

# EXPLORING BY LAND AND SEA

Many people like to pack in as much activity as possible when they go on holiday, especially if the weather allows it. **Stephen Brookes** did just that when he flew to New York and then cruised around Bermuda last year.

**I** joined the Royal Navy in 1996 to travel the world and see as many different places as I could. Ending up with an SCI, as many of you can attest to, was not really part of my life plan. I had a motorbike accident in 2008, which resulted in a C5 complete injury. I generally thought my dreams of travelling and adventure were over.

Travelling to any large crowded city can be a daunting prospect for anyone who has never experienced it. Travelling without the use of your limbs and confined to a wheelchair was a scary thought for me. Luckily, I could bring along my wife, Nichola, my two young children, and a couple of carers. I've been slowly building my confidence going on short-haul holidays and cruises and I finally decided to combine them both and book a fly-cruise family trip to the 'Big Apple' and Bermuda.

One of my initial priorities was to reduce the cost. After deciding on what trip I wanted to take, I visited the local travel agent who quoted me an extortionate amount. This was probably due to the wife adding on a few little extras! I cannot stress enough the importance of planning ahead when booking an ambitious family trip, particularly if flights are involved. But I have always had a passion for travelling. In some instances it can be cheaper to book each element of your holiday individually, and rather than talk to a third party you can talk directly to each person involved in your holiday. But it's whether you can find the time yourself to do this. Personally, I'm far too busy so I handed the job over to my wife and she did a pretty good job – but don't tell her I said that!

It is important to know you must have adequate insurance to cover every aspect should you not be able to travel for any reason. General travel insurance (such as bank policies etc.) does not cover you for anything relating to your SCI and you must declare this. The policy price may increase if you have recently had a urinary tract infection. You may also have to take out an additional policy to include any carers that may be travelling with you as they will not be covered.

Flying out of Heathrow airport as a disabled passenger is really quite easy. When you get to check-in there

is a dedicated lane for disabled flyers and those accompanying them.

It's a good idea to contact your airline's special assistance team to let them know that you are flying as a disabled passenger. I needed to pre-book my seat, as I need someone to assist me with food and drink and to help me in the event of an emergency. Normally you also need to pass on any details of your wheelchair's dimensions, weight, battery type etc. Dry cell batteries are fine to remain with the chair, however, lithium-ion has to be removed and taken into the cabin with you. Some airlines will also ask you to transfer into airport wheelchairs at check-in. I would advise against this. Insist that you wish to remain in your own chair until the aircraft is boarding. By doing so you can make sure your wheelchair makes it into the aircraft hold and arrives with you at your destination.

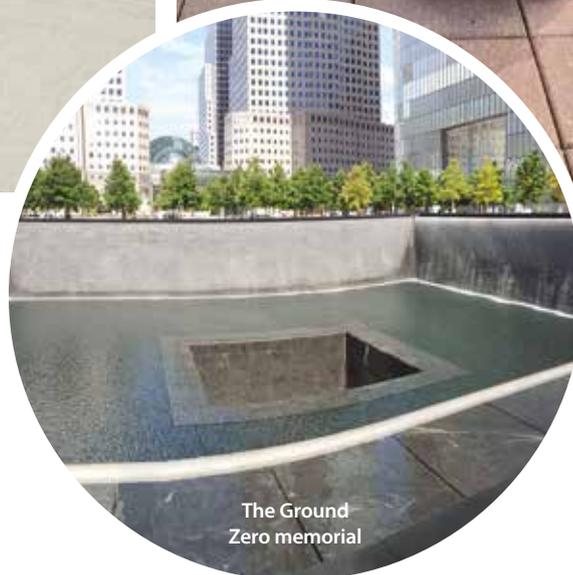
I was one of the first to board the aircraft as passengers with a disability or mobility issues are always first to board the aircraft (and last to disembark). If you are unable to get to your seat unaided or need assistance with transferring, there is always help on hand through the airport's Special Assistance Team and the use of an aisle chair. It is a narrow wheelchair that fits in between the seats and is stored on the aircraft and can be used during the flight if necessary. I'm aware some airports are trialling hoist systems but you should be aware that if you are unable to transfer yourself, a lot of manual handling will be required.

For long-haul flights I use my own pressure-relief cushion. It's important to consume plenty of fluids throughout the flight to stay hydrated. For this reason, I connect a two-litre night bag on the end of my leg bag and place it in a bag under the seat in front, so that it is out of sight.

I did laugh when we arrived in New York. A large number of disabled passengers, along with those who have mobility issues, were suddenly able to stand up and walk off the plane, unaided. The miracle of flight.

New York City was everything I had hoped for and more! It's so big and there was a lot to cram into such a

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The Ground Zero memorial

short space of time. I wanted to do all the touristy things and visit places such as Times Square, the Rockefeller Centre, Ground Zero, the Grand Central Terminal and Central Park. I found access to these places and around the city reasonably good, with only a few dodgy cambers here and there. Accessing wheelchair accessible taxis to travel around the city was easy. If I could not hail one from the street, I would just go into any hotel and the concierge would call one for me. Talking to the driver would get you a tour of the city incorporated in your fare, however, be aware that most of them think they own the road!

When booking hotels do your research; sometimes things get lost in translation. For example, what some people consider an accessible room/bathroom may not meet all of your needs. If you need a roll-in shower in your hotel room, state this in your booking and contact the hotel directly. We found most places were more than happy to send us pictures of the accessible rooms, for peace of mind.

I took with me my own hoist and shower chair and as they are classed as medical equipment, it did not count as part of my luggage allowance. A good hotel can arrange equipment loan with their local mobility equipment centres. However, the condition of the equipment cannot always be guaranteed and it depends on what you're comfortable with.



After a busy three days in the Big Apple, the family was physically exhausted and what we needed was a nice, relaxing cruise.

People tend to think cruising is expensive but there is so much included. Except for drinks, you do not have to pay for food, which is fine dining, the use of the pools, cinemas, coffee shops, live shows, bars, clubs, casinos and most importantly, the kids club!

Getting to relax in the sun with a few cocktails while watching the sun set on the sea, and arriving at a different port in the morning, is quite possibly one of the best feelings in the world. It's one I would definitely recommend.

The disabled access cabins are not the biggest but they come with all the facilities you would expect: wet room, grab rails, roll-in shower etc. But most of your time is spent in other parts of the ship, enjoying the facilities it has to offer. There are such varied passengers on cruise ships and more and more people seem to be taking to it. An increasing number of disabled people are seeing the benefits of having somewhere to stay while the ship takes you to lots of new places.

Of course, this holiday would not have been possible without my care team to help me get on with my day-to-day living. I may not always show it but I am extremely grateful to them.