

HITTING THE TOWN

Are the locales and venues that play host to Britain's nightlife doing all they can to welcome disabled patrons? **Annie Makoff** finds out...

The party season may be over, but there will always be after-work socials or nights out being arranged by those who prefer evenings out to staying in. Yet while the majority of Brits think nothing of spontaneously embarking on a night on the tiles, just how easy is it for the average disabled person?

Is it possible to embark on a pub crawl as a wheelchair user without having to worry about disabled facilities? Can you just turn up at your nearest cinema and assume your requirements will be catered for?

Patchy provision

The short answer is 'no'. *Quelle surprise*, you might think – but considering that public services in Britain have been duty bound since at least 1995 to make reasonable adjustments to their

premises, and that Britain successfully hosted the 2012 Paralympics, the patchy provision available for disabled people is pretty shocking.

A quick vox pop via Twitter, in which **access** asked disabled people about their experiences of arranging a night out, produced the following responses:

"I never go out, it's just too hard,"

@redliz said. @EnabledSports tweeted, "I hate it when some places have only made part of their venue accessible," adding, "And I hate that I can't go on a train unless it's early in the evening because there is no one there to get the ramp."

@thelrm felt that there was also an issue with staff attitudes. On one occasion, a member of security staff laughed at her for asking to use the lift, while another venue refused her entry because they thought she was drunk. "There is a big issue with security staff not



understanding neurological issues and always assuming a wobbly walk or falling over means intoxication," she tweeted.

Overall, the consensus seemed to be that disability provision within venues, be they restaurants, bars or nightclubs, still has a long way to go. But it's not just the actual venues that pose a challenge – it's often also the means of getting to them. As @Poutingpou tweeted, "What

hope have you got when a city like Birmingham has unsafe street fixtures and fittings?"

The 'listed building' excuse

London-based Lisa Jonas agrees. She describes London as a 'nightmare' to get around for wheelchair users because of the state of the pavements and lack of drop-down kerbs. On several occasions while

heading home from a night out, Lisa has had to stop (sometimes drunk) strangers in the street to help lift her down from a kerb.

For people like Lisa, going out sometimes feels like more trouble than it's worth. Lisa's work in the creative industry means that many of her colleagues and clients like meeting for drinks around Soho in the sort of buildings which, she says, are completely inaccessible because of their listed status.

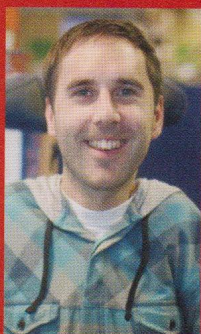
"There are so many venues that hide behind the 'listed building' excuse," she explains. "They say they can't change anything and it drives me mad. Being unable to attend the majority of work events definitely puts me at a disadvantage. I usually just find it easier to tell people to go ahead without me, rather than asking people to change their plans. I don't want to inconvenience people."

"Going out sometimes feels like more trouble than it's worth"

Of course, it's not just listed buildings which tend to be inaccessible. Paul Robinson from Dudley, West Midlands often finds that relatively new buildings are also lacking in disability provision. "Things have got better with legislation," he says, "but it still astonishes me that a lot of places still haven't made any effort at all, even new builds."

Planning ahead

Though some venues do implement some sort of disability provision, they often fail to look at the entire picture. An Italian restaurant Paul visited recently had a disabled toilet, but there was little room to manoeuvre his wheelchair in the rest of the venue because the tables and chairs



"Don't leave anything to chance"

Wheelchair user Martyn Sibley, co-founder of the online disability publication Disability Horizons, travels frequently across the UK and abroad. Here, he shares his top tips for enjoying a great night out.

Plan something you enjoy

All too often, disabled people let a venue's accessibility dictate where they go. Decide

on what you'd like to do and check accessibility in light of that.

Do your research

Check out the venue's accessibility policy via their website or ring up and speak to someone directly. Check transport links and visit the venue during the day to see how easy (or not) it is to get there.

Fine-tune the night

Don't leave anything to chance. Arrange your transport, check and double-check the route and ensure your mobile is fully charged, just in case you run into problems.

