



Travel Diary: A Neurodivergent Traveler

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Front cover: A neurodivergent solo traveler in Hong Kong, enjoying a present moment

Introduction

This story is written from my perspective as a neurodivergent solo traveler. I am a slender, physically resilient person who works hard to maintain health and prioritize overall wellness, but I have long struggled with generalized anxiety disorder. My neurodivergence means I experience sensory input and emotional regulation differently from many people, often feeling heightened anxiety and overwhelm, especially in unpredictable or crowded travel situations.

Traveling with family can be particularly challenging for me. My father's behavior has become increasingly emotionally volatile and immature as he ages, which adds a unique layer of stress to group trips. I find myself constantly anticipating his reactions and bracing for potential conflicts, which drains my energy and makes it difficult to enjoy the moment. Because of this, I've learned to prepare meticulously—packing snacks that meet my dietary needs, planning quiet moments for self-care, and setting realistic expectations for group dynamics.

Over time, I've discovered that I thrive when I can travel alone. Solo trips allow me to set my own pace, honor my sensory needs, and make spontaneous decisions that keep me grounded. Independent travel has become both an act of self-preservation and a source of empowerment: it lets me fully inhabit the journey, observe the world in my own way, and move with a sense of freedom that is often missing when I'm tethered to my parents' plans. Even so, I'm always learning how to balance my desire for autonomy with the realities of family responsibilities.

Joy of My Trip Prep

In early February 2026, my church friends Mai, May, and Fung and I began planning a detailed trip to Washington, DC for the Passport DC event. We researched the list of participating embassies, mapped out which countries we most wanted to visit, and created a flexible itinerary to maximize the number of embassies we could experience in one day. We discussed transportation options, eventually deciding to take Amtrak into the city and book a nearby hotel so we could arrive early and not feel rushed.

We also talked about packing snacks, water, and comfortable shoes, since visiting multiple embassies would involve a lot of walking and waiting in line. In our planning group chat, we shared tips from other travelers and made sure everyone knew the Passport DC rules about lines, security, and required identification. By the time the event drew closer, I felt both excited and well-prepared for this unique cultural exchange adventure.

For me, taking time off to travel is not just about improving my mental health—it's about personal growth, self-discovery, and expanding my understanding of the world. As a neurodivergent individual living with generalized anxiety disorder, every trip is filled with both anticipation and trepidation. The process of researching destinations, planning logistics, and preparing for sensory challenges is as important to me as the trip itself. I pay close attention to details like finding quiet accommodations, identifying safe places to decompress, and mapping out accessible public transportation routes in advance.

I actively seek out advice from solo travel experts who understand the unique needs of neurodiverse travelers. I look for practical tips on managing overstimulation, suggestions for budget-friendly lodging that offers a sense of security, and

recommendations for travel gear that helps with organization and comfort. I also value resources that address how to navigate social interactions and unexpected changes in plans, as these are often the most stressful aspects of travel for me.

Through each journey, I strive to learn more about myself—what triggers my anxiety, what strategies help me stay calm, and which environments allow me to thrive. Travel, for me, is a way to practice self-advocacy, independence, and resilience, all while building joyful memories and new perspectives.

On the morning of our departure for the Passport DC event, a fizz of excitement ran through me. I zipped up my large red backpack, double-checking every pocket to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything important: 2 changes of clothes, a neatly folded set of sleepwear, travel-sized toiletries, my favorite snacks for the road, and a battered notebook for jotting down trip memories. My hands shook a little as I arranged everything by the door—part nerves, part anticipation for what lay ahead.

After packing, I forced myself to lay down on my bed, trying to calm my racing thoughts. The afternoon sun streamed through the window as I sipped on a glass of cold water, scrolling through travel blogs for last-minute tips about DC. It felt strange to pause when my mind was already on the journey ahead, but I knew I'd need the energy.

Day 1 – Departure from Philly

But as the clock crept toward 5:45 p.m., the familiar pre-trip chaos erupted. Instead of a smooth departure, bags in hand and a clear plan, we were suddenly scrambling. My dad paced the hallway, barking reminders about chargers and water bottles, while my mom darted from room to room, double-checking the stove and windows.

Tension buzzed in the air, and I felt my careful preparations slipping out of my grasp.

Trying to make sense of the shifting plans, I finally asked, “Where exactly are we meeting your church friends?” My question hung in the air, a small plea for clarity amidst the confusion.

My father, hands on his hips and keys jangling, replied, “We’re meeting our friends at 30th Street Station. So we’ll park at Frankford Transportation Center, then hop on the train into Center City.” His tone was brisk, as if the change was no big deal, but I could feel my stomach knotting with the disruption.

The last-minute decision to rendezvous at 30th Street Station threw off my carefully planned routine. As we loaded our luggage into the trunk, my father rattled off directions and my mother checked her phone for updates from our friends. The car ride to Frankford Transportation Center was quiet, punctuated only by the hum of the engine and my brother’s soft humming in the backseat. I stared out the window, trying to adjust my expectations and let go of the stress building in my chest.

While we crawled through evening traffic, I fiddled with my phone, determined to make the next step easier. I searched up how to pay for the SEPTA fare on the L train—the new name for the old Market-Frankford line. **My resourcefulness paid off:** I discovered we could use contactless credit cards instead of fussing with the unpredictable transit card machines. My fingers danced over the screen as I shared the news with my family.

“Good news—we can just tap our credit cards to pay for the fare,” I announced, waving my United Airlines card in the air. My dad raised an eyebrow, skeptical, but my mom looked relieved.

At the station, I led the way to the full-length turnstiles and gave my card a confident tap. The screen flashed green and the gate slid open—a small victory. I grinned at my parents, proud that my research had paid off.

It took my parents a few awkward moments to dig their cards out from the depths of their bags. My dad fumbled with his wallet while my mom sorted through receipts and coupons until she found hers. We finally made it through and stood together on the cool concrete platform, the air filled with the distant rumble of an approaching train.

My mom tapped her card and smiled when the gate opened, relief washing over her face. Together, we boarded the train, settling into the navy blue plastic seats as the doors slid shut behind us. The city lights flickered outside, and for the first time all evening, I felt a spark of excitement return—our adventure was finally underway.

As a Millennial, I grew up during the rise of the first generation of the internet, experiencing firsthand how rapidly digital technology transformed the way we access and process information. Unlike my parents, who belong to an older Gen X and primarily relied on libraries, newspapers, and television, and word for mouth for information, my peers and I have become adept at navigating online resources, search engines, and now artificial intelligence tools. For me, now in my mid-30s, finding information online or using AI-powered platforms is second nature, providing instant answers to almost any question.

In contrast, my parents' generation often approaches technology with greater caution and may not feel as comfortable trusting online sources or adapting to new digital tools. This generational gap in digital literacy shapes not only how we learn but also how we experience the world, including

travel. While travel itself has become more accessible in some ways—such as booking flights online or using translation apps—it also presents new challenges. For example, navigating constantly changing travel restrictions, understanding digital boarding passes, or finding reliable online reviews requires a level of digital fluency that comes more naturally to Millennials. The methods and tools we use to plan and experience travel have evolved significantly, making the process feel very different from how previous generations approached it.

When we stepped into the cavernous hall of 30th Street Station, the air was thick with the scent of coffee and the echo of announcements. My sneakers squeaked on the polished floor as I wheeled my suitcase to the enormous departure board looming above the crowds. I checked the board again and again, feeling a knot tighten in my stomach each time our train’s status blinked from “On Time” to “Now 7:55P.”

The Amtrak train to Washington, DC, was now rescheduled to depart at 7:55 p.m.—a full hour later than planned. My mind spun with anxious questions: ***Would we make it to the hotel before the front desk closed? Would we miss dinner? Had I packed enough snacks to get us through the wait?*** I pulled out my phone and double-checked our reservation details, trying to map out new backup plans in my head. I glanced at my parents and brother, wondering if they sensed my unease, then forced myself to take a deep breath and remember: travel never goes exactly as planned, and flexibility is part of the adventure.

A few minutes later, I spotted our friends weaving through the crowd—one of them waving a black backpack and light purple tote bag as they approached. Their faces lit up when they saw us, and we exchanged quick hugs and cheerful greetings amid the bustle of the station. For a moment, my anxiety eased. Surrounded by familiar

faces, I felt a spark of excitement return. Now, together, we were ready to take on the trip to Washington, DC, delayed train and all.

To soothe my anxiety, I slipped away from the bustling crowds and ducked into the farthest stall of the busy station bathroom. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead while the muffled sounds of rolling suitcases and hurried footsteps echoed off the tiled walls.

Back at the waiting area, I waited for my family's text updates. I pulled out my well-worn travel journal and a blue gel pen and wrote a new diary entry, documenting the sensory overload and emotional ups and downs I'd experienced so far as a neurodivergent traveler. I wrote about the pressure of crowds, the relief of finding small pockets of solitude, and the tools I used to regain a sense of control—like deep breathing, making lists, and writing under my travel brand, I-Powers Travel. Every few sentences, I paused to check my phone for notifications, the screen lighting up my anxious face in the tiny sanctuary I'd carved out for myself.

I remind myself that travel stress is always temporary—even during the most chaotic moments, like when I'm sprinting through a crowded station or my itinerary gets thrown off by a sudden train delay. Over the years, I've learned specific ways to manage my anxiety on the road. I keep my phone charged and ready, using Google Search to look up transit schedules, restaurant reviews, or nearby quiet spaces when I need a break. When things feel overwhelming, I'll even turn to AI assistants for real-time advice or calming exercises. These tools make me feel prepared and capable, giving me a sense of control. I'm proud of how resourceful I've become: using technology to navigate uncertainty, problem-solve in the moment, and remind myself that I'm smart and capable—no matter what challenges pop up along the journey.

To my surprise, not long after, an announcement came over the loudspeaker: the train would actually be arriving on time at 7:35pm, despite the earlier posted delay. A wave of relief washed over me. My friends and I quickly gathered our belongings and moved toward the platform, grateful that we would still be able to stick to our original schedule. This small victory—navigating the unpredictability of travel and still making it on time—left me feeling both proud and more confident to face the rest of the trip.

Onboard the Northeast Regional Amtrak train, the familiar whoosh of the train's acceleration and the rhythmic clacking of the tracks helped settle my nerves. My friends chatted animatedly in Cantonese about our upcoming embassy visits, sharing snacks and stories from past trips. I nestled into my window seat, headphones on but with the volume low, so I could still hear the comforting hum of their voices without feeling overwhelmed. The subtle sway of the train soothed my sensory system, and I allowed myself to simply observe—watching the city lights recede and the countryside flash by outside the window. Sometimes, I'd contribute to their conversation when a topic interested me, but mostly I felt content to listen and recharge, honoring my need for quiet moments amid the group. I felt grateful that my friends respected my boundaries and didn't pressure me to talk when I wasn't ready.



