

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Eye on the Cure Podcast. The podcast about winning the fight against retinal disease from the Foundation Fighting Blindness.

Speaker 2:

Welcome everyone to the Eye on the Cure podcast. I'm your host, Ben Shaberman with the Foundation Fighting Blindness. And for this episode we're going to talk about traveling, which is a little different from the science topics and research we usually discuss. But I'm really excited to talk about traveling with visual impairment and I am pleased to have as my guest, Sue Bramhall, who founded a travel service called Mind's Eye Travel, specifically for people with visual impairment. Sue, welcome to Eye on the Cure.

Speaker 3:

Thank you. Thank you. It's been a long time, Ben, since we first met. Counting the years, I think 16 or 17 or more, 18 years, it was my first time coming to the Foundation Fighting Blindness, and I wanted to be around other people who are visually impaired. I have RP and my case is pretty textbook. I was diagnosed when I'm 19 years old and I didn't lose a lot of sight until later in life, but when the day came that I had to stop driving, that was the big thing. That was the big moment when so much changed and I had to stop doing the work I was doing, had to alter my life and start to figure out, "Oh, okay, now what next?" So I've always wanted to travel. Even growing up, my father worked for the government and we transferred around a few times, not a lot, a few times, but there was just so much to learn each time we moved.

And I think that's sort of where that little bud of travel zest came from. My family and I were all born in Iowa, the Midwest. We didn't go anywhere, we didn't do anything. But the more we moved around, we ended up in the East Coast and now I live in Maine, so I wanted to travel. I had traveled a little bit and wanted more, and I decided, well, there must be a lot of other people just like me out there, and why don't I just start a small group? Travel will bring a few fully sighted people to assist us and we can pretty much go wherever we want to go. So that was also a time when everything was becoming web-based instead of having to buy expensive software and become a full-fledged travel agent, which I wasn't, but I figured since everything is web-based, I can learn it as I go.

So I just started really slowly and the first couple years had small groups coming up to here, up to Maine. Each time I do a Maine trip, it's a little different. Sometimes we start in Boston, sometimes we start in Portland, sometimes we just do mid-coast. We usually include Acadia National Park and try to keep a variety of tactile activities included. We like walking tours, we hear a lot of history on those. We go to things that we can touch and feel. Here in Maine, we go to lighthouses that we can wrap our arms around and hear the water rushing up near our feet and eat as much seafood as we can because so many people really love seafood. And this year we had a really nice trip and going to do another one this next year [inaudible 00:03:09] with the overflow because it was so popular.

Speaker 2:

So I remember when I met you back in 2008, I think it was at the Kansas City Visions Conference, and you were just envisioning the travel service. You hadn't even launched it yet, but you were talking about it and it's been exciting for me over many years. I got on your email list to see all the exotic locations you've gone to. I know you've just been talking about traveling to Maine and Acadia National Forest and

so on, but you go all over the world. What are some of the places that you've gone to in the last, I guess, few years? Pre and post pandemic?

Speaker 3:

Pre-COVID and post. Just this last week I got back from Vietnam and Cambodia. We had a small group that we all flew over and met in Hanoi and we had two days in Hanoi and then we went to Ha Long Bay and did an overnight in Ha Long Bay and those who wanted could get into the ocean, swim in the ocean a little bit. I personally stayed at the pool, but after that we flew down to Ho Chi Minh City, which used to be called Saigon, and we had three days there of touring around. And then we got on a Mekong River cruise, had an eight-day river cruise where we got to visit little villages and had a group of orphans come on board and entertain us with their music that they learned. One of the places that we had lunch, let's see, what town was that?

That might've been in Hanoi. One of the places we had lunch was the cooking school that took kids off the street and taught them skills so that they could earn a living. So we had lunch at a place like that. A lot of things that you don't even think of, and it was just really nice because you got a whole sense of their culture. We got to make some of the spring rolls and soups and salads that they eat and the food was wonderful. I thought we'd be eating noodles and rice the whole time, but it was quite a variety of really good, very healthy food too. So that's just the most recent trip. But what I try to do is do two international trips and one domestic and some years I'll have four trips, but most I try to stick to just three, but since we're just ramping back up after COVID, we're doing a little bit more.

Speaker 2:

How many people typically come on an international trip? What's the range of your-

Speaker 3:

Well, it's kind of all over the place. This Vietnam trip was just eight of us and I think it was because it was such a long flight. It was 15 hours to fly from Boston to Hanoi and not everybody wants to do that, but that doesn't stop me. So we had a smaller group. The next trip I'm doing is in April we're going to go back to Europe. Finally, just waiting and waiting and waiting to go back to Europe. So I have almost 30 people in this trip. We're going to start in Zurich and do two nights in Zurich in a hotel and then motor coach over to Basel, Switzerland and get on a viking river cruise. And we're eight days on the river cruise and at the end we get off and go down to Paris for two nights. So it's sort of a cruise and land tour combination.

