

access & allies

**Rolling Gonzo In Europe With C6
Quadriplegia – and Killing It** *by Murray Siple*





Thanksgiving night, 1996.

I met friends at a pub and ended up a passenger in their sports car. In a fast kilometre we reached a 100km/hr. That's when I found out my mates had been partying all day. We hit a barrier and the car launched 40 feet into the air, landing roof first. Hello, quadriplegia.

You might think it was an insane decision—to get in a car in that situation. But in the six years leading up to that night, I'd been travelling the world, snowboarding and skateboarding with professional extreme athletes. I had been in many more insane situations than getting into that car.

In rehab at GF Strong, I was thrown into a new world. I had plummeted from extreme sports to spending my days trying to roll over on a mat while hearing about bowel and bladder issues. Thankfully, one day there was a travel talk for people with SCI held by wheelchair rugby legend Duncan Campbell, who had wheeled as a C6, without assistance, from Amsterdam to Paris. So, if I learned to pull my pants up myself, could I eventually graduate to travelling again? Absolutely. Thank you, Duncan. You inspired and launched me back out into the actual real world.

If you travel and use a wheelchair, don't forget to pack a sense of humour. It'll get you up, down, over, and across barriers that have kept you meandering the same path for too long. Plus, when wheelchair travel goes feco-ventilatory on a trip—and it will, BTW—that sense of humour might be the best wingman you've ever had. I learned this quickly

during my first adventures in Europe as a wheelchair user. I've been around the world since, but those first few travels in Europe taught me a sack of tricks that inspired me to never give up. They gave me the confidence to be bold in my ventures, not to mention a suitcase full of stories—and isn't that the point?

London: Old...and accessible.

My first trip to London as a wheelchair user was solo. I landed at Heathrow Airport, which had flooded from a rainstorm. Long after my fellow passengers had disembarked, I sat alone for an hour, waiting for assistance because the gate staff were dealing with rising water in the terminal. As the cleaning staff began vacuuming around me, a sympathetic pilot dodged them and handed me a whisky (flight staff are unable to assist you off the aircraft; only ground crew can).

Once off the airplane, it became apparent to me that London is surprisingly accessible. All the city's iconic black cabs can accommodate a manual wheelchair. Although you're not strapped down, you'll be preoccupied with London's fascinating street scenes flashing by. I gawked at mobs of people of all ethnicities, and at historical locations made

famous by album covers and movies—who needs tie-downs? There are other options for wheelchair transportation (for starters, wheelchair taxis and buses) but I found hailing a black cab the most convenient and best use of my short time in the big city.

I visited St. Paul's Cathedral (1400 years old), and it had an elevator. Rooftop restaurants all had elevators and incredible views. Both banks of the Thames had massive wheelchair-accessible paths. The art galleries and museums are not only free, but also entirely accessible. But don't always take accessibility for granted in an old city like London. One rainy night, I had to rely on friends in dress shoes to carry me up four stories of glass stairs to a party, then back down.

I stayed at the Ace Hotel London Shoreditch. Most Ace Hotels are retrofitted historic buildings, and have accessible rooms with a small living space, micro kitchen, a music system, street art, and vintage industrial furniture. They also have bars frequented by local artists, writers, and musicians—a great place to find out what's happening. A dishevelled man with a ball cap pulled tightly down over his eyes took a seat at my table. Turns out he was the Ace Hotel





co-founder, Alex Calderwood. Stressed from the explosion of success of his hotel chain, he found solace in disguising himself. I bought us a round of pints and complimented him on the hotel designs, fun vibes, and accessibility.

Two weeks later, I learned Alex had passed away.

Paris: Not So Much

I arrived in Paris on the wheelchair accessible Eurostar train, which rockets from city to city via the Channel Tunnel in less than two hours. I stayed in Montmartre, hoping to see neighbourhoods where Picasso, Van Gogh, and Matisse once lived and worked. Unfortunately, I arrived with the flu and spent the first few days in my room recovering. Hotel rooms in Paris are usually extremely small. Mine had just enough room to just wheel into—I had to back into the bathroom’s roll-in shower just to turn around in order to leave the room.

Once I was mobile, a friend invited me out for *Nuit Blanche*, the dusk ‘til dawn art festival that holds the entire city in its thrall. We first had to travel by non-accessible taxi (no wheelchair van taxis in Paris at that time) to the outskirts of town to meet his friends, and the plan was to walk and roll through the art displays all night. My friend and his comrades loaded up on magic mushroom tea and wine as we discussed the art we anticipated experiencing. I was okay with them on mushrooms, but I personally avoid hallucinogenic drugs because my muscle spasms turn me into Elvis.

