

DSUK Helper Diary

DSUK Adaptive Holidays provide a unique opportunity for people with disabilities to experience all aspects of a snowsports holiday, skiing or snowboarding in a mountain environment and of course Apres.

A helper plays a huge part in making these experiences happen and without them DSUK would not be able to offer these Holidays to our skiers and snowboarders. This diary was written by Anne, and is intended to paint a picture of what it means to be a DSUK helper.

A bit about Anne

Anne is a keen skier and has spent a lot of time in the mountains.

In 2019 as part of her sabbatical Anne was lucky enough to be able to join us on 4 trips: 2 in Neiderau, Austria, and 2 in Arinsal, Andorra.

 Anne holds the record for the most trips in a year for sure!



Anne is an active volunteer at the DSUK Hemel Hempstead Local Group, and regularly joins our skiers and snowboarders at their monthly meet ups.

Anne has very kindly agreed to share her experience with you all to try and describe what the role of a Helper entails and what you should expect in the lead up and during your week.



Pre-Departure and travel

I started volunteering for DSUK when I realised that I wanted to do some adaptive work during my sabbatical. I joined the local group at the Snow Centre in Hemel Hempstead, I did some shadowing of lessons and helping during the once a month, Local Group Recreational evenings, and during the summer the Snowsport School Manager at DSUK Hemel Hempstead also ran some training sessions for helpers.

Don't worry if you can't do this though, the Snowsport Instructors on the trips are super patient and lovely, and will show you everything you need to know.

So, I had some experience of how to help with all the equipment, but it was pretty rusty by the time winter came around.



About a week before the trip you'll get a call from the DSUK Rep for the trip. They'll often buddy you up with one of the skiers or snowboarders, which means being there for them for anything they need at the airports and transfers and off snow during the week.



You can ask questions about what the expectations are and what the disabilities you'll be working with are. The first week I was quite nervous at this point, I had been buddied up with a blind lady, I'd never spent time with any blind people, and I was worried I'd have no idea how to handle the situation.

As it turns out just being open, empathetic and a good friend is the best approach, as soon as I met Bella I asked her to help me learn how best to help, told her to tell me if I was helping too much or too little, I listened and was inquisitive and tried to put myself in her shoes of the types of things she might need assistance with.



The day arrived and we all met in the airport, helping each other get checked in and finding our buddies. At this point you'll wonder how you'll ever remember who everyone is, by the end of the week you will never forget.



I had never seen how travel works for people who need assistance when travelling, and I was actually super impressed with Gatwick, it's well organised and well thought-out to minimize any awkwardness and is super respectful. I stuck with my buddy and went along with her through security, getting breakfast and getting to the plane, being as useful as I could manage.

In Resort



Once we'd made it to the resort my first task was to help Bella orient herself around the hotel, guiding her to the elevator, showing her where all the buttons were, describing hazards and milestones along the walk to the room, and then describing and showing her where everything was in the room. Bella was so gracious in helping me learn how I could help, and being as encouraging to me as I was being to her.

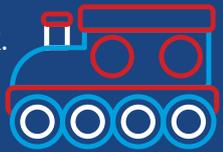
One thing that was extra special about this week for Bella, was the friendship between her and her roommate Steph, who is also blind. This was actually the first time they had physically met, having been friends for a few years via meeting on a Christian chat group, they seemed to have such a fun time together, navigating the slopes and experiencing lots of new things together.

For the first few days Alina (Steph's helper) and I would meet them at their room and guide them downstairs, but by the end of the week, they would beat Alina and me everywhere, having managed to get themselves coffee and food often!



From this point on everything became quite an adventure between the four of us. As it was a buffet style breakfast and salad bar in the evenings, Alina and I would load up their plates and describe where everything was on the plate (like a clock I learned!).

Bella, Steph and I went on an adventure to the supermarket, pharmacy and bank. We were quite the sight navigating our way around in a small train of a trolley, me, Bella and then Steph. Everyone around us was giving us a nice clear path!