Speaker 2:

Sounds like a wonderful trip. You definitely don't hold back on plugging in multiple destinations within a single journey. You go to a lot of places on one trip, that's pretty impressive, especially given people have some sight challenges.

Speaker 3:

I try not to not include options because I'm always surprised at who wants them. Generally, my clients don't want to go for just one week. The farther they travel, the longer they want to stay. So sometimes our trips are 12, 14, 16 days. So people feel, especially if it's a long flight, they want to be there for quite a while and get the most out of it that they can.

Speaker 2:

Sure, that makes total sense. So you mentioned earlier that you try to help people have obviously experiences that aren't visual. Obviously if people are visually impaired, that's not going to happen that well. So eating sounds like an important aspect of a lot of these journeys. You mentioned tactile experiences. What other ways do you help people with vision loss enjoy these journeys?

Speaker 3:

Well, let's see. I guess because since I'm creating the trips, I can pick activities that work for me because I'm a pretty typical client for myself, so it's easy. I don't have to kind of second guess. Plus I know my clients, I have a lot of people that have been traveling with me for a long time and I know what they're looking for. As a general overview, we like to do walking tours, and in doing walking tours often we can just stop and go over and touch things instead of the guys saying, "Oh, look over on your right and this is here and this." So we go over and touch it. If it's a tree, if it's a lighthouse, you name it, we're going to touch it and feel it and just get the general idea of what they're talking about. We like to include food tastings, wine or beer tastings. That's just another one of those tactile things.

There's certain smells in there. You always try to get those. When I do a trip in Maine, you certainly can smell the sea air, especially if it's low tide. But just to seize all those opportunities where we can and create activities that are all tactile and not just viewing from a motor coach with a guide saying, "Look to your left or look to your right."

Speaker 2:

Right. Do you have a specific or some specific memories from trips where somebody just had just a wonderful experience or a surprise, something they weren't expecting on one of your excursions?

Speaker 3:

I'm not thinking of any one person or one situation. I will tell you this last September when we started up again after COVID, we had a really nice size group go to Jackson Hole and Yellowstone, and we did an overnight up in Yellowstone at the Old Faithful Inn. And there's a couple different information centers that were there, and they all had pieces of fur or pieces of antlers, they had footprints all molded out. They started with a human and they went up to different animal sizes and you got to feel it what it was and what animal it matched. There's just so many things, but the end of that trip, we were all just so happy. We laughed all week long. Everyone was just so happy to be traveling again. We had some really terrific sighted guides, and that was one of the trips where I was able to bring one-sighted guide for every person. So any free time, they got to do exactly what they wanted instead of doing what the whole group wanted.

And that really added a nice value to it too, because not everybody wants to do the same thing. Some people want to go do more hiking, some want to do more eating, some want to do a little more shopping. So I guess I'm not really answering your questions in a specific, but people just appreciate the whole experience and they keep coming back.

Speaker 2:

That's great. That's a testament to how much fun and enjoyment people are having. And do you have people who come to you maybe when they're first learning about your service or even when they're ready to leave for the first time. That they come to those situations with a little fear or apprehension for going on a big journey with, and maybe they haven't done that a lot given their vision loss.

Speaker 3:

On this trip in April, the Zurich to Paris trip, I have, let's see, 1, 2, 3. I have three couples coming and they've never been on a river cruise and they haven't traveled, I don't think, outside of the United States. And one spouse is blind, the other one is sighted and they're coming as a couple. So we're going to have a Zoom session a month or so before that trip just to help to answer questions for the first timers. It's always interesting for me because I remember back when I had to stop driving and where do I go and how do I find the answers I'm looking for? One of the suggestions I give them is to go to one of the national conventions, ACB or Foundation Fighting Blindness, just to have that feeling where you're in a whole hotel with everybody. We're all in the same boat, everybody's there, and you're not alone, first of all, that's the big thing.

And it doesn't have to be as scary as it feels sometimes and there's a lot of help. And I find the exhibit areas are full of information because you can get a chance to see what kind of technology is out there, how it's improved, what are they coming up with. And I just think that's a good resource for people, especially people who are new to the blind community.

Speaker 2:

And when I think about traveling, especially far away places, the experiences are often transformational. And I can only imagine that for somebody with visual impairment who hasn't traveled much since they've lost their vision, that these trips must be tremendously transformational in many cases.

