

THE Advocate

A VOICE FOR ACCESSIBLE, EQUITABLE AND EMPOWERED LIVES | 2023 WINTER ISSUE

**Breaking barriers: meet the
unstoppable Dave Jacka**

**An epic outback
road trip to Uluru**

**Shining a light on
the Sunshine Coast**

TRAVEL

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THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF

Spinal Life
AUSTRALIA



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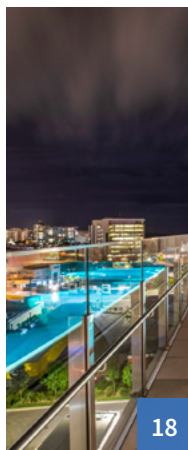
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Opening the door to possibility

When you think about travel, it really is something that looks different for everyone, not only factoring in things like budget and interests, and who is going along with you, but also considering your own individual needs and what works for you.

For me, I have been lucky enough to explore a variety of places, including a road trip through southern Europe, visiting parts of beautiful Italy, Spain and Portugal, cruising to India and the Middle East, and travelling up the Queensland coast by rail on the *Spirit of Queensland*.

In this issue of *The Advocate*, we're sharing travel stories from different perspectives, from the super adventurous to an art competition in France, to a road trip to see one of Australia's iconic locations, Uluru. There are so many more stories we could tell, but we couldn't fit them all into one issue!

There are also updates on our efforts to improve access and inclusion in the Queensland's Sunshine Coast and Geraldton in Western Australia, with more regions in our sights in future.

Many Councils are interested in improving accessibility in their services and infrastructure, and we welcome the positive collaborations we've had so far, all work towards our shared goal: to create more inclusive communities for everyone.

Recently the Spinal Life Board held our monthly meeting at the Healthy Living Centre in Cairns, so we could meet more of our regional team and hear feedback from our members and customers.

We all enjoyed the experience and the beautiful weather in the Far North, and of course seeing the Centre's fully accessible accommodation and services up close.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to come along to say hello, and we hope to host more regional Board meetings in the future.

Lastly, I wanted to pause to remember former Spinal Life Board President and Honorary Life Member, Bill Garsden, who sadly passed away in May. Bill was an exceptional leader in the early stages of our organisation, setting our course in advocating for better access and inclusion so that every person with a disability can participate and be a customer in any community – anytime, anywhere.

Bill's determination, his values and his contribution to make his part of the world better for people with disability, will continue to live on. Our thoughts are with his wife Lee and loved ones. [A](#)

GYL STACEY

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?



Email us at theadvocate@spinal.com.au – we'd love to hear from you!

3 QUESTIONS WITH THE CEO

Mark Townend

What are you most excited about for the rest of 2023?

We are always focused on how we can support people with spinal cord damage to adapt to new ways of doing things wherever possible, and this includes preparing to go on a flight for the first time post-injury.

That's why I'm excited to share that we will soon have a row of airline seats and an aisle chair at our Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane, for people to practise transfers, find what works best for them, and have more of an understanding about what to expect for this stage of their journey.

Our Allied Health team can assist with travel preparations, including Exercise Physiologists and Physiotherapists who can provide support to increase strength and fitness for transfers, and maximise upper limb function through exercise and therapy programs.

We also have Community Nurses who can discuss what may be needed for bowel and bladder management, and how to prevent pressure sores, along with Occupational Therapists and an Assistive Technology Mentor who can assist with assistive technology and equipment for the trip.

The airline seats were generously donated to us by Qantas, while the airline chair has been kindly supplied by the manufacturer, Melrose Kiwi Concept Chairs, all the way from New Zealand – thank you to both companies for this exceptional support.

Have you made any progress in improving tourism opportunities?

We're past the halfway mark of the 'Year of Accessible Tourism' in Queensland, which has provided new and exciting opportunities to raise awareness of the importance of inclusive travel experiences.

Our Advocacy team has been hard at work these past months, meeting with regional tourism organisations,



businesses, local governments and more, to share their feedback and recommendations with venues and services, as well as provide awareness training programs for community leaders, managers and employees.

The team has also been contributing to Accessible Australia, which is our web-based app that provides first-hand reviews of places like hotels, cafés, restaurants, parks and public toilets. If you haven't seen this resource yet, you can visit accessibleaustralia.com.au to read reviews and share your own experiences to help others.

How are you supporting the over 65s who cannot access the NDIS?

We are continuing to advocate to the Federal Government to address age discrimination for Australians aged 65 and older who are living with disability, and are unable to access the NDIS.

Following recent news that more New Zealanders will have access to the NDIS due to changes to citizenship laws, we spoke out in the media; saying that while we welcomed this announcement, more must be done for people with disability who are over 65.

We are calling on the Government to ensure all people with disability have access to the same level of care and funding, regardless of their age. In addition, the class action lawsuit led by Mitry Lawyers is still progressing, aiming for all age groups to be given access to the NDIS. [A](#)



RESPIRE & REHABILITATION

The Healthy Living Centre Cairns offers one and two bedroom units fitted with industry-leading adaptive equipment and home automation. Available for short and medium-term stays, there is also the added benefit of having Spinal Life Allied Health professionals, a fully accessible gym and hydrotherapy pool on-site to assist with all your rehabilitation and wellness needs.

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Dare to dream

Adventure-loving Dave Jacka proves that where there's a will, there's a way

Dave's epic journey down the Murray River.

It's our travel issue, so we thought a story about planes, trains and automobiles would be on point... but how about planes, kayaks and hand cycles instead?

For that, we needed to look no further than Dave Jacka, whose incredible travel adventures are a testimony to lateral thinking, perseverance and pure tenacity.

After breaking his neck in a motorcycle accident in 1988, just four days before his 20th birthday, Dave sustained high-level quadriplegia, with limited arm function, no use of his fingers and the inability to regulate his body temperature.

He says at the time it felt like his whole world had been shattered: "All my goals, all my dreams: everything I thought my life was going to be was suddenly gone."

But that feeling didn't last for long: Dave was a man on a mission, and physical limitations were not going to get in his way. Instead, he employed creative solutions to overcome all sorts of obstacles – or, as he sees them, opportunities.

"To me, having a disability is about solving problems," he explains.

One of the first problems he solved? Learning to feed himself, while still in hospital. Within a year of leaving rehab, he was also driving a modified car, and after two years he'd learnt to transfer from his wheelchair to his bed.

"It took me a while because every time I tried to push off my wheelchair to get on the bed, the chair would shoot out and I'd end up on the floor," he explains. "So I came up with the idea of attaching a hook to my bed frame and clipping it to the front of my chair, which stopped it from moving and allowed me to transfer," he says.

The hook was a real turning point in Dave's life. "It enabled me to transfer, which is one of my greatest accomplishments because it gave me a lot of independence," he says. "It also totally shifted my perspective about my disability. Instead of thinking I couldn't do a lot of things, I started to think well, what else *can* I do? I realised that I wasn't limited by my disability: I just had to find different ways of doing things."

Dave is very goal-oriented and loves nothing more than setting himself a challenge. "Then it's all about breaking that down into a list of smaller, achievable goals and finding



Becoming the first person with quadriplegia to fly solo around Australia.



Dave's adapted aircraft controls.

solutions for them,” he says. “The more things you tick off your list, the closer you get to your big goal.”

His next big goals at the time were to complete an Associate Diploma of Engineering – tick – and to get a job with an engineering firm – tick, tick. The skills he learnt there proved to be very handy when it came to designing adaptations for future challenges... like, for example, learning to fly.

