

Royal Caribbean – Independence of the Seas

This ship is the 2nd biggest passenger liner in the world

Luggage and Parking

On arrival at the dock cars are directed to a queuing system and on reaching the front of the queue luggage is taken out of the car and loaded onto trolleys by porters. The luggage is then delivered to the stateroom and left outside. We did not ask for assistance in unloading luggage from our car or for carrying it into the stateroom but I am sure this would be done if requested. Cars then proceed to the car park which was 5 - 10 minutes walk from the departure lounge over hard surfaced paths with several kerbs to negotiate. We did not enquire in advance about the designated disabled parking which may have been closer to the departure area. It was possible to drop off a disabled person nearer to the departure area if they were able to be left to cope until their carer had parked. Departure on arrival back at Southampton was via a covered zig-zag ramp. Luggage left outside the stateroom the previous evening was collected from the baggage collection area where porters were available with trolleys to take it to the car and help load it. A tip was required. Wheelchair loans and a helper to push the chair were available for departing the ship but this involved a very early start and a wait.

Access to the Ship

Priority is given to wheelchair users and carers. We avoided a very long queue and were taken through the departure area straight away, ahead of the other passengers. At all ports there was ramped access to the ship. At Southampton there was a covered, long, zig-zag ramp up onto the ship - a carer might need to request assistance unless they are very fit. At other ports the ramp was short and rather steep but crew members always insisted on taking wheelchairs up and down the ramps so the carers don't need to worry about safety. There were security checks on each entry to the ship via a magnetic arch (as at airports) but wheelchair users were patted down instead by a same-gender crew member, (we thought it amusing and worrying that the pat-down stopped at the knee joint – who knows what I might have hidden in my artificial leg!)

Booking and Stateroom

Disabled staterooms can only be booked by phone although all the necessary information is on the website. You need to state exactly what your requirements are and they will do their best to meet them. There are no concessionary rates for wheelchair users or their carers. On board I enquired about hoists, they don't provide them but passengers can bring portable hoists on board. Any other equipment can be also be taken aboard eg wheelchairs, electric wheelchairs and mobility scooters as long as the dimensions have been notified. Some passengers took wheelchairs and scooters. The stateroom was one and a half times as large as the adjacent rooms with more than adequate wheelchair turning space, a 6 foot double bed or two 3 foot singles accessible from the right side (with the back of the chair next to the headboard). Left side access could be requested, if required. There were 2 armchairs, a sofa, a dressing table and chair and an adapted wardrobe with a pull-down rail and accessible height shelves. The safe was at wheelchair height but not easy to access inside the wardrobe.

General Access Onboard

Access to all decks is level and there are plenty of lifts at each end of the ship. The lifts have room for 2 or 3 wheelchairs plus about 15 standing passengers and are very quick, so we never waited more than a few minutes for a lift even at the busiest times. There is lift access to 14 of the 15 decks. Deck 15 is the chapel which can be reached by stair-lift. Most flooring is thick carpet which may be difficult for self-propelled wheelchair users or less able carers. All of the facilities are easily wheelchair accessible except for the two whirlpools which had steps up to them, the climbing wall and the flowrider (a surfing experience). It was possible to access these for viewing only.

Dining

All dining rooms and cafes are fully accessible. The formal dining rooms and speciality restaurants have silver service waiters who insist on pushing wheelchairs as soon as you enter the restaurant. This is always done carefully and with humour – the waiters seem to be selected on their ability to make passengers laugh! In the self service (Windjammer Restaurant), which is very busy for breakfast

and lunch, the atmosphere reminded us of a crowded motorway service station; seating is on a first come first seated basis and at times we had to wait for a table. However, again the waiters take over and 'queue –jump' wheelchair users which tends to annoy other passengers. Cutlery was accessible.