Traveling as a neurodivergent person requires detailed preparation and ongoing self-awareness. Sensory needs—such as sensitivity to light, sound, textures, and smells—can fluctuate significantly depending on the environment, transportation methods, or even the time of day. Social energy may also vary from moment to moment, requiring thoughtful planning around group activities, conversations, and rest periods. I’ve learned to proactively communicate my needs, such as requesting quiet spaces, planning for downtime in busy itineraries, and carrying sensory aids like noise-canceling

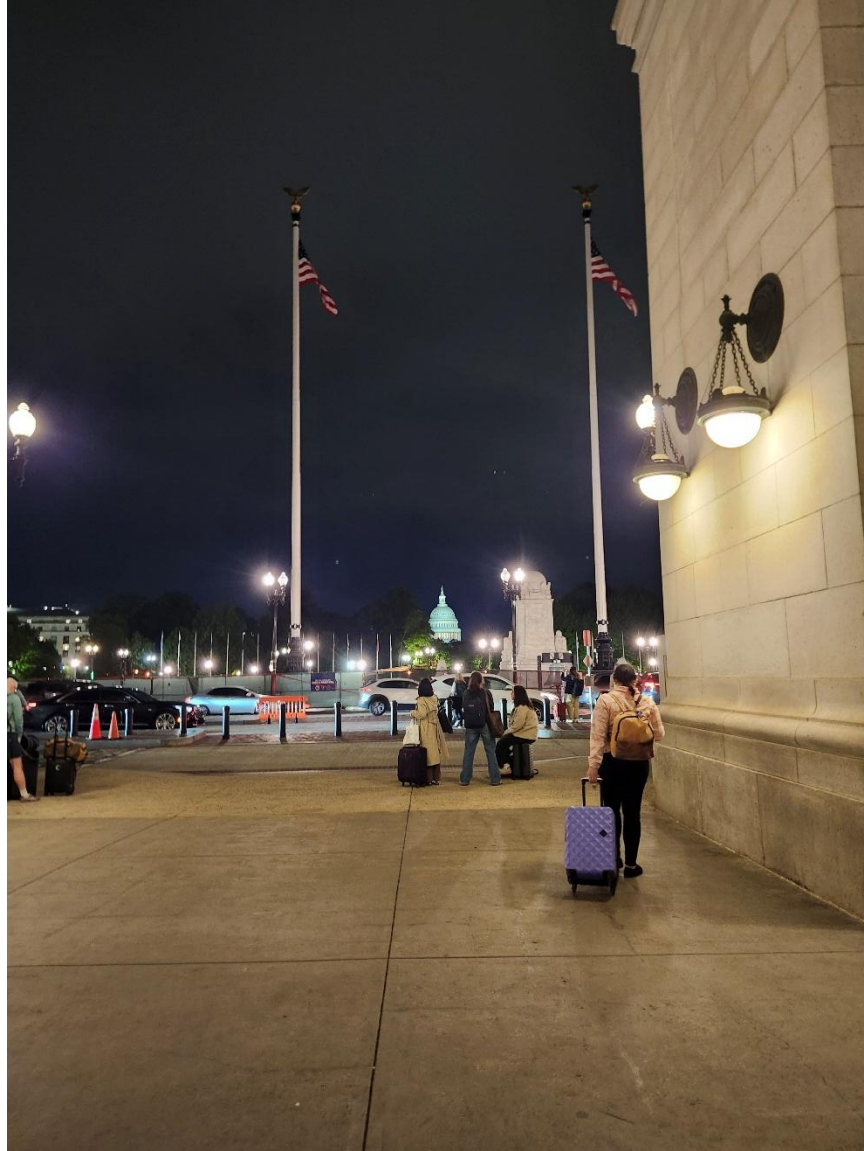
headphones or sunglasses. I appreciate that my friends are supportive and flexible, understanding when I need space to recharge or step back from activities. Everyone's brain works differently, and by respecting each person's unique needs and advocating for accommodations, we can create a travel experience that is enjoyable, inclusive, and supportive for all.

Remember that being neurodivergent is not inherently negative or something to be labeled as "bad." Embracing neurodivergence is an act of self-acceptance, helping us recognize our worth and the value we bring to others. Neurodivergence shapes our identities, strengths, perspectives, and values—sometimes leading to creative problem-solving, adaptability, or heightened empathy. That's why I am sharing travel tips and information rooted in my experiences, such as choosing accommodations with sensory-friendly features, preparing scripts for social interactions, or researching accessibility options in advance. However, every neurodivergent person is different, so these suggestions may need to be adapted or may not work for everyone. The key is to find what supports your unique needs and to remain open to trying new strategies.

When we stepped onto the marble floors of Union Station at 9:33 p.m., the cavernous terminal echoed with the footfalls of late-night travelers. I glanced up at the glowing departure board and thought about the city outside—how DC changes after dark. I'd already read online that public transportation slows down after 9 p.m.—trains run less often, and stations feel emptier. Wanting to keep everyone safe, especially with my family in tow, I decided Uber was our best bet.

I pulled out my phone and ordered an Uber for 4 of us—me, my parents, and my brother. With 7 in our group, my friends quickly tapped away on their phones too, arranging their own ride. We joked

about racing to the hotel, but beneath the laughter was a little tension—would we all get there safely, and *would our drivers find us in the nighttime chaos outside Union Station?*



Stepping outside, the cool night air hit us. Across the plaza, the US Capitol dome glowed white against the dark sky, like something out of a postcard. We stood for a moment, bags at our feet, just taking in the scene. I pulled out my phone and snapped a quick photo, wanting to freeze the memory. “We’ll see it up close on Sunday,” I promised, excitement flickering through my exhaustion.

“Wow, it’s beautiful,” I whispered, my voice soft with awe. The Capitol’s lights reflected in our eyes, and for a second, we all felt the magic of arriving in a new city at night.

A few minutes later, my phone buzzed with a message: our Uber was pulling up at line 3. “I’m on Lane 3 for the Uber!” I called out, scanning the row of cars, their headlights shining through the drizzle.

Rain began to fall in thin, silvery sheets, making it even harder to spot our car. I squinted at the glowing license plates, my heart pounding as I tried to match the numbers on my phone to the blur of vehicles crawling by. My parents were a few steps behind, so I had to take charge, waving my arms to get their attention—hoping I looked more confident than I felt.

After what felt like forever, a silver Toyota finally pulled up—the right license plate gleaming in the rain. We hustled our bags into the trunk and slid into the backseat, damp and relieved. The driver greeted us with a tired smile and a playlist of quiet jazz, and finally, we were on our way to the hotel, the city lights blurring past the windows.

The ride was anything but smooth. As we crawled along Massachusetts Avenue, the tunnel ahead was blocked by construction barriers and flashing lights. Our driver sighed, muttering about road closures, and detoured through a maze of unfamiliar streets. I leaned my head against the window, eyelids heavy, wishing I could just fall asleep and wake up at the hotel.

Stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic on Connecticut Avenue, I closed my eyes and took deep breaths, practicing the meditation techniques I’d learned in therapy. The sound of car horns faded into the background, replaced by the steady rhythm of my own breathing. In

that moment, I let go of the day's stress, focusing only on the promise of rest and the adventures waiting for us in the morning.

We finally stumbled into the Days Inn at 10:33 p.m., bags dragging behind us, the lobby bathed in the harsh glow of fluorescent lights. When the receptionist handed us just one room key, my heart sank—4 people, one room, one bathroom. I could already picture the chaos. As we squeezed into the cramped space, the reality hit: we'd have to take turns for everything. My brother, notorious for his marathon 25-minute showers, claimed the bathroom after me. I could hear the water running and the faint sound of him humming as I sat on the bed, waiting my turn, feeling the exhaustion settle into my bones.

I flopped onto the edge of the mattress and groaned, “How am I supposed to survive with 4 people sharing one tiny hotel bathroom?” The question hung in the air, half joke, half desperate plea. My dad just shrugged, my mom offered a sympathetic smile, and my brother pretended not to hear.

I managed to sneak in a quick shower before the rush started. As my dad headed in next, I joked, “Guess I'll brush my teeth while you shower, Dad. Talk about multitasking!” He just grunted in agreement, and we both laughed at the absurdity—dodging elbows and damp towels, trying not to step in puddles on the tile floor.

Later, as I sprawled on the scratchy bedspread, I stared up at the popcorn ceiling and let my mind wander. “A hostel would be better,” I mused silently. “At least there, I'd have some freedom from my parents and maybe the chance to meet someone new instead of being stuck in this family circus.”

The only thing that saved me from my dad's legendary snoring was the pair of earplugs I'd stuffed in my backpack at the last minute. With those crammed in and my pillow over my head, I drifted off.

The noise faded into the background, replaced by muffled dreams of quiet hostels and empty dorm rooms.

Before nodding off, I rummaged through my bag and double-checked the snacks I'd packed—granola bars, apples, a crumpled bag of pretzels—just in case the Days Inn breakfast turned out to be a disappointment or wasn't included at all. I wasn't about to risk starting the day hungry.

Around 11:25 p.m., lights out. I slipped on my eye mask, shoved the earplugs back in, and burrowed under the stiff hotel blanket. My father's snores rumbled on cue, but I was prepared—my fortress of sleep gear would see me through until morning.

Day 2 – Day of a Passport DC Event

I woke up at 5:55 a.m., groggy from a restless night in the cramped hotel room packed with 3 other people. All I could focus on was getting through the morning routine in the tiny bathroom without delay or drama.

I first took my turn after my father's turn to brush their teeth and wash his face.

Hunger hit as soon as I finished in the bathroom. I rummaged through my bag for something filling, but only found a few granola bars, some dinner rolls, and plain bread—nothing that would really satisfy or fuel me for the day ahead.

Still half-asleep, I wandered to the table and asked, "Is breakfast included?" My question was blunt—my mind was set on finding real food.

My mother shook her head. “No breakfast here. Our friends will bring something from next door, and I still have some snacks.”

“Good fats, high-quality protein?” I thought. “I also brought food too.”

I sighed and tore open a MadeGood oats bar, checking the label: mostly carbs, barely any protein or fat. It wasn’t the breakfast I wanted, but it would have to do for now.

As I chewed, I kept thinking about the real breakfast I craved—eggs, Greek yogurt, avocado toast with seeds, or cereal with nut butter and a protein shake. “Where are my protein and healthy fats?” I muttered, frustrated I hadn’t packed more intentionally.

Only after I’d finished my meager breakfast did my mother and friends explain that the Days Inn didn’t serve breakfast. The disappointment made sense—no buffet trays, no smell of coffee, just us and a few stale snacks. I made a mental note: at the first chance, I’d find something truly satisfying. I pictured a steaming cup of coffee, a thick Greek yogurt piled high with nut butter, or a cold protein shake. I remembered spotting a Mom’s Organic Market a few blocks away during yesterday’s walk—maybe I could sneak out early tomorrow and stock up on real breakfast essentials.

The lack of protein was only temporary, but the fatigue it caused dragged on for hours. I made a mental note: next trip, I’d pack high-protein snacks—hard-boiled eggs, jerky, trail mix with nuts—so I wouldn’t get caught off guard again.

Travel has taught me that protein and healthy fats aren’t just preferences—they’re essential for keeping my mood steady and my energy up. Without them, I crash fast, especially with long

walks and unpredictable schedules. It's a lesson I can't afford to forget.

