

General Information

We have included further down a section on equipment repair and hire. We will start, however, with a suggestion for those who have difficulty walking long distances, but don't normally use a wheelchair. To help people to be more mobile and flexible with less problems, we looked into the possibility of hiring a chair in Paris.

When we looked into this in more detail, we discovered that (in the UK) you can actually buy a chair for around £100 using the internet, and getting direct delivery from a manufacturer.

Two sites from which this is possible (there are others) are:

- **Mobility Zone Ltd** www.mobilitymegastore.co.uk; and,
- the **Bin-to Co** www.bin-to.co.uk.

Also note an American company **Spinlife** www.spinlife.com who offer a similar facility in the USA, and who include some useful tips and information about 'Selecting a wheelchair'.

For the occasional user, a lot of the finer points don't matter all that much, but the choice between having large wheels and small wheels is important. With small wheels you always have to be pushed - with large ones you have more control, and can push yourself over short distances. Also important is the weight of the chair, and how easily it will fold up for example to go in the boot of a car or taxi.

The two we bought recently not only had a fold-down back and detachable footplates, but the chair wheels were also easily removable.

For most people needing to use a chair very occasionally, you can find one at some venues, like the Louvre and the Orsay. If you need it to get around the shops, and to enjoy just wandering around, then taking a chair with you is almost certainly a better option than trying to hire one in Paris, unless your journey to get there is particularly complicated or difficult

Car hire

If you want to hire a wheelchair accessible vehicle in the UK, and use it to go for a visit to Paris, one organisation to try is:

Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles, Unit H4, Morton Park, Darlington DL1 4PH

Tel: 01325-389900 website: www.wheelchairaccessiblevehicles.co.uk

Another good contact point is **Wheelchair Travel**, in Guildford, whose details are in the section on *Coach and minibus hire*. We have used them regularly over the years, and have found them to be extremely helpful and reliable.

In addition, **Thrifty** have two or three adapted Renault Kangoo vehicles which are designed for a wheelchair user and up to three other people. If you are not familiar with this kind of vehicle, there is a large door at the back, and a fold-down ramp to facilitate chair access. Even if you cannot justify (or afford) owning such a vehicle, to hire one for a holiday in Paris or elsewhere, could simplify both getting there, and getting around. It would also help with luggage handling - though you might find it more comfortable with only a driver and only one additional passenger if you are taking a lot of luggage.

The **Thrifty** contact details are: Tel: 0118 951-1123 e-mail: thrifty.reading@thrifty.co.uk

For some visitors there is great advantage in being able to fly to Paris and pick up a rental car at the airport. The independence implied is of great value. For a group of three or four people car hire can be a reasonably priced option, but remember all the extras that may not be

mentioned on the basic tariff, such as passenger insurance, collision damage waiver and VAT. The big companies such as Hertz, Avis, Budget, Europcar etc, all offer this service. They tend to charge what one might call 'business' prices. They have the advantage of airport check-in desks and can be booked quite easily by a British travel agent. It's definitely worth shopping around and getting a quote from several of them, and possibly from smaller local companies as well, as the rates vary a lot.

While you can use the internet to get competitive quotes for car hire, it is generally only possible to book a standard vehicle this way. You may well be restricted to the age range 25-65 for on-line bookings. Any kind of special booking for a particular vehicle generally needs to be done by phone. As with other queries, you need to note and log the time of any call, finding out who you are speaking to. You need to take a reference number for a booking as well as getting confirmation of the details in writing.

Two sites which represent car hire agencies in the UK and USA are:

www.carrentals.co.uk Tel: 0845 225-0845 (in the UK), and

www.autoeurope.com Tel: 1-888-223-5555 (toll free in the USA). The Auto Europe site includes a neat summary of both the history and culture of Paris, and some helpful information about the local climate.

www.easyCar.com only undertakes on-line bookings, which reduces costs, but makes it more difficult if you have questions or special needs. They can offer good value rental. Another American site with links for car rental in Paris is **www.bnm.com**. If you use Google, you'll get an even wider choice.

The **www.Fodor.com** site has some useful tips about reducing the cost of car rental. The minimum age for hiring a car is usually 21, but with some companies it is 25. Some also have an upper age limit. You're recommended to take out CDW (collision damage waiver) insurance, even though it may cost £7-8 per day. This means that if you are unlucky enough to damage the car, most of the cost is paid by the insurance whether it was your fault or not. You have no open-ended financial commitment relating to the car.

To hire an adapted vehicle in Paris, you can try a company which seems to be related to Ulysse Taxis. They have Kangoo vehicles which can take one chair user plus up to four other people, and also minibuses which can take two, three or even four wheelchairs/users.

The firm is called **Libertans**, *website:* www.libertans.com *e-mail:* contact@libertans.com
Tel: 0820-825-216.

Hire cars with hand controls can be made available in Paris from:

- **Hertz** Tel: 08708 448844 (for worldwide reservations from the UK).
website: www.hertz.co.uk. Given 24/48 hours notice they can arrange for a car with hand controls to be available at CDG airport. This would be something like a Ford Focus;
- **Europcar** Tel: 0870 6075000 (the UK office who can probably make your reservation in Paris). +33 825 358358 (for the French office). Europcar have several vehicles available including VW Golf and Bora cars. They require at least 72 hours notice of a reservation. *website:* www.europcar.com.

We have heard of people having difficulty in doing this (like they have turned up having thought they had a booking, only to be told “There is no adapted vehicle available”) - so make sure that you have the booking confirmation in writing, and details of who you spoke to when making phone calls - and check it by phone just a short time before you travel.

Another approach is to fit your hire car with Lynx portable hand controls. Information about the system is available from **Lynx Hand Controls**, 80 Church Lane, Aughton, Nr Ormskirk, Lancs L39 6SB Tel: 01695 422-622 Fax: 01695 422-152 website: www.lynxcontrols.com e-mail: info@lynxcontrols.com. Lynx say that they can make arrangements for you for hiring a car both in the UK and abroad - but we have no direct experience of using them in Paris. They offer some good advice on their website.

- first up is the advice NOT to reserve through local travel agents, nor even, necessarily, the reservation offices of the big companies. ‘Not available’ means either ‘don’t know’, or ‘don’t want to deal with it and take the risk’;
- second, **one of the best ways of communicating with rental companies is by fax** - or possibly by e-mail where this is available. This can help overcome a language barrier where one exists, and it is easier to avoid misunderstandings.

Users have reported good experiences with Lynx controls, but say that “the driver must have good balance on the car seat, because the system ‘floats’. With some cars, strong fingers are also needed. If you’re going to depend on this installation on a car in Paris, it might be wise to try it out first on a car at home and you need to have something in writing from the hire company saying that it’s OK to fit it.

Car hire is an interesting example of where the website information is inadequate, as it doesn’t generally provide any details of manually controlled cars which may be available, or give other information which people with special needs would find helpful.

Climate

This is not dissimilar to that in the south of England. Average autumn, winter and spring temperatures in Paris are much the same as those in London, although it may be a little colder in the winter. Temperatures rise in July and August making it fairly hot and sticky, which is an excuse many Parisians use for getting out of town. When packing, allow for variability, particularly in the winter and spring.

In general the weather poses relatively few problems for the disabled visitor. In the winter it can be both cold and damp. Average temperatures can be misleading, since Paris is more influenced by continental extremes than London. It can easily be -5 or even -10°C for short periods and much colder than people are used to in Britain.

Either the spring or autumn are likely to be the best times for a visit if you are concerned about the weather.

