



Home or Away

It is getting harder and harder to decide on where to holiday nowadays. From accessibility issues to rising costs, Mik Scarlet explores whether it is better to stay in the UK or head for sunnier climes.

It's that time of year when our minds turn to holidays. That week or two of escape from the daily grind where we can forget our responsibilities and enjoy ourselves. Booking that holiday and making sure it goes to plan can be a minefield, especially for disabled people. On top of all the usual issues we have to worry about our access needs, any medical issues we might face and, dare I say, the local attitudes towards disabled people. However, the big question, especially in the current economic situation, is should you stay at home or venture abroad? To help you all make your decision on this tricky question I thought I'd share some of my holiday experiences and how they effect my destination choices.

HOME

If the press is to be believed, a key driving force behind the growth in holidaying at home is the cost. Personally, I have never found this choice to be cheaper, mainly because the budget end of the UK market is not really accessible for those of us with mobility issues. From time to time my wife and I have tried to book cheaper accommodation, only to find on arrival that they were not what we would call accessible. Most recently we arrived at a holiday apartment, which we had been promised was wheelchair accessible, to find that it had a flight of steps to the front door. When we contacted the owner we were told "It's fully accessible once you're inside". Not much help when you're stuck outside in the rain though.

Once you take into account that accessible accommodation tends to be more expensive and that budget flights to foreign climes can be as cheap as the cost of petrol or train tickets to UK destinations, it really does come down to personal choice.

AWAY

Something that has deeply effected my decisions recently is the horror that is flying. From the very first time I flew on a package holiday in my early twenties to my most recent trip abroad, flying has thrown up some nightmares. On my first trip I was dropped after being carried up the stairs to my plane, →



leading to me spending three days in bed in agony. My last trip to Cyprus, over twenty years later, had me experience an equally nightmarish experience. After queuing to get on the plane first I was actually let on last, which meant that the front seats had been taken. Nobody would give up their seat for me, so I had to be carried down to the middle of the plane, injuring myself in the process, yet again leading to a few days of recovery.

However much the airline industry claims to welcome disabled travellers, things have a really long way to go before our experience of flying could be called accessible.

In addition to this, my wheelchair has also been lost and broken in holds, and let's not forget the horror of the security checks at airports. Trying to undress and remove boots and shoes can be really difficult for disabled people. All in all, I have really gone off flying so when it comes to travel, home does seem to win for me.

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation is probably the most

important aspect of your holiday. I have lost count of the number of times I have arrived ready to collapse in my room only to find that I can't get into the room at all or, even worse, the toilet. I won't say that this has happened more in the UK or abroad, but it is easier to explain why the room is no good if everyone speaks the same language. This might make me sound like I am favouring the UK again, but actually I have always found that my issues have been resolved in a much friendlier and more helpful way in other countries. I stayed in an apart-hotel a while back and although it wasn't too bad the bathroom didn't have a shower seat and there was loads of furniture making it difficult to get around. After ringing the front desk, the owner came up and stripped the apartment of all excess furniture and then went out and purchased a shower chair. A trip to Ibiza also saw us upgraded to a beach front apartment when we arrived to a room on the fourth floor of a hotel without a lift, so it's not all horror stories! Many people might say that a package holiday would solve many of these issues, especially now that there are specialist companies that book accessible holidays, but I am not sure my experiences would

prove that belief. It's an issue of communication and more importantly communication breakdown. I feel that contacting everyone yourself is the best way to go. My wife and I now only travel independently, and spend ages before we book our accommodation sending e-mails ensuring everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet.

Does any of this help with the question of whether to holiday at home or away? Well, if I'm honest it probably doesn't but that's because it's an issue that I just don't know the answer to.

