

Access all areas

Finding a disabled-friendly holiday can be a nightmare for families with additional needs. **ANTONIA WINDSOR** reports on the obstacles they face and the travel organisations going the extra mile to offer them fun, freedom and adventure

‘Don’t worry, you go to breakfast with the kids, I’m not that hungry,’ said my husband, ushering us out the door of our little holiday apartment perched on a hill. Our children were aged two and three, and I had booked us a last-minute holiday to Fuerteventura in the weeks before Christmas. It was cheap, as it was term time, and cost had been the only thing on my mind when I booked.

I took the kids down the long steep slope to the restaurant, trying to pull back on the buggy to stop it rolling down too fast. I didn’t think anything of my husband’s refusal of breakfast that first time, but then he began to turn down lunches too, and only reluctantly accompanied me to dinner. My husband has a severe spinal injury from a car crash that initially left him paralysed. He is not in a chair but walking is difficult and painful for him. Slopes are particularly

challenging. I hadn’t thought when booking to find out what the walk from our apartment to the restaurant would be like, and in my ignorance had booked my husband a holiday that he couldn’t enjoy.

When you have family members with additional needs, booking holidays is not always straightforward. And what is

accessible for some may not be accessible for others – for example, the disabled lanes at theme parks often include long winding slopes that are good for wheelchairs but difficult for people like my husband to manage. Similarly, a wheel-in shower might be suitable for an adult in a chair but not for a child who would do better in a bath. You can often spend hours on the internet trawling for a holiday that will suit your particular needs. And, according to a recent study, messages sent about access requirements often go unanswered. The user experience agency Sigma sent requests to 132 tourism organisations in the UK (from trainlines to airports) on behalf of those with wheelchairs, and a shocking 54 per cent of businesses did not respond at all to the requests, even when it was directed to a special access email address. But don’t let this put you off, as there are some amazing companies that will do all the leg work for you.

One such company is the Ski 2 Freedom Foundation, which has been enabling families to

‘What is accessible for some may not be accessible for others’

enjoy the rejuvenating environment of the Alps and elsewhere for a decade. Founder Catherine Cosby works tirelessly to empower adults and children with conditions ranging from cystic fibrosis and cerebral palsy to Down’s syndrome and dyspraxia to take to the slopes and experience the exhilaration of mountain sports. ‘I have spent many years visiting resorts, talking to ski schools and acquiring a deep understanding of what is available, which I pass on to families through my intensive concierge service,’ explains Catherine, who herself has a child with additional needs. Ski 2 Freedom is a charity, so there is no cost to the beneficiary, though a contribution is encouraged so that the service can benefit as many people as possible. ‘People come to me with a desire to have a winter holiday and I talk through their needs and recommend accommodation and ski schools that suit their requirements,’ Catherine adds. ‘They might need to hire blades for a wheelchair, a sit-ski

Below: Fun on a Revitalise respite break; Center Parcs’ accessible lodges



Our writer, Antonia, seeks out accessible holidays for her husband who has a spinal injury



or a hoist, and I can help them with that. Some may then book the holiday themselves, or I might do that for them.’

Through her work, Catherine hopes that the ski industry now recognises the value of being inclusive. ‘When I explain that beneficiaries of the foundation – not including all the family that go with them – have booked holidays totalling €13m since we started, I think people see the value in adapting their provision.’

Another useful companion to booking an accessible holiday is the travel company Disabled Holidays. The team there understands the full gamut of disabilities and special needs, and has access to a wide range of suitable holidays, from beach resorts and cottage rentals to safaris and cruises. Its website (disabledholidays.com) provides inspiration on the types of holidays possible and is a good place to find out about specialist provision, such as the dementia-supported breaks provided by MindforYou or holiday grants available from organisations like Make-A-Wish UK and the Sandcastle Trust.

However, the company’s real value lies in its travel office, which is staffed by people who have a wide knowledge of the market and are able to suggest things you wouldn’t necessarily think of yourself. ‘All of our team are highly skilled in the travel industry and also receive disability awareness training and visit equipment suppliers and properties,’ explains business development manager Gillian Moorhouse-Hoole. ‘We have a mixture of trained staff with backgrounds in travel, care, disability and therapeutic [work]. Several staff members have personal experience of holidaying as a family where a member of their family has a disability, which is very beneficial when dealing with families.’

Sometimes you will be able to take a holiday to a popular resort. In the UK, Butlins, Center Parcs and Haven Holidays all have good accessibility provision, as do Walt Disney World in Orlando and Disneyland Paris. The major travel company TUI has a specialist phone line to call if you have access needs (0203 451 2585). At other times, you might need the enhanced provision from a company such as Revitalise, which organises respite holidays for families needing 24-hour on-call nursing support. And sometimes you might just want the support of others who understand exactly the demands of your particular caring role, such as the Type 1 Diabetes Family Camp in Sequoia National Park that Sally Hodgkinson visited (see p72) or the Beaches Resorts in the Caribbean, which provide one-on-one buddies and art classes with a Sesame Street character called Julia for children with autism.

