

When Wendy met Mary.

Mary and I had met on the internet some 10 years ago. I was going through a difficult patch with my leg and an ill-fitting prosthesis and doing some problem solving with other amputees on an amputee forum. Mary and I had both been amputees for many years, and it was good to communicate with someone who understood first-hand what it was like.

After a few weeks, we exchanged email addresses and have kept in touch intermittently over the years. We discovered that we have much in common – we are both women in our fifties, both long-term amputees (almost 90 years of experience between us!), and we are both support teachers working in schools with students with disabilities.

Mary is from Dublin in Ireland, and had travelled to New Zealand to spend Christmas with two of her children. And I am from Launceston, Tasmania, the southern most state of Australia. We decided that it was too good an opportunity to miss, so we made arrangements to meet up in Melbourne to spend time together over a period of slightly less than 24 hours. And what a whirlwind adventure it was!

I was feeling nervous and excited as I waited what seemed to be an interminable length of time for Mary to emerge through the customs doors. And from the moment we were on the bus from the airport, we talked incessantly. It was just as well we had left our husbands, partners and families behind – they would never have coped with the pace of conversation of two women who had so much in common to talk about. We didn't take long to get used to each other's accents – Mary's lilting Irish accent and my Australian intonation simply served as reminders of the amazing bridging of distance between us.

We had secured two adjacent rooms in a five star hotel in central Melbourne, a special summer deal that we otherwise would not have been able to afford; but chosen carefully for its free shuttle bus for airport connector and close proximity to a city tour bus we wanted to access the next day. (You should have seen Wendy with her husband comparing maps and descriptions on two separate computers in order to find the best deal with the most suitable location!)

Together we marvelled at the external glass elevator in our five star hotel, as well as enjoying free room upgrades. We told our story to strangers who wondered why we were carrying a pair of crutches. But more significantly, we began to share our life journey.

We laughed together as we shared humorous stories of people in our work communities who had known us for years and not realised that we were amputees until some clandestine event which bared all to otherwise unsuspecting acquaintances.

We shared a late evening meal, getting to know each other face-to-face, and the sole customers of the hotel restaurant, talking incessantly, until it was obvious that they wanted to close.

We spoke of our relationships late into the night as girls do. We spoke of our parents and the huge impact of life-changing decisions – the responsibility they bear and acceptance of our difficulties. We both acknowledged the high level of support and understanding which we receive from our families.

Finally realising how tired we were and with the excitement still bubbling, we retreated to our individual rooms to enjoy the spa baths and king sized beds.

The next morning, over a leisurely buffet breakfast, we compared differences in everything from breakfast foods to retirement plans, as well as differences in education systems in Ireland versus Australia; particularly in perceptions and attitudes towards disability, the roles of a support teacher, and the way the needs of students were funded or not met appropriately by our respective governments.

After we returned to our rooms to pack, we were surprised by the hotel cleaning staff knocking on the door at 11.00am to see if we had vacated our rooms. There we were in Mary's room with our suitcases opened and our legs spread around, comparing prostheses, residual limbs and general tips and hints!

That morning, we caught a tourist bus to give Mary a glimpse of significant heritage buildings around Melbourne, but we were so busy talking that I'm not sure we saw much of the view, and we certainly didn't hear much of the commentary!

We strolled (no, I'm not sure amputees stroll, especially in the heat wave we were experiencing in Melbourne that day)...anyway, we walked through Queen Victoria Market, comparing fresh fruit and veg, meats and cheeses.

We attracted the attention of a hawker in the meat department - a good Aussie bloke who took us aside and explained in intricate detail the recipe he used to cook the unusual cut of meat we had spotted, including his secret ingredient – and who then wanted us to buy it to prepare that night. He was a bit startled when we explained where we were each from – perhaps we should have invited him to our hotel to use our kitchenette to prepare it for us!

We marvelled at the 360 degree view from Sky Deck and we laughed with the taxi driver who said he was in love with us and wanted us to marry him. It was safe being two 'mature' women together in a strange city, managing public transport and needing to make the same physical adjustments, taking the same short cuts to see what we wanted to see, but to save steps and reduce walking so that our legs survived the adventure.

Amazingly we made it back to the airport in good time to make a tearful goodbye as we each caught our departure flights. What a truly memorable 24 hours we had spent together. As we return to our separate lives on opposite sides of the globe, we carry with us a new bond which has deepened with the shared experience, and we both hope that we will see each other again sometime over the next number of years.

Wendy Lane
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