“I’d wanted to fly ever since I was a kid, but after my accident I never thought I’d be able to,” Dave recalls. “But then I went to the Avalon Airshow in Melbourne in 2005 and saw an aircraft called a microlight trike. It’s basically like a big powered hang glider with wheels below and a motor on the back. “As soon as I saw it I thought, ‘I could actually do this’”

But before he could start, Dave not only had to find an instructor who would look past his disability and give him a go (thank you, Steve Ruffles), he also had to work out how he could fly without functioning legs or fingers.

He ultimately designed a control bar adaptation that locked his hands in place and allowed him to steer the aircraft in the air. Later on, he also solved the problem of how to >

steer it on the ground, using a sip-and-puff system. These adaptations allowed Dave to fly independently and, in the process, become the first person with quadriplegia to fly solo in a microlight trike.

“That first solo flight was so special for me because I’d made my dream become a reality,” he recalls. “It was exhilarating. After that, I felt like I could do anything.”

He later graduated to a Jabiru (a two-seater, fixed-wing aircraft that he’d again custom-adapted), and in 2013, after years of preparation, was ready to take on a massive challenge: to become the first person with quadriplegia to fly solo around Australia.

It was a 38-day adventure that Dave documented in a book published last year: *On a Wing and a Chair: An Epic Solo Flight Around Australia*. The journey saw him cover a distance of almost 18,000 kilometres: the equivalent of flying from Melbourne to London. He even flew around Tasmania: “You haven’t done the whole country until you’ve done Tassie,” he laughs.

Dave was backed by a team of six people in two support planes, including other pilots, his support worker and his wife Linda, who was not only the project coordinator for the massive trip, but also helped Dave manage social media: “I had a tracking unit on my plane so that people could see where we were in real time, and every night I wrote a blog about that day’s events,” he says. “We received a lot of support from amazing people at every stop along the way. They didn’t know us from a bar of soap, but they donated accommodation, transport and even food. They were absolutely fantastic.”

It was an extraordinary trip, and one of the ultimate highlights was getting to see so much of Australia: “It’s such a beautiful country, and from the air it’s just a different world,” he reflects. “You see so much, and the landscape is always changing. It’s spectacular.”

Naturally there were also difficulties and challenges, including one moment when Dave actually thought it was the end.

“I hit some unbelievable turbulence near Airlie Beach: the air was churning around like a washing machine,” he recalls. “The plane dropped, my head hit the roof and when I came crashing back down my hands came off the controls. The plane started nosing down and banking over, and I thought, ‘this is it’. After a few scary moments I managed to get control

of the aircraft, but my whole body had shifted in my seat. I was hanging on to my rudder lever for balance and my knees had fallen over, jamming the control column, which meant I couldn’t turn left. I eventually got down on the ground thanks to probably my worst landing ever, but I didn’t care – I was just so glad to be safe. It was extremely scary and I had to push through overwhelming fear to take off again the next day.”

After such a terrifying experience you might assume Dave would have given up his adventuring ways, but just three years later he embarked on his toughest challenge to date: becoming the first person with quadriplegia to paddle a kayak 2,226 kilometres down the Murray River.

“I bought a sea kayak and adapted it to suit my ability,” he says. “I added outriggers so that it wouldn’t tip over, I put in a seating system to give me trunk support so I wouldn’t flop over, and I applied the sip-puff concept to the rudder (suck to turn left; blow to turn right). After much trial and error I also realised that the best way for me to hold onto the paddle

without functioning fingers was to literally tape it to my hands every day. We went through a lot of duct tape!”

Training for the trip was intense. “I’d never actually kayaked before, and the first time I tried I could only manage about 100 metres,” says

Dave. “I spent a year paddling up and down the Yarra River in Melbourne and even took a redundancy from my job so I could train six days a week. It was very, very slow going.”

In March 2016, Dave finally set off on his epic journey. It was one that would require him to paddle, unassisted, for 89 days – and then camp on the banks of the river every night.

“I thought the training was brutal, but it was nothing compared to the actual trip,” he recalls. “We broke props, got bogged on sandbars, got our brand new generator and chainsaw waterlogged when we almost sunk the punt with all our gear in it... and that was just the first day!”

It was tough, it was unseasonably hot, and it was relentless.

“We didn’t just go for a couple of weeks, it was three months – that’s what made it challenging, both physically and mentally,” says Dave. “The first month was okay, the second month was hard, and the last month was torture. My whole body was telling me to stop.”

A total of 19 volunteers – including two support boats, a support kayaker, his carer and his parents as ground crew

“To me, having a disability is about solving problems”



Dave with wife Linda, who has supported him through it all.



Flying over Australia's stunning coastline.

– helped Dave out at various stages along the way. Their contribution cannot be understated.

"I seek out help from so many different people in all of my projects," he explains. "If I don't know how to do something I try to surround myself with people who have that knowledge so I can pick their brains. And when it comes to support workers, it's crucial to find the right person, because helping me to fly around Australia or kayak down the Murray is not everyone's cup of tea!"

For Dave, what really draws him to these experiences is the challenge of finding innovative solutions to problems, and solving them one by one: "It's about pushing yourself and exploring what your potential is," he says, "but my main goal was to show the general public what people with disabilities are capable of: to shift their thinking a bit and change their expectations. So many people don't see the person, they just see the disability. I wanted to show them that people with a disability can achieve so much."

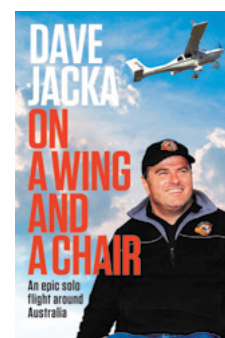
So what's next for adventure-mad Dave, who also represented Australia in wheelchair rugby at the 1996 Paralympic Games, and in 2015 was awarded an Order

of Australia Medal for his contribution to people with a disability through sport?

"I want to finish off the Burke and Wills expedition I started in 2019," he says. "I travelled on a hand cycle to retrace part of their journey, from Melbourne to Broken Hill, but I want to finish stage two and go from Broken Hill up to the Gulf of Carpentaria."

For now, however, Dave and his wife Linda are enjoying a new adventure, having recently made the move from Melbourne to Queensland. Dave is also, extremely aptly, launching a new business as a goal coach: "My passion is about how goals can transform people's lives, so to work with people and help them achieve the things that are important to them, that's the big new adventure for me." [A](#)

Dave Jacka's second book, *On a Wing and a Chair: An Epic Solo Flight Around Australia* was published late last year. It's available for purchase at davejacka.com/books and online book stores, along with his first book, *Six Percent*.



Adventure or bust

A convoy, a competition... and a completely broken-down van



Taking an epic road trip through outback Australia would be enough of an adventure for most couples.

But when Mick and his wife Christine hit the road in July last year, they had a couple of extra things to think about: along the way, Christine was going to run in one of the toughest marathons in the country, the Australian Outback Marathon at Uluru; while accessibility was also a key focus, with Mick using a wheelchair for mobility.

The couple live in Christine's hometown of Brisbane with their terrier, Winky, but actually met in England. "I met her at a wedding in 2004," explains Mick, who is from Southend, just outside of London, "and the rest is history."

Together, they moved to Australia in February 2009, where Christine worked in the travel industry and Mick was a maintenance coordinator for a number of aged care facilities, until he sustained serious injuries in a workplace accident in October 2015.