There is a huge circular buffet full of every type of food you could imagine (according to Barry) and I needed to imagine it as none of it was visible from wheelchair height! Again the waiters rushed to help, even when we'd have preferred to manage ourselves, always most pleasantly and with great willingness, carrying our plates and selecting food that we asked for. Mirrors above the buffet would have solved this problem and I wrote that on the end of cruise feed-back form. Of course there were other places to eat but they were formal and slower. - **This was the only complaint we had about the Independence of the Seas.**

Toilets

In public area the disabled toilets were in the same area as the Ladies or Gents. The outside door and the cubicle door were opened by light pressure on a chair level button. The cubicle door was locked and unlocked manually then the button opened the door. There was room to access the toilet from either side and lots of room for a carer. The wash basin and hand dryer were at chair level. Drop down rails were at each side of the toilet.

In our stateroom, on the port side, toilet access was from in front or the left side (with the back of the chair against the wall behind the toilet). There was probably right side access in starboard staterooms. Drop down rails were at each side of the toilet. There was plenty of turning space and lots of room for a carer. The wash basin was slightly lower than usual so both of us could use it comfortably. There was a wheel-in wet room type shower in the same room as the toilet and basin, with enough room for a carer. There was a fixed high level shower head and a low level detachable, flexible shower hose which I could use sitting on the fold down shower seat, which was non-slip. The shower controls and shelf for soap etc was accessible as was the shampoo dispenser. Drop down rails were at each side and the front of the shower. A towel could be hung on a hook within reach of the shower seat but out of the spray area. I found it possible, but

difficult, to enter this room in my manual wheelchair as there was a small threshold designed to stop water leaking from the shower.

Further information

There were a limited number of wheelchairs available to loan but no scooters.

There were a lot of wheelchair/scooter users on board. There were passengers with a variety of other impairments/disabilities too.

We had no personal experience of Hearing Loop or Assistance Dog facilities so you would need to check the website for further details.

Seating in the tiered theatre is behind the back row of seats and is on a first come basis so get there early. Exit only is via a fairly steep ramp.

There is a lift into one of the pools, I didn't use it myself but it looked to be quite easy, it was a chair which took you across the water and then lowered.

In the stateroom light switches were at chair level and required only gentle pressure. Electricity sockets (USA adaptors needed) were also accessible. Lights could be controlled from a bedside switch.

Balcony access is very steep over a drop-down metal plate about 20 cm wide (which seals the sliding door when closed). I needed to be pushed in and out. This would be a hazard to infirm/visually impaired persons.

All shore trips are graded according to mobility required – see website. A tip is to go to the Explorations Desk on board where the staff there can advise you. We found the 'Scenic Tours' were fine with just a few photo and wine-tasting stops. Very little walking was needed, none if I decided not to get off at any of the stops! Drivers were helpful about putting wheelchairs into and out of the luggage compartment. We didn't see anyone take a scooter on a bus tour.

At some ports there were local open top bus tours available fairly close to the ship which may have been suitable for wheelchairs. You would need to check with the driver prior to boarding.

There were taxi (saloon cars) at most ports and we heard from other passengers that they had negotiated a price and then were taken on a sightseeing tour by the driver. Some may have been willing to take wheelchair passenger, probably those who are able to transfer into the taxi and fold the wheelchair into the boot.

I believe, rightly I think!!! That a disabled person must have a carer with them, as the staff can't be held responsible.

A good insurance is necessary as medical care onboard can be very expensive. I needed an INR (warfarin) test during the holiday and was quoted \$240 to see the doctor who may or may not then order the test, \$70 to have the blood taken and tested then another \$240 to see the doctor again and be told the dosage to take!!!! As you may have guessed I didn't bother. I'll never moan about the NHS again! (Travel insurance didn't cover this blood test).

Services for disabled passengers had clearly been taken extremely seriously and were well thought out and appropriate for various disabilities (see website below) both in staterooms and around the ship and the staff were clearly well trained and motivated to help as much as they could.

The website is excellent and easy to use and full of information.

<http://www.royalcaribbean.com> then select All about Cruising / Accessibility onboard

Excellent information is provided in sections for the mobility impaired, visually impaired, hearing impaired and other health needs eg pregnancy/dialysis/learning disorders and developmental disorders.

The 'Feel Right at Home' section gives information about medical services onboard and other assistance offered both onboard and for boarding and departure.

The 'Accessible Staterooms' section gives a list of the features and adaptations available for wheelchair users.

Further customise the accommodation for your own specific needs, e-mail special_needs@rccl.com