However, whatever you choose, the usual mantra of disabled people - "preparation, preparation, preparation" is the only way to ensure a hassle-free break. Always make sure you have travel insurance (and they know about your disability/illness), if you're travelling within the EU get your European Health Insurance Card, pack enough medication to last the entire holiday (and maybe your repeat prescription as proof). I also always take a mini toolkit, a puncture repair kit and a bike pump. Travelling when you are disabled can be hard work, but



Looking moody and windswept on the seafront

whatever issues you may face they are nothing compared to the enjoyment and memories you gain from seeing the world.

Barcelona, Spain

Of all the places I have visited, Barcelona is one of my favourites. Whether you are new to holidaying with a disability or a seasoned disabled traveller who just hasn't been there yet, it is a must see destination.

I discovered it by chance. During a fairly standard package holiday to a soulless seaside town on the Costa Brava, my wife insisted that we took advantage of the fact the local train station was accessible. So off we went on what my wife calls "an adventure", with no destination in mind. We got off the train and found ourselves in the center of Barcelona, in the Placa De Catalunya. We spent the day wandering the city's historic streets and I was blown away at how amazing the access was in, what is at heart, a medieval city. We returned shortly after for a longer holiday and it was love. Finding accommodation is easy, and you can find accessible places to stay for all budgets. Almost all of the buildings are accessible, even if some of the ramps are on the super steep side, and the people are so friendly and helpful. One of the key reasons I love it is the feeling that everyone you meet wants you to be there and that there is nothing they won't do to make sure your visit is not touched by inaccessibility.

Barcelona has something for everyone. For the culture vultures it has it all, world-class galleries, theatre, music, ballet and architecture are mixed with local culture to

ensure you feed your need for the arts. Shopaholics like me will be able to shop until you drop and while my clubbing days are over now, the Catalan club scene is world famous and there are loads of glamorous places to dance the night away. The food is amazing too, much to the cost of my waistline. You can choose to fill your days exploring the city or simply relax on the fully accessible beach.

The main reason I love Barcelona so much is the fact that almost every place we've stayed has been accessible. We have just started staying in apartments, and even these are pretty OK for wheelies like me. The public transport system is fully accessible, although most of the city's delights are within an easy walk/wheel of each other. If I had to describe Barcelona in one sentence it would be "Imagine if London and Brighton were fused together, with all of their history, culture and excitement and then combined with a sleepy Spanish village, with the weather and lovely people - that would be Barcelona".

www.barcelonaturisme.com/English
www.barcelona-tourist-guide.com

Penzance, Cornwall

Like Barcelona, I discovered Penzance by chance. My wife's Mother lives there, and during our first visit to this picturesque seaside town I found the relaxing atmosphere intoxicating. It is a very different holiday experience from Barcelona but is equally enjoyable. The best way to describe a visit to Penzance is escape. Escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life, especially for those of us who live in busy cities.



Mik befriends a giant cat on the Rambla Del Raval

The great thing about Penzance is that although this area that sees most of its seaside towns built on cliffs, Penzance is amazingly accessible. It has a wonderful long sea front parade that runs from Newlyn to Penzance town centre, and then has a lift up to the high street. Sure this street is on a hill, but hey, this is Cornwall and it is a manageable hill. (Try visiting St Ives if you want to see hills!) Many of the local hotels have accessible rooms and most of the shops and amenities are accessible too.

The main reason we visit, other than to see the in-laws, is to unwind. We always stay in the Queens Hotel, on the seafront with a sea view. To wake up every morning and watch the weather roll in over the bay across the Lizard Peninsula is unbeatable. Whether it's sunny, which is more often than usual in the UK, or wild, wet and windy, you never get bored of watching the changing weather and the beautiful sea. To walk along the sea front, whatever the weather, is another of the joys of Penzance. My wife and I still laugh about the time we were watching the waves crash against the sea wall and found ourselves soaked to the skin by a huge swell.

It doesn't offer all the things to do that a destination like Barcelona does, but in a way that's the point. If you are seeking a beautiful, tranquil place to spend a relaxing weekend then Penzance is for you.

www.visitcornwall.com
www.purelypenzance.co.uk/tourism/touristinfo.html

