

Holidays with a Difference!

Holidays for those with a physical or sensory disability have become much more accessible. From travel to accommodation, to different holidays such as a relaxing “stay-cation” in Ireland, a sun holiday in Spain or an adventurous activity breakaway, the possibilities are endless and no longer restricted by a disability! Padraig Hannafin, Public Affairs and Research Administrator with Rehab, writes of his first holiday with an acquired disability and explores the options for accessible holidays.



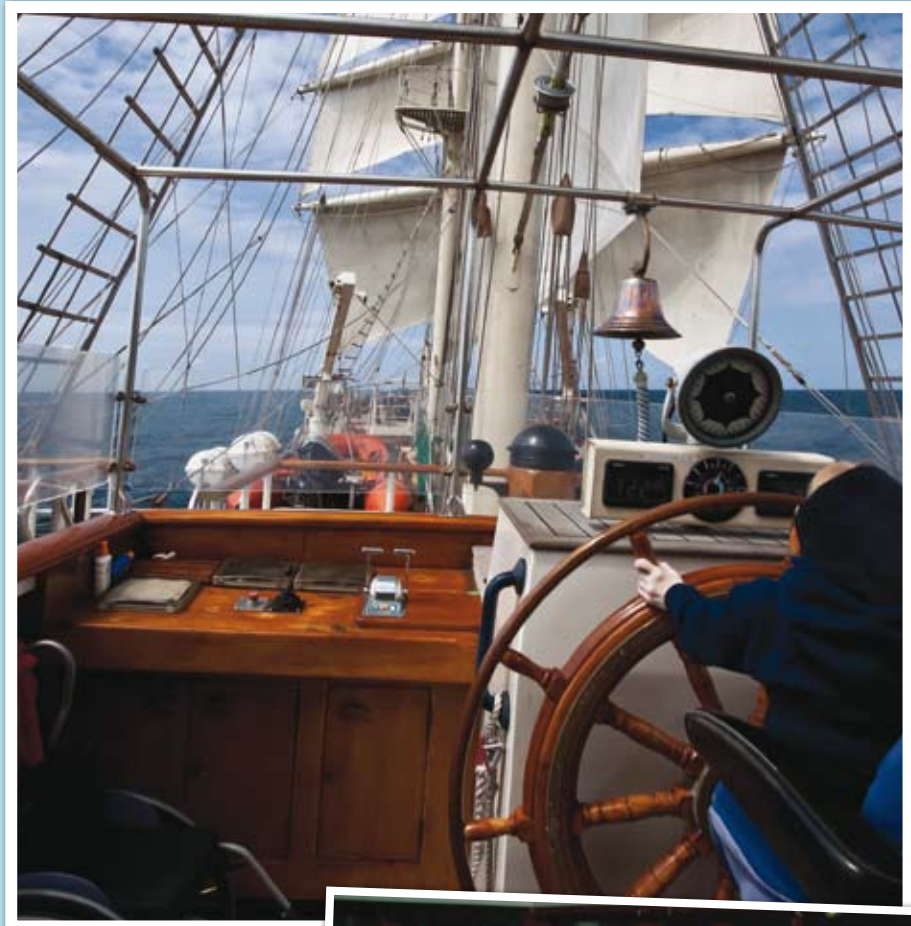
A hoist aboard the Jubilee Sailing Trust boat.

IN THE EARLY days of my disability I almost completely wrote off the idea of “holidays” or “breaks away”. Living with my disability at home seemed daunting enough without even contemplating a holiday away from my support network, whether at home or abroad. I learned over the years, though, that there are opportunities out there.

I know from personal experience that when you are nervous about your first holiday with your disability, there is a great desire to find a destination with as many of the comforts and supports of home as possible. Accessible Ireland has a website that lists accessible accommodation, tourist attractions, restaurants, transport and venues. It can prove to be an invaluable resource for disabled people planning a holiday in Ireland and is particularly relevant as, due to the recession, many people have chosen to holiday at home too.

Cuisle in Roscommon is the Irish Wheelchair Association’s National Holiday Centre and is located within the 50-acre site of Donamon Castle. Cuisle provides accessible and supported holidays and breaks to people with disabilities. Interestingly, the centre also welcomes guests without disabilities, and this helps to clearly define Cuisle as a holiday destination rather than a respite centre. The centre is fully accessible but also has a nursing team available who can provide assistance and support if required, which could make it the perfect stepping stone for someone about to venture on their first holiday who would still like some of the security and support of home.

For some people, getting on a plane means you are really on holidays. One of the most popular holiday destinations for Irish people is sunny Spain. A fine example is the Bungalows Nautilus resort in Lanzarote. It was recently visited by Phil Atkinson, Community Services Manager at RehabCare in Limerick, and RehabCare service users. Phil was full of praise for the resort. “We have



The Jubilee Sailing Trust boat.
Picture by Mike Owens

People who attend RehabCare in Limerick enjoying their holiday at the Bungalows Nautilus Resort in Lanzarote.



been going abroad for 11 years now with those who attend our RehabCare resource centre and this is the first hotel complex we have come across that is very, very disabled friendly.” The resort comprises 70 bungalows, over 30 of which are wheelchair accessible, as well as the reception and restaurant areas. What sets it apart from other resorts of its kind is the thought that has been put into the resort’s development. “The hotel manager explained that they brought architects in to specifically look at things that would make the complex accessible for a range of disabilities. They are also lobbying the local councils to make the area surrounding the hotel accessible also. On the whole it was good.”