Coach and minibus hire

Over 50 coach companies throughout the UK have adapted step-free coaches available for hire. The coaches are accessed by lift or ramp and some have on-board toilets at the same level as the seating, *not* down steep narrow steps. In 2005, the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK updated their "Accessible Coach Directory". It is available on the CPT website at: www.cpt.org.uk We hope that the information will be updated and extended by others in

the future, even though Tripscope who carried out the survey is no longer around. Some of the companies included in the directory say that their vehicles are not available for travel abroad, but many will be open to negotiation, depending on the availability of both vehicles and drivers.

Coach Direct

The Coach House, 22 South Street, Rochford, Essex SS4 1BQ

Tel: 08705-502069 Fax: 08700-702069

website: www.coachdirect.co.uk

We made enquiries through this company which advertises itself as a one-stop-shop for coach and travel information. They came back with a quotation for an accessible coach which would take several chair users, and which had an adapted toilet on board. **Certainly worth a try if you're looking to hire a coach.**

Companies that can hire wheelchair accessible vehicles for foreign travel include:

John Flanagan, 2 Reddish Hall Cottages, Broad Lane, Grappenhall, Warrington WA4 2HA

Tel: 01925-266115 Fax: 01925-261100

website: www.flanagancoaches.co.uk

Wheelchair Travel, 1 Johnston Green, Guildford, Surrey GU2 6XS

Tel: 01483-233640 Fax: 01483-237772

website: www.wheelchair-travel.co.uk e-mail: trevor@wheelchair-travel.co.uk

Probably the oldest source of converted vehicles for hire. Trevor Pollitt who has established and built-up this service over a number of years is well known to us. Wheelchair Travel has a number of adapted minibuses with either tail lifts or ramped access available for hire with or without a driver. In addition they have cars with hand controls, and 'Chairman' cars.

We used a Wheelchair Travel minibus during our Paris survey, and the service we received was excellent. If you have to go to pick it up, make sure that you have a very good map, as the garage/depot (which is not at Johnston Green) is quite difficult to find !

There are an increasing number of organisations, both commercial and voluntary, which have adapted coaches available for hire to groups. Some local Community Transport (CT) organisations can provide wheelchair-accessible minibuses and small coaches. However, our experience in Ealing with the CT is that they no longer allow people to take their vehicles abroad. They take the view that the regulations and the insurance are now too difficult to deal with.

Converting to metric units

In the guide we have put nearly all the measurements in centimetres, metres and kilometres (cm, m and km) since these are the units increasingly used internationally. To convert these to feet and inches, use the following guidelines:

10cm is about 4 inches (2.5cm is about 1 inch)

1m is about a yard

1km is 5/8ths of a mile (3km is about 2 miles)

We've given door widths and other measurements in centimeters (cm) and there's a diagram which gives the approximate dimensions of a standard wheelchair. Obviously chairs vary in size considerably, and you need to know the exact size of yours.

Metric weights and measures are used in France (and increasingly in the UK) and very roughly, a litre is just under two pints, so when you're buying petrol (gasoline) 4.5 litres is about equivalent to a gallon. Solids are sold by the gram or kilogram. There are 1000 grams in a "kilo" and 1 kilo is just over 2 pounds weight.

For temperatures, we have used degrees Centigrade, although readers from the USA will be more familiar with Fahrenheit. To convert:

0°C = 32°F, 10°C = 50°F, 20°C = 68°F, 30°C = 86°F, 40°C = 104°F

Currency

Virtually all forms of currency exchange cost money. It also costs money to convert your unspent cash back at the end of your visit, so it can be wise to use most of it up just before leaving, using it, for example, to pay part of the hotel bill. However, if you're going to Paris on a holiday, it's best simply to accept that there will be costs - and it's certainly not worth spending much of your (valuable and expensive) time in trying to find the best 'rate'. **Our advice is "Go and enjoy yourself, and don't worry about the last few pennies !"**

It is sensible to carry money in the form of a mixture of cash and credit/debit cards, and possibly some as travellers cheques for an emergency. Probably the best way of getting Euros is to buy them before you travel.

We suggest carrying as much cash as you are comfortable with, as it is the most versatile and dependable way of paying for things and for changing money. Make sure that you know roughly what the rate against the euro is, and then you're much less likely to be 'fleeced'.

For making larger payments, our preference is to use a credit card wherever possible, provided you are paying off the balance each month (although don't use a credit card for getting cash unless you absolutely have to). Using a credit card to get cash out of an ATM is particularly expensive as there is a transaction charge, AND you start paying interest immediately. As a rule of thumb, this route costs you about 5% of the cash you get. Debit cards are generally significantly cheaper to use.

It is sensible, if you can, to carry at least two or three cards, so when one doesn't work for some reason, you have another to back it up. You'll need to know your PIN numbers - and there are some discrimination issues here, as not all disabled people are able to use chip and pin easily.

Commonsense security

One thing to watch out for is the safety of your purse, wallet, valuable documents and items like cameras and laptops. The risks are minimal if you take commonsense precautions. Disabled people, like everyone else, are vulnerable to the attentions of pickpockets and

thieves. **Don't keep everything together (cards, cash, cheques etc). In particular, in a place which is quite separate from your main purse or wallet, keep a 'spare' credit card and some spare cash, together with a photocopy of your passport .**

Make sure you have a record of your card details and cheque numbers. Find out what your insurance policy covers, and have a note of the number to ring to cancel your credit cards in the event of something going badly wrong. If you want to claim on your insurance for anything lost or stolen, you will almost certainly have to produce a note proving that you reported it to the local police.

The most risky way of carrying your valuables is in a separate bag. It's easy to put it down somewhere and become distracted, and it's also relatively easy for a thief to grab it and run, possibly by cutting the strap over your shoulder. A pouch or "bum bag" which is attached to your body, or possibly to your wheelchair, provides a safer spot for your valuables.

Documents required

British nationals need to carry a valid passport, and it is becoming an increasingly common requirement for foreign travel that your passport should be valid for at least another six months. Passports are issued by the UK Passport Agency *website: www.ukpa.gov.uk* *Tel: 0870 521-0410* for the advice line which is available 24/7. Visitors from other European Union countries need either a passport or an identity card. No visa is required for American or Canadian visitors, and a passport is sufficient.

If you are coming by car, or intending to hire one, then remember that all the drivers must carry their driving licence. If you are bringing a car you also need the logbook, and an insurance certificate proving that you have third party insurance.

In addition to having a travel/health insurance policy, of which you should carry details in more than one place, British nationals should carry a **European Health Insurance Card (EHIC)**. This entitles you to either free or reduced cost emergency medical treatment in France. The EHIC can be obtained using a form available at a Post Office; on-line from www.ehic.org.uk or from *Tel: 0845 606 2030*.

Electrical supply

This is standardised as 220 volts AC 50 cycles and so will cause no problems for visitors from Britain, except that **you will need an international plug adapter**. Americans may need to buy a transformer if they want to use some electrical items. Remember that if you use an electric wheelchair, the airlines sometimes won't carry the batteries and you may need to organise some batteries and a charger to be available on your arrival.

American visitors may need to convert their electrical equipment to use on the 50 cycle system compared with the 60 cycles normally used in the US. Get proper advice before travelling.

Emergencies

If you run into an urgent problem, or have an accident of some kind, the first thing to do is to seek local help and advice - for example at the hotel you are staying at or at the information desk in the venue you're visiting.

British travellers are entitled to the same health service benefits in France as the French, provided they are armed with the EHIC, see under *Documents required*.