Speaker 3:

A lot of my clients come alone. They may have, some have family members and some don't, but they almost always come alone. And that really gives them a chance to be independent, stay independent, experience things with friends instead of just family members and they can just sort of branch out on their own. One of the trips that's coming up that I've been wanting to do for a long time is we're going to go to Africa in May and my husband has been there many times and we're going to be going to various lodges and different national parks, and we're going to be going on game drives. And essentially, it's like a truck or a van that has the back open. So you're sitting out in the air, and let's say we drive up and we go up to a zebra herd, we can drive up and go right in the middle of the herd and the herd doesn't think anything of it. But the minute you open up a car door like you're going to get out, they're gone.

So we're hoping to get into in the middle of a lot of different herds and that you're going to smell, you're going to hear, you're going to everything, very different sounds. And a part of it will be in the desert. The other part, we're going to be in rainforest, and this is all in Namibia, all the way in the southwest corner of Africa. But that's going to be a whole different tactile experience. And at night there's going to be native dancing and drumming and all [inaudible 00:13:01] with some of the locals, a whole combination. And of course we're going to be visiting Victoria Falls, which is one of the things that was on my bucket list. The mist is so heavy, you have to wear raincoats and hats when you hike in and it's so loud and it vibrates. I'm getting chills just thinking about it.

Speaker 2:

Well, you're giving me chills just talking about it. It sounds like an incredible trip. How many days will that be?

Speaker 3:

We're all flying to Johannesburg and the next morning we're going up to Victoria Falls and it's a 10-day safari starting in Victoria Falls, and then bit by bit going all through Namibia and down and ending up in their capitol in Windhoek. So it's a 10-day safari plus the extra night in Johannesburg.

Speaker 2:

Sounds incredible. So I have sort of a personal question, not too personal, but I know when I'm going on a trip, even if it's not very far away and it's just a few days, there's planning involved. And you have to figure out your itinerary and hotels and flights and all that. Some of these trips, like the Africa trip you just talked about, they're very involved and require a lot of planning. Are you by nature a planner and an organizer?

Speaker 3:

I'd have to say yes, because it's the part I love the most. I really love planning the trips, but the Africa trip ended up being pretty easy because my husband has been there many times, so I'm using one of his vendors that he's used as drivers to get people from one point to another point. And this vendor happens to do photographic safaris and my husband has met him and spoken to him, so I feel very comfortable using him. And then his recommendations, he recommended a hotel right across the airport in Johannesburg. We walk out of arrivals and just walk over to the hotel. So we'll use that one. It's a little more than what I like to spend, but the convenience is, you can't beat it. When I pick a hotel, I always pick a hotel that has a restaurant and those end up being a little bit more too, but we don't want to have to go travel all around the city looking for a decent place to eat.

It's better just to have it right there at the hotel and include breakfast as well. It's just more convenient. And our vendor and some other people that my husband knows, all live in Namibia, in Windhoek, and that's where we're going to be ending up. So there's plenty of places he's been to. "Oh yeah, you got to take your group to this taxidermy place where you can feel the animals are all redone in life-size form." And so we can feel them and get a sense of how big they are, the shape of all these different various animals. So there's help along the way, but sometimes I go to a place I don't really have anything to start with, and I just start online and bit by bit look at the most popular things to do and which ones of those would work for our group and add that.

And then if I'm picking guides, I just get on the phone and I can tell from a five-minute conversation if they're going to be a guide that is going to get into our situation and understand how to communicate with us and give us the most tactile and most descriptive experience we can. And it's pretty easy to pick those out. I have a vendor in Jackson Hole I've used twice now, and he's just absolutely amazing. And in our drive up to Yellowstone and back, he goes all the way back with a geology, how that whole valley was formed and passes around samples of rock formations and pieces of fur. "This is what the buffalo feels like, this is what the bear feels like." Talks about the difference between black bear and a grizzly bear. Just all these fascinating information about animals and I love doing that. I'm getting all the-

Speaker 2:

That's cool.

Speaker 3:

[inaudible 00:16:29] everybody else would just sort of glaze over, but would really be exciting for us.

Speaker 2:

Right. And you have a really nice website. I visited your website before setting up this call. And can you let people know what your URL is, what your website address is?

Speaker 3:

Yes, [mindseyetravel.com](http://mindseyetravel.com). And if they go to the homepage, they can just click on the trip and then that will open up all the details, the day by day itinerary and the prices, what to deposit, terms, everything is all on each of the descriptions for each of the trips. So just a real short lineup of what we've got going, got Zurich to Paris in April. We've got Africa in May. We have another Maine trip. It's going to be the same as this last year because I had so many people call. I had to create a waiting list. So we're doing a second Maine trip this September, and we have a group that's finally going to get to go to New Zealand. They've been waiting and waiting and we've had to reschedule three different times because of COVID. Now they're finally going, so it's New Zealand in September, and then most of them are going to go to Fiji right afterward. I have back-to-back trips. It's a 10-day trip in New Zealand, then they'd do a flight up to Fiji and it's a seven-day island hopping cruise in Fiji for a week. So you can do one or the other or both. And that's what we've got lined up for this year.

