

Thessaloniki by wheelchair

You don't have to be disabled yourself to imagine how difficult it must be to get around in this city – most of us have struggled through the car-ridden pavements with prams to get an idea. Here Paul Shaw talks us through a day in the life of a wheelchair user

Waking up I had a feeling that for some reason today was my day. As I shuffled over onto my wheelchair, I wondered what the International Day of Disabled Persons would have in store. I turned on the radio and went for a shower. Nothing better than a hot shower on a cold morning – I manage using the rails bought and fitted by friends. Social services don't assess the living

stating chirpily that it was all down to education. For the first time ever I decided to call the station. I praised them for mentioning the day, adding that it would be an eye-opener for politicians to try using my wheelchair to see how the ramps in Thessaloniki actually 'work'. The production assistant asked politely, "But why are you calling?" I took a breath and explained that politicians, not just citizens, need

the home and takes care of collecting my prescription.

Luckily my friends had found me a flat with a large lift and a garage door which I can open and free myself into the city I love. OK, I had to wait until my neighbour came and moved his car. We've already discussed this. His reply: "Just shout, you know where I am." My freedom relies on him listening to me.

My first stop was the post

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conditions of the disabled – that's up to us.

On the radio, a cheerful DJ was reminding citizens to pay attention to where they park – avoiding the ramps –

educating. She replied in a bewildered tone, "But we are not that kind of show – we just play music." And the music carried on and again we were reminded about the ramps. But had they listened to me?

Before any wheelchair user leaves home alone, deep inside – no matter how positively they see the world – there is that burning hope that today will be an easy day. Just before I went out, the "Home help", provided by a European project, arrived. She runs some errands for me outside

office. I was quickly up the ramp and to the desk for disabled persons. No queue and the staff treated me well. Next, the bank, but due to the new security doors, I couldn't get in. I had to knock on a side door. My freedom relies on them listening to me.

I stopped at a cafe – couldn't stay long, there was no bathroom I could get in, and then a bit of window shopping. That's all wheelchair users can do – window shop. See for yourself how many shops have steps. At times I am served on the pavement – providing the assistant sees or hears me; otherwise I am invisible.

Next, my favourite place,





Lack of education: Thoughtless parking is sadly an all too familiar sight to citizens of Thessaloniki

the old market. They treat me like a friend there: I know their names – they know mine. They place the bag on my knees so it won't fall off.

On my way home there is one corner that has no ramp, so I either ask for help or wait, and everybody listens, seeing me in the middle of a main street. They even get out of their cars to help. They apologise for our city – but should I have to ask for help in the first place?

Eventually, I arrive back, relieved to be safely home. I put on my bracelet with the

emergency button that connects me to a volunteer service which will call friends or medical help if necessary. They will listen to me.

When the day ended

I heard more promises on the news for persons with disabilities. I was listening – was anyone else?

By Paul Shaw

Note: This is an abridged version of an article first published by the Athens News 14th Dec 2009. In 2010 Paul Shaw founded the Disabled Access Friendly campaign, www.disabled-accessfriendly.com

Editor's note: If anyone you know who prefers to travel on wide, flat, pedestrianised surfaces is suffering while the promenade of the city's seafront is closed (due to revamp works), Peraia to Neoi Epivates is a good flat, seaside walk, stroll or roll. Just 10 minutes past the airport from Thessaloniki city. See www.thermaikos.gr

Paul's favourite place, Thessaloniki's market



Raffle news

An anonymous raffle enthusiast bought a ticket this month saying that our IWOG raffles brought her good luck because whenever she won she had a lucky omen for the month, everything went right. Right? What? Well well! So for the sake of this unknown member and others who feel so blessed **I am seeking those unwanted Christmas, New Year, birthday and Name Day GIFTS** you have stashed away in the back of the wardrobe. Bring them to the raffle table at the meeting(s) and think of those happy months you might be bestowing on another member!

I've had such a lot of feedback from the lucky winners of the Christmas Bazaar Raffle who were really pleased with the prizes they won. We had only one minor grumble which was solved within minutes. I would like to say a special **thank YOU** to all of you who made or found prizes. As a result we made a record profit which is badly needed these days!

Diana