I think that my pretty high level of empathy was really helpful, it helped me think about the types of things they might like to know or need and anticipate in advance. I came away from the week with my other senses (apart from sight) quite heightened, especially for sounds. Bella told me about how she and her friends make sound casts, recordings of lots of different sounds, and making a play or music out of it.

All week I was listening out for the sounds of the mountains, so I could record them as memories for them or describe them later on.

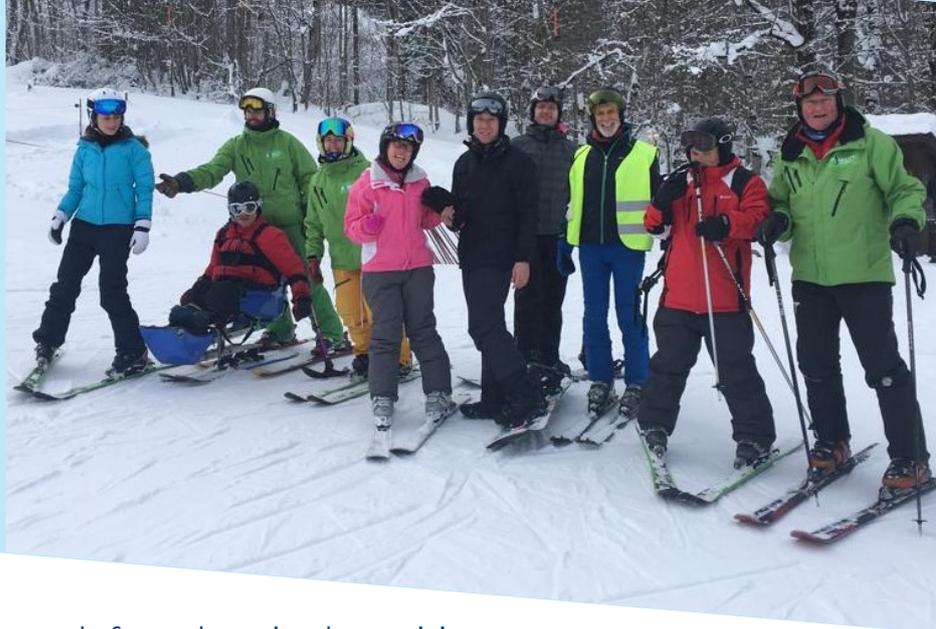
I tried to describe the views, and the houses in the town and the glittering you sometimes get on the snow in the right light.

I had the best time getting to know Steph, Bella and Alina. There were some really special moments, like accompanying them to this tiny chapel that was at the top of the mountain and getting to watch them explore the place with their hands, how much belief they had in their faith and seeing the joy on their faces as they zoomed down the slopes. I got quite emotional many times just witnessing them getting on with what was totally normal for them, but astounding for me.



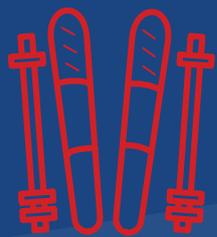
On the Snow

There were 12 adaptive skiers in total, some came with carers or family, some on their own. Many had been coming on this same trip for years and were well known amongst the hotel staff and around town. There was a real range of people, proving that DSUK can help anybody to ski. I skied with people who are visually impaired, have cerebral palsy, downs syndrome, epilepsy, and learning disabilities...



But each and every one of them was so much fun, alarmingly positive about life and really lovely people.

The helpers and snowsports instructors too, it was great to meet so many people from such different walks of life, all brought together with a love of skiing who want to help others experience that love too.



Skiing With Bella

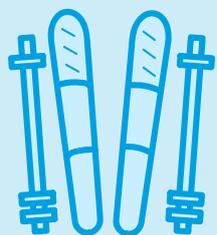
I skied a few days with Bella and her instructor Doug on-and-off. They kept the Visually Impaired skiers with the same instructors all week so that they could build up trust and rapport.

Bella has actually skied quite a lot, especially when younger but it had been 16 years since her last time on skis. She much preferred being totally independent and not being physically guided, she quickly got back her ski legs. She has a brilliant feel for the snow and the terrain, instinctively knowing when to turn and how sharply given the gradient to slow down. She would pick herself a corridor of 15 meters or so and off she went, doing lots of little turns, testing when to let the skis run and how much room she had, and how much speed she could safely pick up.