Later that morning, we strolled down Connecticut Avenue with our friends and ducked into a busy Starbucks for coffee. As everyone waited in line, chatting and debating their orders, I felt restless. I've never liked standing around while others decide; I'd rather use that time to explore the neighborhood or hunt for a local grocery store. Managing my time—and my nutrition—has become a travel priority.

Saturday morning arrived with a biting chill—45 degrees, but the wind made it feel colder as we huddled in line outside the Chinese Embassy. My breath fogged in the air as I shifted my weight from foot to foot, trying to keep warm. The crowd was thick, everyone bundled in jackets and scarves, and every so often, the distant rhythm of drums and festive music drifted over the embassy's tall fence.



For over an hour, we waited, stamping our feet and craning our necks for any sign of movement. Occasionally, volunteers weaved through the line, handing out event maps and answering questions. When the announcement finally came that the drumming had begun at the front of the building, the energy in the line lifted. Some people

even danced in place to keep the cold at bay, and I found myself humming along, grateful for the little distraction.



Finally, after what felt like forever, we shuffled forward through the security checkpoint—metal detectors, bag checks, and the polite but firm reminders to keep our documents ready. Stepping inside, the warmth was immediate, and my glasses fogged up. The embassy’s interior was decorated with bright banners and enormous posters celebrating Chinese culture. Volunteers handed us special “fantasy passports,” each with a photo of Shaanxi’s famous landscapes. I clutched mine, marveling at the vibrant colors and intricate designs.

As soon as we entered the Chinese embassy for Passport DC, the space buzzed with energy—tour groups, families, and solo travelers

all weaving between elaborate displays. My friends and family split up, giving each of us a chance to explore our own interests. I wandered into a hall where life-sized Terracotta Warriors stood guard, their faces so detailed I felt as if they might start marching at any moment. Paper lanterns in rich reds and golds hung overhead, casting a warm glow on the crowds below. There was a photo wall designed to look like a window into a bustling Chinese city, and I took my time snapping photos, trying to capture the feeling of being transported far from DC. For the first time all morning, I wasn't rushing; I could linger, read descriptions, and really soak up the atmosphere.

One of the most memorable experiences was trying my hand at cuju—an ancient Chinese version of football. Volunteers in silk tunics explained the rules, and before I knew it, I was kicking a leather ball alongside kids and adults from all over the world. The laughter, friendly competition, and shared curiosity made it easy to strike up conversations with strangers, deepening the sense of cultural immersion.



Later, I joined the line for a special Passport DC treat: with each embassy stop, you could collect a stamp in a fantasy ‘Chinese

passport.’ After showing mine, I was offered a choice of free gifts—a ceramic cup or a plush stuffed panda. I picked the panda, its soft black-and-white fur a perfect souvenir. Holding it, I felt a surge of delight, like I was carrying a piece of the experience home with me.



At one point, I sat in a darkened room watching a looping PowerPoint about China's vast landscapes, cities, and traditions. The

vivid images and background music made me forget I was in Washington for a moment—I whispered, “I feel like I’m actually in China.” While my friends waited in line for their own free gifts—some choosing cups, other pandas—I spent about 23 minutes people-watching, jotting down notes in my travel journal, and savoring the last moments inside the embassy before we regrouped to continue our Passport DC adventure.

By 11:05, hunger gnawed at all of us. When a volunteer announced that food samples were being served, our group moved quickly toward the tables. The spread was a welcome sight: steaming trays of spicy beef, crispy egg rolls, and plump dumplings. I grabbed a plate, my hands shaking slightly—from both hunger and excitement. Just as I was about to take my first bite, my father’s voice rose above the crowd: “This is the exit—we’re not supposed to go this way! If we do, we’ll have to go through security again!” His tone was sharp, frustration bubbling over. The tension in his voice made my chest tighten. I hesitated, dumpling halfway to my mouth, suddenly anxious. The idea of a long wait to re-enter sent a wave of overwhelm through me. In that moment, my father’s emotions seemed to fill the whole room, and I felt myself shrinking, wishing I could disappear until the conflict blew over.



When someone around me—especially a close family member—became emotionally reactive, it felt like a switch flipped inside my brain. As a neurodiverse traveler, I found it nearly impossible to stay mindful or calm in those moments. One afternoon, after a heated argument with my father over a small miscommunication at the embassy, I felt my own stress spiral out of control. My hands shook as I tried to breathe deeply, but the tension in my chest only grew tighter. Suddenly, the entire trip felt pointless, every plan overshadowed by waves of frustration and helplessness.

Realizing I couldn't keep going like this, I slipped away from my family and found a quiet spot on a shaded bench beneath the embassy's flag. I sat alone, feeling the rough wood beneath

my palms, forcing myself to count each inhale and exhale. It took time, but eventually my heartbeat slowed. In those silent minutes, I reminded myself that I couldn't change my father's reactions—only my own. I repeated a quiet mantra: "Focus on what I can control." Taking responsibility for my own emotions, rather than reacting to his, became my anchor. That brief escape didn't fix everything, but it was enough to return to the group with a little more peace and perspective.

I realized my mood was fragile—not just from the tension, but from the exhaustion and lack of real food. I thought about how missing protein and healthy fats always made me feel on edge, and I quietly promised myself that next time, I'd bring snacks that actually nourished me. As the noise and confusion swirled, I found myself daydreaming about a solo trip—how peaceful it would be to make my own schedule, eat when I wanted, and escape the unpredictable moods of others.

Sensing my distress, my mother leaned over and said gently, "Let's focus on your mental wellness, okay?" Her calmness was a small anchor in the chaos, reminding me that I wasn't alone.

May, our family friend, chimed in with a reassuring smile. "Of course you can plan your own trip. Just make sure you keep your parents in the loop about your plans and where you'll be." Her words felt validating—a small spark of independence and trust.

Just then, I caught a whiff of something sweet and spicy—downstairs, the embassy had opened up a crafts market and a folk art show. Tables were lined with intricate paper cuttings, calligraphy demonstrations, and more trays of regional snacks. In the next room, performers prepared for a traditional music and dance show. The space was alive with color, music, and movement.

At 11:30, I found a quiet corner, sipping hot tea as the folk musicians started their performance. The notes of the erhu and the beat of the drums filled the air. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the music wash over me, determined to be present. The swirling costumes and intricate dance steps were mesmerizing. For a few precious minutes, I forgot about the morning's stress and simply enjoyed the rich tapestry of culture unfolding before me.



By noon, as the show ended, my parents and friends gathered by a painted backdrop for a group photo, everyone laughing and relaxed. I snapped a few candid shots, grateful for these moments when everyone was calm and in good spirits. I realized I cherished the slow, gentle pace, where there was time to breathe and truly appreciate each other's company.

Outside of the embassy, I paused to take in the swirl of activity and the cool spring breeze brushing my face. The Passport DC event always draws a lively crowd, and as a neurodivergent traveler, these

moments are both exhilarating and intimidating for me. I pulled my sweater tighter, mentally rehearsing the day's plan and trying to keep my sensory overwhelm in check.

“Where are you heading next?” one of my friends asked, her lanyard swinging as she gestured toward the street lined with embassy banners.

Mei, always quick to make decisions for the group, replied, “We might go to the Japanese and Korean embassies.” Her voice was upbeat, but I could hear the uncertainty beneath it—we all knew the lines could get long, and the crowds were growing by the minute.

I took a deep breath and answered, “I am going to the Singapore Embassy.” Just saying it out loud gave me a small rush of independence—a rare feeling during group outings with my family. For a brief moment, I imagined myself as a solo traveler in a bustling city, choosing my own adventure. That spark of autonomy made me stand a little taller.

As we started toward the Singapore Embassy, my parents smiled and agreed to join me. My father's mood shifted as soon as he saw the length of the line. He began muttering about the wait, his frustration rising with every step. The tension was palpable, and I felt my shoulders tighten in anticipation. I tried to tune out his complaints by focusing on the rhythmic shuffle of feet on the pavement and the anticipation buzzing in the air.

All around us, people clutched their event passports and chatted excitedly about which embassies to visit next. The line for Singapore snaked down the block, a colorful mix of families, friend groups, and solo explorers—all waiting, just like us, for a glimpse inside.

As we waited for the Singapore Embassy, my anxiety crept in. The line snaked around the block, and I caught myself fidgeting with my

phone, checking the time, counting the people ahead. “How long will I be here?” I wondered, my mind racing through every possible scenario, from missing our next stop to getting overwhelmed by the noise. My father, never one to hide his emotions, started complaining loudly about the wait, which only made my nerves worse.

“That’s a 2-hour wait,” my father announced, his voice rising above the low hum of the crowd. His words hung in the air, sharp and heavy. I felt dozens of eyes flicker in our direction. My cheeks flushed hot with embarrassment, and I quickly looked away, wishing I could shrink into my jacket.

I forced my voice to sound calm, even though my insides felt knotted. “No, it’s not that long. The security line moves very quickly,” I replied, trying to diffuse the tension. But I could feel irritation growing inside me, mingling with a familiar sense of helplessness. My father’s outbursts in public always made me tense. I hated how easily his frustration could become the center of attention, overshadowing the excitement I wanted to feel.

He lingered next to my mother, almost clinging to her for reassurance, which struck me as odd for a man approaching 60. I watched him, a complicated swirl of sympathy and frustration churning in my chest. Sometimes, it felt like the roles between parent and child were reversed.

My mother, composed as ever, finally broke the cycle. “Mr., if you want to go to the Korean embassy, you can. Plus, you don’t want to depend on others, okay?” she said, her tone both gentle and firm. It was her way of giving him permission to make his own choices and a subtle nudge toward independence.

He bristled, “I am good,” his voice louder than necessary. The words bounced off the embassy walls, tension still hanging between us.

Trying to offer an olive branch, I said, “Dad, you can freely explore as you please. You can do what you want to do. I am a free spirit, young woman.” I hoped to ease his defensiveness, though I doubted he would actually take me up on it.

Again, he shot back, “I am good,” stubborn as ever.

My mother chose to ignore his tone and addressed the rest of us instead. “You can go with May and Mei,” she said, calmly steering the conversation away from conflict. Her steadiness was the anchor I needed in that chaotic moment.

Traveling with my parents sometimes feels like walking on eggshells—each step careful, every word measured, because I never know when my father’s patience might snap, especially when traveling together.

His voice, sharp and impatient, cut through the hum of conversation, making my heart race. I instinctively tensed, scanning the room for exits, wishing I could melt onto the patterned carpet.

It’s moments like these that remind me why I value slow travel and mindfulness. I force myself to slow down, to notice the way sunlight slants through the window or how the coffee smells, trying to anchor myself in the present rather than the rising tension. Sometimes I mutter under my breath, “Travel is supposed to be about presence and discovery, not stress and arguments.” The words are a tiny lifeline, pulling me back from anxiety and letting me reclaim a little bit of peace—even in the chaos of family travel.

So, I am providing tips when traveling and planning a trip for neurodiverse travelers at the end of the story.

Despite my worries about the crowds, the line at the Singapore Embassy moved faster than I'd expected. In just 30 minutes, I was ushered through security, feeling a rush of relief as a friendly staff member handed me a bright Singapore sticker. The sense of anticipation built as I stepped inside, knowing I was about to explore a small piece of Singapore right in the heart of DC. Instantly, I knew this visit would be one of the highlights of my Passport DC adventure.