Unlike the British National Health Service, French citizens pay for part of their medical costs. Consequently **the benefits of the Reciprocal Health Agreement are no substitute for proper health insurance cover** discussed and outlined in the paragraphs on Insurance.

If you are a UK citizen you can reclaim some 70% of any doctors fees incurred during a stay in France. If you are treated as an in-patient in an 'approved' hospital, and show your EHIC then the office will pay 75% or more of the cost direct to the hospital. You pay the balance, together with a fixed daily charge. The procedures are bureaucratic, and you have to get and keep records and receipts for virtually everything, including prescription medicines. The full details are given on the appropriate page in *website*:

www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/HealthAdviceForTravellers/GettingTreatmentAroundTheWorld/

We give here some of the emergency telephone numbers which you might have to call, although you may well, of course, run into a language barrier - which is why it may be better to involve locals if you can.

The numbers for :

- the 24 hour ambulance service (called "SAMU") is 15;
- for the Police it is 17, and for the Fire Service it is 18.

Note that the European emergency phone number is 112.

Other useful telephone numbers in Paris are:

- SOS Médecins for a 24 hour doctor *Tel:* 01 47 07 77 77;
- SOS Dentaire provides for dental emergencies *Tel:* 01 43 37 51 00, but take care over any charges involved in using any of these services as they may not be recoverable under your insurance policy;
- SOS Handicap (medical help for disabled people) *Tel:* 01 47 10 70 20. This is the number of the Hôpital Raymond Poincaré, Garches, 92380 just past St Cloud. It is a major centre for both treatment and rehabilitation and consequently might be able to help with advice or with broken equipment. We used them in 2006 when someone's specialist equipment for evacuating the fluid from the base of a tracheotomy was damaged, and they were extremely helpful and replaced it;
- and there's an English language crisis line on 01 47 23 80 80.

What would almost certainly happen in the event of a serious accident or illness is that someone around would arrange for an ambulance to take you to the nearest hospital. If you have an accident at your hotel or hostel then the management will organise things for you.

In the event of a serious accident or medical condition, the procedure is to dial 15 for your nearest public emergency service SAMU (Service d'Aide Médicale d'Urgence). You will be billed for using this service, but part of the costs will be covered by your EHIC and the rest by your insurance policy. We have referred above to the need to keep records of expenditures and to keep receipts for money paid. *It cannot be emphasised too strongly that things will be much easier if you have adequate insurance.*

Note that before you undergo any extensive or expensive medical treatment, you need to check with your insurance company as to whether they will pay for the treatment at the hospital you have been taken to. They will have a 24-hour phone number - which you can usually ring without charge.

You may want to be taken or transferred to either the British or the American hospital, but as these are private hospitals, your insurance policy may not pay for treatment there. They are normally open 24 hours a day, but you should be aware that due to their relatively small size, sometimes all the beds are occupied.:

- The **British Hertford hospital**, Centre Hospitalier Franco-Britannique, 3 rue Barbès, 92300 Levallois-Perret, *Tel:* 01 46 39 22 22 has some 90 beds and good facilities for dealing with most kinds of illness or injury. Although by law the doctors are French, all the nurses and some of the other staff are British and you won't have any major language problems. British residents and visitors have priority access to the hospital;
- The **American hospital**, 63 blvd Victor Hugo, Neuilly, *Tel:* (1) 47.47.53.00 is a little larger but offers similar facilities and can cope with dental as well as medical problems.

One of the larger hospitals in Paris with an Accident and Emergency Department is:

Hôpital Cochin

27 rue du Faubourg St Jacques, 75014

Tel: 01 58 41 27 21

Chemists

There's a 24-hour pharmacy at:

Dhéry Pharmacy, inside Galerie des Champs

84, ave des Champs-Élysées, 75008 (Métro George-V)

Tel: 01 42 25 49 95

With step free access.

and some late-night pharmacies at:

British Pharmacy

62, ave des Champs-Élysées, 75008

On the corner with rue la Boétie

Tel: 01 43 59 22 52 (a British chemist open until midnight)

With step free access.

British and American Pharmacy

1 rue Auber, 75009

by pl de l'Opéra (open 08.30-20.00)

Tel: 01 42 65 88 29

+1 step at the entrance.

Pharmacy

2 rue Duphot, 75001

on the corner of rue Saint Honoré (open 09.15-19.30, Mon-Sat)

Small step/lip [7cm] at the entrance.

Equipment repair and hire

For wheelchair users, **it is always a good idea to carry a repair kit, including some simple tools. Taking a few vital spares also be an advantage**, especially if your chair isn't standard. Carrying one of the instant tyre-repair kits available from shops like Halfords may well be a sensible precaution.

One potentially useful place that we came across right in the centre is a bicycle sales and repair shop who provided 'free air' on the pavement for pumping up tyres. They might well be able to help with running repairs to a wheelchair. The shop is:

Au Réparateur de Bicyclettes

44 blvd de Sebastopol, 75003 Tel: 01 48 04 51 19

Located opposite the end of the rue de la Grande Truanderie, near the Pompidou Centre.

We have listed below shops and showrooms where you may be able to get repairs to equipment such as wheelchairs and/or where you may be able to hire things, although some are a little way outside the centre.

Hiring equipment needs to be carefully negotiated, as you may need to be absolutely certain that what you need is available, and (if necessary) will be delivered to your hotel or wherever you are staying. Where we have made comments, they are based on information given when we visited various shops and showrooms.

In connection with equipment hire, you may have to pay a substantial deposit, particularly for hiring items like a powered wheelchair or a scooter - and it may be necessary to make the deposit in cash, possibly as much as €1000-2000, depending on the value of the equipment being hired.

With the two big companies, AMMA and Bastide, you can write in before your visit and get a catalogue if that would be helpful.

The French word for sale/purchase is *vente*, and for hire/rent is *location*. Note that very few of the people we spoke to at the showrooms had anything more than very basic English.

AMMA (Matériel Médical & Para Médical - Vente et Location)

170 rue Henri Barbusse, 95100 Argenteuil, Tel: 01 39 61 11 35 Fax: 01 39 61 98 78

105, blvd Ney 75018 Tel: 01 42 54 02 02 Fax: 01 42 54 12 35

website: www.amma.fr or www.medicalassistance.fr e-mail: valerie@amma.fr

AMMA are agents for Invacare www.invacare.fr who provide a wide range of products,

some of which are available for hire as well as for purchase. The various products include those needed by disabled people to enable them to live independently at home, and thus might be needed on a temporary basis by visitors. They are unable to hire equipment that might be used in bathrooms or toilets for reasons of hygiene.

The main AMMA showroom/shop is in Argenteuil, which is some 15 km northwest of the pl de la Concorde, and almost due north of la Défense.

It has ramped access, 3 BB parking spaces outside, and a **wheelchair toilet**.

The showroom in blvd Ney is closed during August.

This was the only company we spoke to who might be able to hire out a scooter - though the cost of doing this, and the deposit, would be quite high.

Bastide (Le Confort Médical - Vente et Location)

35 blvd Exelmans 75016 *Tel:* 01 53 92 52 52 *Fax:* 01 53 92 52 59

39 rue Hermel 75018 *Tel:* 01 53 09 22 50 *Fax:* 01 42 64 67 69

website: www.bastideleconfortmedical.com *Tel:* 0800 506 509 (free within France)

Bastide is a nationwide company with an extensive catalogue of equipment for supporting disabled people and enabling them to live independently. Some of it is available for hire. We visited their rue Hermel showroom, which is extensive, although it includes a split level section with +4 steps.

Bastide put the hire rates for various items of equipment which are listed on the first few pages of their main catalogue. Items for hire include wheelchairs, respiratory aids, hoists and inflatable beds - but not scooters.

