

# REACHING FURTHER DESTINATIONS

While *Simon Pinnell* confidently drives across Europe to enjoy city breaks and new experiences, his recent holiday to Cyprus saw him take to the sky on his first flight outside the UK following his injury.

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**T**hey say that travel broadens the mind... I certainly agree that you should take every opportunity when you travel to see and do things that you wouldn't ordinarily think about doing at home. This is probably why I found myself being pushed up a ramp of what appeared to be little more than a glorified pallet onto a boat about to set sail on a three-hour cruise along the north Cyprus coast. Those who know me will know that the sea and I go together about as well as Donald Trump and Mexicans! But somehow, my fiancée, Louise, had persuaded me that it would be fun and as it went to parts of the island that were totally inaccessible in our hire car, let alone my wheelchair, it wasn't to be missed.

This was my first 'proper' holiday abroad since my injury and as with everyone's first time, it didn't come without a good deal of planning and double checking of arrangements. We rented a wonderfully accessible villa in the delightful village of Polis, about a 40-minute drive north of Paphos, where we flew in to late one Saturday night in July. We had arrived at Gatwick in plenty of time to ensure we could get checked in safely, that my additional 'medical luggage' (including my freewheel packed in bubble wrap for further protection), was all in order and to negotiate the security checks, etc. We flew with Thomas Cook Airlines who were very helpful and accommodating with pre-booking special assistance. Having checked us and our luggage in, we simply had to let the special assistance desk at the airport know we were there and they told me what time to be at the gate by. We were whisked through security via a priority gate (which the rest of the party thought was great!) and waited for our departure.

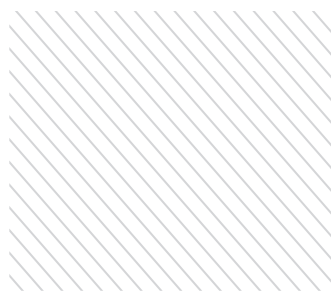
We were boarded first and I simply pushed along the airbridge to the door of the aircraft to

transfer onto the aisle chair. Louise grabbed my cushion and carried it on board for me, just in case there was a problem at the other end. For me, having someone looking out for things like that was a godsend as I was focusing on getting onto the seat, which was proving entertaining as the armrest wouldn't lift up. This meant that I had to be lifted over it – not the most glamorous of manoeuvres but achieved with the minimum of fuss by the assistance team.

A few hours later and we were landing in the dark at Paphos, where the service crew were the epitome of helpful. I was lifted onto another aisle chair and then reunited with my own one. There was no airbridge to the plane here, so we were lowered to the tarmac by ambulift and then transported by bus to the terminal. So efficient was the process that our luggage hadn't even made it to the carousel by then. A quick drive along unknown and undulating roads followed to get to Polis. It was now time to relax!

## EXPLORING PAPHOS

We made the most of having a hire car while we were there to see as much as possible. For someone who drives all the time at home, I had to relearn transferring into the passenger seat, which was entertaining but very worthwhile. It's fair to say that Cyprus is a little behind the UK in terms of accessibility, etc. For all the moans and gripes we sometimes have, it's a bit of an eye-opener to see how much worse it could be! In some places, dropped kerbs are very hit-and-miss. While there were designated accessible parking spaces at the local supermarket, they were barely any wider than a regular space and still open to abuse! But the people we met were incredibly friendly and accommodating and had a 'can do' attitude. I'm not one for being pushed in my chair but as I pushed up the hill through the town on one occasion, a waiter from a restaurant dashed out to give me a shove, despite my own and Louise's protestations. I did have a wry grin when I went to use an accessible loo in one restaurant. It was beautifully appointed with a huge amount of space to get pretty much any size





wheelchair in. The only feature lacking was any grab-rail of any description!

I was grateful for having taken my freewheel and it got well used on one of our cultural days, when we went to the Tomb of the Kings and Paphos Archaeological Park. The latter has a wonderful paved ramp to access it, but the one after the entrance hall up to the site is of Himalayan steepness! Luckily, once at the top, the rest of the park isn't too bad and I was able to get to the main attractions fairly comfortably (if anything can be described as comfortable in temperatures approaching 40 degrees).

Another occasion when I was grateful for slopes and the freewheel was during our visit to the Monastery of Saint Neophytos in the hills above Paphos. Despite having been founded in the 12th century, the modern monks have ensured that even wheelchair visitors can enjoy as much of the place as possible – even if you might need a bit of a push up from the car park.

Having done the old and the very old, it was time for a bit of modernity, which is how I found myself being talked into going on a sunset cruise from Latchi. We had spoken to the crew when we booked the tickets and they explained that they were well used to getting wheelchairs on board, which proved to be the case. While there was no accessible toilet on board, a bit of forward planning meant that this wasn't an

issue and we were soon off to the Blue Lagoon where the boat moored for an hour or so to allow passengers to swim and snorkel in the clear water. I took the opportunity to take plenty of photos and admire the scenery. I'll admit to a bit of 'cruise envy' as one of the boats had a huge barbecue going at the front, which looked delicious. Thankfully, the breeze was in the wrong direction so I couldn't tell how good it smelt! The cruise back to the harbour treated us to a glorious sunset from the back of the boat over the Akamas Peninsular. Even I, the non-sailor, had to admit it was worth it.

All too soon, it was time to think about returning home. A final meal on the harbour-front was followed by a day spent killing time in Paphos before our evening flight home. While we were waiting to be boarded, one of the assistance team proudly told us that we were lucky enough to be using their new ambulift, which only came into service three weeks earlier and had cost €200,000. Apparently, it had super-cool air-conditioning, though it wasn't very evident when we got inside. This time the seat armrest wasn't a problem and I was able to transfer easily into my seat. I closed my eyes and dozed my way home after a wonderful and memorable holiday, which had gone far better than I had dared to hope. Cyprus... we'll be back!

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