Remember, there are people who share your needs in every country of the world, so nowhere should be off limits for your family. →



Sesame Street character, Julia, is on hand for children with autism at Beaches Resorts

Holiday inspiration

Ready to start planning your next trip? Here are some ideas to get you started



THE THEME PARK EFTELING

The fairytale park in Holland is one of the first to launch a virtual version of a ride. The Virtual Droomvlucht incorporates audiovisual techniques to allow disabled visitors to experience the ride via headphones and microphones.

efteling.com/en



THE FAR-FLUNG DESTINATION JAPAN

With the 2020 Paralympics on the horizon, Japan is one of the most wheelchair-friendly countries in the world. InsideJapan Tours has created a self-guided itinerary, designed specifically with wheelchair users in mind.

insidejapantours.com



THE CITY BREAK CHESTER

Chester might sound like an unusual suggestion, given its historic multistorey landscape, but in 2016 the city was named the most accessible in Europe. Download the free guide, 'Chester City Centre Access' at

visitchester.com



THE HISTORIC HOTEL CRINGLETIE HOUSE

Access was not something our ancestors thought much about, but Cringletie House, near Edinburgh, is fully wheelchair accessible and has equipment in the bedrooms to help guests with impaired hearing.

cringletie.com



THE FARM STAY HOE GRANGE HOLIDAYS

Stay in characterful log cabins with stunning views and enjoy a hot tub with hoist, the hire of a Boma 7 off-road wheelchair to explore the Peak District and a host of other equipment included in the price.

hoegrangeholidays.co.uk



THE SELF CATERING ONE COTTAGES.COM

This UK self catering company has a number of accessible cottages on its site. Filter your searches by facility required for your family, such as wheelchair access, grab rails or low worktops.

cottages.com

Travel specialists

Disabled Holidays

Everything from coach holidays to cruises.

disabledholidays.com

Enable Holidays

Tailor-made holidays for wheelchair users.

enableholidays.com

Responsible Travel

97 accessible holidays from Peak District to Japan.

responsibletravel.com/holidays/accessible

Ski 2 Freedom Foundation

Mountains for all is this company's mantra.

ski2freedom.com/en

Disabled Access Holidays

Parents set this company up after seeking accessible holidays for their son.

disabledaccessholidays.com

Limitless Travel

Provides disabled-friendly escorted tours to UK and Europe

limitlesstravel.org

Revitalise

Accessible respite holidays and short breaks.

revitalise.org.uk

For more help

For advice on the accessibility of hundreds of UK venues try

disabledgo.com

CASE STUDY ONE

WHO:

The Yates family

THE HOLIDAY:

Skiing in La Rosière

Mum Rachel Yates: "Our 12-year-old son Alfie has Duchenne muscular dystrophy. This is a muscle-wasting condition, meaning that every muscle in his body is getting weaker. He was able to walk until he was 11, although he began using a powered wheelchair when he was nine, as he was starting to struggle to get around school. He is now fully dependant on his wheelchair. Because it's a progressive condition, we have to focus on what he can currently do, while having an eye to what he won't be able to do in the days, and months ahead. It is desperately sad.

Holidays have been a nightmare to sort for several years now. We are an active family and love sport. We have a younger son, Oli, who is eight. He is a true 'sports billy'! So finding a holiday with the right balance is hard. We are also very lucky to live in a lovely home in a lovely area that we have managed to kit out for Alfie's needs. But this means that finding somewhere that works equally well, that is equally as nice, is very difficult. So many places that are advertised for 'disabled people' are actually kitted out for old, less mobile people, and are often 'tired'.

At the start of 2017, Alfie said he wanted to go skiing. I thought that would be impossible and so put it out of my mind. Then Alfie had a bit of an emotional breakdown one day (he's usually super-positive and copes so well with his condition - incredibly brave!), but things just got too much for him. In response to that, I decided that we would go skiing. I started with Google and came across Ski 2 Freedom. It was a golden moment.

I sent an email enquiry and Catherine called me back rather than emailing. She knew just what I needed. Catherine understood the stresses and strains of our family life without me having to say anything at all. She understood what it takes to be parents, working full time, doing normal parent stuff and then doing all the extra stuff that you do as a parent of

Alfie enjoys the slopes in the French Alps



a child with significant additional needs. And she understood not just the physical strain that it puts on you but the emotional strain - knowing that you are going to lose your child means that you carry such a depth of sadness in your heart and yet paradoxically you feel blessed for every moment that you have together, so you never take your child for granted.

I explained I wanted a mountain experience for us all, but particularly for Alfie - a resort that worked for us, where we weren't battling against the odds.

'These ski holidays have literally changed our lives'

Catherine proposed La Rosière in the French Alps, staying with Faye and Mike in Chalet Matsuzaka. And it was just perfect for us. The chalet is absolutely beautiful, a place where we could read books on a cosy sofa in front of the fire.