I was often trailing behind her welling up at how amazing it was to witness. To start with Doug would ski behind her and just shout left or right, but by the end, Doug and I would ski down opposite edges of the run and just shout when Bella got too close to the edge, otherwise, off she skied. Totally amazing. My usual role when it came to the drag lifts was to go up ahead and then give Bella a warning when she was getting to the end and a "1,2,3 let go". The progression throughout the week was pretty great.





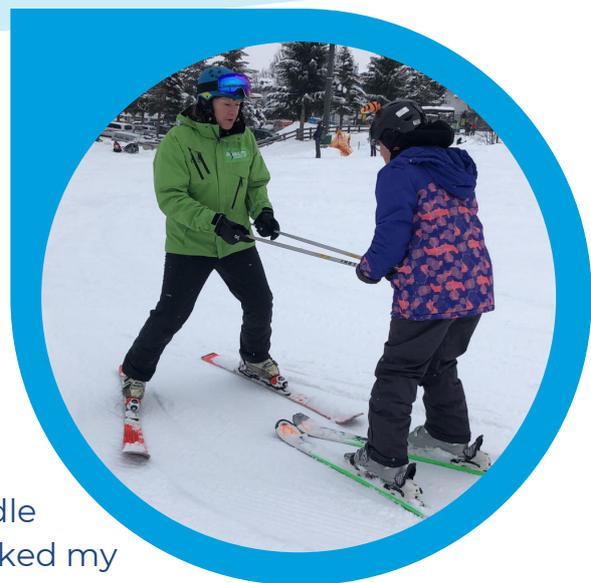
Skiing with Julia

Next up was Julia, she had come along with her sister Kate and their full-time carers. They had both been on this trip a few times and

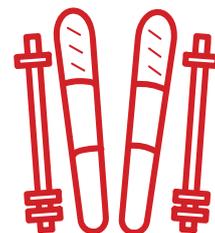
seemed to know the drill. Julia permanently had a smile plastered on her face, and would often get to the bottom of the slopes exclaiming “didn’t I do well!”.

On her first run of the week, at the top, she told us how she was feeling nervous... she skied literally 3 feet before telling us that it was all good now and that she really was quite good.

She loved that my middle name was Julia, and talked my ear off non-stop about her house, her family, her friends, her pets. We had one morning where she retold word for word this whole book that she’d had read to her, probably many times, when she was 8 (some 35 years previously!). I could barely remember what I had for breakfast. She loved counting how many runs and turns she’d done and then telling anyone who would listen over dinner.



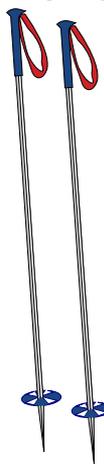
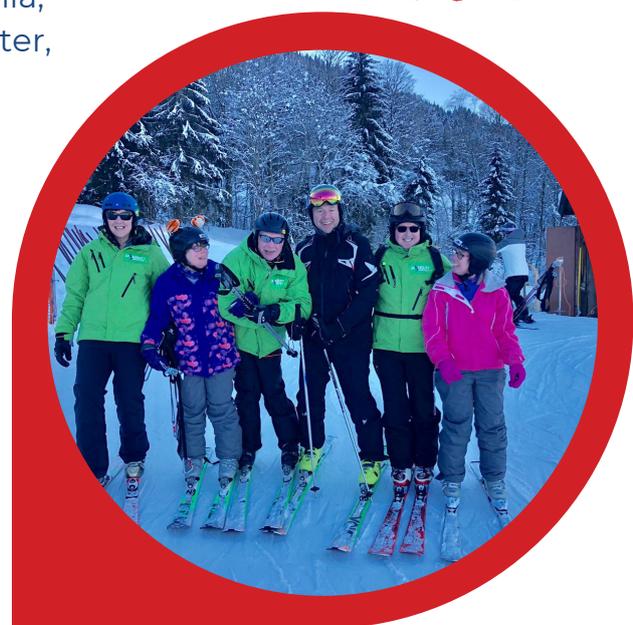
Skiing with Kate