Cap Vital Santé is the umbrella for a number of large distributors of equipment related to independent living.

website: www.cap-vital-sante.com

There are Paris showrooms at:

Créa Santé 160 rue St Maur, 75011 *Tel:* 01 53 36 88 88 *Fax:* 01 53 36 88 93

CRF Matériel Médical, 153 blvd Voltaire 75011

Tel: 01 43 73 98 98 *Fax:* 01 43 73 17 37

e-mail: go2@go2sante.com (for both the above locations)

Aide et Confort du Malade, 94 rue Amiral Mouchez 75014

Tel: 01 45 89 16 16 *Fax:* 01 45 89 48 59 *e-mail:* aide-et-confort-du-malade@wanadoo.fr

Matériel Médical can provide wheelchairs and/or equipment for either sale or hire. Their focus seems to be the provision of equipment which promotes independent living, together with that for hospitals and surgeries. They have a stock of both manual and electric wheelchairs. To hire equipment you need to provide a deposit and we were told that this was around € 550 for a manual one, and € 2300 for an electric chair. Hiring a manual chair will around € 60/week, and an electric one € 350/week. This information was gathered during 2005.

Also note two other companies - whom we didn't manage to visit:

Orthofrance

9 rue de Paradis 75010

Tel: 01 48 00 06 36 *Fax:* 01 48 00 06 42

website: www.orthofrance.fr *e-mail:* info@orthofrance.fr

Tout le Confort du Malade

198 rue Lecourbe 75015 near the junction with rue de l'Abbé Groult.

Tel: 01 56 56 83 33 Fax: 01 56 56 83 34

website: www.toutleconfortmalade.fr e-mail: m.gillard@free.fr

If the shops can't help then you could try the APF for advice. Other potentially good contacts for running repairs would be specialist schools or institutions where there are disabled residents and someone on the administrative staff who is used to doing running repairs. An example of such a school is the École Nationale pour Handicapés Moteurs, 106 blvd Raymond Poincaré, 92380 Garches, just outside Paris Tel: 01 47 95 65 00. There is the adjacent Hôpital Raymond Poincaré.

In 2006 one of our group had a major problem with his pump for clearing material accumulating at the bottom of his tracheotomy tube, and we went to Garches - where they were able to fix him up with a brand new pump.

A further suggestion for some repairs is to try a small garage or motor-bike shop.

Alternatively you might ring the British Hertford Hospital for possible assistance, advice and/or the temporary loan of equipment.

France has, of course, branches of the **Red Cross (Croix Rouge)** and their Paris delegation is at 12 rue Chardin 75016 Tel: 01 44 14 68 88 Fax: 01 44 14 68 86. The Croix Rouge website is www.croix-rouge.fr.

French organisations for disabled people

Rather like the situation in Britain there are numerous organisations set up to meet the needs of disabled people and to work for changes in attitude. Organisations cover different disabilities and encompass umbrella set-ups as well as those with particular objectives such as providing holidays, improving access, talking to government departments, coordinating information, action and research.

In trying to find out what people are doing, we found that these seems to be a significant language barrier. As a very broad generality, France has only quite recently become sensitised to the needs of disabled people, so the process of promoting inclusive design hasn't gone very far as yet. In addition, we found that a number of organisations were much more interested in the needs of local disabled people, and not very much (in practical terms) in the needs and interests of visitors.

In the Rough Guide the author refers to a website www.coliac.cnt.fr as the site for the *Comité de liaison pour l'accessibilité*. This promotes the rights of disabled people in France, and has a useful list of contacts for Handicap Moteur.

One major organisation with whom we had good relations back in the early 1990s the **Comité National Français de Liaison pour la Réadaptation des Handicapés (CNFLRH)** was closed down some years ago due to a lack of funding.

The main groups we have come across this time are:

- the **Association des Paralysés de France (APF)**, 17 bd Auguste Blanqui, 75013 Tel:

- 01 40 78 69 00 Fax: 01 45 89 40 57 website: www.apf.asso.fr;
and their Paris Delegation, **APF Ile-de-France**, 13 pl Rungis, 75013
Tel: 01 53 80 92 97 Fax: 01 53 80 92 98;
- **Mobile en Ville (MeV)**, 1 rue de l'Internationale, BP 59, 91002 Evry
Tel: 06 82 91 72 16
website: www.mobile-en-ville.asso.fr e-mail: mev@mobile-en-ville.asso.fr

MeV are an interesting alliance between ALL wheel users, so they include roller-skaters, and child buggy users as well as wheelchair users. They have made an impressive map of Paris where all the kerb heights at the ends of pavements have been measured., and pavements are colour-coded for 'accessibility'. MeV were helpful to us during our survey.

For those with an interest in sport, the central body is the **Fédération Handisport**
website: www.handisport.org Tel: 01 40 31 45 00

The French disabled sports federation is developing the market for non-competitive sports such as hiking, by launching partnerships with other, more traditional sporting federations in addition to the more familiar competitive sports activities. In Paris they make extensive use of the facilities attached to the Résidence Internationale de Paris.

Information services and organisations

The main sources of information about France are the French Government Tourist Office (FGTO), your local travel agent and the standard guidebooks. In addition, in the UK, Holiday Care offer advice to disabled travellers about travel.

The French Government Tourist Office (FGTO)

178 Piccadilly, London W1J 9AL

Tel: 09068 244 123 (60p per minute at all times) Fax: 020 7493- 6594

website: www.franceguide.com/uk e-mail: info.uk@franceguide.com

The amount of information about access is very limited as it is only relatively recently that the tourism authorities have been sensitised to the need for the provision of such information.

The labelling of facilities is at an early stage - which means that most places, even accessible ones, do not yet have a label. Also, as discussed elsewhere, the labelling system used (Tourisme et Handicap) does not include proper descriptions of any barriers. The website does, however, include a great deal of useful general information for the intending visitor.

The **Office de Tourisme de Paris**, no longer has its main office at 127 Champs Elysées.

The official website of the Paris Convention and Visitors Bureau is now www.parisinfo.com

There is also the tourist office for the Ile-de-Paris covering the areas around, and, generally, outside the blvd Périphérique. See www.pidf.com

There are tourist information kiosks in central Paris in 2006 as follows:

Carousel du Louvre, place de la Pyramide Inversée, 99 rue de Rivoli, 75001 Under the pyramid at the Louvre.

Opéra - Grands Magazins, 11 rue Scribe, 75009

Tour Eiffel between the East and North pillars.

Pyramides, 25 rue des Pyramides, 75001 very near the metro station.

Montmartre, 21 place du Tertre, 75018

Anvers, facing 72 blvd Rochechourt, 75018

Gare du Nord, 18 rue de Dunkerque, 75010 under the glass station roof, it is part of the Ile-de-France Accueil kiosk.

Gare de Lyon, 20 blvd Diderot, 75012

Clémenceau, ave des Champs-Élysées, on the corner with ave Marigny. Only open in the summer.

Paris Expo/Porte de Versailles, 1 pl de la Porte de Versailles, 75015. Open during trade fairs.

These kiosks are good at providing standard tourist information like which times things are open, but their specialist knowledge for disabled visitors is limited, and generally they will only be able refer to the *Tourisme et Handicap* labels.

Access information on the web

Most information about accessibility which is provided on websites is limited and imprecise. Hotels may go so far as to say that they have ‘adapted rooms for those with reduced mobility’ but give NO REAL INFORMATION about what provisions they have. Many other sites will simply say ‘accessible’ to wheelchair users, without defining what they mean. What this probably implies is that there is step free access to a part of the site. When the place is described as being ‘inaccessible’, little or no attempt is made to describe the barriers, so that a visitor can make an informed choice about whether a visit is practicable.