Getting underway, we began to encounter the many bridges or “passerelles,” over the canals. Most had stairs that I had to be carried up by new friends



with slowly-melting brains. Adventure is everywhere, I guess; I made it without being dropped or tipped into a canal. But by the time we reached downtown, *Nuit Blanche* was over.

The next day, I wheeled alone along the Seine, past Notre Dame and to the Eiffel Tower. The tower’s elevator, of course, was under repair.

Paris sidewalks are too narrow for wheelchairs, so I fought my way through the middle of side streets where dog excrement is a constant reality. I asked numerous people for a little help, and “Why are you here?” was a typical response. Paris is many things, but it’s not London, especially for those using a wheelchair. After a few photos, I left, hoping to find better accessibility and friendlier faces in Barcelona.

Barcelona: Mediterranean Magic

Some of my optimism faded as I contemplated the grim reality of the non-accessible night train from Paris to Barcelona. I was carried grudgingly by staff to a car devoid of other passengers. But my peace and quiet soon disappeared as the train stopped to gather late-night commuters: a drunk mad at his wife for cheating; a woman in a torn gown who frequented the bathroom often and crawled out (heroin?); a small group of excited Japanese teens. I put a blanket over my head and managed to doze.

I woke up in Barcelona, where no staff were willing to carry me off. I hollered at

a few tourists for help, and fortunately, a few came to my aid. I had made it to Spain, and although physically burnt out from train travel, I was stoked to explore everything that glistened in the bright morning sunshine. Beckoning me were beaches, long seawalls, architecture, art, culture, and culinary adventures—all in one concentrated area of a city that quickly became my favourite.

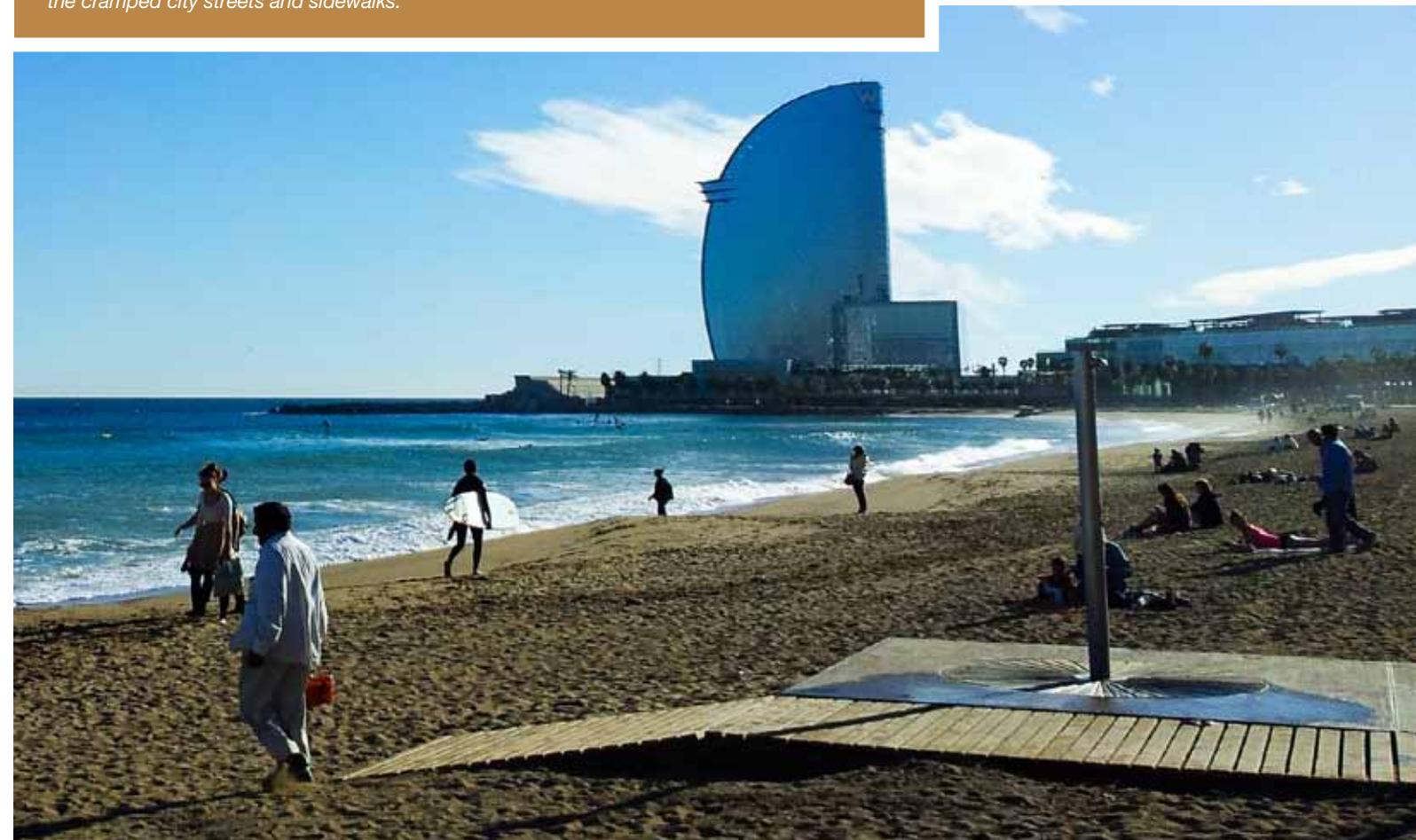
I discovered that navigating Barcelona in a wheelchair is relatively easy. For example, the curb cuts are designed so that when you roll down one, it gives you enough momentum to cross the street and roll up the other—genius. Even the beaches are highly accessible with ramps, hard paths, and change rooms with beds.