Have an alternative planned

If the worst comes to the worst and the venue isn't as accessible as you thought, having a plan B up your sleeve may just save the day or night.



were so close together. Similarly, Lisa found that the disabled toilet in one restaurant she visited could only be accessed via the kitchens, and another venue using its disabled toilet for extra storage space.

Pubs too, have their problems. "There are virtually no pubs with low-level counters, so I tend to get overlooked by staff," Paul explains. "The staff are looking at the next customer at their eye level, so if you are out of their line of vision you won't be noticed."

Yet for all the difficulties that the majority of venues create, it is possible to enjoy a night out, providing you plan and research beforehand. Paul advises going to the venue during the day to check out its location and proximity to bus stops and taxi ranks, while Lisa suggests telephoning the venue to ask specific questions about its provision. "It's no good just asking if they have any steps," she says. "Staff might forget the odd one. So ask, are there any steps up to the entrance? Are there any steps up to the bar?"

There are also organisations like DisabledGo, a provider of access information to UK venues and products, and Attitude is Everything, which works closely with music venues to improve access to gigs, concerts and festivals.

As the CEO of DisabledGo, Chris Spratling, explains, "We provide access information for over 120,000 venues across the UK, including pubs, bars, nightclubs and cinemas. You can even filter your results on the basis of your particular access requirements. By doing a bit of research in advance you can potentially avoid an evening out which doesn't live up to your expectations."

Useful Contacts

DISABLEDGO

An information resource that provides access details regarding more than 120,000 places of interest across the country

0845 270 4627 www.disabledgo.com

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

A charity that campaigns to make live music venues more accessible

020 7383 7979 www.attitudeiseverything.org.uk

BLUE BADGE STYLE

An online guide to accessible venues with an emphasis on the upmarket and fashionable end of the scale

020 8568 7353
www.bluebadgestyle.com

Access all areas

There are some great accessible venues out there, but finding them is another matter. Here are some suggestions you might want to check out...

IF YOU'RE IN....

London

The Eclectic Cinema and Brasserie, Portobello Road

Get more than you bargained for at this West London cinema, thanks to a choice of sofas, armchairs, cashmere blankets and even double beds in which to enjoy the film. You can order drinks and food once you're settled, put your feet up on the footstools provided and then just relax. The on-site brasserie does exceptional food, too. There are disabled facilities throughout the venue, and a ramp can be arranged for access to the building itself.

Contact: 020 7908 9696
www.electrccinema.co.uk

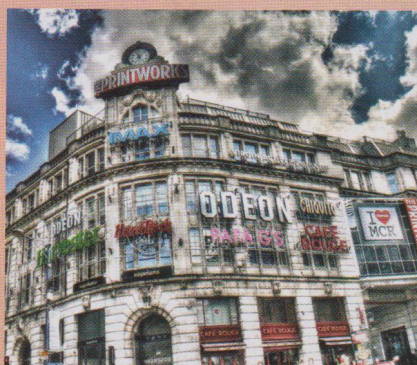


Manchester

The Printworks, Withy Grove

Containing restaurants, bars, club, gym and cinema – all of which are accessible to wheelchair users – this entertainment complex serves a diverse crowd. Its director, Fred Booth, also sits on the board of the charity Disabled Living. Well-trained security staff can be found throughout the premises, ready to provide advice and assistance to any disabled customers.

Contact: 0161 834 2414
www.theprintworks.com



Nottingham

Capital FM Arena, Lace Market

Working closely with Attitude is Everything – and the only venue outside London to be awarded the Gold level of said organisation's Charter of Best Practice – the Capital FM Arena is a fully-accessible arts and music venue with lifts to all floors, hearing loops and low level counters at all onsite food and drink outlets.

Contact: Stephen Chaston, Accessibility Officer (accessibility.officer@national-ice-centre.com)
www.capitalfmarena.com



Colchester

Colchester Arts Centre, Church St

This fully accessible arts centre doubles as a live music venue and comedy club, having previously hosted the likes of Eddie Izzard, Bill Bailey and The Strokes. The venue features hearing loops, low-level serving counters and ample seating, and programmes autism-friendly performances on a regular basis.

Contact: 01206 500 900
www.colchesterartscentre.com