"I had bleeding on the brain, a torn aorta in my heart, broken scapula, punctured lungs and broken ribs," he says. "I broke T9 and T10, and fragments of bone shot up and cut through my spinal cord at the T7 level, so I'm completely paralysed below the middle of my chest. I have no memory of the accident whatsoever: because of the brain injury it's all been scrubbed from my mind."

Mick and Christine were keen travellers before the accident, visiting numerous countries across the globe, and planning their next adventure: Everest base camp in Nepal. Post-accident, they holidayed to Hawaii in 2018, and last year Mick made a solo trip back to England following the death of his father.

"The airlines are really helpful, but it's still a challenge," he says. "I have to really plan things in advance for a long-haul flight."

The idea of taking a road trip and avoiding all the hassles of flying, therefore, was very appealing to Mick and Christine. They bought a Volkswagen Crafter van and had it modified to include, among other things, a side lifter for Mick's wheelchair, a bed that raises to the ceiling when it's not needed, and a modified front seat and hand controls so that it can be driven by Mick.

They set off for Uluru in July last year, travelling in a four-vehicle convoy with a group of friends who were also running in the marathon, and stopping at Roma, Winton, Longreach, Emerald and Mount Isa along the way.

Mick and Christine hadn't seen much of the Outback before, and were blown away by its unique, rugged beauty. "It was just incredible," says Mick. "You can see for miles and miles, and there's just... nothingness, stretching out to the horizon."

A big thumbs up from Mick as they arrive in the Northern Territory.



Their itinerary – from Brisbane to Uluru, down to South Australia and then back to Brisbane via Victoria and New South Wales – was mapped out thanks to some hardcore research from Christine. “I would ask for photos and detailed measurements at every ‘accessible’ place I could find,” she says. “It took a very, very long time.”

One of their favourite spots was in Longreach. “We stayed in a huge Mulga Tent that had an excellent accessible bathroom, a super-comfortable bed and just really good wheelchair access everywhere,” says Mick. “There was an outdoor steel tub where Christine had a nice soak, a constant supply of firewood for the fire pit and even marshmallows to toast.”

Thanks to all her research and planning, Christine managed to find accessible accommodation at most stops along the way. But she stresses that everyone has different needs in terms of what is suitable for their disability, and what worked for Mick might not work for other people.

Sightseeing, however, was a mixed bag when it came to accessibility.

“The Dinosaur Trail at Winton was great,” says Christine, “but there are other places that don’t seem to know the difference between ‘accessible’ and ‘wheelchair accessible!’”

After 10 days on the road the group arrived at Uluru, ready for the marathon.

“It took us a little longer to get there, not only because we spent a few nights in Longreach and Mount Isa, but also because every day we’d go for a training run in preparation for the big race,” says Christine.

“Not me,” says Mick, “I’d have a scotch!”

The race itself offered stunning views of Uluru and Kata Tjuta, and although it was “much harder than we had all anticipated,” Christine was thrilled to finish her first ever marathon – even if she didn’t quite meet her goal to complete it in under six hours. Her actual time? Six hours and *two minutes*!

Other highlights for the marathon mates included sunset drinks and a BBQ dinner in the town of Yulara overlooking Uluru, and experiencing the magical Field of Lights.

“You can see for miles and miles, and there’s just... nothingness, stretching out to the horizon.”

“The lights are spectacular and great to walk around,” says Mick. “I used a Batec attachment on my manual wheelchair on this trip, which let me get around the Field of Lights by myself. It was just amazing.”

After five brilliant days in Uluru the group headed down to South Australia, before going their separate ways in Adelaide.

“We passed through so many interesting, beautiful places and they were all so different,” says Mick. ➤



Mick takes in the wonder that is Kata Tjuta.

“Coober Pedy was weird and fantastic; like a lunar landscape at some points. Arriving into Port Augusta and seeing the ocean after so much time in the outback was great. And then in Adelaide we got to spend time with good friends of ours and visit some of the world-class wineries in McLaren Vale and the Adelaide Hills.”

On the way back to Brisbane, Mick and Christine met up again with one of the convoy couples, in country Victoria. It was definitely a blessing, because their brand new, beautifully modified van had completely died while they were in Adelaide.

“We were given a replacement vehicle, but it obviously wasn’t modified so I couldn’t drive it. It meant it was a *long* drive home for Christine,” says Mick.

“It was a fantastic trip, but it was hard work and not something that we could have done by ourselves,” she says. “It was great having friends to help us with things like lugging gear in and out of the van every day. Travelling with them was a brilliant way to go.” **A**

To find first-hand accessibility reviews for a range of destinations and plan your next trip, visit accessibleaustralia.com.au.



Wheelchair access stops here at Simpsons Gap (thank you, steps!).

Mick and Christine enjoying the view of Uluru.



Mick & Christine's travel tips

- The number one tip is you need to have a sense of humour!
- Phone ahead to your accommodation to double-check your booking.
- If you're heading to the Outback, take a Telstra mobile because you don't get coverage with any other networks.
- Invest in a handheld CB – they last really well and they're so handy. You can switch over to channel 40 and talk to truckers to find out what's going on. We used them to coordinate petrol stops and loo breaks – and even deliver the 'fun fact of the day'. They're worth their weight in gold. Just remember that you can't use them while you're driving, so hand it to the person in the passenger seat!
- Take a selection of tools for basic wheelchair maintenance – things like Allen keys etc.
- Take a spare inner tube for your wheelchair tyres or, even better, get solid tyres fitted. It's a little bit more uncomfortable, but you won't have to pump them up or worry about punctures. They're a really great idea when you're travelling.



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The art of travel

How a hobby became Jean Gilbert's ticket to France



Jean and her husband outside Metz Cathedral.



Ready to go at the Abilympics.



With some of her fellow competitors from around the world.

Millions of people travel to Europe every year to enjoy the culture and history, the amazing food and shopping, and the incredible attractions and scenic wonders. Hardly any make the trip to take part in a painting competition. But that's exactly what Jean Gilbert, 66, did in March of this year.

Jean was one of eight Australians chosen to represent Down Under at the 10th International Abilympics [abilympics.org.au], aka the "Work Skill Olympics for People with Disabilities".

"It's a vocational skills competition, specifically designed for people with disabilities," explains Jean. "I competed in the painting and waste reuse category, but there's everything from cooking, gardening and photography, to bicycle assembly, word processing and electrical installation."

Like the Olympics and Paralympics, the Abilympics (a contraction of the words "abilities" and "Olympics") are generally held every four years. Past host cities have included Prague, New Delhi, Seoul and Bordeaux. Back in 1995 it was held in Perth, the city where Jean lives today.

"I'm from Cape Town originally, but I lived in New Zealand for a decade and then moved to Perth in 2006," she says.

In 2013 Jean underwent surgery on her back and four days later awoke in the hospital, paralysed. "I'd contracted transverse myelitis in a different region in my back, which means my autoimmune system had attacked my spinal cord."

"It was in my thoracic region (T8/9), so it mostly affects my bladder, bowel and legs. I can walk a few steps but my legs go numb and I fall, and I get spasms and pain at night. These days, I use a wheelchair 99% of the time."

In the wake of her experience, as well as undergoing intensive rehabilitation, Jean also embraced a number of new hobbies. One such hobby was painting, and it was her talents in this artistic endeavour that led Jean to be selected to represent Australia at the 2020 Abilympics... which, thanks to COVID delays and the need to change the host country from Russia to France, actually took place in 2023.

The new host city was Metz, a beautiful destination about four hours' drive from Paris. It's famous for its Gothic cathedral, a spectacular structure known as the "Lantern of God" thanks to its distinctive golden glow and one of the world's largest expanses of stained glass.

