

# Edinburgh Festival Fun

*A recent Guardian [article](#) has highlighted the lack of accessibility to many Fringe venues. However, this is not the full story. Many Fringe activities are accessible. Euan's Guide aims to promote which venues are accessible in the future. In the meantime, intrepid explorer Paul tells us about his adventures to the Fringe. Hopefully next year's Fringe will have increased accessibility for all and Paul can venture a little further.*

Festival time in Edinburgh brings with it an air of excitement, the unexpected, and the chance to soak up an atmosphere unique to the event. I decided to put this to the test and see for myself.

Here's an account of my adventures on a day trip around the Festival hotspots. It all started when I left the cool shade of Waverley station. Getting out of the station was the first challenge of the day. As a busy station there are lots of people, plenty of different directions to head, and not many clues where to go if you use a set of wheels like me.

A quick pit stop at the information desk revealed the answer to my navigational challenge. No sat navs here, just plain old questions and answers from a very helpful guy behind the desk. Seems like there are several choices as you can opt to go to Princes Street on one side, Waverley Bridge in the middle, and Market Street on the other. All of these are now accessible to wheelchair users like myself. If you haven't been before I should explain that Market Street is nearest to the old town and handy for the High Street, Castle, and Parliament. Waverley Bridge is good for getting a tourist bus or the airport buses and these are all wheelchair accessible. If you do head for Waverley Bridge there's no lift so it's a push and shove up the ramp or shove your power chair in second gear and go for it. Princes Street is the main shopping area and the accessible route is fairly new and involves getting two lifts.

I decided that Princes Street fitted the bill. I'm not a shopper but fancied going to Princes Street gardens. The gardens form a quiet and scenic backdrop to the busy street and give some great views of the old town and castle.

Getting to Princes Street from the station is something like a challenge as you actually go in the opposite direction to what you would expect. From the station concourse you have to go and find the lift that takes you up to the "Bridge". The Bridge is a raised walkway that crosses the station from side to side with an array of lifts going down to the platforms.

Once I was on the Bridge it was a case of following the signs for Princes Street. Toward the end of the Bridge there's an escalator going up to street level. A little further and there's a pair of lifts. Choosing the nearest lift I entered the glass cabin.

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The lift moved off and suddenly you're stuck to the side of a building looking down at the station rooftops. A bit scary, if like me, you don't care for heights. Just keep looking forward and you'll be fine. At the top you roll out and you are in Princes Street. On your right is the dramatic tower and structure of the Balmoral Hotel. Bet that place could tell a tale or two!

The next stage of the adventure was to find the gardens by heading west. The pavements are wheelchair friendly and most of it is on the level. At the moment it all looks a bit strange as the street is getting ready for the new tram system. The overhead cables are now in and the track winds its way along the road. All that's missing is a tram. I'm told the trams are going to be very easy to use for disabled people. Level platforms, plenty of wheelchair spaces, high contrast fittings, and stops at all the key tourist spots en route. Better still is the thought that two wheelchair users can travel together; something you can't do on the bus!

Back to my adventures, my next point of call was Princes Street gardens to see the Scott Monument. The tall imposing structure sits in the heart of the city and seems like an enormous giant when you get up close. The brave, or some may say foolish, can opt to climb the 287 steps to the top. I bet you get a fantastic view when you get to the top and it's probably equivalent to a week's workout in the gym.

The gardens are in full flourish with the bright red geraniums and bedding plants forming circles of colour as you walk along the central path heading towards the National Gallery. You can walk along the paths in the lower part of the park if you're fairly ambulant. I didn't venture in that direction as there are fairly challenging slopes or steps to get down to that level. That said, I didn't miss anything as you get a great view from the main path and the added bonus of being able to see the castle and the picturesque buildings of the old town.

Leaving the first part of the gardens it was time for a pause at the Mound, the open area by the galleries, where there is an accessible toilet (RADAR Key). Staying on the Mound it was time to experience the atmosphere of the festival. There were performers, stalls, ticket kiosks, and loads of people. Getting around was slow but people were great at helping carve a way through the crowds. Stopped to watch a couple of artists doing odd things with fire torches, spinning hoops, and a couple of singers.

Appetite wetted it was time to enter the thick of it and venture up to the High Street. For those unfamiliar with the city, the old town is up the hill and has the castle at one end and the Palace of Holyrood at the other.

The trip up to the High Street involved choices as you could climb the many steps that go straight up the side of the hill, follow the road, or cheat and take the bus. Knowing how steep the hill can be I opted to take the bus from the nearby stop.

Edinburgh's buses are a great option as all Lothian Buses are wheelchair accessible. The drivers are very helpful and the service covers most of the city. To get best value for money I'd recommend buying a day saver so you can hop on and off the buses when you need to for the day.