This situation is likely to vary with time, as more and more information is posted on to websites - and what we would like to do here is to highlight some examples.

The **MONUM** website www.monum.fr for example is the site for the Centre des Monuments Nationaux. On the Home page is a link to information titled *Accès visiteurs handicapés*. This leads to the four ‘Tourisme et Handicap’ symbols, and if you follow the link with the wheelchair symbol for *Visiteurs à mobilité réduite* you reach a list of seven sites (in 2006). We have commented elsewhere on the limitations of the ‘Tourisme et Handicap’ symbols.

Three of the sites are in Paris, and the remarkable thing about the information here is that it includes a detailed **description** of the access, much as you find it in the PHSP guide.

The description allows the visitor to make the informed choice that we regard as being essential.

The English version of these listings can, however, be misleading, as the translations are incomplete, and ‘good access’ is implied by the use of the wheelchair symbol when all that is intended is that it should be the heading for some subsequent descriptive text. It does NOT mean that this site is accessible.

Monum also publish a guide entitled *Activités pour les publics handicapés dans les monuments nationaux d’Ile-de-France*. This can be downloaded from their website, and includes more sites than the three mentioned above. The information has obviously been put together quite carefully, but does NOT always include a description of the barriers when declaring a site to be inaccessible.

It apparently describes Notre Dame as being ‘inaccessible to handicap moteur’. This is due to the fact that it is ONLY describing the Tower, which comes under one jurisdiction while the church itself comes under another ! As the information (about

the tower/tour) was in French we misinterpreted it, but reckon that it was a mistake that others might make as well.

In the write-up about the Sainte-Chapelle, it says that if you contact the 'Service de la visite' there is lift access using a lift in the Palais de Justice. What it does not say is that this is difficult to arrange (particularly if you just turn up on the day), and that the lift is quite often out of action. It's difficult we know, to get the right balance in presenting this kind of information - but the Monum data has NOT (we suspect) been gathered by disabled surveyors/visitors, but has been provided by those responsible for the buildings themselves.

The **Handihomes** site www.handihomes.com sets high standards in its description of accommodation with photos and precise data. **ALL hotels and apartments could usefully follow their example when describing their 'accessible' rooms.** Quite extraordinarily (in our view) the Handihomes accommodation has not been awarded the 'Tourisme et Handicap' label, because of extremely minor ways in which it does not meet all of the required standards.

A site which is innovative in its use of descriptive symbols relating to 'access' is www.jaccede.com *Le portail des personnes à mobilité réduite*. We have used some of the data we found there in researching our 'Good loo guide'. Like similar sites in the UK it tries to cover too much ground - in this case, the whole of France. It therefore finishes up being simply a directory in which it is not entirely clear who has supplied or validated the information and does not have an editor with local knowledge. Some of the entries are descriptive - others aren't. The mix under 'accessible toilets' which is where we searched, turned out to be a very broad mixture, including, apparently, quite a number of places without accessible toilets.

From the site Home page, you currently have to go via *Visiter l'ancien site*, and then you can search a number of different pages. The website is quite new, and was only set up in 2002.

The contact details for the organisation responsible are:

Association Créactif, 10 passage Turquetil, 75011

Tel: 08 70 76 75 36 *e-mail:* info@jaccede.com

If you make your bookings through your local travel agent remember that they will have a lot of trouble getting accurate and reliable information about any access problems you may encounter either en route or at your hotel. It is precisely because of this that these Access Guides are necessary. If certain things are important to you (eg avoiding steps, using a wheelchair, having a large bathroom) then make sure you check with the airline, port or hotel owner yourself to ensure that the facilities are what you need.

UK information centres include:

Disabled Living Foundation (DLF), 380 Harrow Road, London W9 2HU

Tel: 020 7289-6111 *Textphone:* 020 7432-8009 *Fax:* 020 7266-2922

website: www.dlf.org.uk *e-mail:* info@dlf.org.uk

The DLF works to help disabled people in aspects of ordinary life which present difficulty. It has a large showroom and has a comprehensive information service on specialised equipment of all kinds. Advice is given on visual impairment, incontinence, music, sport, clothing and skin care. A publication list is available on application. *An appointment is necessary as you*

usually get shown round by an expert Tel: 0845 130 9177. Their showroom is completely accessible and has a **wheelchair toilet**. Parking possible if you book. The display includes a special kitchen for visually impaired people. Their website is useful, and they have an excellent list of factsheets.

Holiday Care

Tourism for All, The Hawkins Suite, Enham Place, Enham Alamein, Andover SP11 6JS
Tel: 0845 124 9971 Textphone: 0845 124 9976 Fax: 0845 124 9972
website: www.tourismforall.org.uk e-mail: info@tourismforall.org.uk
Holiday Care is the UK's central source of travel and holiday information for disabled or disadvantaged people.

Insurance

People rarely go abroad without some sort of insurance, largely because of a greater awareness of the costs involved if something unexpected happens. While you hear quite a lot about legionnaire's disease, insolvent airline companies; the work of pickpockets and general rip-off merchants, and these days, the threat of terrorism, the risk to the individual traveller is very small indeed. **What IS important is to have good cover for something that just might happen, and which would cost a lot of money if something went badly wrong**. This would include, for example, the result of injury in a traffic accident, where you needed immediate treatment and possible repatriation to your home country by air.

It has become a complicated subject. At one time, you could probably get insurance provided you had a doctor's letter saying that you were 'fit to travel'. Now, there are many different agencies/companies offering to assess the degree of risk for the insurance companies and they will all come out with slightly (or possibly very) different answers, so, regrettably, you have to shop around. Hopefully you will find some good leads here, but bear in mind that this is a snapshot of the situation in 2006 (when we did our research), and over the years, things may move on - though changes aren't always for the better !

Insurance is offered as part and parcel of most travel arrangements made by agents. It is also readily available on the internet, but **for the disabled traveller there are special requirements** and if you don't do it properly, you can finish up without cover when you thought you had it. In the *Which* report mentioned below, the advice was quite strongly NOT to rely on policies available through travel agents, as they are unlikely to have the necessary specialist knowledge.

Much depends on whether your condition is basically stable. Many policies will have a clause excluding claims with a pre-existing medical condition or disability unless you have made a detailed declaration about your condition. *It is necessary to look at the small print on any policy and to make the insurer aware of your medical history*. Some policies have an age loading, and can double in price for people aged over 65 (or even 60 in some cases).

There is advice in the UK on the www.direct.gov.uk site under Disabled People, Travel & Holidays, Planning a trip, Travel Insurance. This highlights your rights under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). It also emphasises the need to describe your medical condition to

your insurer. There is also advice on www.youreable.com under life, money, when you travel abroad, travel insurance

When this guide was first published in 1974, the insurance world, with one or two notable exceptions, proved to be very uncooperative in providing cover for disabled travellers as they were generally considered to be a bad risk! It was not realised that very few people would want to travel abroad if they were likely to be ill. Thankfully since then much has changed and there are some policies which provide good cover for the disabled traveller.

What you generally have to do is to answer a medical questionnaire. If your condition is stable, and you rarely need to visit your doctor, then you can say so, and issuing your policy should be straightforward. Where you can run into questioning and discussion, is, particularly if you are being treated as an outpatient OR if some test results are pending. Since, in the UK, you may be waiting for a hospital appointment for several months (for a non-urgent condition), this can cause a problem when getting insurance. One of the authors is taking warfarin on a long-term basis and is checked in hospital about once a month. He was asked by his doctor to have a blood test related to another possible condition. When getting a quote for travel insurance he was told that there was no problem with the warfarin but that anything to do with the outcome of the blood test would carry an 'excess' of £500.