"The whole trip and Abilympics experience was just amazing," says Jean. "Eight of us were chosen to represent Western Australia, and we travelled with a couple of nurses and carers, and a physiotherapist. My husband came along, which made the trip even better! I didn't win anything, but it didn't matter, it was just the excitement of taking part. It was an amazing experience and I would definitely go again."

People from 27 nations took part in the event, which ran over two days and attracted more than 50,000 people:



“The whole trip and Abilympics experience was just amazing”

applicants, judges, experts and visitors who came to watch competitors represent their passions, their jobs and their countries.

The Abilympics Association funded Jean's trip to France, but that's not the only help she received. Spinal Life Supports Coordinator, Sam Michelides has been helping Jean manage and implement her NDIS funding, including money to pursue her passion for art, which ultimately led to her Abilympics experience.

“Sam has also been instrumental in helping me organise NDIS Specialist Disability Accommodation, and I've recently moved into an apartment that's totally wheelchair-friendly, which has been life-changing,” says Jean. “Plus, he's helping me to participate in my sport: sailing.”

Twice a week, she heads to Perth's Swan River to take to the water in a Hansa Liberty boat, which has been specifically designed for people with a physical disability. Jean belongs to a squad of about 10 people, ranging in age from 23 to 84. “It's good to get out of our wheelchairs to sail and it's such a positive atmosphere: this time is about *sailing*, not about our disabilities,” she says.

“I started sailing about two years ago,” says Jean, “and I love, love, love it!” [A](#)

Visit spinal.com.au/support-coordination to find out more.



Photo by Sacha Verheij on Unsplash

Jean's top tips for flying

- If possible, use an experienced travel agent. We had a fantastic lady who organised everything.
- Make sure you reserve the right seat for you. For example, some of the people on my trip use indwelling catheters and would have preferred a window seat as they could have dealt with things more discretely there.
- Wear compression stockings to help avoid swollen legs.
- Be sure to pack your usual medications, plus any travel “basics” that you might struggle to get abroad, especially in non-English-speaking destinations (eg antihistamines, motion sickness medication etc). I ended up needing gastro medication on this trip.
- If you're on a long-haul flight and can afford to upgrade to premium economy, do it!

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MY FIRST HOLIDAY WITH MY NEW KÜSCHALL KSL WHEELCHAIR

- BY ADAM SHEPPARD

Some of us like sitting on a beach somewhere staring into the deep blue, whilst others prefer a more adrenalin-filled holiday, maybe skydiving or scaling the side of a mountain is more your thing but I am pretty sure I can confidently say that there wouldn't be a person reading this now who doesn't enjoy a good holiday.

Believe it or not, for me, my excitement really ramps up as I start to think about packing my bags to go. Yep, you heard me right... packing! I'm one of these maybe slightly crazy people that get a real kick out of challenging myself to pack as lightly as humanly possible. This inevitably means, at some point, I'll end up at a local shopping centre wherever I am to pick up something that missed being packed.

On a recent trip to a coolish Hobart, my penchant for light packing saw me unstuck when I realised we had booked an ocean boat tour that took in the landscape and the wildlife surrounding Tasman Island, however, I'd managed not to pack anything that was both warm and waterproof. So, with an already strained credit card in hand, off I went to the only clothing store I could find.

Last week I was lucky enough to travel to Hervey Bay on Queensland's stunning Fraser Coast with my friend and Business Partner Tash for some work and a bit of a look around, and you know what's even better then travelling to a place that has a myriad of fun things to do and great places to stay and eat? Having a brand spanking new Küschall KSL wheelchair to do it all in.

Hervey Bay is honestly such an amazing place for a wheelchair user to

explore, with around 17kms of decent quality pathways (even with my new 6-inch front castor wheels).

The opportunity to explore along the coastline which takes in some stunning views of the Great Sandy Strait and encompasses the 70kms of waterway between the mainland and the picturesque Fraser Island, was one I couldn't pass up and in one day pushed 14kms in my trusty new KSL.

If you're up for a challenge, the Urangan Pier is something you will want to put on your "To Do" list while in this amazing part of the world. The Pier is steeped in history from as far back as 1913 and was originally built to a length of 1124m but was shortened to 868m in 1985 after narrowly missing being demolished all together.

If the history of the Pier is not your thing, I would suggest checking it out as a great way to see some of the local birdlife but, be warned, if you are planning on tackling the Pier in a manual wheelchair, I would strongly suggest a Free Wheel attachment or something similar. At least something better than the tiny front castors I have, otherwise it ends up being quite a long and bumpy adventure!

About the author:

Adam Sheppard is a Motivational Speaker, Writer, Entrepreneur, Podcaster and Personal Trainer who is a full time wheelchair user born with Spina Bifida and is also a bilateral above knee amputee. Adam is based on the sunny Gold Coast and lives by the mantra "Say Yes More!" and is always on the hunt for new adventure and ways to extract every bit of fun life has to offer!



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The A-Team

A group of accessibility warriors shine a light on the Sunshine Coast

Spinal Life Advocacy Officers, Nate Greenfield and Joel Fernandes, recently spent five days in Maroochydore and Mooloolaba with a group of eight volunteers, reviewing holiday hotspots for the Accessible Australia Sunshine Coast project. We asked Nate to give us the Sunny Coast scoop.

What was the trip all about?

“We visited all sorts of places in order to review them for the Accessible Australia web app, which gives people helpful accessibility information before they travel. We received a grant from Sunshine Coast Council for this project, so we’re also doing a report for them.”

How did you find the volunteers?

“Some of them came to us via posts I put on Spinal Life’s Facebook page and our Peer Support closed group, while the rest came via word of mouth.”

How did you divvy up the workload?

“We all stuck together on the first day, but for the rest of the time it was a case of ‘divide and conquer’. We split into two groups, but we’d meet up for breakfast, lunch and then a debrief at the end of the day. On the last day, as a thank you, the volunteers got to go to Strike Bowling and play laser tag. It was a fun trip and the participants were awesome. They all said they’re keen to do another one if it ever happens again, so I think they enjoyed it!”

What sort of places did you visit?

“There were 57 different cafés and eateries on our ‘hit list’ (although we missed a handful because they weren’t open), plus parks, public toilets and four hotels. I’m a manual wheelchair user and I generally just go between my home, car and work. On this trip we did 10 kilometres on each of the first two days, so I was wrecked!”

Did you give feedback to businesses?

“Yes, if a business wasn’t accessible, we left them a checklist of things that could be improved. They were all very accommodating and willing to listen to our critiques and feedback. I thought there might be a little bit of pushback, but there was none.”

So, in general, just how accessible is this part of the world?

“Once you navigate a bunch of criss-crossing streets in the first part of Maroochydore, it’s all quite flat and actually pretty great. It was a bit of an eye opener for me. I’ve lived in Brisbane for six years, but I’ve never actually been to the Sunshine Coast before. It’s so beautiful and I will definitely be going again.”

What about any negatives?

“It’s such a lovely area and there are all these businesses doing everything they possibly can to be accessible... but

then you go to book accommodation and that's when the problems can start. Many places say they have accessible rooms, but then you discover there's a step into the shower, or something like that. Great, so I can access everything else in the unit, but I can't have a shower. That may be *semi-accessible*, but it's not accessible! We have a traffic light system on the Accessible Australia app: a place gets a green light if it's fully compliant, it gets orange if it's semi-accessible, and red if it's not accessible at all. We're very honest in our reviews, so clearly a number of accommodation venues here are going to have orange lights. This is the Year of Accessible Tourism in Queensland, so we hope more places get ➤



Finley also shared his feedback on access, to improve the local region.