“Whew, that line isn't too bad,” I said. “The wait is worth it, practicing slow traveling.”

Upon passing the security, it was nice to grab the sticker. Stunning.

Inside, the embassy was transformed into a lush, tropical oasis. Living walls of orchids, ferns, and palms lined the hallways, while sunlight poured through floor-to-ceiling windows and danced across displays of Singapore's famous Gardens by the Bay and Marina Bay Sands. Everywhere I turned, there were bursts of color—red hibiscus, yellow daisies, and intricate batik patterns on banners. Downstairs, a cheerful line had formed for the photo booth, where visitors could pose in front of a panoramic Singapore skyline or the iconic Supertree Grove. The air buzzed with laughter, camera shutters, and a faint hint of pandan and coconut from the refreshments table. As I wandered, my earlier anxiety melted away, replaced by pure curiosity and delight at the immersive experience.



As I explored the exhibits, I recalled stories my parents and friends had shared about Singapore's reputation for safety, order, and

culinary wonders. The thought sparked a quiet dream in me—to come back someday on my own, moving from hawker center to hawker center, tasting chili crab and kaya toast, and lingering in the botanical gardens as long as I wanted. The idea of solo travel in a place so organized and vibrant filled me with hope and excitement for the future.

“Next year will be the extraordinary trip of a lifetime. I don’t need my parents’ permission to go there since I am an adult, and I can make good decisions.” I have ambitions.

While waiting for the 15-minute view, my mother smiled and stood at the entrance, “[United], I will be waiting in front of the entrance when you are done.”

“Thank you, Mom.”

While waiting in line for the photo booth, I snapped photos of colorful posters highlighting Singapore’s accolades—safest city in the world, a food paradise, and a melting pot of cultures. I made a note to myself: these facts would make great inspiration for my travel blog.

One display caught my eye: “30 Things You Didn’t Know About Singapore.” I snapped a close-up of the list, excited to share fun trivia with friends—like how chewing gum is banned, and how the city’s airport has an indoor waterfall.



Every few minutes, I'd hear the cheerful whir of the photo printer as visitors collected their souvenir pictures. The excitement was

contagious, and I found myself smiling at the families posing in front of Singapore's skyline, holding up props shaped like Merlions and durians.

"I can't wait until 2027, and then I start to grow and receive rewards for my job as a solo travel expert, and finally, be able to publish a book about a neurodivergent traveler," I said in joy.

That line was relatively long, but I am not giving up. I liked the patience and slow travel, taking time to practice both.

When it was finally my turn, the attendant smiled and asked which background I wanted. I chose the Gardens by the Bay, imagining myself among the Supertrees. The attendant handed me a flower crown to wear, and I grinned for the camera, trying to channel the spirit of adventure I felt in that moment.

"I want a background of Gardens by the Bay."

"Sure."

I smiled at the camera, heart pounding with pride. When the printer spat out my photo, I held it in my hands, savoring the glossy image of me against the Gardens by the Bay. It wasn't just a souvenir—it was proof that I could embrace new experiences and make memories on my own terms, even in a crowd.

After taking my photo, I wandered through the embassy's art displays—paintings of Singapore's cityscape, sculptures of the Merlion, and interactive digital exhibits about urban sustainability.

few exhibits as a family, each of us carrying a little piece of Singapore with us as we stepped back out into DC.

After leaving the bustling Singapore embassy, our spirits were high, passports clutched in hand, ready for our next destination: the Malaysian embassy. The bright partly sunny sky beat down on International Drive as we joined a stream of visitors, each with their own travel dreams and stories. But as we turned the corner, our excitement quickly turned to dismay. The road ahead was blocked by stern-faced police officers, barricades cutting off our path, and a sea of people stretching as far as we could see. The crowd was dense, voices rising in a mixture of anticipation and impatience, and the line at the Malaysian embassy snaked around the block, barely inching forward. It was obvious that if we joined the end, we'd be waiting for hours, if not the entire day.

“How will we get around?” my father hissed, frustration etched into every line of his face. “I want to go to Malaysia!” he insisted, his voice strained and impatient. In that moment, his determination felt almost childish, as if he couldn't see past his own disappointment. The tension in the air was palpable, and for a second, I wondered if our whole day would unravel right there on the sidewalk.

Trying to salvage the moment, I squared my shoulders and said, “Let's go to Bangladesh instead. I bet it'll be an adventure—we never know what we'll find Dhaka.” I tried to inject some enthusiasm, hoping it would break the tension and shift our focus to something new and unexpected.

My mother glanced between us and then at the endless line, weighing our options. With a small, hopeful smile, she said, “Okay. Let's go there since there's no line.” Her willingness to adapt eased the heaviness, and suddenly, the prospect of exploring the Bangladeshi

embassy felt like a hidden opportunity rather than a consolation prize. I enjoyed flexibility.

Without another word, we changed direction and wandered a few blocks, our footsteps echoing on the sun-warmed pavement. It didn't take long before the vibrant colors of the Bangladeshi embassy came into view, its entrance framed by fluttering green and red banners. The air smelled faintly of spices, and the open doors seemed to beckon us inside, promising a world away from the chaos we'd just left behind. To our delight, there was no line at all—just a handful of people milling about, chatting and laughing as if they were already on a journey of their own.

“It's like visiting Dhaka,” I murmured, taking in the scene around me. Banners in green and red fluttered overhead, while posters of the city's bustling streets and serene rivers adorned the walls. Tables were stacked high with glossy pamphlets, each one offering a glimpse of Bangladesh's natural beauty—emerald tea gardens, sun-drenched beaches, and ancient temples lost in the mist.

Curious, and trying to draw him out of his funk, I nudged my dad and asked, “What do you think of visiting Dhaka someday?” I hoped the question would spark his imagination, or at the very least, distract him from the disappointment of missing Malaysia. I wanted us to dream a little bigger, to think beyond our usual destinations and routines.

He barely looked up from his phone, mumbling, “Ugh?” in that distracted way he does when he's tired, overwhelmed, or simply uninterested. I felt a pang of frustration but tried not to let it bother me—his mood had swung back and forth all day, and I knew better than to take it personally. Still, I couldn't help wishing he'd share in the wonder of the moment.

Stepping inside, we were greeted by the lilting notes of Bangladeshi national music—flutes and drums weaving together in a lively tapestry, underscored by the low hum of conversation and laughter. For a moment, I let myself be carried away by the unfamiliar melodies, closing my eyes and imagining I'd been transported far from the heart of DC to somewhere wild and new.

At a table near the entrance, volunteers handed out steaming plates piled high with spiced chicken, fragrant rice, and crispy vegetable fritters. The aroma was irresistible, making my stomach rumble with anticipation. As I reached for a plate, I struck up a conversation with a tall, friendly white guy named Nathan, who stood next to me in line. He told me he was attending Passport DC for the first time too, his eyes lighting up as he described the embassies he'd already visited. We swapped stories about the best food we'd tasted and the most welcoming staff, laughing over our shared discoveries. It felt good to connect with someone else who was just as curious and eager to explore as I was.

“Is this food free?” I asked, eyeing the generous spread and hesitating for a moment, fingers halfway to my wallet. The thought of getting something for nothing made me both excited and a little suspicious—surely, a feast like this couldn't come without strings attached.

Nathan grinned, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “I think so. Nobody's asked for money yet!” he whispered, as if we were in on some delightful secret together.

“Thanks,” I laughed, feeling a little more at ease in the lively, welcoming space.

Nathan waved goodbye and disappeared into the sea of faces, swallowed up by the embassy's cheerful chaos. My family and I found an empty table, set down our plates, and dug in. The flavors

exploded on my tongue—bold, unexpected, and thrillingly new. For a few precious minutes, all the stress and uncertainty of the day melted away. I let myself get lost in the food, the music, and the sense of discovery that had carried us, almost by accident, to this bright corner of the world.

Later, after what felt like miles of weaving through bustling crowds and the relentless heat of the midday sun, we finally arrived at the Malaysian embassy. My father’s legs ached from the walk, but the sight before me made it all worthwhile: the embassy was draped in the vibrant colors of Malaysia, with flags fluttering in the breeze and the scent of lemongrass and spices wafting through the air. I grinned, pulled out my phone, and snapped a picture of the elaborate display at the entrance—determined to capture this moment of arrival and relief. We found a quiet spot near a shaded bench to catch our breath, the hum of music and laughter from inside promising more adventure ahead.

As we sat down to rest, my mother’s eyes wandered over the embassy courtyard. A stage had been set up, where dancers in shimmering costumes performed traditional routines to rhythmic drumbeats, their movements telling stories older than the city around us. Stalls displayed intricate batik fabrics, hand-carved wooden masks, and glossy photos of Malaysia’s lush rainforests and glittering city skylines. It felt as if we’d stepped out of Washington, D.C., and into the heart of Kuala Lumpur itself.

“Mom, being here makes me feel like I’m actually in Malaysia,” I said, my voice filled with excitement as I watched the dancers and breathed in the unfamiliar scents. For a moment, the embassy was more than a building—it was a doorway to another world.

She smiled, her eyes lighting up as she nodded. “It really does. There’s so much to see and taste here,” she replied, her tone warm and inviting.

My brother, who is also a neurodivergent, stayed quiet, lost in his own thoughts. After a moment, he quietly shared, “I remember when we visited China the last 2 years.” His voice was soft, his mind perhaps wandering back to those memories, drawing silent comparisons between the experiences.

At the next food stall, our senses were overwhelmed by the array of offerings: golden roti canai sizzling on griddles, trays of satay skewers glistening with peanut sauce, and platters of kuih, the colorful Malaysian desserts. We sampled everything, laughing as we tried to guess the flavors—some sweet, some spicy, all deliciously unfamiliar. The volunteers encouraged us to try more, their enthusiasm infectious as they explained each dish’s origins.

“Yummy!”

Just as my mother reached for a piece of satay, my brother piped up, “I want one too!” In the flurry of passing plates, my mother, flustered by the attention and trying to juggle our needs, accidentally reused her fork from the dessert tray. I saw the uncomfortable glances from a few nearby, their eyes silently judging as she handed my brother a bite. The tension prickled in the air, and my mother’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

A woman standing nearby—a friendly-looking guest, dressed in a bright, patterned dress—leaned over and gently reminded us, “Excuse me, you don’t need to reuse the fork...” Her tone was kind, but the reminder still stung, making the moment feel even more awkward.

My father, already on edge, raised his voice. “What’s wrong with you? Why are you reusing your fork? Everyone is looking at you, betraying at you.” His frustration echoed louder than he intended, drawing a few more stares from those around us.

My anxiety spiked; the embarrassment and tension overwhelmed me. Without thinking, I snapped at my brother, “You shouldn’t eat more meat!” My words came out harsher than I intended, a verbal jab born from stress and discomfort rather than real anger.