By the first evening, I had met a local artist who guided me to the Plaça Sant Felip Neri where young people were drinking wine, writing poetry, and playing guitar. At that moment, under the starlit Mediterranean sky, all my efforts to get to Spain were justified. I’ll concede, however, that the night suddenly became darker when my guide pointed out bullet holes on the walls and doors of the church, left as reminders of Franco’s atrocities less than 80 years ago during the Spanish Civil War. My guide’s words, “That’s where they killed children,” will haunt me forever.

Barcelona has wheelchair taxis, one of which I hired to get up the dauntingly steep hill to Park Guell, home to some



ABOVE: Barcelona's incredible Sagrada Família, scheduled to be completed by 2025—more than 140 years since construction started. RIGHT: I found exceptional accessibility at the amazing monastery of Santa María de Montserrat, outside of Barcelona. BELOW: Barcelona's beautiful beaches offer exceptional accessibility. That's the famous Hotel W Barcelona towering in the background. FACING PAGE, LEFT: Sharing pints with new friends in a typical London pub. FACING PAGE, RIGHT: Paris' iconic landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower, are difficult to reach via wheelchair on the cramped city streets and sidewalks.



of the most significant works of sculptor Antoni Gaudí. My plan to explore the park failed when, barely 100 meters in, I realized the trails were either gravel, dirt, or hot asphalt. I had no water, it was 38 degrees, and the friend I was to connect with bailed on me. I had no choice but to call the police. What else does a person with quadriplegia in this predicament do? When the Guardia arrived, they took me through the park and down the trail like angry tour guides, and hailed me a cab.

Initially, I wanted to find a rental apartment in Barcelona. This turned out to be a challenge—in Spain, it's common to have three steps up to the elevator. After days of blowing my budget on hotels, I started to give up hope for staying longer. That's when I stumbled upon Pere Pueyo's ground-floor rental apartment.

Pere, like me, is a filmmaker. Travel luck! His eco-friendly studio had a roll-in shower, and a courtyard lined with banana trees. The entry had one step; I rented it anyway. After a day of exploring, I came home to find Pere had designed,

built and installed a shining aluminum ramp I could deploy as needed.

From my base at Pere's now fully-accessible apartment, I wallowed in the sights, sounds, tastes and smells of Barcelona for days. Throughout it all, I marvelled at how the city and its citizens design so incredibly well, then commit to the finishing of projects. Gaudí died 100 years ago, yet work continues on his visionary Sagrada Familia—a cathedral that enralls believers and non-believers alike.



This past winter, I traded in air travel for long-distance driving, and ended up in a small village near Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. But I'll always cherish my rough European adventures, experienced in the first years after my injury—even when they didn't unfold perfectly (think Paris). The exoticness of the Old World destinations was one reason, but I think these journeys also restored my confidence as a traveller—something that had waned in the dark days following my injury.

Travelling as a wheelchair user should not leave you on a beach where you can't roll anywhere, at a pool you can't dive into, or on a tour bus removed from the local vibe. Life is short; if someone is vacuuming around you while you sit and do nothing, or you can't find anything new on Instagram, at least be in a foreign country with a drink in your hand. ■

Murray Siple is a 48-year-old filmmaker who studied at the Emily Carr University of Art And Design. When he's not rolling gonzo in an exotic destination, he lives in North Vancouver, where he's painting, editing experimental films, designing sculptures, putting the finishing renovation touches on his fully-accessible 50s-era rancher, and researching new adventures to locales where he's not supposed to go.

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