The standard format for asking medical questions goes something like this:

- please describe/declare your medical condition/s (with dates relating to their onset where appropriate);
- do you have any other medical conditions ?
- have any of your medications for this/these condition/s changed during the past 12 months ?
- have you had any (other) surgery during the past 5 years ?
- have you had any other in-patient treatment in the past 5 years ?
- have you seen a specialist in the past 2 years (if so, how frequently) ?
- can you walk 100 metres and climb two average flights of stairs without difficulty ? (and if you're a paraplegic chair user, your answer to that will be "NO !!! but I'd like to");
- has your/any doctor advised against travel ?
- are you awaiting any investigations or treatment ?
- are you awaiting any test results ?

Different companies will use slightly different questions, but the objective is much the same, and it is important that you provide the information asked for. Where you will bump into a difficulty with most policies is if you are travelling in order to get medical treatment.

Some people will find that they cannot get adequate cover - or any cover at all - especially if they have been diagnosed with an unstable and/or terminal condition. They may still decide to travel, and to take the risk - taking out a policy which will cover them against many risks, but not necessarily against the consequences of a deterioration in their health associated with their existing condition. For UK residents and for others coming from European Union countries carrying an EHIC card (mentioned earlier) is essential.

A basic problem with insurance is that you don't know how good your policy is until you need to make a claim. Remember that for loss and theft claims, you nearly always need to report the theft to the local police (within 24 hours) and to get a piece of paper to prove it. Similarly with health/medical claims, they need to be thoroughly documented - and you need to consult the insurers 24-hour telephone Helpline to ensure that you are proceeding within their guidelines. This is a little difficult if you (for example) happen to be unconscious after an accident - but the earliest possible contact with your insurers Helpline is ESSENTIAL. They may specify which kind of hospital you can be treated in and certainly which method of transport you can use for repatriation. You need to keep copies of all receipts for money spent, and a detailed note of what happens and when it happens.

We asked around in 2006, and the following information is based on these enquiries. What we did is to ask the disabled members of the group what their experience was. We also used the Travel questions pages on the Youreable website www.youreable.com where disabled people share information about their experiences.

A company that was recommended by several people, including someone who had had a kidney transplant, was:

Preferential Direct, PO Box 5317, Southend-on-Sea, Essex SS1 1WY
website: www.preferential.co.uk *Tel:* 0870 428 4399

Another company was recommended by two members of our group, both of whom are disabled. The procedure for getting insurance was relatively straightforward, and the company were quick to pay up when one of them needed to make a claim.

The company is: **Direct Travel Insurance**

Tel: 0845-605-2700 *Fax:* 0845-605-2710

website: www.direct-travel.co.uk which includes clear information and the statement that "although our standard policies do not cover pre-existing medical conditions, we are able to cover the vast majority of people with a pre-existing condition without any additional premium loading".

Other companies include:

Chartwell Insurance (Disabled Drivers' Insurance Bureau) Chartwell House, 292 Hale Lane, Edgware HA8 8NP.

website: www.chartwellinsurance.co.uk *Tel:* 0800 652-4652 (freephone)

Chartwell say that those with possible health problems can ring the 'Health Check' line, and get immediate clarification about the cover that can be provided

Direct Line

www.uk.directline.com *Tel:* 0845 246 8704; a number of people speak highly of their policies.

J & M Insurance Services, 14 Guldford Street, London WC1N 1DX

website: www.jmi.co.uk *e-mail:* sales@jmi.co.uk *Tel:* 020 7446-7626

Club Direct

website: www.clubdirect.com *Tel:* 0870 8902 842

Access Travel Insurance associated with a tour company specialising in organising foreign holidays for disabled people. They have a good explanation of the basis of travel insurance on their Insurance page.

website: www.access-travel.co.uk e-mail: info@access-travel.co.uk Tel: 01942 888844

Two other companies that we found on the net look as though they provide a useful service: **24Dr Travel Insurance**, Great Strudgates Farm, Balcombe, Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH17 6RB offers policies up to age 74.

website: www.24drtravel.com Tel: 0870 740 9260 Their website has a good section relating to pre-existing medical conditions. It also has an excellent on-line 'fit to travel' self assessment form - which told me that in spite of various problems and needing regular medication, I was OK to travel. Very reassuring !

All Clear offers tailored medical travel insurance with no age limit.

website: www.allcleartravel.co.uk Tel: 0870 777 9339

There is also **Diabetes Insurance UK** which will be of particular interest to some.

Their contact details are: Tel: 0800 731-7431 (freephone) website: www.diabetes.org.uk e-mail: diabetes@healthlambert.com. The advice on their website is very good and straightforward.

There's an excellent overall review and assessment of travel insurance in the July 2006 issue of *Which*, published for members by the Consumer Association. In their investigation they specifically looked for whether a policy was 'Good for pre-existing medical conditions'. Only a very small number of companies emerged with a tick in that box.

For a single trip policy for Europe, the only ones with a tick were for those aged 70+, from:

- the Travel Insurance Agency (Superior);
- Simple; and,
- Bradford and Bingley.

For annual policies for Europe, the ones with a tick were again mainly for those aged 70+, from:

- CIS Home Options;
- the AA;
- Halfords

and for families, Simple.

The insurance company Simple crops up in several categories, and seems to be well worth a close look. Their details are:

Simple Tel: 08707-444-3778 website: www.simpletravelinsurance.co.uk.

On their website they say that there are potential exclusions relating to pre-existing medical conditions and they use the Travellers Protection Services screening service to find out if cover can be provided, Tel: 08707 744408.

One up-to-date source of advice in the UK would be Holiday Care www.holidaycare.co.uk

Remember that you almost certainly need to talk to someone to sort out their procedure over Health Checking, as they all use agencies for medical screening - although different ones may come up with somewhat different answers. ALSO you need to check that they provide 24-hour cover on an emergency line to be able to advise you in the event of there being an emergency.

Wherever you live, you will have to find appropriate contacts and information in your own country, although the principles involved are likely to be much the same. **In Canada** there is the **CIBC Emergency Travel Medical Insurance** *Tel:* 1-800 281-9109. There is a comprehensive description of the policy and its conditions on their website: www.cibc.com on the appropriate page.

For travellers from the USA the following contacts may be useful:

- Mobility International USA www.miusa.org;
- Moss Rehab Resource Net www.mossresourcenet.org;
- The Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality www.sath.org.

Maps and guides available

There's a wide range of good conventional guidebooks to Paris, and your choice may depend on the 'style' you like. **Our book is written on the assumption that it will be used in conjunction with one or more conventional guides**, as our main purpose is to discuss accessibility, and not history or architecture. We do not, generally, attempt to tell people when the various facilities are open, nor what it costs to get in, as this information is readily available elsewhere - in conventional guidebooks; from the Tourist Office, and directly from websites.

Different books have particular strengths and advantages, and personal preference will play its part in your choice. For an independent review, have a look at Yahoo News *Reviewing the Paris guidebooks*.

The new **AA Key Guide** has one of the best information pages for disabled visitors, and actually mentions Access Project, giving correct contact details ! In addition it has good area guides, and suggested walks, and includes information on opening times and prices which we do not attempt to cover.

