



Have walking frame, *will travel!*

When planning her latest excursion to the Greek village of Leonidion, **Diana Noonan** asked her Mum to share the journey.

Adventures with Mum!

For 20 years I've been visiting the same small village on the southeast coast of Greece's Peloponese Peninsula.

Last year, I asked my mother Val, aged 79, if she would like to join me.

Val experiences mobility difficulties due to arthritis, so when she replied that she would be delighted to travel to Leonidion, we both set about looking for the best ways to manage long haul travel and enjoy new experiences together.

Val, who has had hip, knee and ankle

replacements, and who uses a walking stick to aid mobility, immediately decided that a walking frame would increase her confidence, thus giving her a greater degree of independence.

She purchased a walker with a seat so she could rest while waiting in airline queues and while sightseeing.

She also chose one with a basket, as this would enable her to stow essential belongings such as sunglasses, her camera, and small purchases.

Then she did something I had not

anticipated: she began a daily exercise routine, walking up to three kilometres a day using the walking frame in order to increase her fitness, decrease her weight, and be in the best possible physical condition to enjoy our holiday.

Meanwhile, I organised our bookings, and requested wheelchair assistance at all airports.

This is because airlines prefer that walking frames be stowed in the hold, so they can't be used for boarding purposes or at any stage after checking in.



The 'wheelchair assisted' note on our booking forms also automatically ensured that Val boarded all aircraft with the aid of a hydraulic lift, and that I accompanied her.

It is important to note that while wheelchair assisted travellers are the first to board a plane, they are also the last to get off; it is necessary to ensure that you do not have any tight flight connections, as time can be an issue.

We booked aisle seats for ease of moving about the plane, and so we were close to the bathrooms.

We avoided seats directly in front of the bathrooms, as these do not recline.

Val chose a folding walking stick to keep in the aircraft seat pocket in front of her. When she wanted to move around the plane, she simply assembled the stick rather than having to ask for assistance to get it down from the overhead lockers.

Even if I was asleep, she was still independent.

Thoughtful packing

I chose a hiker's backpack and a daypack.

Val used a wheelie bag and a daypack.

This meant that at airports, I could manage both large pieces of luggage with ease while Val pushed her walker with our daypacks lying on its seat.

On day excursions, wearing a daypack meant that my hands were free to push Val (sitting on the seat of her walker) if this became necessary. >



Val carried her medications with her as hand luggage in case our checked luggage went missing en route.

As Val wears two hearing aids, we purchased a small lapel badge from The Hearing Association so she could alert others of her hearing impairment.

I would like to say that this was a helpful move which encouraged airline staff to speak clearly and loudly to Val.

In fact, stewards almost always directed their enquiries to me when Val had any difficulty hearing them.

This was a frustrating experience and one that we hope airlines will address in



their future staff training.

We booked a two night stopover in Singapore so Val would feel refreshed enough to enjoy the city, and chose a central city hotel so that a bus was always just a short walk from the door.

Not all city buses are able to accommodate walking frames, so it pays to check before leaving home.

Studying a Singapore city map before leaving New Zealand meant that we seldom had any wasted walking time, and always took the shortest routes, essential since Val could only walk for a limited number of kilometres.

We also planned our 'adventures' well ahead so that, wherever possible, we could request mobility assistance.

The Singapore Bird Park, for instance, provided a mobility scooter for a fee of just NZ\$20, and the Singapore Gardens

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provided a wheelchair free of charge.

In Greece, we took a train out of Athens and, in Corinth, hired a small car for our onward journey to the village.

We used the car not only for day trips but as a way of conveying Val to flat areas of the village where she could use her walker to shop independently.

During our three weeks away from home, we completed all of the excursions that we had looked forward to.

This was largely due to Val's high level of fitness and her sensible approach to spending the odd day simply relaxing and building up stamina for our next adventure.

Not everything went according to plan, but we look back with amusement on these unexpected events.

How could we ever have envisaged, for instance, that the travelators on the Singapore underground, which Val was managing so well on her walker, would suddenly increase dramatically in speed during the 6pm rush hour so that we were almost propelled off the ends of them!

We quickly found the lifts.

And who was to know that the drop from the carriage to the platform of the airport-to-Corinth train was so great at one station that even a fully mobile adult would have to leap?

And that the train stopped for only four minutes!

But this is the stuff that independent travel is made of. And it's good to know that, whatever your age or ability, it's possible not only to manage or overcome such obstacles, but to look back with a degree of satisfaction and pride at having vanquished them.

Would Val and I travel again to the other side of the world? Just try and stop us!



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