

March 7, 2003

Hilton Tours and Safaris
P.O. Box 766
Hilton 3245, Kwazulu Natal, South Africa

Dear Hilton Tours and Safaris,

To say that we were absolutely thrilled with our recent tour of KwaZulu Natal with Hilton Tours and Safaris would be quite an understatement. I have traveled throughout the world with the disabled and physically challenged for over 12 years and have never experienced the level of exemplary service and commitment exhibited by Greg ... Garson. Not only did they provide a dream vacation, they were the ideal people to experience it with.

My traveling companion for our five-week vacation in South Africa was Keith Ruff, a 56 year-old man with cerebral palsy. Although Keith and I have traveled extensively throughout the world, Keith's physical condition does require considerable flexibility and attention to detail. During the planning of our trip, Hilton Tours was fastidious in their effort to make every detail of the itinerary match our "wish list" while also accommodating Keith's condition. Keith is confined to a wheelchair and has limited mobility and dexterity, so transferring in and out of the wheelchair to a vehicle or other mode of transportation requires considerable effort. We were provided with a roomy and comfortable luxury vehicle that facilitated transfers and easily accommodated specialized medical equipment, the wheelchair, and the luggage. Greg Garson, our driver and guide, quickly put us at ease and demonstrated a high level of comfort and adaptability when working with our special needs. It was clear that he was as excited to learn about us as he was to share his extensive knowledge of the area. For two weeks Greg explained the history, politics, and culture of our exotic locales, all with his characteristic warmth and good humor. As a university instructor, I appreciated the level of detailed knowledge Greg possessed, and I marveled at how well he was able to adapt and explain complex ideas for my traveling companion.

Although he is confined to wheelchair, Keith loves to try new things. This usually involves unforeseen challenges and a process of trial and error to determine what works and what does not. Hilton Tours was well up to the challenge. The presentation of activities made it clear that Hilton Tours had researched a wide variety of activities and had explored the expertise of a number of agencies. Because it was mid-winter, each day Greg presented us with a number of exciting options that effectively addressed the weather conditions as well as Keith's comfort level for that day. Greg was always full of enthusiasm, and we very quickly came to trust his prudence and wisdom. Our activities were so well chosen and planned out that they maximized our enjoyment of the culture, adventure, wildlife, and scenic beauty of the area, while minimizing any inconvenience or strain. Our every wish for the trip was fulfilled, including a four-wheeling excursion up Sani Pass, parasailing, visiting with a sangoma, remarkable rock art, and safaris tailored to our interest in seeing specific animals.

When it came to accommodation, Greg knew ahead of time the layout of the hotel, the room, and the bathroom. Issues such as stairs, narrow doorways, and a too-tight turning radius for the wheelchair were all avoided. When Greg discovered that cold temperatures could be difficult for persons with cerebral palsy, he called ahead to each hotel to make sure that a roaring fire and comfortable room awaited us each evening. Remarkably, although each hotel had been carefully chosen with our specific needs in mind, we were surprised and delighted by the charm and character of the lodgings. Our lodgings were more than just a place to sleep, but were enjoyable destinations in themselves. Some of our fondest memories

involve relaxing by the bar after a full day's activities, having a nightcap and exchanging rousing stories with Greg.

It is important to note that while cerebral palsy affects all levels of motor coordination, it leaves the mind intact and healthy. Keith has a pronounced speech impediment and we have become accustomed to people assuming that a disabled body implies a disabled mind. I am happy to say this was never an issue with ... Greg ... From the very beginning, Keith was addressed as any other person would be and was always fully involved in plans and conversations. In fact, although it takes a few hours to become accustomed to Keith's speech pattern, Keith and Greg were trading quips and telling jokes within minutes of meeting each other. Although this may sound like a minor issue, it was crucial to our enjoyment of the trip. Keith never felt as though he was a "second-class citizen" on his own vacation, and I never felt like I had to act as translator.

Safety and security are always issues when traveling, and we felt safe and well-taken care of at all times. Greg demonstrated an extraordinary level of comfort, intuition, and adaptability when working with Keith's special needs. Because Keith is completely immobile without assistance, we are together 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For the first time in 12 years, I felt comfortable turning over wheelchair pushing responsibilities to another person and often wandered off to find my own adventures. For me, it was a rare vacation within a vacation.

I would like to offer one final example of the superb quality of our tour and of the high caliber of character exhibited by Hilton Tours. Not knowing that Hilton Tours worked throughout South Africa, we had contracted with another tour company that "specialized" in tours for the disabled to take us on to Cape Town. From day one it was a disaster. The "fully inspected disability-friendly rooms" we were promised were non-existent. The rooms that were provided were accessible only by stairs or over a great expanse of lawn and the wheelchair wouldn't fit into the bathrooms. When we complained, we were told this was what South Africa had to offer (which by now we knew to be untrue). Furthermore, we often felt fear for our own safety. By day three, we were desperate, but we were in the middle of nowhere and given our special situation we didn't know where to turn. Greg ... had told us to call if we ever needed anything, so I took a chance and called them, out of the blue, late at night. They quickly soothed our fears and within hours, and without remuneration, they had secured an extraordinary room nearby and had even found an accessible excursion to fill the time until we could make other plans. The overwhelming relief and gratitude we felt to finally reach a safe and secure environment can scarcely be expressed in words.

As I said before, these are the people we all hope to travel with. We couldn't have asked for more on this trip, and we can't wait to return to South Africa. Whether you are able-bodied or have physical challenges, Hilton Tours will provide a trip beyond your expectations.

Sincerely Yours,

Kelly Armstrong
Owner, Armstrong Home Health Care
Instructor, Biomedical Ethics
303 Gilmore Hall
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA 52240, United States