The **Eyewitness Travel Guide** includes very limited information for disabled visitors. It does, however, include five guided walks. It has a good section on getting around Paris, and incorporates a map of the central areas. It is very well illustrated and has good area guides.

The **Fodor** and **Frommer's** guides cater well for visitors from America.

The **Green Guide**, published by Michelin, has some 'wheelchair' symbols scattered around in the chapter on Admission times and charges, with little indication of exactly what they mean. It includes an excellent write-up on the Louvre, with detailed plans of every floor. The maps and plans are generally very useful.

The **Lonely Planet Guide** is good value.

The **Rough Guide** is, as always, very practical, and splits the city up into a number of areas, which is helpful for those with limited mobility. There are good insights into many aspects of

the history of Paris, and lively sections on eating, drinking and nightlife.

The **Time Out** guide is updated annually, with opening times and prices. It also tries to include information about wheelchair access, although, suggests that this should be checked. When people understand the various issues relating to access better, it may be possible to incorporate this with confidence into the conventional books, but our experience with the Time Out guide both to Paris and to Paris Restaurants was that it was so inaccurate and inadequate that it was worse than useless.

Maps

There are a number of excellent maps available including several which are ring-bound and easier to handle. You need to consider having both a fold-out map covering the whole city, and a smaller book-like one which has its maps on an arrondissement by arrondissement basis. The book is fine for detail, but if you're not familiar with the city you'll find that everything you want to find out about is on the edge of a page. You can buy either or both for about £5 to £10 (or 8-16US\$), so it's not expensive. If you're going to use the map a lot, and carry it around, the ones that are laminated have advantages as they last a lot longer, but are considerably more expensive.

The smaller versions, generally with maps on an arrondissement by arrondissement basis include:

- the Michelin Paris atlas no 57 by arrondissement;
- Michelin Paris atlas no 56 (nord & sud) in conventional pocket atlas format;
- the Blay-Foldex Paris atlas by arrondissement, available both in paper in a laminated format;
- the Michelin Paris tourism map;
- the Falk Paris city map using their patented fold-out system which allows folding in either direction.

There are also some much larger street plans which include the suburban areas outside the boulevard Périphérique which you might need if you are staying for longer, and intend to move around more widely.

These are considerably more expensive and include:

- the Blay-Foldex Paris & Banlieue atlas;
- the Blay-Foldex Grand Banlieue atlas in A4 size in both paper and laminated versions. The big laminated version costs as much as £30, but we found it extremely useful when visiting and travelling around. The big ones are also quite heavy !

Ideally you will be able to choose your own map in a local bookshop, but if that's difficult then you can order from Stanford's in the UK www.stanfords.co.uk who have the biggest map/guide shop in London or from www.omnimap.com in the USA. If you do a web search you'll be bound to come up with other possibilities.

If you're driving, you'll definitely need the excellent guide *Parkings de Paris* - and there are details about it and how to get it in the chapter on *Getting around* .

Medical advice

There should be no special problems when travelling anywhere in Western Europe. No jabs or inoculations are either required or advised for nearby continental countries. If you have any doubts check with your doctor as to whether there are any particular precautions you should take.

It is worth noting again that many health insurance policies have a clause which says you are covered *'providing you are not travelling against the advice of a doctor'*. This does mean that your doctor has to agree that travelling is a reasonable and sensible thing to do, and in some circumstances, it might be a good idea to get that in writing.

If you are taking important drugs or medicines, make sure that you know both the pharmacological name and dosage. It can be a good idea to split your supply, carrying some in your pocket or handbag and some in your luggage. This minimises the possibility of loss. It is also no bad thing to take a doctor's note and a prescription with you with amounts and dosage clearly stated.

A first-aid kit is invaluable for dealing with travel sickness, stomach upsets, sore throat, cuts and bruises, headaches and stings. It is much better to take brands of drugs and medicines that you are used to, rather than having to experiment with the local ones.

Other sources of advice, apart from your GP or specialist are:

Asthma UK

Summit House, 70 Wilson Street, London EC2A 2DB

Helpline: 08457-010203 Tel: 020 7786-4900 Fax: 020 7256-6075

website: www.asthma.org.uk e-mail: info@asthma.org.uk

provides a wealth of information about monitoring and controlling asthma, including advice about what to do when taking a holiday and/or travelling.

Diabetes UK

Macleod House, 10 Parkway, London NW1 7AA

Tel: 020 7424-1000 Fax: 020 7424-1001

website: www.diabetes.org.uk e-mail: info@diabetes.org.uk

provide useful information for travellers, including advice about taking needles through customs and other practical advice - under the heading *'Travelling Abroad'*.

Incontact

United House, North Road, London N7 9DP

Tel: 0870 770 3246 Fax: 0870 770 3249

website: www.incontact.org e-mail: info@incontact.org

can offer practical advice about travelling for those with incontinence problems. There is extensive information on their website, including a very comprehensive collection of links on all kinds of health and disability related subjects.

While we were writing the book, we heard that the **British Colostomy Association** which has been around since 1963, had been forced to close due to lack of funding. Some of its services, and in particular the provision of help and advice have been taken over by a newly formed **Colostomy Association** with services supplied by volunteers.

Its contact details are:

PO Box 8017, Reading RG6 9DE

Helpline: 0800 587-6744

website: www.colostomyassociation.org.uk *e-mail:* cass@colostomyassociation.org.uk

A commercial company which supplies equipment is:

Coloplast, Peterborough Business Park, Peterborough PE2 6FX,

Tel: 01733-39200 *website:* www.coloplast.co.uk

who also offer advice for those who have a colostomy, ileostomy or urostomy.

A general website providing medical advice of all kinds is www.netdoctor.co.uk and this includes advice about travelling.

Medicalert/SOS Talisman

There are two similar services which are of special importance to those who have epilepsy, haemophilia, diabetes or allergies, and to those who need regular dosage of a particular drug.

Medicalert provides a central point where updated information about your medical is available 24 hours a day, but which makes an annual charge for membership. SOS Talisman provides something for you to wear, which contains your vital medical information on a strip which you update yourself. This involves only a one-off payment.

The Medic Alert Foundation

12 Bridge Wharf, 156 Caledonian Road, London N1 9UU

Tel: 020 7833-3034 *Fax:* 020 7278-0647

website: www.medicalert.org.uk *e-mail:* info@medicalert.org.uk

Medic-alert provides a useful service for those with medical problems that could be compounded by treatment after an accident. Membership currently costs about £20/year, but as the foundation is a registered charity, it can provide free membership to individuals who have a limited income. Members wear a metal emblem engraved with the telephone number of the Emergency Service and a note of the immediate medical problems of the wearer. Additional medical information is filed at the Emergency Headquarters, where the telephone is staffed 24 hours a day.

SOS Talisman Co

PO Box 985, Newton Mearns, Glasgow G77 6UY UK

Tel: 0141 639 7090 *Fax:* 0141 577 7290

website: www.sostalisman.com *e-mail:* consultant@sostalisman.com

Talisman operate a service which works on the basis of including information in a small locket which is worn permanently. A bracelet, pendant or watch-type capsule, is provided which contains your vital medical information on a strip which you update yourself.

Museums and monuments pass

If you are likely to visit several of the main and more expensive museums, houses and collections, you can buy a two-, four- or six-day pass. In 2006 it was just around €40 for two days, €55 for four, and just over €70 for six days. The pass has advantages, more perhaps for disabled walkers, since chair users and their companions may find concessionary discounts and even free entry, at quite a number of places.