Thanks to our intrepid reviewers, Darren, Jet, Nate, Joel and Johnny!

Opposite page: The group explores beautiful Sunshine Coast.



Checking out an accessible beach on the Sunny Coast.



Grabbing a coffee (priorities, people!).

the message and make their venues and services more accessible. It's not only the right thing to do, it's also the smart thing to do, revenue-wise. Like many people, I normally travel with a carer – so places automatically get two bookings, not just one.”

What's next?

“This project was made possible thanks to the generous support of Sunshine Coast Council through their community grants program. We're hoping to collect similar information from all around Australia, and encourage anyone who is on holidays to leave a review of the places they visit!” [A](#)

To read or share your own accessibility reviews, head to accessibleaustralia.com.au and follow the prompts.



Darren tries his hand at ten-pin bowling.



Where to stay

Nate and Joel's home away from home was the Holiday Inn Express & Suites Sunshine Coast (42 First Avenue and Fairway Drive, Maroochydore, ihg.com). The four-star property (pictured), which only opened a year ago, has a range of features including 24-hour reception, secure parking (\$20/day), a restaurant, bar and gorgeous rooftop pool. There are also many accessible services and venues nearby, including restaurants, coffee shops, Sunshine Plaza shopping centre, the Maroochy RSL, parklands, public toilets and, of course, the beach.

“I stayed in room 517, which is an Accessible Room and included breakfast in the price,” says Nate. “It featured

a wide doorway and hallway, a peephole at disability level, and a large bathroom with shower seat, roll-in shower and accessible vanities and toilet. I did advise staff that access to the bed was tight and only suitable for a manual wheelchair, but simply moving the bed to the opposite wall would allow for more access and accommodate a power chair and a hoist. They were very open to my suggestion – the staff in general were just the friendliest people I've ever come across, always polite and eager to help.”

You can read Nate's full review on the Accessible Australia app: accessibleaustralia.com.au

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1. In vitro data on file - WHR 16933 TA 1369 FeelClean Phase 1 Report. 2. A Multi-Centre Clinical Investigation to Assess the Performance of GentleCath™ Glide Intermittent Catheters. Study U378 GentleCath™ Glide Final Report. July 2018. Data on File. ConvaTec Inc.

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Getting the gist of Geraldton

Just how accessible is this beautiful spot in Western Australia?

Checking out the Geraldton Foreshore, including beach matting.

Located 424 kilometres north of Perth (a five-hour drive or a one-hour flight away), Geraldton is the only city on Western Australia's Coral Coast. Boasting world-class beaches and a lovely, laid-back coastal vibe, it's rich with cafés, shops, street art and galleries, and some of the world's top windsurfing and kitesurfing spots. Wildflower meadows burst into bloom between July and October, carpeting the landscape in colour, while just 60 kilometres off the coastline lie the Abrolhos Islands, a pristine archipelago of 122 islands brimming with incredible beauty and some of the most diverse bird and marine life in the world.

Geraldton is also where Spinal Life Advocacy Officer, Karen Harvey, headed recently with a team of volunteers, to conduct the Geraldton Accessible Tourism Review.

Their goal was to identify, review and promote accessible tourism offerings in the region, advise operators and businesses on how they can make improvements, and raise awareness about the value of the accessible tourism market.

"We collaborated with Atlas (Access To Leisure And Sport), a non-profit charity organisation committed to increasing access and inclusion for people with disabilities in Geraldton," says Karen. "The results were really promising, and I'd recommend a visit to this beautiful part of the world to anyone."

Three of Karen's Geraldton gems

The Esplanade

"Located at the southern end of the Geraldton Foreshore, the Esplanade is a must-visit destination if you're in Geraldton. Upon arrival there are two up-to-date disability parking bays, with space to transfer in and out of your vehicle, and easy access onto an unobstructed wide path. The first part of the Esplanade features a shaded area with an accessible water fountain and BBQ facilities (that, unfortunately, are not accessible). From there you travel along a lovely, wide, landscaped walkway with views of the ocean on one side, and the Port on the other. Once you've followed the accessible path to the end, there's an area with ramp access where wheelchair-accessible telescopes offer stunning views of the city, Port, Champion Bay and Moresby Ranges. You can also see local sea lions swimming in the water or sunning themselves on iconic Seal Rock, which is just off the Esplanade. The whole atmosphere is lovely and relaxing, with plenty of areas where you can sit and rest, and take in additional cultural information via interpretative signage all along the Esplanade."

Revolutions Geraldton

"Revolutions Geraldton [revolutionsgeraldton.com.au] is a bike store owned and operated by cyclists from a range of disciplines, including BMX and scooters, mountain biking,

road riding and touring. Located in the Geraldton CBD [268 Marine Terrace], there are designated accessible parking bays close by in front of the nearby Multipurpose Centre. The staff are very welcoming and provide excellent service: they cater to everything from fixing a puncture to suspension servicing. They're happy to assist with any questions, and if you want to get out and about in Geraldton, they seem to have a piece of equipment for just about every biking experience, whatever your disability needs. This includes a great range of accessible equipment available for hire, including mobility scooters, pedal-assisted electric trikes, a manual trike, three-wheeled hand cycle and even a rickshaw, which allows for one rider at the front and a bench seat (with seat belts) at the back for two people."

Museum of Geraldton and Geraldton Regional Art Gallery

"For stories of shipwrecks and other displays that explore the region's indigenous, European and natural history, be sure to pay a visit to the Museum of Geraldton. Located at 2 Museum Place, right on the waterfront near the marina and overlooking the Indian Ocean, it celebrates the rich heritage of the land, sea and people of the greater Geraldton area. In the Shipwrecks Gallery you can see artefacts from four Dutch shipwrecks, while a 3D film lets you view the *HMAS Sydney II* and *HSK Kormoran*, which currently lie 2,500m deep on the ocean floor. There are two accessible parking bays on the side road right next to the Museum, which lead to a curb

ramp and a wide unobstructed path to the venue. The front door is self-opening, the reception desk is the perfect height for talking with staff, and there's an accessible water fountain, accessible bathroom and easy access to all the exhibits.

Culture vultures should also check out the Geraldton Regional Art Gallery (or GRAG), which is housed in the lovely old heritage-listed Town Hall building at 24 Chapman Road (you can't miss the building: outside the entrance is a striking four-metre tall sculpture of a human, called *Protective Memory*). The gallery houses artwork from local, national and international artists, and has a regular calendar of exhibitions. It has accessible parking bays in the main car park, and an unobstructed path into the building via the front self-opening door. Inside, there are large open spaces galore, in which to enjoy the exhibits. On the day we visited the lift was broken so we could only explore the bottom floor, but there was a lot to see and we thoroughly enjoyed it – and the lift has since been fixed!" [A](#)

The Geraldton Accessible Tourism Review was conducted in partnership with the City of Greater Geraldton, Visit Geraldton and volunteers from the local region. You can read the full report at spinal.com.au or visit accessibleaustralia.com.au to check out more reviews.



Enjoying the diverse exhibitions at the gallery.



Accessible walkways along the Esplanade.



Checking out bike hire options at Revolutions Geraldton.



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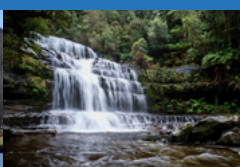
Glenn Moore Units consist of two spacious, accessible and fully self-contained units featuring all the comforts of home. Each unit sleeps up to five people and are close to transport, shopping centres, sports grounds and medical facilities and is only minutes from the heart of Hobart.