I got off the bus at the top of the hill as you get a great view across the gardens and toward the Scott monument. Just after the bus stop toward the top of the Mound you go past a million quid! Don't get excited, it's an exhibition in the Museum on the Mound. A history of money and that sort of thing. Good for the kids as they let you strike your own coin to take away. Accessibility is good with ramps to all areas and an accessible toilet if you need one.

Shortly after the museum the road turns right past the rear of the High Courts and you find yourself at a junction with the High Street. Turn right to head up to the Castle but be warned as the road gets steeper as you approach the castle precinct. The castle is accessible in most areas with just a few of the older parts being difficult to access. I didn't venture beyond the precinct as it was very busy. I much preferred rolling down the High Street as gravity makes going down the street much easier.

A short distance down from the castle I arrived at Parliament Square. It was colourful as the collection of stalls displayed a wide variety of crafts. Good for getting a hat or a wooden carving if you wanted such a thing. Nearby the crowds were several people deep as a performer was entertaining them with his agility as an escapologist. Couldn't see much but knew it must be good by the rapturous applause.

Just around the corner St Giles cathedral was trying to maintain a sense of dignity amongst the balloons, banter, and ballads of its neighbours. I decided this might be a peaceful opportunity to take time out. Going up the ramp to the door you're greeted by an automatic door. Passing into the low light of the kirk you see the way ahead is blocked by steps. Scanning the landscape I spotted a discrete ramp at the side of the entrance lobby and took this route. Once inside the cathedral is level and you can get to most areas with ease. The building has beautiful stained glass, lots of monuments, and an atmosphere that is very peaceful. Venturing deep inside you

encounter a set of steps leading down to the cafe. This isn't a problem if, like me, you fancy a cuppa as you can join in with the tea ritual. Simply go outside and pop around the side of the building to the accessible entrance to the cafe.

Feeling refreshed, it's time to go down the hill. More performers line the streets and it's a hive of activity with everything from the world's most pierced lady through to street dance, bagpipe playing, a headless man, and stilt walkers. It's all beginning to feel like a gigantic open-air circus. The crowds are at their busiest, the noise and bustle atmospheric, and the artists in their finest colours and costumes.

Moving further down the hill the mood changes with mini stages where the fringe shows perform extracts from their performances. A brief pause to watch some musicians, enjoy a comedy sketch and wonder at the plays it's time to move on.

High Street done, I was heading for the Grassmarket. Going back up the street and heading toward the George IV Bridge a kind bus driver holds up the traffic to let me cross the busy road. I find Victoria Street which comes as a pleasant surprise; almost a step back in time. The old world shop fronts, the cobbles, and tall buildings all combine to create an atmosphere that could have leapt from pages of a Harry Potter story. Put platform nine and three quarters at the foot of the hill and the picture would be complete.

The street forms a fairly steep hill. It was manageable and there's the option of getting to the Grassmarket on the bus if it's too challenging. As you go back in time on your journey down the hill look out for the hog roast shop, the cheese maker, the tweed outfitters, and lots more.

Getting near the bottom it was time to be brought back to the real world by the deep throbbing of the drums as a group played its melodies to the gathered crowd. The pavements of the Grassmarket form one of Edinburgh's outside eating spaces with the bars and restaurants providing their finest delicacies.

The street is closed to traffic and was playing host to a market. Not the cattle market of old times but a modern array of brightly coloured stalls offering vintage clothes, old musical instruments, books, and antiques. The tables surrounded by people on a quest to find a bargain. Not tempted by getting my fortune read in a brightly painted gypsy caravan I move on. At the end of the pedestrian area there's one of those accessible automated toilets, handy for future reference.

Resisting the temptation to eat and drink I move to the other side of the street and head back toward the way I came. I decided to take the road leading from the Grassmarket up towards Greyfriars and the National Museum of Scotland. It's a bit of

a slope but has good pavements and is on the bus route. Getting to Greyfriars it's time for a quick look at the statue commemorating the famous dog before heading off to Bristo Square.

During the Festival the Square plays host to several festival events and is home of the Underbelly where you can see a variety of shows. Tucked away in the centre of the Square is a courtyard area where you can get a bite to eat and a beer. It's accessible to wheelchair users and there are loos as well.

Just around the corner, amidst the university buildings, I find George Square. It's been transformed for the festival with artificial grass, picnic benches, performance areas, and loads of eating options from the colourful stands. Although a bit lumpy in places I manage to get around.

Having seen the action in the Square I take a short walk around the corner to the Meadows. One of Edinburgh's large green spaces playing host to shows, open-air events and sports.

All done I head slowly back toward town, passing an array of festival venues, until arriving back at the High Street. One last look at the street performers and its time to head home having had a day of Festival fun.

Paul