I couldn’t take it anymore. My heart pounded in my chest as I squeezed past a group of chattering visitors, the embassy’s bright lights and noise pressing in on me. I barely managed to whisper, “I need to step outside,” before ducking through the gate doors and out into the afternoon sun. The sudden quiet was jarring—gone were the layers of conversation and clinking plates, replaced by distant city sounds and the flutter of embassy banners overhead.

I found a bench tucked beneath a maple tree and sat down, feeling the rough slats under my hands. My breath came in short bursts at first, but slowly, I counted each inhale and exhale, letting the tension drain away. I hadn’t told my parents where I was going, but at that moment, I needed space more than anything. For a few precious minutes, I focused only on the feeling of the warm breeze and the scent of grass—reminding myself that setting boundaries was necessary for my own well-being, even if it meant stepping away without warning.

Still, as I sat there, the initial relief faded and a new worry crept in—I realized my parents would have no idea where I’d gone. Next time, I promised myself, I’d send a quick text or say something before stepping away. Setting boundaries matters, but so does keeping my family informed and safe.

Outside, the sharp contrast of fresh air and quiet hit me. The embassy's noise faded behind me as I wandered down the sidewalk, letting the cool breeze calm my nerves. Each step felt lighter, the stress melting away with distance.

As I strolled past the embassy's ornate gates, I whispered to myself, "I feel free now—a little like a traveler with no map and no destination." The city seemed different from outside, less overwhelming, fuller of possibility.

After 5 minutes of wandering, my phone buzzed. My mother's number flashed on the screen, but when I answered, it was my father's voice—her phone had lost signal, and she'd borrowed his, her concern coming through in the hurried way he relayed her message.

When I finally heard her voice, she sounded anxious. "Where are you right now? Are you okay?" she asked, her tone tight with worry but also relief.

"Mom, I'm coming back. I just needed a minute... things got a little overwhelming in there," I admitted, hoping she'd understand.

I made my way back to the embassy, the noise and color greeting me once more. This time, as I spotted my family, their faces broke into relieved smiles. I felt a weight lift—maybe today hadn't gone perfectly, but we were together, still exploring, still trying. That was enough for now.

Moment later, we made our way to the Pakistani embassy, where the courtyard buzzed with excitement. Inside, mannequins displayed intricate shalwar kameez and sherwanis—traditional Pakistani outfits in jewel-toned silks and delicate embroidery.



Local artisans demonstrated the art of hand-embellishing scarves, and I even got to try on a vibrant dupatta, the fabric cool and smooth on

my shoulders. The air was lively with the sound of Urdu and the scent of spiced tea wafting from a nearby table. After admiring the fashion and snapping a few photos, we realized there wasn't much else to see, so we thanked the staff and stepped outside.

Almost immediately, the rhythmic pulse of Nigerian drumming drifted across the street. Following the music, we found ourselves at the Nigerian embassy, where a group of musicians played talking drums and dancers in bright Ankara prints spun in circles. Inside, I paused to admire a bold painting of a village scene, its colors jumping off the canvas.



At a corner table, vendors offered samples of locally made shea butter and scented lotions. I picked up a small jar and breathed in the rich, earthy aroma—nutty with a hint of vanilla. The vendor smiled as I rubbed the lotion onto my wrist, the scent lingering as we continued our tour.

Curious, I turned to the vendor and asked, “How much is this lotion?”

She replied, “It’s \$28 for the medium jar,” her tone warm and inviting as she gestured to the display of different sizes.

I weighed the idea of buying some, remembering to factor in the extra cost for shipping it home. The woman at the table caught my hesitation and smiled reassuringly, adding, “If you buy today, you can order it with you—no shipping needed.”

After an eventful afternoon of embassy visits and cultural discoveries, we decided to walk the length of Van Ness Street. The sun was warm on my face, and the city buzzed with festival energy. My feet ached from all the walking, but I couldn’t help smiling as we passed the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). The campus lawn was dotted with Passport DC visitors resting, chatting, and comparing their stamps and souvenirs. For a moment, I felt lucky to be part of this vibrant international event, surrounded by people from all over the world, each tracing their own path through the city.

But even as I tried to enjoy the moment, stress started to creep in again—this time because my father was fixated on getting an official “Passport DC” booklet. He grew anxious as supplies dwindled, his frustration simmering just beneath the surface. I tried to reassure him, saying, “It’s okay if we don’t get the Passport DC book. Not everyone has one, and we’ve already collected so many memories today.”

At 3:30, my father’s impatience boiled over. “I want that Passport DC book. Why haven’t we gotten one earlier at 9:30?” he said, his voice rising above the crowd noise, drawing a few curious glances from other visitors.

Desperate, he asked staff about the booklet, only to learn there were just 23 left—snapped up quickly by other eager attendees trying to

complete the event's stamp challenge. The pressure added a new layer of tension to an otherwise joyful afternoon.

We waited for the official Passport DC group photo, but the delay agitated my father further. His mood darkened when things didn't go as planned, and the air between us felt thick with unspoken frustration. I found myself wishing I could slip away and explore again on my own, free from the weight of his expectations.

Around 4:03pm, I made a conscious decision to explore the Passport DC event at the UDC main campus on my own, eager to experience the embassies at my own pace and according to my interests. I began my journey at the Embassy of Indonesia, where I sampled sweet and spicy Indonesian snacks, chatted briefly with embassy staff about the meaning behind their ritual offerings, and admired batik fabric displays.



Next, I visited the Embassy of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, where I was greeted with warm hospitality and learned about the island nation's vibrant Carnival traditions.

My final stop was the Burundi embassy, where the atmosphere was alive with energetic drumming and spirited dance. I spent time observing the colorful traditional attire, watched a group of children perform a folk dance, and engaged in a conversation with a Burundian artist about the symbolism in her beadwork. Exploring on my own allowed me to fully immerse myself in each culture, ask questions directly, and linger wherever something caught my interest. This independent experience not only deepened my appreciation for the diversity on display but also gave me a sense of freedom, confidence, and mindfulness that comes from charting my own path.

Exploring alone allowed me to move at my own pace, free from external pressure, and fully engage in mindful observation. I realized that managing stress is particularly challenging when traveling with someone who is emotionally reactive, as their mood can influence the entire experience. Therefore, I consciously chose to focus on my own well-being by letting go of others' reactions, planning my route thoughtfully, and using mindfulness strategies to stay grounded throughout the day.

Ultimately, this approach enables me to remain present and centered, even as I work to release the lingering effects of my father's emotional reactivity. By prioritizing my mental and emotional balance, I can enjoy my travels more fully and respond to challenges with greater resilience.

At approximately 4:45pm, after a full afternoon of embassy visits and walking around the city, I carefully navigated my way back to the hotel. Before setting out, I double-checked the hotel's address and marked the route on my phone to ensure I wouldn't get lost. The late afternoon sunlight cast long shadows on Connecticut Avenue as I retraced my steps, passing familiar landmarks and noting a few interesting shops along the way. Once I safely returned to the hotel, I took a moment to rest in the quiet lobby, took a shower, then headed up to my room to freshen up and gather my thoughts. Knowing that dinner would be the next priority, I methodically researched dining options using both Google Maps and local food blogs, comparing reviews, menus, and walking distances. Viet Chopsticks DC stood out as a highly-rated Vietnamese restaurant just a short walk from the hotel, praised for its authentic pho and welcoming atmosphere. I made a mental note of the directions and checked their opening hours to avoid disappointment.

By 5:22pm, after confirming that everyone was ready, we set out for Viet Chopsticks DC, following a tree-lined path through a lively neighborhood filled with visitors and locals heading home or hotel. When we arrived at the restaurant, the lights were off and a sign on the door announced it was temporarily closed for renovations—a disappointing surprise, given the effort I'd put into planning. Instead of letting frustration take over, I took a deep breath, reassured my family, and immediately pulled out my phone to look for other nearby options. Using my saved list of restaurants and checking recent reviews, I quickly narrowed down a few alternatives and suggested we try another Vietnamese place within walking distance.

I suggested Pho 14, a Vietnamese restaurant I had seen earlier on the corner of Van Ness Street and Connecticut Avenue, which also had excellent reviews for its flavorful pho and friendly service. We made our way there, navigating the bustling intersection and passing by the neighborhood's mix of small shops and apartment buildings. The interior of Pho 14 was warm and inviting, filled with the aromas of simmering broth and fresh herbs. After being seated, we ordered a variety of dishes, including rare beef pho, grilled pork vermicelli, and crispy spring rolls. The food arrived quickly, and each bite was delicious and comforting after a long day. We took our time enjoying the meal and reflecting on the day's adventures, grateful that flexibility had led us to a memorable dining experience even when our original plans didn't work out.

After dinner, feeling emotionally drained by the tense atmosphere at the restaurant, I excused myself and left to take a solitary walk. The calmness of the quiet streets in the evening provided a much-needed escape from the ongoing family tension. As I walked, I reflected on the events of the day and allowed myself to process my emotions in peace. This time alone not only helped me decompress, but also gave me valuable perspective on how to handle similar situations in the future. I realized that planning solo trips could offer more freedom

and control, reducing the likelihood of being caught in family conflicts that lead to sadness and frustration. By taking responsibility for my own well-being and creating space for self-reflection, I can better manage emotional challenges while traveling.

I was pleased with my decision to visit Mom's Organic Market later that evening. There, I carefully selected a variety of nutritious items, including proteins like roasted edamame and beef jerky, complex carbohydrates such as whole grain bread and oat bar, and healthy fats like avocados and almonds. I also felt a sense of environmental responsibility by bringing my own reusable shopping bag, even though it meant an extra expense. Making these thoughtful choices contributed to my well-being and reinforced my commitment to healthy habits, even while traveling.

At the hotel after 8pm, I collapsed onto the bed, exhausted and emotionally raw after a day filled with my father's intense, reactive outbursts. The pattern was painfully familiar: simple mishaps—like missing a turn, waiting too long for food samples, or encountering slow service—would spark disproportionate frustration in him. He would raise his voice in public, frown deeply, and stubbornly refuse to listen to anyone else's suggestions, shutting down attempts to calm him. These incidents didn't just end quickly—they lingered, creating a tense, uncomfortable atmosphere that hung over the rest of the day. I found myself shrinking inward, my muscles tight, feeling constantly on edge and unable to fully relax or enjoy the places we visited. As his negativity seeped in, I began to question my own reactions: ***Was I doing enough to keep the peace? Was I somehow responsible for escalating the conflict?*** My emotions ran the gamut from frustration and sadness to guilt and helplessness. Instead of looking back on a joyful travel experience, I felt as if a dark cloud had settled over what should have been a memorable day, all because of the ongoing family conflict.

My mother's voice cut through the silence, sharper than I expected. "Why are you upset and crying?" she snapped, her tone a mixture of frustration and concern. I sat on the edge of the hotel bed, trying to wipe away my tears before she noticed just how much the day had affected me. The sting of her words only made my throat tighten. I fumbled for an answer, not wanting to reopen old wounds or admit how overwhelmed I felt.

Finally, I managed to say, "Because of my father's emotional reactions when visiting the Chinese Embassy." My voice was barely above a whisper, and I kept my eyes focused on the floor, hoping she wouldn't press further. I could feel the heaviness in the room as she absorbed my response.