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Your home in Hobart...

Back to school

Class is very much back in session for Hayden Boyd

Hayden back on campus at QUT.

Like most 22-year-olds, Hayden Boyd has got a lot on his plate. He's got a part-time job at JB Hi-Fi, spends as much time with his girlfriend as he can... and he's doing a double degree at Queensland University of Technology.

But *unlike* most 22-year-olds, he's doing it all while using a wheelchair.

In February 2021 Hayden went with his girlfriend Kate to the Gold Coast for a weekend getaway.

"On the final day we went for one last swim," he recalls. "I was body surfing, caught a wave... and it dumped me headfirst into a sandbank. I broke my neck, fracturing two vertebrae at C4/5."

Hayden ultimately spent three weeks in the orthopaedics ward at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane while his broken vertebrae healed, before moving to the Spinal Injuries Unit to start the rehabilitation process.

After eight months in the SIU, he returned to his family home in Brisbane's Wynnum West. "We self-funded renovations to update the house to make it nice and open and liveable," explains Hayden, who has no mobility from below his chest: "I can still lift my arms up and down, but

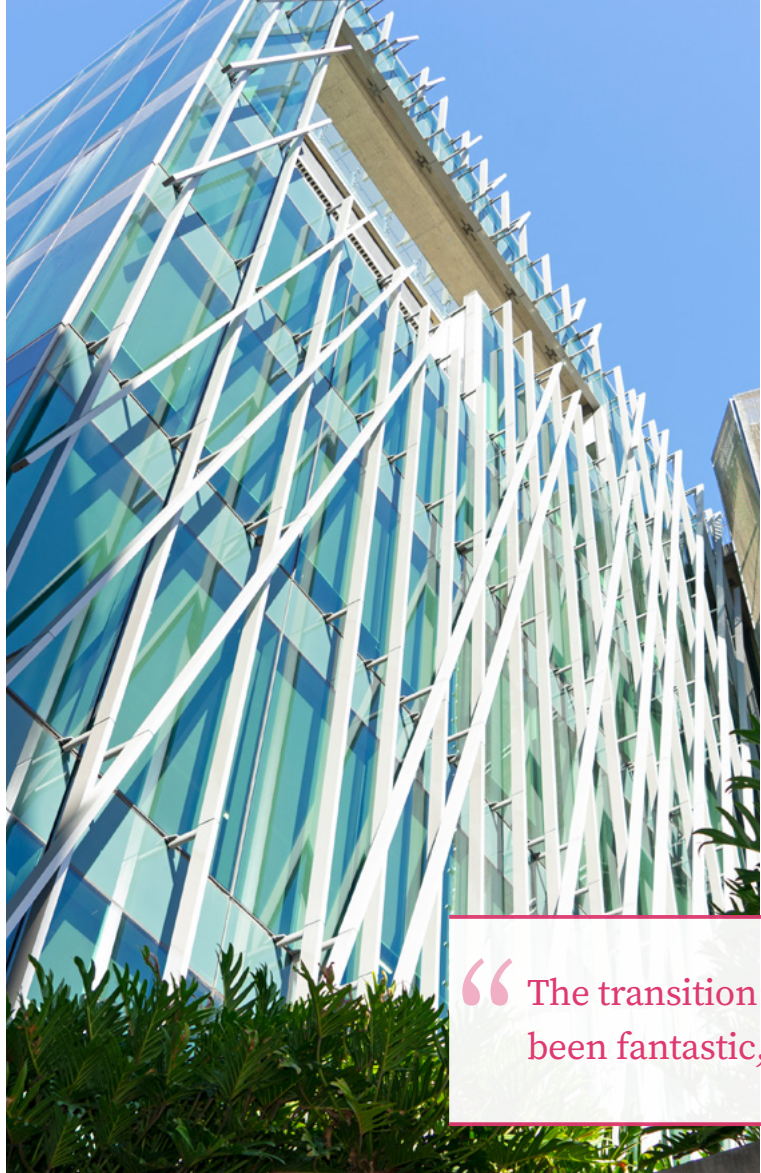
I have limited arm function and no fine motor skills so I can't move my fingers."

Before his accident, Hayden was studying full time, doing a double degree in film and law at QUT.

"I actually took two units online while I was still in the hospital," he says. "I struggled a little at first because I found it difficult to disconnect my brain from the rehab element, but then I got into the swing of things and was flying along by the end of the semester."

So much so that he was ready to go back to full-time, on-campus studies. That's when Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor Belinda McLeod – who is from the Spinal Life Australia Back2Work project and had already been instrumental in helping Hayden commence his online studies in the hospital – really stepped things up.

"The transition back to uni has been fantastic, thanks to Belinda," says Hayden. "My lectures are recorded so I can access them at home, but all of my tutorials are on campus and Belinda did a lot of work getting me back there." Together, Belinda and Hayden toured his classrooms so that he knew exactly where they were, how to get to them, and what accessible facilities, such as toilets, were nearby.



cord injury,” says Hayden. “She also helped me determine what information I wanted to give my co-workers in terms of my injury and the support that I would need. And because I already knew the workplace, she was always happy for me to step in and take the lead if needed. She’s just been fantastic, and I still talk to her regularly.”

Belinda speaks just as highly of Hayden: “He’s such a self-starter,” she says. “He had really clear goals, and he met them more quickly than any of us could have ever anticipated. He’s also a great problem solver, especially when it comes to assistive tech. He’s a genius with Apple products, and has helped us and other participants so much. We still call him for advice!”

Hayden returned to work in July last year. “Previously I was a salesperson in the small appliances department, but now I’ve transitioned to a role called floor leading,

which involves greeting customers, leading them to the right place in the store for what they need, and getting a salesperson to help them out,” he explains.

“The transition back to uni has been fantastic, thanks to Belinda”

“There are also specialist disability advisors who work at QUT,” Hayden explains, “and Belinda spent a lot of time coordinating with my advisor – whose name, if you can believe it, is Melinda!”

Hayden has a wheelchair accessible van that his parents, granddad or partner drive for him when needed, but he mostly gets around on city council buses.

And not just for uni: he also catches the bus to get home from his part-time job at JB Hi-Fi in Carindale. He worked there before his injury and was always keen to return. Happily, the management team and his co-workers have been incredibly understanding and supportive every step of the way.

“My area manager sent a condolence email to my parents following my accident, and said they’d do anything in their capacity to help,” recalls Hayden. “They kept my job open for me the whole time until I was ready to come back to work.”

When he was ready, Belinda again played an important role: “She liaised with the management team to get the wheels in motion and gave them a breakdown of what a ‘normal’ return to work plan might look like for a person with a spinal

“I understand it’s not *that* common to go to a shop and see a staff member in a wheelchair, but people have been more than happy to work with me... although I have noticed that lots of them ask me if I work there, even with the big yellow JB Hi-Fi lanyard around my neck!”

Belinda says that the role of Back2Work is, ultimately, to be in a person’s corner: “We’re on their side to help them take their life back, which is so important when so much has changed. Hayden has shown us that it’s possible to do full-time study and return to work after such a life-changing accident. He really took control. I just had to smooth the way... and get out of his way!”

Hayden is set to complete his university degrees in the middle of 2025, and then do a six-month post-graduate course in order to be able to practice law in Queensland. After that, who knows? “I’m keen to work in talent management, to look after contracts, copyrights and all sorts of intellectual property stuff for actors and sports stars,” he says. “But I’m open to anything!” [A](#)

Back2Work is a specialist project that provides early intervention vocational rehabilitation to patients in the Princess Alexandra Hospital’s Spinal Injuries Unit, funded through the Motor Accident Insurance Commission (MAIC). For more information, go to spinal.com.au/back2work

Getting to know...

