit further, but we were only there for two days. So, but, there were kiosks or, um, things like, ATMs. [Mark, to Illese] I think that time you got the money out there was even - [Mark] That the ability to even talk to a, human bank teller because there was a situation that Illese had to sort, that impressed me. So, things like that, yeah, I was actually, yeah, quite, fascinated by it. [Narelle] So, [Illese] And of course, there's braille on the toilets seats, as well. [Narelle] On the toilet seats, wow. [Illese] Well, on the remote control, next to the toilet seat that runs the heated toilets or, the bidet or whatever that you get. [Mark] Every toilet, that I found in the accessible toilet, if you use the accessible toilet, even, most of the toilets they had bidets, and all the bidets have um, buttons for, you know, different operations. And, yeah, they were definitely clearly brailled in Japanese, of course. But once you learn the braille, uh, for what you want, it's pretty straightforward, so. [Narelle] So, as a special project, it was well worth doing. You learnt a lot. [Illese] Oh, yeah. [Mark] Um, yeah, I, look, it was a very, uh, it was a very interesting group of, experiences that we've had. It allowed me to give some thought to some things. And, um, yeah, it's, obviously, there's lots of notes that I wrote. It's just a whole lot of, um, a whole lot of things that we can actually bring to the table when it comes to discussions around accessibility, [Narelle] Wonderful. [Mark] In general, yeah. [Narelle] So, what's your takeaway? Two takeaways, one from each of you, about the whole experience. [Mark, to Illese] You go this time. [Illese] Um.. Take away... I think, for me, traveling, through the cruise side of it, it was certainly easier to go to the dining rooms. with Mark,

rather than having to go through the buffet upstairs. So that was my learning curve. But in saying that I was very disappointed that even though the buffet menus repeated regularly. There were none available in braille. So, [Mark] Yeah. [Illese] That would be my, you know, comment back to Norwegian, to.. [Mark] They actually said that, they had an embosser, but when I spoke to the lady, she said: "Oh no, we don't have anything like that on the ship." Which is quite interesting, Obviously, you know they are aware of braille and embossing braille, but they probably should've been told, or they should've got that. And I'm hoping that they'll put that on the on their survey next time that, y'know, if you want braille menus and so forth. I think the problem sometimes is when, when they're doing ship type schedules, that these menus often will get changed. So, it's a case of making sure that, you know, whoever plans that can get that information, it's just the usual, you know, publishing and getting things brailled. But, yeah, I would have really appreciated. The app was awful. I've got to say, the app on board. Once we were off open, opened in the seas, it was useless. They had graphics for graphics for the menus. And, you know, in being, because we're not, I didn't want to go and spend a lot of money just to get Wi-Fi, thank you very much. I wasn't able to use artificial intelligent solutions. So, yeah, therefore I had to sort of rely on Illese and other people that tell me what's available. Well, what was on during the day - that was the other feedback I needed to say. The take for me, I think, for me, the biggest take was that we've got a lot to learn, in terms of accessibility. There's a lot more improvement. Sometimes it's easy to get complacent with what we've got. And, you know, we need to start challenging ourselves, but not only that, we need to challenge the people that make decisions. In , in getting accessible things for us. Because, you know, without improvements, we will get left behind. And we've all been in that situation. And we're not out of that situation, so we can still, you know, still be suffering the same thing 5, 10 years, 15 years down the track from now. So, that was a big take for me. [Narelle] Thank you, Mark. Thank you, Illese, for coming back and telling us about the experience because it's been really, actually it's been really valuable, because obviously I love traveling as well. And just hearing about what you've experienced, what you've learnt. So, next year, you will report back from Osaka I'm presuming? And, obviously, this is The Digital Access Show. We hope you like what we're talking about. And what we're doing, please like, review, subscribe, share, Google Review. Take your pick. And we will see you next time onThe Digital Access Show. Thanks, Mark, and Illese. [Mark and Illese] Bye! [Music]