Instead of softening, my mother's demeanor grew more intense. She started pacing, her emotions clearly bubbling to the surface. "Why are you doing this?" she demanded, her voice rising. I could see the lines of worry and anger etched across her face, her hands clenched at her sides. The small hotel room suddenly felt even smaller, the weight of our family's tension pressing in from all sides. In that moment, I realized I wasn't just fighting my own feelings—I was caught in the middle of my parents' storm, forced to weather it whether I wanted to or not.

For example, earlier in the day, just before noon, my father became visibly agitated when we accidentally walked the wrong way in search of the food sampling area at one of the embassies. His face flushed with irritation, he started blaming my mother for the mistake, his voice rising from a grumble to a loud, public argument. The air around us grew thick with tension as bystanders glanced over uncomfortably. My mother's disappointment and anger showed in her rigid posture and clipped tone as she tried to defend herself, snapping at both my father and me for not paying enough attention or following directions. I felt the stress rise up in my chest, my own voice reduced to muttered, one-word responses as I withdrew,

hoping to avoid further confrontation. The atmosphere was so heavy that it felt like the walls were closing in, and each attempt to defuse the situation only made things worse. Despite my desire to restore calm, I became emotionally numb, trapped in a cycle of coldness and resentment, unable to break free from the negative energy that permeated our family interactions.

My mother finally broke the silence, her voice trembling with a mixture of anger and hurt. “I worked hard to save money for the trip you love, and then you became upset?” she demanded, her eyes searching my face for an explanation. The accusation hung in the air, heavy and raw, and I felt my chest tighten with a mix of guilt and frustration.

The words tumbled out of me before I could stop them. “My father’s angry over something,” I shouted back, unable to keep my voice steady. “And I wanted to have a calm trip.” My own anger surprised me, but it was fueled by days of bottled-up emotion, the constant pressure to keep the peace, and the exhaustion of walking on eggshells.

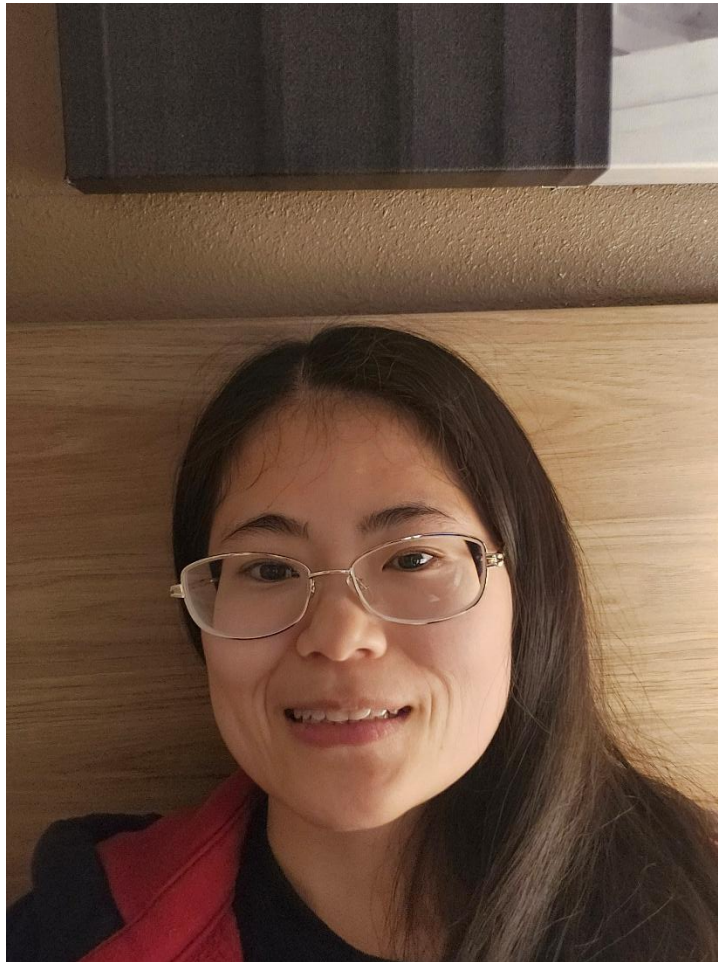
She softened just a little, her tone shifting from accusation to concern. “Honey, I am not happy when you are upset during the trip because your father is overreacting.” Her hands twisted anxiously, and for a moment, I saw the strain that all of us were carrying.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, defeated. “It is hard to fathom that,” I said quietly, my words barely audible. I wanted her to understand how impossible it felt to stay calm when every small conflict threatened to erupt into something bigger.

She sat beside me, her voice gentle now. “Don’t worry about father’s reaction. Focus on what you can control.” The advice sounded simple, but in that moment, it felt like trying to hold back the tide

with my bare hands. Still, her words lingered, a small anchor in the storm of our family's emotions.

There were moments during the trip when the collective stress boiled over, leaving me mentally foggy and unable to appreciate even the most beautiful sights or experiences. My mother's anxiety was like a pressure cooker, heightening every minor mishap—such as a missed bus or a delayed meal—into a source of family-wide conflict. One night, after an especially tense day, my mother confronted me in our hotel room, her voice trembling with frustration. She accused me of being the reason my father wanted to leave the room, insisting that my attitude and responses had pushed him over the edge. The accusation felt like a punch to the gut—sudden, undeserved, and deeply painful. I stood there, barely able to speak, feeling both intensely blamed and utterly invisible, as if my own emotions and perspective didn't matter. These emotionally charged episodes are the reason I feel compelled to share my story as a neurodivergent traveler. By sharing the realities of navigating difficult family dynamics on the road, I hope to offer support, understanding, and practical advice to others who face similar emotional challenges and seek to travel mindfully and meaningfully, despite the obstacles.



It's important to recognize that emotional reactivity during travel does not resolve conflicts. In fact, it often exacerbates tensions, resulting in wasted time, money, and missed opportunities for enjoyment. To travel mindfully and avoid aggressive reactions, I recommend avoiding travel with an emotionally immature person, planning your own itinerary and prioritizing self-care. This approach not only fosters personal growth but also encourages maturity and can help your parents feel proud of your independence.

In the end, it was a single photograph that shifted the mood in our family. After a long, emotionally charged day, I scrolled through my phone and found a favorite image: me standing in the heart of Gardens by the Bay, surrounded by towering Supertrees and vibrant

bursts of orchids and bougainvillea includes pictures of places I download on my phone. My smile in the picture was wide and unguarded, my posture relaxed as sunlight filtered through the glass domes overhead. I handed my phone to my mother and watched her face as she took in the scene. Her brows, furrowed with the weight of the day's worries, gradually smoothed out. She studied the photo, lingering on my expression, and I could see her shoulders drop as some of the tension left her body.



It was a humid afternoon in Singapore's Botanic Gardens, the kind where the air wraps around you like a warm blanket. I sat cross-legged on the grass, eyes closed, letting the sounds of birds and distant laughter settle my mind. My mother watched from a nearby bench, worry lines softening as she saw me genuinely happy—at peace in a place of such beauty. It seemed to melt the frustration and disappointment that had built up between us over the past few days. She glanced at my father, then back at me, and suddenly the arguments over dinner choices felt irrelevant.

While I meditated, my mind wandered, imagining myself confidently navigating Singapore's MRT system, with its signs in English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. The weight of expectations and misunderstandings faded, giving way to a sense of clarity and belonging. My mother reached for my hand, squeezing it gently, and whispered, "You look so happy here. That's what matters most."

"For sure, Mom."

"You can plan your own trip after you manage your emotions and take responsibility for your own. But be sure to share with your itinerary."

"I might plan my solo trip to Singapore or abroad soon."

"Ohh. Be sure to share your itinerary with us, and be sure to research your trip intentions, and we will let you travel only in safer places."

In that quiet moment, forgiveness flowed unspoken between us. The simple act of sharing the picture bridged the gap created by the day's conflicts. We spent the rest of the evening recalling favorite memories from the trip, laughing about the rainstorm that had caught us by surprise and planning the sights we wanted to see the next day. The tension that had hung in the air all day finally lifted, replaced by a sense of hope and unity. As we prepared for bed, I felt a sense of closure—not just for that day, but for many past misunderstandings. We all agreed, silently and aloud, to leave the mistakes behind and look forward to a better journey together in the months ahead.

Day 3 – Returning Home

The next morning dawned gently, sunlight filtering through the hotel curtains as we woke without the pressure of a tightly packed schedule. We gathered around the small table in our room and

unpacked the breakfast I'd thoughtfully prepared the night before: bread and a sandwich, a handful of fresh fruit, and this time, something new—beef jerky and a MadeGood bar. I poured coffee for each of us, the rich aroma filling the room and mingling with the sweet notes of berries and the savory scent of jerky. My parents smiled as they tasted the breakfast, clearly appreciating the variety and care I'd put into selecting foods that would energize us for the day ahead. Sharing this simple meal together, without any hint of tension, felt like a reassuring reset after the previous day's emotional ups and downs.

After breakfast, the morning unfolded with a sense of calm cooperation. We looked together at our coffee shop, mapping out the day's itinerary on my phone. Everyone contributed suggestions—my father pointed out a park he wanted to visit; my mother circled a café she'd read about, and I recommended a scenic walk along Connecticut Avenue. As we strolled down the bustling avenue, I guided my parents through the maze of crosswalks and city blocks, showing them how to read public transit signs and locate landmarks. At a sunny corner, we paused to snap a photo together—my parents beaming with pride and gratitude, blessing me for being so resourceful and patient in helping them learn to navigate the city independently. In that moment, I felt truly seen and appreciated for the role I played, and I was filled with deep gratitude for the opportunity to explore with them. I realized how meaningful it was to take time off for these shared adventures, and I silently promised myself to cherish more moments like this.

Morning sunlight filtered through the hotel window as we zipped up our suitcases for the last time, making sure nothing was left behind. There was a sense of both relief and anticipation in the air—one chapter closing, another about to begin.



Around 10:30, we double-checked every drawer and closet before finally stepping out of the room with our bags in tow. In the hotel lounge, we found a quiet corner to sit and catch our breath. The low hum of other travelers filled the space as we debated whether to join the Wyndham Rewards loyalty program, weighing the pros and cons of future points and discounts with playful banter. It was a small but memorable moment of togetherness before we headed out into the busy city.

After checking out at the Days Inn, we made our way to the Washington Metro station, suitcases rolling behind us over the bumpy sidewalks. As we descended into the cool, echoing underground, we were blissfully unaware of the service announcements flashing on the screens—weekend track repairs meant the Red Line trains would be running less frequently than usual. The station was busier than we expected, filled with other travelers and families, some glancing at watches, others peering anxiously down the track.

Arriving at the platform, we soon found ourselves in a stunning, beautiful Architecture station, only to see when the next train to Glenmont would be. It said the train will arrive in 35 minutes. Groans rippled through the crowd. We settled in for the wait, some of us pacing the platform while others sat on the clean benches, chatting quietly or scrolling through phones to pass the time.

