

Have wheels, will travel – including up mountains!

TRAILBLAZER

As part of our 1,000 miles series, *Debbie North* reveals how she overcame a nightmarish six years to help make our best country walks accessible to all

In 2008, my life changed forever. At 47 I was diagnosed with spinal degeneration. Quicker than I could have imagined, I was a wheelchair user.

My husband Andy and I had always been keen hillwalkers and spent most weekends walking in the Yorkshire Dales and the Lake District. But with my diagnosis, our passion for hillwalking seemed to have come to an abrupt end, and it hit me hard. Andy stopped walking too, saying he couldn't go without his "walking partner".

Devastated, but not defeated, I began exploring other options and stumbled across all-terrain wheelchairs. By sheer luck, I saw a local news report and made an appointment to test drive the TerrainHopper – a 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair. It was amazing. It climbed up the side of a hill with ease and went through deep mud and dry sand. I fell in love.

But shortly afterwards, when a session of didgeridoo sound therapy went awry and my spine finally gave up the ghost, I was admitted to hospital. I survived an eight-hour operation and a three-month hospital stay only to be involved in a car accident just six weeks later. To complete the adage about things coming in threes, I then contracted severe pneumonia.

Two patients passed away while I was back in hospital and a third was yelled at by a nurse with the instruction: "Put your oxygen mask back on! You've already died once today."

I thought I was next, but knew I had to keep focused and positive.

I wondered if it was possible to complete Wainwright's Coast to Coast (C2C) long distance trail using the TerrainHopper. Andy and I had already walked the C2C twice – once in 1999 and again in 2003.

It was at the end of the second walk that Andy proposed to me while standing in the North Sea at Robin Hood's Bay, so understandably the C2C has a special place in our hearts.

I sent Andy a card from hospital asking if we could walk it again when I got out. He said "yes" but it seemed conciliatory. Things just seemed a bit grim, but slowly, I did get better.

The TerrainHopper even went through deep mud and dry sand. I fell in love

Andy planned how I could do the walk in the wheelchair. I sent a cheeky email to Julia Bradbury asking for her help with my crazy idea and was shocked to receive a call from her sister, Gina. With their support, Andy and I completed the C2C in 2015. It was a truly amazing adventure.

We had to adapt the route, picking our way using bridleways and quiet country roads. It was certainly challenging, especially coming through the Lake District, but as we reached Robin Hood's Bay, we were greeted by our loved ones, who had come to cheer us on.

Once back down to earth following our trek, I joined Julia, who was filming her TV series *Best Walks with a View* on part of her climb to the summit of Pen-y-ghent (694m). After the filming, Gina offered me my own section on The Outdoor Guide, a free-to-access online resource for walks around the UK and I look after AccessTOG – where Julia walks, I wheel.

Since then, I haven't looked back. Usually, I travel all over the UK, filming stile-free walks – and I love it. I am passionate about creating a countryside for all and I am thrilled to be in a position where I can reach the people who make the decisions and make real changes.

Slowly but surely, things are changing as the inaccessible is made accessible for everyone. As lockdown is starting to ease, I am planning my return to the hills and mountains with Andy – my walking partner, husband and best friend.

With some travel now permitted for exercise purposes, and a further lifting of restrictions on the way, here are my 10 favourite stile-free walks with top tips on where to stay – for when we finally can.

THE BEST ACCESSIBLE WALKS

GREAT SHUNNER FELL, YORKSHIRE DALES

DISTANCE 9 miles; **MAP OS** OL30
ROUTE Great Shunner Fell stands at 680m, making it the third highest mountain in the Dales. This route follows part of the Pennine Way, along the bridleway to the summit. The walk guarantees stunning views over Wensleydale, Cotterdale and beyond. It is a challenging climb and requires a sturdy 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair.
WHERE TO STAY Cottage in the Dales (cottageinthedales.co.uk) offers luxury self-catering holiday cottages in the national park, including an adapted cottage for people with disabilities.

THE HIGH PEAK TRAIL, PEAK DISTRICT

DISTANCE 5 miles; **MAP OS** OL24
ROUTE The High Peak Trail is a fully accessible, wheel-friendly route along the old High Peak Railway line in the Peak District National Park. Our walk begins from Hoe Grange Farm and follows a concessionary path across the

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What obstacles do you face when out exploring new areas for accessible walks?

Generally, it's the man-made obstacles that pose the biggest problem, such as locked gates and stiles and wide drainage channels. Technology is out there for people with disabilities to access the countryside and we really need to campaign for better provision of resources, rather than thinking about tarmac paths and sterilisation of countryside.

What next?
I want to climb some more Munros in Scotland and complete some more Wainwrights in the Lake District. I also want to explore some of the Welsh mountains – here's hoping I can visit our neighbours again safely soon.

Where do I find places to rent an all-terrain wheelchair?
There are many places in the UK that hire out all-terrain wheelchairs and scooters. Many National Trust properties have scooters available, but there are additional challenges to be faced now, so do check before travelling.

