



Tui competition winner Josh enjoys a visit to the cockpit on his Tui Airways flight to Cyprus

Barrier-free breaks

Two UK agents with first-hand experience of disability won accessible stays at Tui Blue resorts in Cyprus and Majorca, following a competition in *Travel Weekly*. Here's what they discovered, as told to **Alice Barnes-Brown**



Travelling with a neurodivergent child to Cyprus was easier thanks to sensory rooms and helpful staff at Tui Blue's Atlantica Aeneas Resort, says LUCIE DUMBLETON of Independent Travel Experts, who took son Josh and mum Karen to the resort in Nissi Beach, Ayia Napa, in April

I live in Worthing with my 14-year-old son Josh, but I frequently travel with my mum, Karen, too. Josh has autism with pathological demand avoidance – any demand on him can trigger him to become dysregulated. He also has ADHD, Tourette syndrome and sensory processing disorder, so can present with behaviours that challenge.

After winning the competition, I had the full Tui accessible experience. Before we travelled, they asked a series of questions, like what barriers there were and what Josh struggles with. Tui arranged special assistance at the airport and put us on the first bus to the aircraft, so we could board first – which means my son is not getting stressed while others are boarding. He was even able to go into the cockpit, which was great for him because he absolutely loves planes.

I sell accessible travel for a living because I have lived experience of disability, but it's different when it's

your own holiday. Transfers are something I stress over, because Josh has Tourette's, so he can say quite extreme things. Tui arranged access to its welfare taxis – which I didn't think we'd qualify for, as I thought they were only for people with physical disabilities – rather than being on a coach transfer, which was a huge relief.

THE BIG BLUE

The Tui Blue Atlantica Aeneas Resort is a big hotel, but didn't feel busy. Tui made sure I had the right room – not near an entrance or lift where people come and go, or with external air-conditioning units that make noise.

When we checked in, we could get into the room straight away. We had access to the pool directly from our terrace, which was brilliant for Josh, because he's drawn like a magnet to water, and steps meant he was able to safely get in and out. He often struggles on a sunlounger if there are lots of people next to him, but he could come back to our terrace and wouldn't have anyone but me and his grandma around. When he was in the pool, we could watch him from the terrace, which gave us a bit of a breather.

Tui rep Lucy showed us the sensory room, which can be accessed 24 hours a day by both adults and children, and explained how they meet children's needs. Many of the staff are ex-childcare workers, some ➤



FAR LEFT: Lucie's son Josh enjoys the Sensory Room at Tui Blue's Atlantica Aeneas Resort
CENTRE: Lucie and Josh pictured with Lucie's mother Karen (right) and restaurant staff member Androula
BELOW: Hayley with Tui Airways crew



know Makaton [a communication system] to interact with neurodiverse individuals, and they've done neurodiversity training. They'd thought of everything, from quiet book corners to mood lighting, tactile objects plus a fidget board, mirrors, music and soft seating.

FOODIE FAVOURITES

When planning a trip, I find out what sort of activities are on and ensure there are going to be food options for Josh, such as plain foods or dishes that can be deconstructed. The children's buffet is like heaven for a lot of neurodiverse individuals: chips, nuggets and plain pasta are Josh's safe foods. The snack bar was close to our room, so when he wanted a nugget fix, I could see him walk there, which gave him some independence. It's the most I've ever seen him eat on holiday.

Everything was inclusive, and the staff couldn't do enough for us. In the restaurant, Androula always reserved us a special table, and Spyros greeted everyone with a smile. Josh did the football activity three or four times during our stay, and the trainers were very good with him; the first day was like a one-to-one session. My mum and I said it was one of the easiest holidays we've done with Josh. It was very calm – and it's not always like that for us.

My main advice for agents wanting to sell holidays for neurodiverse clients is to undertake some training – visit the National Autistic Society (autism.org.uk). If you understand more about neurodiverse needs, you'll understand the questions that families might ask you.

