

***ABLED TRAVEL

Alexandar Campion thoroughly planned and prepared for his European road-trip, from Dorset in the UK to Athens, Greece. However, he soon learned that some things just can't be planned as his journey home did not go as he had expected.

ALEXANDAR CAMPION – SIA MEMBER

ROAD-TRIP:
UK to
Greece

DISTANCE:
4,208
miles

I have been a T6 paraplegic since 2012. This trip was my first holiday since the big day of being put on wheels. I suppose you might be thinking: "Why wait three years until a holiday?" Well, there's a simple answer – I work a lot! Mainly on things I find interesting which probably would bore others close to tears, so I will leave it at that.

My girlfriend and I drove in a Range Rover which had enough space and could comfortably take the miles. We went via the Euro Tunnel, travelling from France to Belgium, ending up in Bruges, where we stopped for some dinner. There were lots of cobbles but we had a lovely dinner and two of the friendly waiters lifted me (including chair) to the nice raised outdoor seating overlooking the square. Bruges is actually good for disabled parking and we found it readily available.

Fed and watered it was onwards to

Budapest, Hungary. The drive was good and borders were no problem. The service toilets all the way were good and there were no holes in the floor or poor access. However, there is a Euro radar key which I was not aware of; this is usually kept with the cashier and I found if you simply asked they were most helpful. All rest services and rest areas we encountered had disabled parking. Tip: reverse into bays if in a right-hand drive car to allow enough access on the driver's side. We arrived about 14 hours later in Budapest, and stayed in the Corinthia Hotel which I would more than recommend. Budapest is an old city with steps to shops but most have ramps and/or access. Just a simple wave and a smile and you're in.

Disabled parking wasn't really an issue. However, drop curb hunting as a sport could be invented in Budapest. They are about but you have to look for them unless you are happy with curbs or have a helping hand as they are the same size as in the UK. We set off for Athens, Greece, after a good night's sleep and a very nice afternoon tea in the New York Café, which had portable ramps for access (but you need to ask staff to use them).

We began the long 19-hour drive which included having to contend with Serbia and Macedonia – the two worrying parts in my planning! However, other than a grumpy

If there wasn't a way into a shop or restaurant, people were only too happy to help.

border guard in Serbia, all went smoothly; other than the roads, which were bumpy but not much worse than the M25. Again, services were good.

In Macedonia you pay for insurance at the border – a simple process of just presenting a V5C document and paying €50 for a fortnight's insurance. Entering Greece was again smooth and the roads were comfortable and Greece has brilliant services with no key required. There are also standard toilets which are wide enough for use if you don't need a handle, etc.

ATHENS

The accessibility is okay. Curbs are slightly lower than the UK but I believe they are made from granite which makes them slippery. The Greeks are very helpful, extremely hard working and polite. From the shops, to the hotel, to the local attractions, they seemed very happy to help. The Acropolis is accessible via a lift. The Temple of Zeus in Athens and The Temple of Poseidon in Sounion also offer disabled access. However, parking is poor in Sounion and if you are not lucky enough to park at the top of the hill it would be a big push up – even for me! Personally, I would suggest hiring a driver for the day to take you to the best spots at the best times. Maybe we were lucky but our driver





Above: Alexandar and his girlfriend did not come across any accessibility issues when touring around Athens

was a very proud Greek man who loved his city and country. We saw everything we wanted to and more! They have big shopping centres of course, which I found were fully accessible with adaptations in one way or another to make it work for you. If there wasn't a way into a shop or restaurant, people were only too happy to help. I noticed that people didn't stare at me in my chair very much in Greece.

After a wonderful four nights in Athens we left for Lake Garda, Italy. We set off about 13:00 and got 19 miles up the road to the first toll. There are a lot of tolls in Greece. If you have taken a right-hand drive car and don't have a passenger you will need to have either a stick or very long arms! We got through the toll and "Oh dear!" there was white smoke bellowing from the car. We pulled over straight away and turned the engine off. The long and short of it was that the car ended up being shipped home and we had to fly back with Aegean Airlines.

I spoke with the supervisor at the airport check-in, explaining how my chair is vital and that I didn't have a spare at the other end (London Heathrow). They then gave my wheelchair a seat of its own in the cabin and it did not go into the hold. I didn't think this was usual practice so I emailed them once getting home to thank them. I received a reply which stated if you request 48 hours in advance and your chair is foldable with detachable wheels (such as mine), it can go in the cabin. We were also informed that if it did go into the hold the company will insure a wheelchair up to £5,000. If an incident did



occur, alternative arrangements would be made upon landing.

Ultimately, we had a bit of an interesting turn to the end of our trip. However, other than breaking down, lots of people offered help and we got an extra three days in Greece which was good. We are going to make plans to go to Italy in the near future, as we missed it this time round. We had a great time and didn't find any major travel issues hence the title of this article, ****abled travel*. Keep safe, enjoy life and have fun!

TRAVEL CHECKLIST

- 1 Ask for hotel room pictures so you can see how accessible the bathrooms really are. All four hotels I booked were happy to do so.
- 2 Pack everything from pants to a car kettle – we even took teabags!
- 3 Take extra supplies in a medical bag – basically a hospital in a bag
- 4 Call your GP to ask for extra supplies
- 5 Get an International Driving Permit (IDP) from the post office
- 6 Arrange travel insurance
- 7 Photocopy all documents with originals in a separate folder
- 8 Practise packing the car so there are no last-minute issues.