Alfie skied in a ski kart with an amazing instructor, Lionel. Catherine recognised that with Alfie's needs, this was the only way he was going to get out there on the snow. Lionel helped my husband hoik Alfie into the ski kart each morning, and out again after two hours. He took Alfie across the mountains, travelling at super-speeds - up to 110km/ph. Alfie

saw more of the mountains than the rest of us. Catherine also pointed us in the direction of clip-on skis for Alfie's manual wheelchair. These turned out to be a fantastic investment. It meant that we could walk with Alfie along the beautiful woodland path between the two sides of the La Rosière resort. That walk was magical at Christmas, with lights in the trees. A week before the trip, Catherine called me to see how I was. At that point I was pretty terrified - she knew I would be, which is why she called me to reassure me that it would all be fine. Faye and Mike had helped sort out how we were going to get from the airport to their chalet (you can't book a wheelchair-accessible taxi from the airport and you can't hire a wheelchair-accessible car!). They were ready for us, having helped us hire a mobile hoist (needed to transfer Alfie from bed to chair/chair to loo, etc) and had helped sort all of our ski lessons. Seeing Alfie come down the slope for the first time and seeing the smile on his face at the bottom made me cry. I loved seeing Oli master his snow ploughs. Having two hours on my own on the slopes brought me great peace. These holidays have literally changed our lives."

ski2freedom.com/en →

CASE STUDY TWO

WHO:

The Hodgkinson family

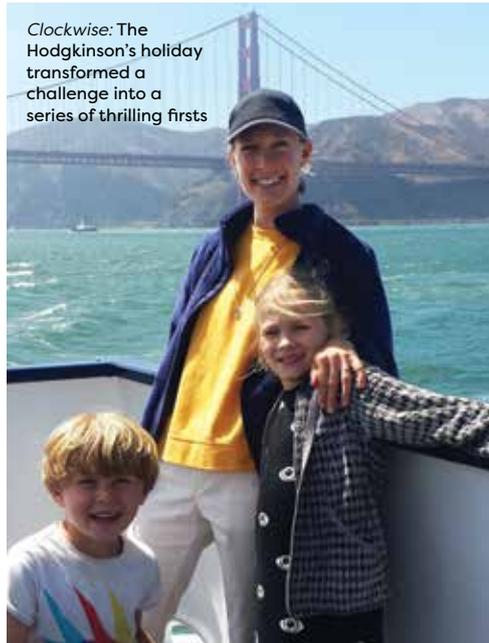
THE HOLIDAY:

Bearskin Meadow Camp,
Sequoia National Forest

Mum Sally Hodgkinson: “Our daughter Isis was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes (T1D) in April 2016, when she was eight years old. It was all so shocking and we knew very little about it. I am American and knew the US offers ‘medical’ summer camps, because my stepfather runs an epilepsy camp in Minnesota every summer. I wanted something that would feel like an adventure for the whole family, including our son Rex, who was six. When I discovered the T1D family camp in California, I figured we could build a holiday around it and take in some of my favourite spots. We wanted to send the message to us as a family that things may have changed, but it will bring good things to us as well as new challenges.

We spent a week at Bearskin Meadow Camp, run by the Diabetes Youth Families, in the summer of 2016. The kids did all the usual camp activities; swimming, climbing, hiking, games and crafts, while me and my husband Charles attended classes and support groups. It was an amazing setting, nestled in the mountains between Kings Canyon National Park and Sequoia National Park. The staff either have T1D themselves or are trained medical professionals in the area. We slept out under the full moon on large sleeping decks with two or three other families on camp beds. In the morning, they woke us up by blasting brilliant music from Jethro Tull to Mozart over loudspeakers in the huge pines and redwoods that surrounded us. Our sleeping bags were wet with sap and dew. It was gorgeous, and a novel experience for us as a family, which took the focus off the diabetes and helped soothe the shock we were all still grappling with.

Other highlights included a midnight hike up to Cathedral Dome, where we sang songs and heard funny camp stories by the light of a huge moon. And



Clockwise: The Hodgkinson's holiday transformed a challenge into a series of thrilling firsts



something called the ‘firsts lists’ in the canteen, when kids could write down a ‘first’ they had accomplished during the week of camp, ranging from conquering a zip-line to injecting their own insulin to changing a pump site without tears. It was very moving.

It really helped us to be around other parents who understood what we were going through. Hearing the endless stories of people struggling to cope, rising to new challenges and accepting that their everyday lives were changed for ever was one of the most powerful things I have ever done. I believe it has helped Isis immensely, as she felt a part of something



strong and fun and exciting outside of her school and home life, where no one else we knew was living with T1D. She now has a number of friends from all over America at different stages in their T1D journey who she can look to for support and inspiration. It has also really helped her in meeting other kids with it in the UK, and feeling confident to talk about it with other people, most of whom confuse her condition with T2D and often make judgements. She is happy to educate people gently, which she definitely learnt at this American camp.

dyf.org/camps/bearskin-meadow-camp ↗