Bungalows Nautilus can also put you in touch with companies offering a variety of services and equipment, such as accessible guided tours of the island, personal assistants if you are travelling alone, mobility aids, disability equipment, and accessible and hand-controlled vehicles. Phil explains how the inclusive outlook of the resort is also refreshing. “The other good thing is that it’s not done as a specifically disabled complex. They didn’t want to just have it as a disabled complex but as a complex that everyone can use, especially if there is a mixture of people with a disability and people without a disability within the same groups.”



Padraig Hannafin enjoys the thrill of freefalling during a skydive with Accessible Portugal.

Adventure breaks for disabled people are much more accessible at present and are almost as varied as those available for those who are able-bodied. Accessible Portugal, an organisation of which I've had personal experience, provides accessible holidays for disabled people throughout most of Portugal. The organisation provides assistance in organising your holiday such as accessible transport and activities, which range from outings to the beach to the activities for the more adventurous, such as skydiving and paragliding. I chose the skydiving! I had always wanted to do it and I decided to give it a go. I guess I wouldn't be normal if I wasn't a bit nervous, but once I got there and saw their professionalism, I quickly began to relax.

My skydive was made possible by a jumpsuit designed even for people with the least amount of mobility. I'm paralysed from the chest down with limited use of my arms and no use of my hands. The skydive was from 13,000 feet and took place just outside Lisbon with the aid of an experienced skydiver. Accessible Portugal organised the skydive and brought me to and from the jump site in its accessible van. It was hugely exciting and everything I had hoped for. An incredible and amazingly satisfying day and overall experience! So if you feel like experiencing 30–40 seconds of freefall and speeds of about 190km/hour, do not let your disability hold you back!

Having returned home, I started to explore other activities I could take part in and began to sail occasionally.

Although I have sailed only on a small scale so far, there is the possibility of hitting the high seas! The Jubilee Sailing Trust (JST), for example, is a UK charity that offers disabled people the challenge of sailing tall ships. According to the JST, tall ships lend themselves very well to their mission for two reasons: first, very few people spend their lives on a tall ship these days so every one of our voyage crew is as unfamiliar with the environment as the next person. Second, to get the ship to sail requires good teamwork so the voyage crew learns how to spot people's natural strengths, talk to and encourage each other, and engage with people they may otherwise never have met.

Sarah Davies, JST Marketing Manager, says, "Sailing with JST is all about what you CAN do, not what you can't

do. It's no secret that sailing with us will challenge the perception of your own ability and of those around you, regardless of physical ability." The ships have flat wide decks, raised markers on handrails for the visually impaired, lifts between decks and gangways that are wide enough for a wheelchair. They also have speaking compasses and hearing loops. These are all features to ensure disabled crew members can easily make their way around the ship unaided. The overall aim of the JST is "to build the bridges of awareness and understanding and, by using two fantastic, specially-designed tall ships, break down barriers for a better, more inclusive world". Paul, a crew member on one voyage, certainly felt the benefit of the ship's features and the overall outlook and aim of the JST. "The brochure said 'No passengers', but I never imagined I would be allowed to steer the ship across the Channel in total darkness on day two of my first voyage. I didn't want to leave!" he says.

If you would prefer to keep your feet on the ground rather than on the sea or in the air, then why not try your hand at adaptive skiing. Adaptive skiing allows skiers to participate in alpine skiing by using special equipment despite their disabilities. The equipment used in adaptive skiing enables people with spinal cord injuries, brain injuries, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, visual and hearing impairments, post-polio syndrome and a wide variety of other disabilities to enjoy the sport. There is a range of options available, such as guides for blind skiers, bi-skis (a sit-down ski that lets even those with severe balance impairment experience the thrill of skiing), two-track skis and snowboards (for any skier who stands on two skis but who might need tethers to aid in leg strength), and a three- and four-track (for skiers who can stand on skis but need additional support to remain balanced).

A more sedate and relaxed but still exciting and enthralling holiday may be an accessible Safari trip in South Africa. Epic-Enabled provides the opportunities to experience African wildlife and culture. Despite your disability, you could tour the Kruger National Park and witness the "Big Five", lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo and rhino. All tours are conducted from the organisation's adapted tour truck, which is fitted with a hydraulic lift for easy access for wheelchairs and has a high axle set-up to give passengers extra height for a better view. The accommodation is also accessible and additional aids and equipment are available.

Undoubtedly, despite the changes and advances in accessible holidays, it is still necessary for people with physical disabilities to put extra planning and thought into their trips. However, the advances that have been made have ensured that barriers have been removed to many holidays, including some of the most exotic. So do not think that your disability excludes you from the holiday of your dreams. From the comfort of a break at home in the lap of luxury to a sun holiday in an idyllic resort in Spain, or from a relaxing nature trip through the plains of a National Park in South Africa to an adrenaline-packed adventure on the high seas, through the air, or down the slopes, all possibilities are open to you! The world awaits! ■



Padraig Hannafin about to take his first skydive.

WHO TO CONTACT



Cuisle

www.cuisle.com

Accessible Ireland

www.accessibleireland.com

Accessible Portugal

www.accessibleportugal.com

Jubilee Sailing Trust

www.jst.org.uk

Epic-Enabled

www.epic-enabled.com