KEY WORKER, MARY KERR

When Mary Kerr moved to Australia from Northern Ireland seven years ago, she knew she was getting a big upgrade when it came to the weather, but didn't realise what a difference it would make to her working life as well.

We asked Mary, who lives in Perth with her partner, David, and their little dog Yogi (so named because he looks just like a little teddy bear), to tell us more...

What three words describe you best?

"Kind, compassionate and determined."

How long have you been working at Spinal Life?

"My one-year anniversary was on June 8 this year."

Have you always been a Key Worker, or did you start off in another role?

"I've been a Key Worker since I started with Spinal Life, but before that I was a support worker for 14 years, in both Australia and in Northern Ireland."

What sort of experience/qualifications did you have in order to secure the role of Key Worker?

"I completed a Cert 3 in Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, but I think it's my experience as a support worker that really helped: I've worked in nursing homes, as a hospital care aide and in community support roles."

What do you think are the main qualities somebody needs to be a good Key Worker?

"To be passionate about the work that we do, to be able to put ourselves in our clients' shoes, and to constantly want to learn how we can contribute to our clients' quality of life."

What are the main responsibilities of a Key Worker?

"As well as supporting clients I also help to train new members of staff and work closely with my Client Service Officer, Team Leader and Regional Manager on daily tasks."

What's one item that you often recommend to people with a spinal cord injury, to make their life easier?

"Mobility aids, such as slide boards and slide sheets, which make transferring a lot easier."

What's the funniest/most embarrassing moment you've ever had while on a job?

"When a client started laughing one day and pointed out that I was wearing two completely different shoes. Whoops!"



And the most life-affirming moment?

"When a client, who had just transitioned from the hospital to home, told me how grateful she is for all my support and how it's made things easier for her to keep moving forwards."

What's the one thing you wish people understood better about people with spinal cord injuries?

"That they've had a traumatic experience and everything in their life now looks completely different. It takes a lot of strength, hard work and determination to build their lives again."

How do you relax when you're not at work?

"I like to read, knit, crochet and do jigsaw puzzles. I also love to get out and about with my little dog Yogi, at the park or on nature trails."


What's the best thing about your job?

"The clients I work with and my colleagues in Perth who support me each step of the way."

What's the hardest thing about your job?

"When my clients are having a rough time. I just want to help in the best way that I can."

What's the most important lesson being a Key Worker has taught you?

"We have a lot of responsibility on our shoulders. Our clients rely on us to help them have a great quality of life." 

We're recruiting for Personal Support Workers across Queensland and Western Australia! If you know someone who would be perfect for the role, encourage them to visit spinal.com.au/careers to find out more.

Improve your health, without leaving home

Online yoga and exercise classes are now available to you

Whether you live in a regional area or are finding it hard to access health and fitness for any other reason, telehealth may be a solution that works best for you.

Spinal Life offers exercise and adaptive yoga classes, via a simple-to-use online platform called CoviU. It offers a great way to enjoy the many benefits of these classes, all from the comfort of your home.

Run in small groups, there is also the bonus of being able to chat and connect with others, as well as our highly experienced Allied Health professionals who run the classes.

Exercise Physiology

Our Exercise Physiologists and Physiotherapists deliver classes that are focused on increasing strength, movement and mobility.

Exercise Physiologist Ernest Starowicz says the classes are tailored to the abilities of everyone within the group.

“Sessions involve a warm-up with stretches and strength components, then a short burst of cardio, with a focus on stretches and breathing at the end,” he says.

“The best part about the sessions is building friendships and learning about our bodies in a supportive environment.”

Adaptive Yoga

Yoga can have many benefits for your mental and physical health, such as reducing stress and anxiety, managing chronic pain and improving your strength and balance.

Occupational Therapist and Yoga Specialist Lisa Bidgood, who delivers the classes, says they run for 60 minutes and include breath work, meditation and yoga poses.

“The idea with adapted yoga is that the poses are modified to fit your body, not your body fitting a certain aesthetic,” she says.



“We look at the essence of a pose and what that feels like in your body. This is the same for both online and in-person classes.”

What do I need to access classes?

These classes are available to anyone in any location with a reliable internet connection and either a computer, iPad or tablet.

To participate, you will need:

- An adequate space to undertake exercises and move through them without any potential hazards in the way
- For exercise physiology, you will need exercise equipment (dumbbells, Thera/resistance bands, active mitts, water bottle)
- For yoga, you can use yoga props such as blocks, bolsters or straps, but these can be swapped out for a rolled beach towel, scarf or belt, or a pillow
- A camera on your device at eye level to see exercise demonstrations
- A carer or family member to assist if required.

All participants will have a one-on-one chat with an Allied Health team member prior to attending, so we have a clear understanding of your fitness level and your goals and you can ask any questions – beginners are not only welcomed but encouraged!

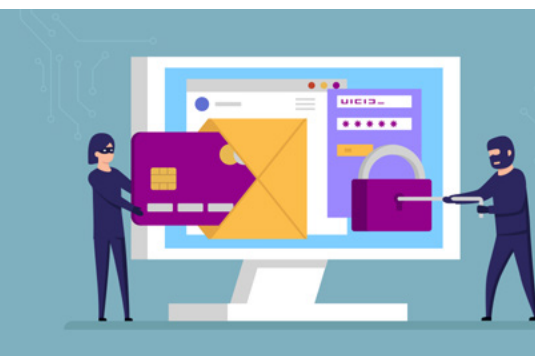
Classes run once a week for a six-week period, to ensure participants can gain the most benefits from the exercise physiology and adaptive yoga programs.

If you would prefer to attend in person, group yoga classes and one-on-one exercise physiology appointments are available at our Healthy Living Centres in Brisbane and Cairns. [A](#)

Visit spinal.com.au/classes to find out more or call **1300 774 625** to speak with our team.

The latest

Information, inspiration and inclusivity



BEWARE OF SCAMMERS

Scammers are becoming more sophisticated than ever as they attempt to access personal details and gain financial information, so it's important to stay up to date with the latest warnings.

The most recent 'Targeting Scams' report from Scamwatch revealed Australians lost a record \$3.1 billion to scams in 2022, with people with disability reporting financial losses of \$33.7 million.

Common scams include phone calls, SMS and emails impersonating known brands, with a link for the recipient to

click through. This includes bank notices about large transactions, overdue toll fees, parcels needing to be picked up and more.

There have also been scams involving the NDIS, including calls from scammers pretending to be the National Disability Insurance Agency, asking for debts to be paid, as well as false invoices purporting to be from suppliers.

To avoid scams, Scamwatch recommends:

- If you receive a phone call from someone you suspect is a scammer, hang up, find the organisation's number yourself and call them back.
- Watch out for telltale signs of a scam in unsolicited emails and messages, like not using your correct name, typos and grammatical errors, or suspicious web addresses.
- Don't click on links in unexpected emails or messages, even if it appears to have come from a legitimate source.
- Don't give financial or account details, or copies of your identity documents to someone online who you've never met in person.
- Never give strangers remote access to your computer.
- Limit what personal information you share about yourself online, including on social media.
- Use strong passwords for your accounts and internet network, and never share them with others.
- Check your credit report for free using a reputable credit reference bureau at least once every year – this can help you catch any unauthorised activity.
- Install anti-virus software on your devices and keep it up to date.

