

CATALONIA

Coping with Barcelona from a wheelchair

Craig Grimes talks about his company Accessible Barcelona, which caters for the disabled

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Visiting Barcelona in a wheelchair should be a little less daunting now as the visitor can get complete information on accessibility in the city by logging onto the web page www.accessiblebarcelona.com.

The web page was created in 2003 by Craig Grimes, a 29-year-old Briton who has lived in the Gràcia district of Barcelona for four years. Craig is himself disabled after an accident in his home town of Leeds in 1997. However, this hasn't prevented him from indulging in one his passions: travelling. In 2002, after settling in Barcelona, he took a trip around Europe, visiting Paris, Prague and Berlin, among other places. One thing he realised then was that

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the most frequently used guide-books, such as Lonely Planet or the Rough Guide, had no information at all for disabled people. The consequence was that Craig would travel around Berlin, for example, for half an hour to get to a museum, only to be confronted by an entrance with a staircase and no ramp. He says that Berlin was a turning point for him and he decided to offer disabled visitors to his own city, Barcelona, information on places accessible to them.

His web page started as an information site only but it quickly developed into a small business that offers a variety of services to the disabled. The page is written in English, Catalan and Spanish and it receives visits from people from all over Europe.

“The web page provides informa-

tion about everything a disabled visitor to Barcelona needs,” says Craig. “The three main sections are: getting around the city, hotels, and things to do, like sightseeing, restaurants and bars.” Each section has detailed information on accessibility for wheelchair users. In addition, visitors can book a hotel room through the web page and can arrange for accessible transport to pick them up at the airport and take them to the hotel. Furthermore, visitors can hire the services of a tour guide specialised in disabled people.

Accessible Barcelona is a pioneer company in Europe. “In the UK there are travel agencies that organise trips for the disabled, usually beach holidays” says Craig. “But the problem with them is that they're package tours and besides, they charge a high commission, about 30 per cent on top of the cost of the trip. Our idea at Accessible Barcelona is for visitors to be independent and to be able to organise their own trip. Besides, we don't charge a commission.”

Currently, the company has about five clients a month and most of them come from Ireland and Holland, as well as the UK, Scandinavia and Germany. “And this month we've had a client from Pamplona, the first one from Spain,” Craig says. In addition, the Barcelona web page is developing a sister page with sport offers for the disabled. “We already offer information on skiing and want to provide facilities for people interested in mountain-biking and paragliding. We want to offer sports that are not usually practised by the disabled in Spain.”

Since Craig knows wheelchair accessibility in Barcelona inside out, I asked him how he rates the city “Barcelona is pretty good for the disabled, compared to other cities in Europe. Yet sometimes you also



Askier in La Molina, with equipment provided by the Johann Cruyff Foundation.

come across unexpected obstacles here. For example, you might want to cross the street and there's a drop kerb on the pavement where you are, but when you get to the pavement across the street, there isn't one on that side. On the other hand, you can require the council to install drop kerbs in the area where you live and they do it.” Another frequent problem is that many bars and restaurants, while providing no obstacles for access, don't have toilets for the disabled. As regards public transport, the metro is still a nightmare for wheelchair users as several stations lack facilities.

Barcelona council, though, is proud of its policy on disability. In 1995 it drew up a very ambitious plan, called Accessibility Plan 1995-2006, which was meant to remove all possible obstacles in the streets, make public transport available to the disabled and oblige public places to put in ramps and adapted toilets.

According to the council, a wheelchair user can now move around 70 per cent of the city without problems but it also admits that about 5,600 new drop kerbs are still needed and they will be installed by the end of 2006. Currently, 84.5 per



Craig Grimes showing one of the services at a hotel catering for the disabled.

cent of the buses have ramps and the plan is to reach 100 per cent of the bus fleet. A novelty is that the council intends to extend the regulation for obstacle-free access to public places less than 100 square metres in size since currently this regulation only applies to spaces larger than 100 square metres.

Another example of the increasing social awareness of disability is the recently-published book by Montse Serrano and Isabel de Villalonga *Barcelona en silla de ruedas (una guía accesible de la ciudad)*, a guide for the disabled with practical tips and services specialising in those with disabilities.



A Barcelona taxi adapted for disabled passengers.