

Travel Accessible travel



ACCESS

THIBAUT LOUBERE


Aim high with the Jubilee Sailing Trust

visited the venue, so readers get an honest picture of how accessible facilities work in practice. How easy is it to park nearby, for example? Crucially, each review is clear about its target audience, whether they're users of wheelchairs, powerchairs, walking aids or symbol canes.

With this sense of adventure comes a more assertive spirit. Travellers in wheelchairs, for example, are now calling out airlines if they are left stranded on a flight because their prebooked assistance doesn't materialise. Meanwhile, schemes such as the Blue Badge Access Awards, launched last year, are encouraging hotels, bars and restaurants to up their game when it comes to the design of accessible facilities (bluebadgeaccessawards.com).

There is, of course, a long way to go. Designers of many accessible toilets still don't seem to understand that their disabled users are not all challenged in the same way. For many, flying remains a stressful experience, too, especially if they face more complex disabilities.

London barrister Marcia Shekerdeman QC has been travelling for many years with her son, Leo, who has cerebral palsy. For them, moving about inside a plane is difficult. "The aisle chairs are fine if you've got trunk support," she says of the small wheelchairs designed to get disabled passengers up and down the cabin. "But my son doesn't have trunk support – it takes three or four people to make sure he doesn't fall out of the chair."

Robbie Crow knows exactly how transformative accessible travel can be. The 28-year-old charity worker was born with two rare conditions, microphthalmia and coloboma, and has been registered as blind since birth. But that didn't stop him boarding a yacht when he was 14, courtesy of Ocean Youth Trust Scotland, and learning how to sail.

"I'd been told from an early age that my life would be constrained – that I'd never drive and never go mountain-biking," he recalls. "But on that boat I realised sailing is not so much about seeing. It's about feeling: what the wind is doing, how the ship is moving, the state of the waves. And I realised I could be as good at it – if not better – than a sighted person."

Now, aged 28, he's a regular on board the purpose-built tall ships of the Jubilee Sailing Trust, Tenacious and Lord Nelson. The trust's aim is to give teams of mixed-ability sailors the chance to discover their potential at sea – and one of Robbie's talents is helming. With the help of a talking compass and a spotter (who watches for other boats), he guides the three-masted ships across the open sea.

When he's not at the helm, he's climbing the rigging. "When the topsail blows in a force 7 or force 8 wind, I'll be one of the madmen who goes up and brings it under control," he says. "Sailing feels like freedom."

Robbie is part of a new wave of disabled travellers who are testing the limits of

ALL AREAS

Thanks to a number of intrepid pioneers, the world of accessible travel is changing fast, finds *Sean Newsom*

what's possible when it comes to exploring the world. Some are daring themselves to try ever more extraordinary experiences, including the tetraplegic paraglider Jezza Williams. The subject of a bittersweet and beautiful short film, *Limitless* (available on YouTube), he's also the founder of traxtravel.co.nz, which aims to make adventure travel in New Zealand accessible to everyone – whether it's tandem skydiving, white-water rafting or whale-watching.

Others are busy mapping out the world according to their needs. In 2013, Euan MacDonald – who has motor neurone disease – founded euansguide.com, with the simple aim of helping disabled people "find great places to go". It now hosts more than 7,000 reviews of venues in the UK and beyond, from Edinburgh Castle to Disneyland Paris. Every entry is written by a disabled traveller (or a carer) who has



The Dairy, North Yorkshire, one of the winners in the Blue Badge Access Awards. Top, skiing lessons in Val Thorens

There is, however, no doubt that the opportunities and facilities are improving. Specialist tour operators such as Enable Holidays are offering expert advice and itineraries tailored to a range of disabilities.

More widely, there's been a change in attitudes – one that Marcia has been struck by on British Airways flights. "Now nobody balks at helping me to lift Leo into his seat," she says. No wonder, given recent estimates that the "purple pound" contributes £12bn to the tourist industry in the UK alone.

For the travellers themselves, the rewards are considerable. "As a person with a disability, aeroplanes, trains and even taxis can be challenging," Leo says. "But going to places I've never been gives me so much to look forward to."

Helmsman Robbie is equally enthused by what he has learnt. "Sailing has taught me to take life's challenges as they come," he says. "When the wind turns into a gale, you have to think on your feet and solve immediate problems, rather than the ones you anticipated. It's an invaluable lesson."

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TEN OF THE BEST ACCESSIBLE HOLIDAYS

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ISTANBUL AND ANATOLIA

"There's nothing quite like the spice market of Misir Carsisi to wake up your senses," says Andrew Milburn, tour manager at Traveleyes. The company specialises in holidays partnering blind and sighted travellers, and its 11-day tour of Turkey in March starts with Istanbul. "It's not just the smell of turmeric and cumin that gets you tingling," he adds. "It's the hubbub of voices and the tang of the local coffee." The sensory overload continues with beach days in Bodrum, an ancient spa in Pamukkale and the touch of Roman stonework warmed by the Mediterranean sun in Hierapolis. For visually impaired travellers, the price is £2,199pp, B&B, including most meals, flights and transfers; the sighted pay £1,499pp (traveleyes-international.com).