Visit scamwatch.gov.au to report a scam and read the latest advice. NDIS participants can also visit ndis.gov.au/participants/working-providers/what-are-scams for resources.

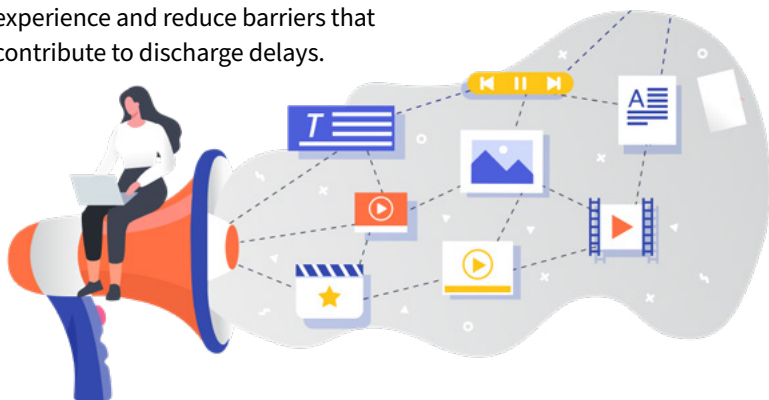
HELPFUL RESOURCES FOR HOSPITAL STAYS

National Disability Services (NDS) has published a series of helpful guides to help you prepare for hospital stays and plan for being discharged.

The 'Ready to Go Home' project was created by people with disability, service providers and health professionals to improve the hospital experience and reduce barriers that contribute to discharge delays.

NDS and the Department of Health WA partnered to deliver the project, which was funded by the Australian Government's Department of Social Services.

Visit nds.org.au/index.php/resources and search for 'Ready to Go Home' to find these helpful resources.



SHARE YOUR NDIS EXPERIENCES

The NDIS is looking for participants, families, carers and people within the disability community to share valuable feedback on future improvements.

By signing up to be part of Participant First, you will receive a weekly email inviting you to have your say through surveys, focus groups or interviews.

Participation is optional and feedback is confidential and not added to your official records. [A](#)

Visit ndis.gov.au/community/have-your-say and click the 'Participant First' button.



CATCH UP WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

Our Peer Support catch-ups are held across Queensland and Western Australia. Keep an eye on Facebook and our website for updates on upcoming events.

If you'd like to connect with our Peer Support, Post Polio or Transverse Myelitis Groups in your region, please use the contact details below.

Spinal Life Peer Support Groups

BRIEBIE ISLAND: Ross Duncan on
0475 077 080.

BRISBANE: Fred Nitz on 0412 190 585.

BUNDABERG: Steve Richter on
0413 457 284.

MACKAY: Debra Reaves on
0487 021 735.

MORETON BAY: Ross Duncan on
0475 077 080.

ROCKHAMPTON: Robynne Clifton on
0473 576 107 or Anne Guthrie on
0407 116 035.

Post Polio Groups

CAIRNS: Joy Hay on 4055 5795.

GOLD COAST: Lyn Glover on
0448 206 856 or

Joan Radanovic on 0413 178 073.

SUNSHINE COAST: Cathy Newman
on 5447 6608.

Transverse Myelitis Group

Contact Jodi Gallon on 0451 235 860.

Join our community today at
spinal.com.au/membership or
call **1300 774 625** to find out more.



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WE DELIVER FREEDOM
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Taking the plunge

How hydrotherapy, hard work and horses are helping Janet get back on her feet

There's a beautiful spot about an hour and a half from Cairns, called Herberton. The oldest town on the Atherton Tablelands, it's situated on the banks of the Wild River and, at 918 metres above sea level, is known as "the village in the hills".

It's the place where Janet Blaik lives... and also where she disappears from regularly.

That's because once every month, Janet heads to Cairns to spend a week at the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre.

Back in 2018, when Janet was 64, the avid horse rider went riding one weekend. "I didn't have a fall or anything," she says, "but I did move the heavy horse float and thought I might have pulled a muscle. To cut a long story short, about a week later I woke up one morning and simply couldn't move."

The following 12 months was a whirl of hospitals, tests and a tough rehabilitation process, after Janet sustained a spinal cord injury at the T5 level while undergoing an operation to remove a blood clot on her spine.

"It took ages and a lot of hard work to get back up on my feet again," says Janet, who credits a forearm support frame with helping her initially manage transfers to get into bed, and later standing up straight. And when she eventually got a prosthesis for her weaker right leg, she was even able to use the forearm support frame to help her walk again.

While she was in hospital Janet made the decision to go with Spinal Life for her personal care needs, but then someone suggested she try the organisation's Healthy Living Centre in Cairns.

She loved it.

"It's all about the hydrotherapy for me," she says. "It's so great. The water is lovely and warm, and my physios Julie and Olivia, who are with me in the pool, are fantastic."

As her health and mobility started to improve, Janet decided to go all-in and increase her Healthy Living Centre stays to once a month.

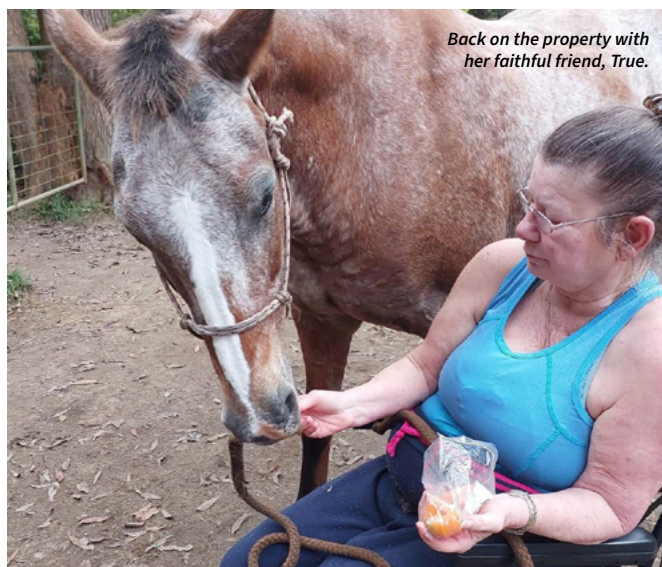
"My Spinal Life Supports Coordinator, Alice Schiller, who has been absolutely wonderful, helped me get the necessary NDIS funding, and for the last year I've spent five nights at the Healthy Living Centre every month bar one," she says. "I come down on a Monday and go home on a Saturday... and then it's only three weeks until I'm back again! It's a big effort, but it's worth it."

Janet's determination and incredible commitment to her health and fitness are definitely paying off.

"My endurance was really poor when I first started hydrotherapy, but I now do a full hour in the pool at every session," she says. "And while I used to need one person in front of me and another person behind me to help me walk back and forth in the water, I can now do it pretty much unassisted – I just use a pool noodle for balance. I'm doing heel-toe walking now as well. Before, I was walking on tiptoes, but now I'm putting my heels on the ground as well. One of my physios saw me in the pool recently for the first time in a few months, and she was quite astounded at my improvement."

"I'm definitely getting better, and I'm determined that I'm going to *keep* getting better, until I can get back on my horse," says Janet, who also maintains a regular exercise routine at home between her visits to the Healthy Living Centre. "And the only way I'm going to do that is by working at it every day, whether I feel like it or not. I don't know how far I'll get, but I'm going to give it a bloody good try." **A**

For more information about the Healthy Living Centre in Cairns, go to spinalhealthyliving.com.au or call **1300 774 625**.



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