I tried to keep my spirits up, making a joke to my parents about how patience is the only ticket that never gets lost during a transit delay. As I wandered around the Van Ness station, I noticed how pristine and well-lit it was—so safe and orderly that my friends and parents felt comfortable watching their backpacks and tote bags on a bench while stretching their legs. The air was filled with snippets of conversation: some people complaining about the wait, others swapping stories about previous Metro adventures.



“What?” another passenger said, “That train is running on only 1 track?”

“Yes. Because of the weekend track work on the westbound.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“No wonder how long the train is coming.”

After about half an hour, the eastbound train finally arrived, and we squeezed into a crowded car. The buzz of anticipation returned as we rode to Gallery Place, where we disembarked and made our way into the colorful heart of Chinatown. Lanterns swayed gently above the busy street, and the aroma of stir-fried noodles drifted from nearby restaurants. At the iconic Friendship Archway, a uniformed police officer offered to take a group photo, arranging us in front of the ornate structure and snapping a picture that captured everyone's tired smiles and shared sense of accomplishment.

A few of our friends had connections in Washington's Chinatown, so we stopped by a local apartment to drop off their bags. The apartment was small but cozy, filled with the comforting aroma of home-cooked food and the chatter of longtime residents. After saying our goodbyes, we set off on foot down H Street, the city buzzing around us.



Our destination: the White House and the Washington Monument, glimmering in the distance beneath the midday sun.



The afternoon sun hung low as we hustled down the block, eager to squeeze in a visit to the U.S. Capitol before the day ended. The city buzzed with energy, and we wove through pedestrians toward the nearest D80 Metrobus stop. When the bus finally arrived, we filed on in a flurry of bags and chatter—only to hit an unexpected hurdle at the fare box. Several of our older Gen X and younger Baby Boomer friends stared in confusion at the card reader, unsure how to tap their debit or credit cards for payment. The line stalled as one friend tried to swipe instead of tap, another fumbled for the right card, and a third asked if cash was still accepted. The bus driver, a woman with a kindly face and endless patience, leaned over to demonstrate, repeating, “Just tap here—no need to swipe!” Other passengers, sensing our predicament, offered guidance, sharing their own tips for navigating D.C.’s transit quirks. Laughter and a few groans rippled through our group as we finally sorted it out, everyone relieved to settle into their seats as the bus lurched away from the curb.

“Excuse me, you will need to pay your fare.” The bus driver said.



The ride itself was a whirlwind 8 minutes—a blur of city streets flashing by as we caught our breath and shared quick stories from the day’s adventures. Someone pointed out a mural we’d missed earlier, another recalled the mishap at the Metro station, and laughter filled the bus as we compared notes on our favorite embassy exhibits. Before we knew it, the driver called out our stop. We spilled out near Chinatown, drawn by the neon signs and the familiar bustle of the neighborhood. Our local friend led the way to Chinatown Express, a no-frills spot known for fast, delicious dumplings and hand-pulled

noodles. We crowded around a table, steam rising from a bowl and plate of beef, bok choy, and fried rice, grateful for a quick, hearty meal before the next leg of our journey home.



After lunch, we gathered our scattered belongings—backpacks, souvenir bags, and jackets—carefully scanning beneath the table for anything left behind. Satisfied that nothing remained, we stepped out onto the sunlit sidewalk. The city’s afternoon energy surged around us: taxis honked in quick bursts, bike couriers zipped between lanes, and the distant, soulful tune of a street performer’s saxophone drifted through the air. We paused for a moment, letting the sights and sounds of the city sink in, and exchanged tired but triumphant smiles.

There was a deep sense of camaraderie, a bond forged not just from ticking off landmarks, but from navigating every unexpected detour together. Earlier, we'd found ourselves temporarily lost in the Metro, puzzling over the color-coded lines and deciphering the fare machines. At one point, a missed bus forced us to improvise our route, turning a simple transfer into a shared adventure. Through each setback, we grew more determined and supportive, helping each other laugh off mistakes and stay on track.

By afternoon's end, those small challenges had knitted us into a resilient team. As we set off toward our next destination, the Capitol dome visible in the distance, I felt a quiet pride—not only in what we'd seen, but in how we'd faced the day's hurdles together.

We did not have enough time to explore the US Capitol, and the Amtrak train was departing in 50 minutes.

We lugged our suitcases onto the Gallery Place Station, the car filling with the soft hum of early travelers. I checked the transit map one more time, determined not to miss our stop, and the next train was arriving in 3 minutes.

As the subway train rattled and clattered beneath the city streets, I held tightly to the metal pole while guiding my parents through the packed subway car. Every few minutes, I checked over my shoulder to make sure they hadn't been separated by the shifting crowd. At each transfer, I scanned the transit map overhead, double-checking our route and motioning for my parents to follow as we squeezed onto new trains. My heart pounded with a mix of anxiety and excitement, and I could feel the tension in my shoulders as the city flashed by outside the grimy windows. When the train finally pulled into Union Station, the doors whooshed open and a wave of cool air hit us. Relief and anticipation mingled in my chest as we stepped out into the rush of commuters on the busy platform, finally reaching our long-awaited destination.

“We are going this way to Union Station,” I said.

Leading my parents through the winding corridors and up the bustling escalators, I guided our group toward the heart of Union Station, the city’s iconic train hub. As we entered the grand hall, the space buzzed with life—a symphony of rolling suitcases, hurried footsteps, and overlapping conversations echoed beneath the soaring, arched ceilings. Sunlight poured through the magnificent windows, illuminating gold leaf accents and casting intricate patterns onto the gleaming marble floors. The scent of fresh coffee drifted from a nearby café, mingling with the distant, metallic scent of train tracks. I paused for a moment, taking in the grandeur and movement all around us, feeling a swell of pride that I’d successfully navigated us here without a single wrong turn.

Only 10 minutes after Union Station arrival, the announcement crackled overhead: “Train 132, D gate, track 12 to Boston.” We made our way through the bustling terminal, weaving between other travelers, and found a pair of seats near the platform. The rhythmic announcements and the distant clatter of luggage created a soothing backdrop as I closed my eyes. Fatigue from the morning caught up with me, and I drifted into a light nap, my mind wandering to dreams of soaring above the clouds on a future plane ride. My mother, sitting quietly at my side, soon nodded off as well, her head resting lightly against my shoulder.

As we waited for our train to depart Washington, my parents turned to me with gentle encouragement. They reminded me how important it would be to manage my emotions on my next adventure abroad, scheduled for 2027. Their words were both practical and caring—my father offering a reassuring squeeze on my shoulder, my mother sharing a quiet smile. In that busy station, surrounded by the anticipation of new journeys and the echoes of past frustrations, I felt

a renewed sense of determination to approach future travels with calmer and resilience.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my journey to Washington, D.C. for Passport DC, I realize just how transformative the experience has been. Each embassy I visited offered a distinct window into another culture, from the intricate calligraphy and ceremonial displays at the Chinese Embassy to the vibrant music, dance, and culinary samples at the Chinese and Bangladeshi embassies. The highlight was undoubtedly my long-awaited visit to the Singapore Embassy, where immersive exhibits recreated the lush beauty of Gardens by the Bay, complete with living orchids, architectural models of Supertrees, and digital displays of Singapore's skyline. I wandered among displays of traditional Peranakan attire, tasted kaya toast and sweet iced tea, and learned about the nation's commitment to sustainability and innovation from passionate embassy staff.

Passport DC truly felt like a whirlwind tour of the world, right in the heart of D.C. I left with a camera full of photos, a bag of cultural souvenirs, and, most importantly, a deeper understanding of global diversity and connection. Beyond the excitement, the challenges I faced—navigating family dynamics, learning patience during travel delays, and adapting plans on the fly—helped me grow more resilient and independent as a traveler.

This experience has inspired me to pursue my passion for travel more seriously. I am now working on building my brand, I-Powers Travel, with the goal of sharing travel tips, destination guides, and personal stories on my blog. I aspire to become a recognized Content Creator and solo travel expert, offering support to others who seek adventure and self-discovery. While I continue my work at Paul's Run, I am determined to invest in my travel education and build a community

of like-minded explorers. The lessons and memories from this trip will guide me as I plan future journeys, always seeking meaningful connections and new perspectives.

Tale of a Neurodiverse Traveler

Traveling as a neurodiverse person is both a challenge and a gift—one that shapes who I am and how I experience the world. Neurodiversity means my brain processes information, emotions, and sensory input differently, and that can influence my reactions, communication, and comfort levels while traveling. I don't need to be a tech expert to enjoy the journey; instead, I rely on my strengths: curiosity, empathy, observation, and a willingness to learn from new environments. My travel style is intentionally slow, giving me time to acclimate to unfamiliar places, manage sensory overload, and build meaningful connections with people from other cultures. I am ambitious about exploring the world, but I prioritize mindfulness and self-care along the way, always seeking to understand and appreciate the diversity around me.

If you are a neurodiverse traveler—know that you are not alone. There are many of us out there, each with our own stories of adventure and adaptation. I have friends on the autism spectrum and with ADHD who have navigated airports, train stations, and new cities on their own terms, proving that neurodiverse people can travel safely, independently, and joyfully. It is crucial to share these experiences widely, because the more we talk about our successes and challenges, the more we break down stereotypes and push back against discrimination and prejudice faced by people with disabilities. By spreading the word and advocating for better understanding and inclusion, we create a travel community where everyone feels welcome and empowered.

Now, I want to offer encouragement and hope—reminding myself and others that travel is possible, rewarding, and transformative for neurodiverse individuals. Our differences are our strengths, and our voices matter.

People who are born neurodivergent, such as those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or dyslexia, do not have control over the genes/genetic that determine their neurodevelopmental differences. These conditions result from complex interactions of genetic and environmental factors during brain development. Neurodivergent individuals experience differences in how they process information, learn, and interact with the world, but these genetic traits are inherited and not something they can change or influence before birth.

***Advice:** It is not fair to exclude people from participating in the community and enjoying life simply because they are neurodivergent. Neurodivergent individuals, whether they experience autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or any other differences, are still human beings deserving of respect and inclusion. Their perspectives and talents enrich our communities, making them more diverse and vibrant. In a society that values freedom, equality, and personal expression, it is our responsibility to foster acceptance and challenge prejudice. We should strive to create environments where everyone feels welcome and supported, regardless of neurological differences. Only then can we truly call ourselves a liberal world, free from prejudice and discrimination.*

Effects of Traveling with an Emotional Immature Person, e.g. My Father

In my experience, traveling with an emotionally immature person significantly increases my anxiety and exacerbates my condition. The impact on the quality of the trip is profound and multifaceted, as the emotional dynamics within the group can quickly spiral out of control. Emotional immaturity manifests in unpredictable reactions, poor conflict resolution, and a general sense of instability, which undermines the sense of safety and enjoyment that travel is supposed to bring.

For instance, imagine 4 people traveling together, each with distinct personalities and emotional needs. The group consists of:

- Ken (emotionally immature father)
- United (a 35-year-old neurodivergent traveler)
- Lisa (supportive mother)
- Violet (family's friend)

When Ken, who demonstrates clear signs of emotional immaturity, encounters even minor inconveniences—such as a delayed flight, changes in restaurant plans, or a lost item—his reactions are often disproportionate to the situation. He quickly escalates to loud complaints, visible frustration, or even tantrums in public, which can be embarrassing and disruptive for those around him. This pattern of behavior sets a negative tone for the entire group, creating a tense atmosphere that permeates every interaction.

