

California dreaming

Cairns member Ian Chill found using a wheelchair posed no barrier to enjoying a family holiday in the US.

When each ride came to an end at Disneyland, it was Ian Chill and not his three children who wanted to go again.

After sustaining a spinal cord injury six years ago, Ian thought his days of travelling and exploring new countries might be over.

However, over Christmas and New Year he spent a fun-filled three weeks on a US holiday with wife Nikki and children Sam, 14, Hayley, 13, and Jaimee, seven, and is already looking into returning to the States in the near future.

Three days at Disneyland, exploring Alcatraz in San Francisco, seeing Hollywood Boulevard, Universal Studios and enjoying the world-famous San Diego Zoo were just some of the highlights of the Chill family holiday.

"I turned into a big kid at Disneyland and had a ball; it was a great feeling to be able to go on rides with the kids for a change," Ian said.

"In Australia we are so far behind in terms of accessible theme parks and holiday options; it's quite disappointing."

As well as accessible rides for people who use wheelchairs, Ian said the public transport system and accommodation options in California were of an extremely high standard. "We used the whole host of public transport – buses, trains and taxis – and they were all fully accessible," Ian said.

"The buses in particular really impressed me as they have a tie-down



Thrills for Ian (left) and his son (next to Ian) at Disneyland

system similar to Australia's maxi taxis to secure not only your chair, but a lap sash to secure your upper body so you're not swaying all over the place like buses tend to make you do in Australia.

"People with spinal cord injuries lose their sense of balance so this type of securing device would be extremely beneficial here."

Ian said he also found the customer service in the States fantastic, with

people seemingly more aware of how they could assist people with a physical disability, and more importantly, staff would address the person who used a wheelchair and not their carer or family member.

"Customer service assistants were always ready and willing to assist to make our visit more comfortable. I was really impressed from the time we touched down until we left."

A website that was extremely helpful when Ian was planning his holiday was World on Wheelz (www.worldonwheelz.com).

Run by James Glasbergen, a Canadian who has quadriplegia, the site showcases the many countries James has visited, and his first-hand tips and recommendations about where to stay, what to see and how to go about seeing it.

"James has road tested these destinations himself, and as someone



Ian and his children meet Elmo

with no leg function and limited hand mobility, you know his recommendations are coming from someone who requires fully accessible options," Ian said.

"With around one in five Australians having some form of physical disability (ABS 2008), it's important that the tourism

industry both here and abroad realises the potential in making their tourist attractions, whether it's a hotel, theme park or eatery, fully accessible for all people."

Ian sustained paraplegia after falling 10 metres down a cave while on a peace keeping mission with the Royal Australian Navy in the Solomon Islands in 2004.

At that time he said he felt extremely vulnerable and didn't know what he would be able to do now he had to use a wheelchair.

"There's a long process of learning what you can and can't do, or finding new ways to be able to do things that used to come naturally," Ian said.

"This holiday has been a real celebration and revelation that you can continue to lead a fulfilling life

following a permanent injury."

Now working full-time as Cairns Regional Council's Access and Equity Project Officer, Ian is also an important part of the Association's Spinal Education Awareness Team (SEAT), which visits schools and workplaces to share their stories and messages of safety.

Travel story to share? Email vmannxcoppard@spinal.com.au.

