

A day in the life

An intrepid reporter takes the 'high road' to Scotland to test Euroscot Express's facilities for disabled passengers

Story by **Simon Watkinson**

I used to loathe the daily scrum on the 7.27am from Ascot to Waterloo back in the '80s and often pondered the sheer futility of it all. However, it was only after noticing a chap in a wheelchair at Sunningdale being unceremoniously pushed up a makeshift ramp into the solitude of the guard's van that I realised how lucky I was.

At least I could exchange early morning banter on both the extortionate rail fares and imminent share flotations with fellow sufferers. This solitary soul had only a grunting guard for company.

Some 15 years later, when asked to write a piece on how a wheelchair user would fare on the Euroscot Express from

Bournemouth to Glasgow, I first considered a rush to the newsagents to stock up on literature for my journey. Signal failures and anxious delays due to leaves on the line immediately sprang to mind.

So I was pleasantly surprised when I discovered that I would be taking the "high road" to Scotland – the faster, aerial route.

"Lovely day for flying!" the Euroscot Express representative sang out as I heaved myself into my wheelchair moments after parking at Bournemouth International Airport.

She accompanied me to the reservations desk, where I was warmly welcomed as I handed in my ticket.

"You'll be the first on. The supervisor will be along shortly to escort you

to the aircraft," the reservations clerk had assured me. "Hello, Mr Watkinson. Shall I carry your bag?" the supervisor greeted me a few minutes later.

Once through security, where I was lightly frisked and my bag scanned, I was spirited up a steep incline through the departure lounge and out on to the tarmac.

Any fears of being fed into the rear of the aircraft with the catering trolleys,

scrambled on toast or frittered with the bananas were soon tempered by the timely arrival of three "ramp hands" and a Sedan chair.

"I'm sorry, I really should have gone on a strict diet," I apologised on realising I would be carried, like some Emperor without any clothes, up the stairs into the aircraft.

"Don't worry, Terry here is an ex-fireman," the burly chaps countered.



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enced – and waited in my seat until the aircraft emptied. The two polite and jovial passenger handlers from Glasgow Wheelchair Services came on board with the by now familiar Sedan chair and asked me the all-important question: "Does it hurt you anywhere if we lift

handed over my Pentax, she wished me a pleasant stay in Scotland.

"That's service," I pondered, admiring her professionalism and bright smile. "How lucky I was not to have had to endure the guard's van on that 7.27!"

I can vouch that the Sedan was far more comfortable than a fireman's lift and I was beside my seat in the aircraft in next to no time.

"How can we help you to your seat?" Terry and Andy had thoughtfully requested.

"I'll be OK," I insisted, trying not to offend with my independence.

Stewardesses Lucy and Monica, ensured I was comfortable during a very pleasant flight, and Euroscot treated me with dignity without any unnecessary or embarrassing fussing.

In fact, I felt so at ease that I almost forgot all about my rusty old wheelchair.

I marvelled at the smooth landing at Glasgow – one of the best I have ever experi-

you into the chair, or would you rather lift yourself?"

Nervously predicting a Moroccan victory over Scotland in an imminent World Cup match, I felt safe in the knowledge that a parachute would not be required as I descended the aircraft steps to the tarmac.

After a short ride in a van fitted with an "ambulift" and the usual security checks I reached the first stage of my journey in Scotland – the arrivals hall.

As I was browsing through the latest best-sellers in John Menzies, I felt a light tap on my shoulder and heard a soft voice saying: "You left your camera on the seat, Simon." As Lucy the stewardess

Planning ahead

The Greater Glasgow & Clyde Tourist Board has made every effort to accommodate the disabled person's needs with its disabled access fact file detailing Glasgow's numerous wheelchair-accessible arts centres, theatres and concert halls. It is available from the Greater Glasgow & Clyde Tourist Board, 11 George Square, Glasgow G2 1DY. Tel: 0141-204-4480.

The Board's Tourism Training Unit co-ordinates Disability Awareness Training sessions for staff working in the city's travel and tourism industry.

Glasgow Wheelchair Services' Executive Management Services is a private company responsible for handling wheelchair passengers at Glasgow Airport. Tel: 0141-848-4736.

Flying High is a comprehensive practical guide to air travel for elderly and disabled people. Produced in conjunction with British Airways, it is available from The Disabled Living Foundation, 389-384 Harrow Road, London W9 2HU. Helpline tel: 0870-603-9177.

The Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR) has a pamphlet, Access to Air Travel – A Guide for People with Reduced Mobility. Write to 12 City Forum, 250 City Road, London EC4 8AF. Tel: 0171-250 3222.

The Royal National Institute for the Blind produces a free cassette, Plane Easy, with information for blind people wishing to fly. Write to the RNIB, 224 Great Portland Street, London W1N 6AA. Tel: 0171-388-1266.