SAILING FROM ANTIGUA

With the Jubilee Sailing Trust, it doesn't really matter where you sail. For most of its crews, it's the personal discoveries that count, as they learn to helm a 200ft ship or hoist themselves onto the crosstrees, halfway up a mast. That said, its island-hopping Antiguan itineraries

have a special allure – thanks in large part to the delicious balm of a Caribbean breeze when it's winter back home. In February, it has two 11-day voyages planned on the fully adapted Tenacious, exploring the islands to the north and south. Both cost £2,200pp, full-board, excluding flights. First-time sailors with a wide range of disabilities are welcome (jst.org.uk).

TAKING IT EASY IN TENERIFE

Its volcanic landscapes may be raw and rugged, but the Canary Island has long been a pioneer of accessible travel. As a base, Disabled Holidays recommends the chic, wheelchair-friendly rooms at the Baobab Suites hotel, in Costa Adeje; from there, both the beach and excursions beckon. Plenty of beaches are barrier-free and equipped with amphibious wheelchairs, ramps, promenades, toilets and changing rooms. The accessible day trips include tapas and wine tastings in the capital, Santa Cruz, as well as tours of the spectacular landscapes in adapted coaches. A week starts at £1,105pp, including flights and adapted-taxi transfers (disabledholidays.com).

DISNEYLAND PARIS

Hats off to Mickey and co, whose French theme parks have an exemplary approach to accessibility. Many of the attractions take wheelchairs, and information about who can ride what is available at disneylandparis.com, so you can plan ahead. Best of all is the Priority Card, available to each disabled guest and up to four companions: your licence to jump the queues. Magicbreaks has a two-night



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Breakfast at the Hotel Schani, Vienna; top, Turkish spices

package for a family of four, staying in interconnecting rooms (one of which is wheelchair-friendly) at Disney's Sequoia Lodge Hotel, from £287pp, half-board, including three days' park entry and direct Eurostar travel from London St Pancras (magicbreaks.co.uk).

CRUISING THE NORWEGIAN FJORDS

This year, P&O launches a new megaship, Iona, and she'll be spending much of the summer cruising the Norwegian fjords. So, as well as the thrill of being on board a state-of-the-art liner, there'll be plenty to look at as the world slides by. The weekly itineraries start and finish in Southampton, so there's no need for flights, and 55 accessible cabins are available at a wide range of prices. Cue seven nights of relaxing, with dinner under the stars in the glass-roofed SkyDome among the highlights. Seven nights in an inside accessible cabin with a balcony start at £899pp, full-board, including afternoon tea, 24-hour snacking and the odd barbecue if the weather's good (pocruises.com).

GALLERY-GOING IN VIENNA

Vienna is kind to wheelchair users. All the underground stations are accessed by lifts or ramps, and there are low-floor trams and buses on every public transport route. But it's the Austrian capital's world-class art and music that will thrill. Almost every venue is wheelchair-friendly – whether it's the Musikverein (home of the Vienna Philharmonic) or the collection of Old Masters and archaeology at the KHM. There's detailed access



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information at wien.info, and the Hotel Schani Wien offers accessible rooms (twins from £65; hotelschani.com). Fly to Vienna with easyJet.

BASQUE COUNTRY GASTRONOMY

San Sebastian, in the Spanish Basque country, offers another sensual feast and is well suited to wheelchair users – with Michelin-starred restaurants, covered markets and pintxos tastings all on the menu. There's the chance to get into the sea, too, with disabled surfing lessons. The accessible holidays specialist Enable offers a tailor-made trip with airport assistance, staying at the wheelchair-friendly Astoria 7, which has a rare ceiling hoist and a range of harnesses. A week starts at £1,399pp, B&B, including flights and transfers, for a wheelchair user and their partner (enableholidays.com).

SKIING IN THE FRENCH ALPS

Not everyone will take to adaptive skiing as quickly as a former motorcyclist taught by Alain Proux, of Prosneige, in Val Thorens. After just three days, he was making turns down intermediate-level pistes in his ski-bottomed chair. But even those who aren't quite so gung-ho will love the excitement of learning. Proux teaches skiers with a range of disabilities, with lessons starting at £100 for two hours (prosneige.fr). In between, wheelchair users can try one of the resort's new Z Green electric buggies. The accessible

Sail a tall ship; above, pintxos in San Sebastian

self-catering apartments at the ski-in, ski-out Montana Plein Sud, next door to Prosneige, are the best bet for accommodation. A self-drive, self-catering week in a two-bedroom flat starts at £433pp, based on four sharing and including return Eurotunnel crossings (skicollection.co.uk).



SELF-CATERING IN STYLE

The Blue Badge Access Awards and the accessible travel website euansguide.com have created a People's Choice award – and the Dairy, in Wensleydale, North Yorkshire, was the 2019-20 winner.

Designed with mobility, visual and hearing impairments in mind, the one-bedroom, single-storey cottage is step-free and equipped with hearing loops, a giant accessible wetroom and a bespoke kitchen aimed at wheelchair users. Three nights start at £450 (premiercottages.co.uk).

HOUSES AND GARDENS OF THE NORTH

Revitalise wants to give everyone a break. The charity's purpose-built centres in Essex, Lancashire and Hampshire run residential holidays with 24-hour nursing care, invigorating excursions (waterskiing, anyone?) and live entertainment. What's more, with the ratio of staff and volunteers to guests as high as 1:1, carers can have a holiday too. In Southport, the seven-night Spring Gardens & Country Houses itinerary takes in the northwest's grandest mansions and floral displays. Prices start at £1,288pp, full-board, arriving on May 11 (revitalise.org.uk).