United, being neurodivergent and highly sensitive to the emotional environment, is especially attuned to Ken's distress. She often mirrors his overreactions, which may manifest as her own emotional outbursts, crying spells, or bouts of frustration. The tension between Ken and United can intensify rapidly, with each person's emotions feeding off the other. Lisa, recognizing the escalating mood, attempts to ground herself through mindfulness techniques and actively supports United in managing her emotions, but the overall group dynamic remains fragile.

When United reacts to Ken's emotionally immature behavior, it triggers a recurring cycle of emotional escalation and negativity that is difficult to break. The group becomes consumed by managing conflicts and soothing frayed nerves, which overshadows any attempts at enjoying the trip. As tensions mount, members may begin to feel that their time, money, and effort have been squandered, leaving them with memories tainted by stress and disappointment rather than joy or connection.

As a result of the ongoing stress, United's anxiety intensifies dramatically. She may begin to act out in response—her behavior shifting from mild irritability to outright defiance of group decisions or withdrawing completely and refusing to participate in activities. Sleep becomes elusive, and exhaustion exacerbates her emotional instability. Lisa, observing these changes in United, remains vigilant and supportive, often staying up late to comfort her, offering reassurance, or adjusting plans to accommodate United's needs. However, the unrelenting tension leaves both of them physically and emotionally drained.

United, feeling overwhelmed and unsupported, may break down and cry over seemingly minor issues—over Ken's emotional immaturity for small problems—because her emotional reserves are depleted by the ongoing tension. These breakdowns often occur in public, adding to her sense of embarrassment and isolation, and reinforcing a cycle of negative emotions that is hard to escape.

Lisa, the mother, becomes increasingly upset—and at times furious—when United reacts to Ken's outbursts. This dynamic often leads to frequent, heated arguments over seemingly trivial matters, such as what activities to do or how to manage daily logistics. The resulting atmosphere is tense and uncomfortable, with everyone feeling on edge and unable to relax. Over time, the constant bickering and unresolved conflicts erode group cohesion and trust, making it harder for members to communicate openly or rely on one another for support.

Violet, a long-time family friend, becomes increasingly disheartened by Ken's repeated emotional outbursts. What began as mild discomfort soon grows into reluctance, and she eventually loses all interest in joining future group trips. Violet candidly expresses her desire to travel only with calm, emotionally stable companions in the future, openly citing the stress and unpredictability caused by Ken's behavior. This reaction underscores the long-term social

consequences of emotional immaturity, as the group's ability to attract and retain supportive companions diminishes over time.

Ultimately, the entire group suffers from these repeated cycles of emotional upheaval. The emotional scars do not fade quickly—members may become resentful, emotionally distant, and even hostile toward one another. Bitterness builds, old grievances resurface, and efforts to reconnect or rebuild trust are fraught with suspicion and reluctance. Rather than fostering closeness or shared positive memories, the experience drives a wedge between group members, sometimes resulting in long-term estrangement.

In the aftermath of the trip, United may struggle to process the difficult emotions she experienced. To cope with lingering anxiety and distress, she might resort to unhealthy behaviors such as emotional eating, binge-watching television, or spending hours on her phone in isolation. These coping mechanisms can lead to weight gain, sleep disturbances, and increased feelings of loneliness. If these patterns persist, she can trigger more severe mental health challenges, including prolonged episodes of depression, anxiety, or even mania. Over time, United's physical health may decline, and she may find herself caught in a cycle of illness and emotional instability that becomes difficult to break without intervention and support.

In conclusion, traveling with an emotionally immature person can profoundly disrupt the well-being of neurodivergent travelers. For example, as seen with United, the ongoing stress and emotional escalation can lead to severe anxiety, public breakdowns, unhealthy coping strategies like emotional eating or social withdrawal, and even long-term health consequences such as insomnia and depression. These behaviors can ruin their wellness and longevity. These effects ripple through the group, causing tension, resentment, and in some cases, permanent rifts in relationships, as illustrated by Violet's decision to avoid future trips for people who have a harder time controlling their emotions. To prevent such negative outcomes, it is

critical for families and travel groups to establish clear boundaries, proactively address emotional triggers, and ensure that all members—especially those with neurodiverse needs—have access to understanding, support, and practical coping strategies throughout the journey.

How to Overcome These Triggers?

For sensitive, neurodivergent travelers, focus on taking full ownership of your travel experience by planning every detail yourself. Avoid traveling with emotionally immature companions. Accept that no trip will be perfect but prioritize managing your own emotions and mental well-being. Take responsibility for your emotional, mental, physical, and overall wellness. While you cannot control others' emotions or behaviors, you can choose how you respond.

A good rule of thumb I follow is to not worry about what others think of me. Instead, I make it a priority to focus on my own wellness by living intentionally and with clear purpose. This means setting personal goals, making mindful choices each day, and surrounding myself with positive influences. By prioritizing my own well-being and happiness, I am able to lead a more fulfilling and balanced life, regardless of outside opinions.

Start by selecting destinations that align with your comfort levels and interests—such as quieter cities, nature retreats, or locations with reliable public transportation. Research accommodations in advance, prioritizing hotels or rentals that offer sensory-friendly features like quiet rooms, blackout curtains, and easy access to amenities.

Develop a detailed itinerary that balances activities with ample downtime; include specific times for meals, rest, and personal reflection to help regulate your energy and emotions. Consider bringing comfort items, such as noise-canceling

headphones, favorite snacks, or a weighted blanket, to create a sense of familiarity while away from home.

Practice mindful travel by preparing for potential stressors: list possible triggers (crowded places, schedule changes, unfamiliar foods) and brainstorm coping strategies, such as deep breathing exercises, step-away breaks, or calming apps. Communicate your needs and preferences clearly to travel companions, setting expectations for alone time or specific routines you need to maintain your well-being.

By planning proactively and advocating for yourself, you can reduce the likelihood of anxiety flare-ups and unhealthy coping habits, such as emotional eating or excessive screen time. Over time, this practice will help you build confidence, resilience, and emotional maturity. Ultimately, your parents and friends will appreciate your self-awareness and personal growth, and your travel experiences will become more positive and fulfilling for everyone involved.

My Tips for Neurodiverse Travelers

Here are my detailed tips for thriving as a solo neurodivergent traveler, based on personal experience and insights from others in the neurodiverse community.

Embrace your uniqueness: Being neurodivergent means you may process travel experiences differently—whether it’s how you handle new foods, unfamiliar environments, or sleep routines. Use positive affirmations to boost your confidence before and during your trip (e.g., “I can handle changes in plans,” or “I am adaptable and resourceful”). If you face an unexpected challenge like a flight cancellation, pause, breathe, and remember you’ve managed new situations before. Watching content from neurodivergent travel creators, like YouTuber Live Abroad with ADHD, can offer reassurance and practical advice.

Consult your healthcare team: Before planning your solo journey, let your doctor, therapist, or other medical professionals know about your plans. Ask for advice on managing your mental, emotional, and physical health while away, and ensure your medications or coping strategies are up to date. This step not only shows your independence but helps you prepare for potential challenges.

Pack with intention: Bring sensory aids or comfort items that help you self-regulate—such as noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, weighted blankets, or familiar snacks. Pack books, puzzles, art supplies, or other calming activities. If you are sensitive to crowds or noise, consider travel gear like earplugs, sunglasses, or a travel pillow. Always purchase travel insurance that covers medical needs and look for travel companies or programs that offer neurodiversity-friendly support.

Plan and research thoroughly: Give yourself extra time to research destinations, accommodations, and transportation. Look for places with quiet spaces, flexible check-in/check-out policies, and easy access to medical care if needed. Make lists, set reminders, and create a flexible itinerary that allows for downtime and spontaneous changes. Prioritize destinations that are known to be safe and solo-traveler-friendly—my parents and friends always encouraged me to choose places where I could reach support if needed.

Choose accommodations thoughtfully: Hostels can be a great way to meet fellow travelers and find supportive communities, but private rooms or small guesthouses may offer more comfort if you need quiet and routine. Reach out to staff ahead of time to ask about the environment and accessibility. Having a trusted place to recharge at the end of the day makes a big difference.

Build in breaks and communicate: Avoid over-scheduling your days. Plan regular breaks for rest, meditation, or quiet time. Leave space for sensory recovery between activities. Share your itinerary,

emergency contacts, and daily check-in plans with trusted family or friends, so you're never truly on your own if you need help.

Manage finances mindfully: Use travel rewards programs or credit cards with low or no annual fees—only if you are comfortable managing payments. Track your spending and stick to a set budget, using apps or travel journals if that helps. Always pay your cards in full to avoid debt and keep your credit utilization low. If you qualify for special savings programs like an ABLE account or a trust fund, use them to support your travel goals.

Prepare for emergencies: Carry emergency contact cards, medical information, and copies of your insurance with you. If you're traveling internationally, purchase additional medical insurance, as most U.S. health plans (including Medicaid and Medicare) do not cover you abroad. Write down phone numbers and addresses for local embassies, hospitals, or support organizations just in case.

Maintain financial stability: If you're working, continue to save as much as you can. Having a job or steady income fosters independence and confidence. Many neurodivergent travelers find that using an ABLE account or special needs trust provides extra freedom and security, especially if you have limited resources or rely on public benefits. Research how your travel plans might impact any benefits you receive, so you can plan accordingly.

Know the rules for benefits: If you receive public benefits like SSI, be aware of the travel restrictions—current U.S. law allows you to be abroad for up to 30 days without losing eligibility. Personally, I take international trips for 7–10 days to maintain peace of mind and avoid complications. Always confirm the latest rules with your benefits administrator before planning extended travel.

Bonus: Did you know that traveling and taking time off can provide significant benefits for individuals with neurodiverse conditions, such

as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, and dyslexia? These benefits extend to improvements in social communication, mental well-being, and emotional regulation. For example, traveling can expose neurodiverse individuals to new environments, encouraging them to practice social skills in real-world settings and build confidence. Additionally, the mental break from daily routines and structured activities can reduce anxiety and stress, supporting better emotional balance.

According to Jelski, C., contributor of Travel Weekly, a growing number of travelers—including those who are neurodiverse—are adapting their travel habits and finding new strategies to manage sensory overload. Techniques like guided meditation and yoga help regulate sensory input and foster relaxation during trips. Many airports and attractions now offer sensory-friendly spaces and break rooms, allowing neurodiverse travelers to take a break from overstimulation and recharge before continuing their journey.

This shift toward a more inclusive travel industry means neurodiverse travelers have more choices and accommodations, rather than facing exclusion or discomfort. As a result, more organizations and travel providers are actively supporting and promoting diversity, ensuring that everyone can experience the joys and benefits of travel regardless of their neurodiversity (Jelski et al., n.d.).

Reference:

Jelski, C., et.al. n.d. “No mind left behind: How travel embraces neurodiversity.” *Travel Weekly*. Retrieved from <https://www.travelweekly.com/Travel-News/Travel-Agent-Issues/How-travel-embraces-neurodiversity>