Harini's days out - mystery shopping around the City



**By Allen Stone, FYi Information Officer**

The truth is, I like my job. I have responsibility and most of what I do is interesting and, I think, useful. Then one day I was asked to go shopping.

Generally speaking, I’m not big on shopping. If I need something, fine. Otherwise I can think of better things to do than braving high streets and malls in search of something I may or may not need.

This, however, would be different. This was *mystery* shopping to check the accessibility and customer experience of some of the most popular public attractions in the City of London. The goal was to find out how easy it was for people with SEND to get into and around the venues, and the degree to which they could participate in the activities there.

My partner on this undercover assignment was Harini Bala.

Haini is 25 and uses a wheelchair, which affects her experience of doing things we ‘walkers’ take for granted. She also needs the help of a personal assistant to venture out. During term time Harini attends a residential placement out of town, but when she’s home for the holidays, away from her placement community, life can get a bit slow and boring. This summer Harini was keen to get out and about, so we offered her the chance to become a mystery shopper.

I met Harini for the first time when she came to the Guildhall to discuss the practicalities of the project. It was clear from the outset that this was something she really wanted to do. She also gave a hint of her sense of humour when I mistakenly said we planned for our outings to last from 10am to 2am, meaning, of course, 2pm. When her concerned mother, who had tagged along, questioned my timekeeping, Harini told mum, with a smile, that 2am was fine with her.

We decided on three excursions during the final weeks of August, the first to the Tower Bridge Exhibition, the second to *Fire! Fire!,*the Great Fire of Londonexhibit at the Museum of London and, finally, (gasp) a shopping trip to the One New Change mall on Cheapside. I would meet Harini and her assistant at her home and go with them by car service to the venue. We’d grab a cab for the return.

**Tower Bridge Exhibition**

Getting to Tower Bridge was easy. Getting to the exhibition itself wasn’t. Although our driver could drop us near the entry on the bridge, we approached the bridge in the southbound lane and the entrance to the exhibition is on the opposite side of the road. There are no marked pedestrian crossings on the bridge, but Harini and her assistant weren’t deterred. At a dropped curb they calmly and confidently stopped traffic and wheeled across.

The rest *was* easy. The venue has a separate, ramped entrance for wheelchair users, manned lifts to all levels, information panels set at wheelchair height, and large spaces in both towers with displays and films about the bridge and enough room to take a break from the action. Staff are invariably friendly and helpful.

Then there are the viewing galleries, the duel, enclosed walkways between the tops of the towers lined with wheelchair-user accessible information panels, projections and spectacular views of the river and City skyline.

One feature Harini particularly liked was the glass sections in the walkway floors, which make them ‘no go’ zones for anyone squeamish about heights. Harini’s assistant was definitely among the squeamish. Harini, however, not only loved the view but needed little encouragement to wheel her heavy wheelchair across the void, stopping midway to let us know that, really, there’s nothing to it.

The only downside to the exhibition is that the waist-high, panelled railing outside the walkways prevents wheelchair users and small children from seeing the river or shore. This is an unavoidable feature of the bridge’s Victorian design, but staff at the exhibition are aware of it and are considering solutions.

**Fire! Fire! Exhibition at the Museum of London**

The Museum of London is only a short stroll from Harini’s home so we walked there. Harini provided directions for the quickest route to the museum’s mezzanine level entrance.

Fire! Fire! is very accessible for wheelchair users. It’s spacious, the information panels are the right height for wheelchair users, there are plenty of creative, easy-to-operate interactive displays, and it does a great job of telling the story of the Great Fire and fire fighting in 17th century London.

Harini watched the fire spread on a three-dimensional table top map, tried her hand at saving the City at a ‘Control the Fire’ video game, listened to contemporary diary entries through headphones, and handled and wore period fireman equipment - including a choice of heavy, leather fire helmets.

**Shopping at One New Change**

This was a nightmare that didn’t come true. As mentioned, I’m not big on shopping when it’s for me, never mind someone else. The experience doesn’t appeal. Here, despite the worthiness of the endeavour, I’d essentially be clothes shopping with two women. I was ready for endlessly waiting around. I was ready to be bored!

Well, I was right about the waiting, but wrong about the boredom.

Like the previous venues, One New Change is highly accessible for wheelchairs and as soon as Harini and her assistant realised they’d have no trouble navigating its stores, lifts and public spaces Harini’s eyes lit up and they were off. The two spent the next three hours going from store to store comparing fashions, discussing cut, colour and fabric, and trying on hats, sunglasses and accessories.

I couldn’t help but enjoy watching Harini step out in public and have fun. For once, the waiting didn’t matter.

***Note on transport****.*

*By law, licensed London black cabs must be accessible to people with mobility issues. We took black cabs back to Harini’s from Tower Bridge Exhibition and One New Change. Each time there were no problems taking Harini in her wheelchair and the cab drivers were friendly and helpful.*