



ACCESS ALL AREAS

How accommodating are cruise lines when it comes to catering for passengers with disabilities?

Rebecca Barnes investigates

PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK/MIYAKOYAKOY, MICHA VERBURG/TIM LUN

The beauty of travel is that it gives you the chance to see the world while creating unforgettable memories.

But for anyone with a disability or limited mobility, travelling can be a challenging and stressful process, and the idea of going on a cruise may fill them with trepidation.

Cruising is, however, one of the most inclusive forms of travel, and many ships excel in providing accessible cabins and facilities.

Alison Smith, business development manager for equipment hire service Mobility at Sea, agrees that cruise lines now recognise disabled passengers as an important sector of the market, but points out the lack of suitable accommodation is often an issue.

“As there is only a small percentage of fully accessible cabins per ship offering wet rooms and adequate space, passengers still need to book well in advance. The lack of availability can deter clients with more complex medical conditions – once on board however, they usually enjoy it so much they want to book another.”

SHORE EXCURSIONS

Aside from accommodation, key requirements include an itinerary where the ship always docks if tendering is a concern, and destinations that can provide accessible tours and transport.

“There is definitely room for improvement when it comes to the choice of accessible shore excursions,” says Joanne Byrne of blog Byrne Voyage, who cruises as part of an interabled couple.

“Where an accessible option is provided, we generally find them to be uninspiring and lacklustre. One example is a cruise we did that included two days in Reykjavik.

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There were 32 excursions for able-bodied guests, and only one accessible option.”

While larger ships have the advantage when it comes to space and activities, smaller ships can be good for those looking to explore ashore without too much stress – and with some lines currently operating at reduced capacity it’s also likely to be easier to move around on board.

“At Fred Olsen, we have an expression: it’s all about the people. Making our ships and our sailings inclusive for all is a big part of that,” says Geoff Ridgeon, head of sales at Fred Olsen Cruise Lines.

“We have an inclusive entertainment programme, adapted and wheelchair-accessible cabins and a crew who go above and beyond to make sure every guest has all they need.

“Plus, the smaller size of our ships allows us to dock closer to the places we visit, and in many cases right in the heart of the city, meaning explorations can begin at the end of the gangway.”

MSC Cruises’ accessible tours programme – allowing those with reduced mobility the opportunity to explore destinations without having to worry about restricted access – was suspended as a result of the pandemic, but is set to return in 2022.

Some 20 tours will be tailored for guests with all types of mobility. Routes will be

completely step-free and accessible to wheelchairs wherever possible, only short distances will be covered and timings will run at a slower pace. Accessible restrooms with wide doors are also planned along routes, and guides who are experienced in working with guests with limited mobility will accompany all tours.

ACCESSIBILITY TRAINING

If your client has a disability or mobility issues, make sure you research and ask questions to ensure a successful booking.

“Holidays should be accessible to all, so we are constantly developing new ways to offer experiences to everyone,” says Claire Stirrup, director of sales at Celebrity Cruises. “Our ships are fully accessible and we’ve made our Edge series ships even more inclusive, with accessible tendering from the Magic Carpet platform.

“It is really important that we equip our agents with the information they need to have meaningful conversations with guests, to understand what they are looking for and what is important to them.”

Torey Kings-Hodkin, UK head of sales at Royal Caribbean International, says: “This sector is very important to us and we plan to incorporate more training that includes accessibility on our agent training platform and run a webinar for trade partners, so they can broaden their knowledge on our accessible options.

“We have systems in place to ensure guests with disabilities have a sensational experience but the more information we have in advance, the better. Find out what is really important to them and we can recommend a cruise that will deliver on all levels. Our special services team knows which excursions are accessible and which cruise might, or might not, suit.” ●