“Tui made sure we had a room not near an entrance or busy lift, or with external air-conditioning units that make noise



HAYLEY CUNNINGHAM of IntelTravel in Liverpool has limited mobility, but Tui Blue Sensatori Biomar on Majorca's east coast offered a relaxing escape for her and partner Iain in May

● have fibromyalgia, arthritis and bowel issues. Because these are hidden disabilities, people sometimes question my need for assistance. On a previous trip, a member of staff at the airport asked: “Do you really need support going through?”, even though I'd brought my crutches with me.

When I found out I'd won the competition, I was gobsmacked. We checked in first for our flight from Manchester, and the special-assistance wheelchair was waiting for us, so my partner Iain pushed me through the airport. We were through in 10 minutes.

We got onto the plane and had the extra legroom seats at the front, which was perfect, and were last off, having waited for the lift to get down from the plane.

The minibus transfer to Tui Blue Sensatori Biomar went well. There were two steps up to it, so Iain had to help me, but the bus was comfortable. We arrived late at night, so there was only one staff member at reception; she helped us with our luggage and showed us to the room.

AROUND THE RESORT

I couldn't easily get into the pool in our swim-up suite, as there was only a ladder with two steps going into the water. Iain helped me slide in when I sat at the edge of



ABOVE: Tui Blue Sensori Biomar, Majorca RIGHT: Hayley explores the resort PICTURE: Mateu Bennassar

the pool, but I usually prefer a zero-entry [step-free] pool. Elsewhere in the resort, the kids' pool had roll-in access for wheelchairs and the main pool had chairlifts.

I spoke to a few other guests who used wheelchairs, and they hadn't struggled to get around the resort; there were ramps and lifts everywhere. I don't use my wheelchair all the time, but my room was accessible and had a level-access shower, plus there were wheelchair-friendly toilets and showers in all the public areas.

The only issue wheelchair users had was that the buffet stations were too high for them to reach everything, but the restaurant staff were on hand to help. Every member of hotel staff was amazing – the manager kept coming to bring us things from the buffet. He even brought sparkling wine over to our table.

The food was beautiful in the speciality restaurants. We had three speciality meals for the week, so we went to the Italian one night and the grill for the other two. Iain had a T-bone steak, which was spilling off the side of his plate.

I wanted total rest, so I was happy chilling in the resort, but Iain did go on a bike ride. We also saw some entertainment in the adult-only section, and spent time in the outdoor bar where there was live music. It was gorgeous and so peaceful.

When it came to check-out, the manager let us keep the room until 4pm. As my bowel issues prevent me from eating for 12 hours before heading for the airport, I need to be resting as I'm very weak. Being able to stay in our room was great, but maybe all accessible rooms should allow late check-out – and agents should always ask their clients if they have accessibility needs, because not everyone will tell you. **TV**

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'HOLIDAYS FOR EVERYONE'



Tui's Holidays for Everyone competition, which ran in conjunction with *Travel Weekly*, gave agents the chance to win one of two seven-night holidays with the support of Tui's accessibility team. Entrants had to submit a short description of their ideal accessible holiday and a suggestion of how to improve accessibility in travel.

Jill Cunningham (pictured), director of retail, omnichannel and third-party sales, said: "Accessibility is a key focus for Tui and this initiative with independent agents has reinforced just how important clear, practical information is in helping customers travel with confidence. Entries highlighted the challenges faced by those with additional needs, from managing anxiety ahead of travel to ensuring accessibility information is detailed, visible and easy to understand.

"Tui has seen accessible holiday bookings grow by 56% since 2022, with demand now more than double pre-pandemic levels. In response, we have introduced Detailed Access Guides across hundreds of the most popular hotels, alongside dedicated assisted travel support teams and enhanced training.

"It's vital agents have the right information so they can recommend the right holidays. We're not perfect, but are committed to listening, learning and making meaningful changes so that Tui holidays are accessible to everyone."