Speaker 2:

That sounds like so much fun.

Speaker 3:

And I'm working on 2004 too. I've always wanted to, I've been to Alaska twice but on cruise ships and now we're going to go back and see some of the inland areas. We're going to start in Anchorage, but then get on that train trip up to Denali National Park and stay a couple nights up there and explore that whole area. My clients love to go various national parks, and I'm not sure if we're going to end up in Fairbanks or what we're going to do because I haven't put that together yet, but that's for 2024. I'll probably limit it that year to three trips, so I'll see what I'm going to do.

Speaker 2:

Sounds great.

Speaker 3:

I know what the other one is for 2024, we're going to cruise the British Isles on Viking.

Speaker 2:

That sounds awesome. You really cover the whole world practically. It's very impressive. So this has been wonderful. I'm getting excited just hearing about all your different trips and adventures. But to close things out, I was wondering if you could talk about just some general tips and guidelines for people who have visual impairment who may be a little tentative about traveling or just ways that people with visual impairment can travel better and be more prepared for things that could happen along the way.

Speaker 3:

One of the easiest things, and most of us get on an airplane from time to time, whether we're just visiting family or going somewhere on a vacation. But once you get to the check-in encounter at the airport, all you have to do is ask them for assistance and you have what you need all the way through. They'll come and they always bring a wheelchair, so don't be offended by that. You don't have to get

into the wheelchair, you can just let them know you can walk. I've gotten to the point where I just get in the wheelchair because it's so much faster and easier, and some of these airports are really big. But anyway, they take you right to the head of the line. When you go through security, they help you go through everything together. They'll take you to your gate, they'll ask you do you need to use the restroom, need to get a sandwich or a cup of coffee.

They're almost always very accommodating. And then if you have a connection, they're going to arrange to have somebody at your gate again with that wheelchair, and they're going to take you to your connection. And again, when you get to your destination, again, they're going to take you from your gate down to baggage claim, help you get your bag, and then take you out to get to wherever, whoever's picking you up, or if you're getting on a shuttle or whatever. They see you all the way through and that's so nice to be able to have that and rely on it. Doesn't mean I haven't missed a connection because of it, but things like that can happen. And sometimes you get someone assisting you who barely knows English, and I'm not very good with accents, so sometimes we don't all get the right information back and forth.

But if you repeat things often enough, you can get it done, so that's an easy part. And I have clients who love traveling on Amtrak and they say the same thing, that there's assistance there that will help. They'll get you into your right car or help you make whatever changes you need to make. Chicago, I guess, is a huge train station, and a lot of my clients end up having to change trains there. But again, there's assistance and you can count on it and it's helpful.

Speaker 2:

So I guess the bottom line is to speak up and advocate for yourself and try to plan ahead a little bit.

Speaker 3:

And speak up and be clear. "Need help getting to my gate. Yes, I can walk. I don't need the wheelchair." And just be clear on what you're asking for. And people in general are just always so nice and want to jump in and help too. So even I struggle sometimes with travel. When I came back on this trip, the flight attendant wanted to take me out to the person that was meeting me to put me in the wheelchair, and she was trying to position me in a way that she thought was right. Person with the wheelchair was trying to move the wheelchair up, crammed it, just ran into me with the wheelchair. Please, let's start over. And sometimes you just say, please, just one person give me instructions. I mean, I can't answer to three different people. Everyone's trying so hard to help, but it can get a little confusing. But again, just speak up and say just one person and that that's helpful.

Speaker 2:

And so again, your website is...

Speaker 3:

Mindseye, M-I-N-D-S-E-Y-E travel.com.

Speaker 2:

Great. And again, your website is nicely designed with a lot of great information.

Speaker 3:

Thank you. I just redid it earlier this year, so glad you like it.

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Speaker 2:

So Sue, this has been a lot of fun. I've really enjoyed hearing about your adventures and the opportunities you're providing for people who may not have these opportunities readily available otherwise. So thanks for doing it, and it's great that you have such a passion for it.

Speaker 3:

Well, if people want to travel, there's no reason why they can't. We find a way to make it happen. So I bring sighted guides on all of my trips, and sometimes you're sharing a guide, sometimes you have your own, depending on the trip. And that's how we make it happen is of the assistance. So we just can all do the fun things we want to do.

Speaker 2:

Right. Excellent. So Sue, thank you again. Enjoy your next adventures, Africa, Europe, and many more after that. And listeners, thank you again for tuning into Eye on the Cure, and we look forward to having you back for our next episode. Take care.

Speaker 1:

This has been Eye on the Cure. To help us win the fight, please donate at [foundationfightingblindness.org](http://foundationfightingblindness.org).