Is it safe to explore the UK countryside in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak?
Staying safe is the most important factor. However, if possible, it is still important to get outside and enjoy some fresh air. Follow Government advice, avoid unnecessary travel by enjoying walks close to home and only book accommodation for later in the year that is flexible. Always check the cancellation/refund policy.

land of owners David and Felicity, who are usually very happy for you to park at Hoe Grange and use their disabled-friendly facilities before and after your walk. An all-terrain wheelchair is normally available for hire at Hoe Grange, but it's worth double-checking availability and accessibility.
WHERE TO STAY Hoe Grange Holidays (hoeग्रangeholidays.co.uk) offers four accessible self-catering log cabins set on a working farm with stunning views over the Peak District.

NORFOLK COASTAL PATH

DISTANCE 7 miles; **MAP OS** 250
ROUTE This joyful walk follows the coastal path, meandering along the tops of sand dunes at the edge of the sea. This section of the 84-mile Norfolk Coastal Path from Thornham to Old Hunstanton is completely barrier free.
WHERE TO STAY Church Farm Barns (church-farm-barns.co.uk) is a family-run business in the quiet hamlet of Bircham Newton, Norfolk. It has eight converted cottages that have been adapted for people with disabilities and their families.

DURLSTON COUNTRY PARK, DORSET

DISTANCE 3 miles; **MAP OS** OL15
ROUTE Durlston Country Park can be found in the south-east corner of the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset, a mile south of Swanage. The coastal path is steep in places and the ground is rough and uneven, making this walk unsuitable for a manual wheelchair. The visitor centre, when open, has mobility scooters available to hire so do check in with them if planning a trip this year.
WHERE TO STAY Hill Lodge (endeavour-uk.co.uk) in Poole is owned and run by a tetraplegic and full-time wheelchair user. It's a tastefully converted annexe offering accessible self-catering accommodation for up to six people.

CAIRN GORM MOUNTAIN, SCOTLAND

DISTANCE 5 miles; **MAP OS** OL57
ROUTE At 1,245 metres, Cairn Gorm is the sixth-highest mountain in the United Kingdom. Our walk starts from the Cairngorm car park where there is a good track that is used by the rangers. From the disused Ptarmigan restaurant, the path becomes rugged and there is a boulder field to negotiate to the summit. But the views are worth the effort. A robust 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair is required for this walk.
WHERE TO STAY Uvie Farm (myhighlandcroft.co.uk) in Newtonmore provides accommodation in the heart of the Scottish Highlands surrounded by Highland cattle.

STAFFIN BAY, ISLE OF SKYE

DISTANCE 4 miles; **MAP OS** 408
ROUTE The views from this coastal road are stunning and seals and even whales can sometimes be spotted in the bay. There is a slipway down to the beach and if you have a sturdy 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair, you can get down to see the fossilised dinosaur footprints that are visible at low tide.
WHERE TO STAY Skye Camping and Caravanning Club Site (campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk) affords an idyllic location right on the loch shore where campers enjoy views over the water to the hills beyond.



BEAUTY SPOT Aberporth village in Ceredigion, Wales, seen from its coastal path



ON THE WAY UP
Debbie on the High Peak Trail; the Norfolk coast, below

ALAMY, GETTY IMAGES

ROATH PARK AND LAKE, CARDIFF

DISTANCE 3 miles; **MAP OS** 151
ROUTE Set in the heart of Cardiff with miles of wheelchair-accessible pathways to explore around the lake, botanic gardens and glass house.
WHERE TO STAY Ty Coch Camping and Caravanning (tycochleisure.com) has plenty of new walks that are wheelchair-accessible. It is just 15 minutes from Cardiff and Newport and the three-acre camping ground has 15 hardstand pitches and 15 tent pitches.

RUTLAND WATER, EAST MIDLANDS

DISTANCE 6 miles; **MAP OS** 234
ROUTE The linear walk at Rutland Water, one of the largest artificial lakes in Europe, is great for all types of wheels: bikes, pushchairs, electric scooters and manual wheelchairs.
WHERE TO STAY Barnsdale Lodge (barnsdalelodge.co.uk) is a beautiful hotel, positioned on the north shore of Rutland Water, with facilities for people with disabilities.

SETTLE, YORKSHIRE DALES

DISTANCE 2 miles; **MAP OS** OL2
ROUTE This easy walk between Settle and Giggleswick is ideal for any type of wheelchair. Here you can discover

some of the history linked to this Dales market town.
WHERE TO STAY King William The Fourth Guest House (kingwilliamthefourthguesthouse.co.uk) sits in the centre of the beautiful town of Settle. It has a ground-floor room that has been adapted for people with disabilities.

For more information, see: theoutdoorguide.co.uk/walks/wheelchair-friendly-walks

GET INVOLVED

Throughout 2020, *Telegraph Travel* and *Country Walking* magazine will be encouraging Britons to get out and discover more of the UK by clocking up 1,000 miles on foot. We'll be revealing the UK's most beautiful walks (providing approximately 83.3 miles of inspiration per month), where to

stay while you're there and how to turn them into your own mini-adventure. To tell us where you are walking this year and to get involved, use #walk1000miles or visit walk1000miles.co.uk



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