Principally it will help you to avoid the inevitable queues at the big venues. However, be careful; many of the places included in the pass will have access problems, so make sure that you will be visiting enough 'accessible' places to make it worth while. *One advantage of having a pass is that it gives you access to quite a number of wheelchair toilets around Paris* and, even though it is quite time consuming to have to go through some museum or monument just to go to the toilet, it could be useful, given the general shortage.

The passes can be bought at museums, tourist offices and métro stations, and from the internet from: www.museums-of-paris.com/museum-pass.php where there is a list of the museums which are included.

Pedestrians

Apart from keeping a sharp look-out the only things we feel we should mention are that **zebra crossings don't give you priority as they do in Britain** and that at light controlled crossings you are expected to obey the lights. Also watch out for French drivers filtering, ie turning at right angles to the lights, which they may do even though the lights are red for going straight ahead. In principle, pedestrians have priority in this situation, but our advice (to a visitor) would be "Don't push your luck!", though you can watch what the locals do, and follow their lead.

Postal services

Post offices are normally open on weekdays and on Saturday mornings. There's a small but useful office in the Carrousel du Louvre, the underground shopping complex attached to the Louvre Museum, where most of the staff speak English.

The main post office is at 52 rue du Louvre, 75001, by the junction with rue Etienne Marcel. *Tel:* (1) 40.28.20.00. It has ramped access to the main entrance and most facilities are on the ground floor. Counter 5 is specially low to suit those who use chairs, and Counter 6 is used for **poste restante** collections. Remember that you will need identification to collect your mail, so take your passport with you. If it is addressed to two people you should both go to claim it. This office is open 24/7 (24 hours a day and seven days a week)

Another post office which is open for quite long hours is at 71 ave des Champs-Élysées, between rue Lincoln and Pierre Charron. There's a small lip [3cm] at the entrance, and all the counters are quite low. Open Mon-Fri 09.00-19.30; Sat 10.00-19.30.

Price concessions

Several places will offer price reductions and sometimes free entry, for wheelchair users and/or a pusher. This applies mainly to entrance fees of one kind or another. Reductions are not often available for other disabled people except, sometimes, people who are blind or partially sighted.

In France, there is a system where disabled people normally carry an Orange Card which 'certifies' their degree of disability. This makes it easier for people to claim (and validate their claim) to various concessions. For the visitor from the UK, the USA or from a number of other countries, there is no similar system. The fact that you have used a wheelchair since childhood and have never been able to walk doesn't necessarily 'count'. Many UK visitors can produce their Blue Badge (for parking concessions) as evidence of disability - and you may need to carry a copy of this if the real thing is on your dashboard ! The problem with all this is that it makes the whole business highly capricious for the visitor, and it depends as much on who is in the ticket office or on the door as it does on official policy. All we would recommend is that if you can, you take with you some kind of 'proof of disability' - possibly a letter about Attendance Allowance, if applicable, or some other state provision - as this may ease your path, and slightly reduce the cost of getting around.

Because of the uncertainties, **we have made virtually no reference to concessions** because the information might be misleading on the day.

The fare concession to disabled drivers offered by most of the ferry operators for cross-channel journeys to and from the UK is worth mentioning. The concession involves the vehicle travelling free of charge or at a discount. Each operator has different conditions attached to this concession, possibly depending on whether the disabled person is driving or is a passenger etc.

Most of the companies give the reduction to DDA and DDMC members, details below:

Disabled Drivers Association

Ashwellthorpe, Norwich NR16 1EX, *Tel:* (0870) 7703333 *Fax:* 01508-488173 *website:*

www.dda.org.uk e-mail: hq@dda.org.uk;

Disabled Drivers Motor Club

Cottingham Way, Thrapston, Northamptonshire NN14 4PL, *Tel:* (01832) 734724

Fax: (01832) 733816 *website:* www.ddmc.org.uk *e-mail:* monicaball@ddmc.org.uk.

The operators rely on the clubs validating the application. Details are available from each operator but the procedure can be somewhat long-winded and bureaucratic so make sure you apply well in advance, especially during peak periods when a month's notice is requested.

Telephones

The mobile phone has revolutionised phone use when travelling. Take care over the cost of calls, since, depending on your tariff or rental agreement, they may cost a considerable amount in a foreign country. You may well have to pay to receive calls. With my UK pay-as-you-go contract, it cost 50p/minute to receive a call from the UK, which was a strong incentive to keep any conversations short !

Your mobile phone will automatically link-in to a new network in Paris, but to make calls back to the UK you may have to add 0044 (often shown as +44) to the number you are calling, and this replaces the initial 0 in the local number.

For using conventional phones, there are some low level telephones suitable for chair users, including some street call boxes and with no door. Background noise can then be a problem. More generally there are telephones in post offices, hotels, railway stations and in cafés. Many if not most use a pre-paid phone card which you can get from post offices, many tabacs (kiosks selling cigarettes), and newsagents.

To ring France from abroad dial 0033, then area code leaving out the 0.

For Paris, this means simply dialling 1, followed by eight digits (after the 0033). France is divided into five areas with the codes 01 (Paris); 02 (northwest); 03 (northeast); 04 (southeast) and 05 (southwest).

To ring the UK from France dial 00, wait for a continuous tone, then dial 44 followed by the STD code and number but leaving off the first 0. For example, for central London the 00 and 44 replace the 0 in the 020 code before the number, ie 004420 followed by the eight digit London number.

Tour companies

During our researches we came across an interesting company called *Accessible Europe* who offer tours, visits and even cruises to a wide range of European destinations, including a city break in Paris. Their objective is to provide tourism for all. Accessible Europe is a pool of European travel agents who have expertise in providing services for a range of people with special needs including chair users and slow walkers. We also found *Access Tourisme Service* and *Paris on Wheels*, details of which are given below. Over the years, new companies will come along providing 'accessible' tours, so it may be worth doing a new internet search when you are looking for a suitable provider.

The lead travel agency for **Accessible Europe** is:

Promotour Viaggi,

Piazza Pitagora 9, 10137 Turin, Italy

Tel: +39 (0)113018888

website: www.accessibleeurope.com e-mail: info@accessibleeurope.com.

When we e-mailed, we got a speedy and helpful reply, although we should say that we have not ourselves been on one of their tours. They sound as though they are well organised and thoroughly positive.

In Paris they were offering 3-4 day visits for 4 people including accessible transfers for around €500-600/person, although the exact cost would depend on what you want to do, and where you want to go. There was a supplement of €65 each for the accessible transfer to Disneyland. Other packages would be possible, subject to negotiation. They also offer the hire of an accessible van which has a lift and space for up to two wheelchairs which could be picked-up and dropped-off at any of the Paris airports. The cost is around €1250/week, though rates will obviously vary, and the prices quoted here were those in 2005.

There is also the **Access Tourisme Service**,

8 rue Saint-Loup, 45130 Charsonville, France

Tel: +33 2 38 74 28 40 *Fax:* +33 2 38 74 28 50

website: www.access-tourisme.com *e-mail:* access.tourisme.service@wanadoo.fr.

ATS offer 'accessible' and inclusive holidays to a number of places in France, including Paris.

On their website they appear to be able to offer the hire of medical equipment, vehicle rental and even of a travelling companion/escort if needed.

Paris on Wheels

US Office, 238 Ocean Avenue, Middletown, New Jersey 07748, USA

Tel: USA (732) 787-4763

website: www.parisonwheels.com

e-mail: powparis@yahoo.com or parisonwheels@hotmail.com

This company offers travel consultation, guided vacations with a personal attendant, accessible transport and pushing/walking tours of Paris - at certain times of the year. It was founded by Derek Guzman who worked for many years as an aide to chair users in Seattle in the northwest USA.