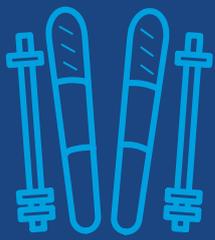


Her younger sister Kate isn’t as full sentence chatty as Julia, but there are a few things that she really loves. Harry Potter, Tigger and ABBA. My knowledge of Harry Potter was nothing in comparison to Kate. We would ski about yelling “Gryffindor” or “Hermione”. I even put my annoyance at ABBA aside and we went down the whole run playing “Dancing Queen” out loud whilst singing and dancing.

She also does the most amazing impression of the Tigger growl, that most of us spent the whole week trying to master but didn’t have much luck. Karen her instructor used ski poles held against Kate’s hips to help her turn when she needed it. It had never dawned on me to manipulate (very gently) someone’s hips like that. Only the slightest pressure and it would make turning much easier for Kate. Genius!

Kate is also a total whizz at Jigsaw puzzles.





Skiing with Edward

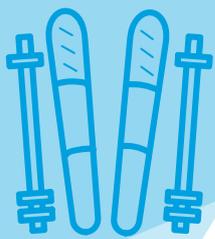
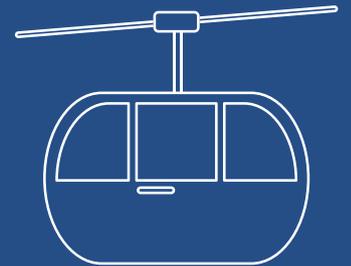
Edward was one of the three people on the trip with Down's Syndrome. He is a real gentleman. A really kind, quiet and diligent soul who would listen attentively to his ski instructor and do everything was suggested. He was parallel skiing and pole planting like a pro by the end of the week.



I was sat next to him on the official Apres Ski bar afternoon, and we had a lot of fun dancing. He could always be found relaxing with his book of word searches and exactly where he was meant to be 5 mins early.



Edward wouldn't stop dancing so blurry photo! The grumpy face is Paul, another of the helpers, who was less than impressed by the Euro-pop...



Skiing with Ian

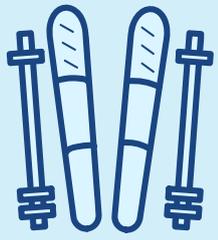
Ian is visually impaired and uses a wheelchair. He has a wicked sense of humour, so wicked that between him and his ski instructor Ross

I would often have to close my delicate(!) ears to as they wound each other up! Ian used a bi-ski, which is a sit ski with two skis underneath, and he and Ross were working on how to get him to the point where he could independently get himself in and out of the sit-ski and around the hill. They also used a headset so that Ross could call turns to him as they were tethering (the things that look like reins) down the hill.



My job as helper was to mostly pack and unpack all the ropes that you need whenever you are going up on a drag lift. You attach the quick release end to the t-bar or button, wrap another layer around the ski instructor behind the sit ski, and then the lift would pull everyone up the hill. When getting to the top the ski instructor then pulls the quick release which lets go of the button and they slide off gracefully. There's a total technique to putting all the ropes away and setting up the quick release properly, every time we got to the top safely and the quick release actually released I would rejoice that I hadn't messed anything up!

Skiing with Alex



Talking of messing things up, I did one session with the same instructor and Alex, a young 21-year-old with cerebral palsy who also used the sit ski. Super into music and also a wicked sense of humour, he came along with his Dad on the trip.

This was to be the day of my first attempt to take a sit ski up a t-bar with someone in it. I had practised with a sit-ski a few times in Hemel Hempstead when we had some volunteer training session over the summer, but we practised on each other, and it's hardly a mountain.



I was pretty nervous, and Alex was game, we got onto the lift ok, and were maybe 3 feet from the top, when my body reacted before my brain (or the other way around) and I pulled the quick release, meaning we promptly started sliding backwards rather than forwards, thankfully my instinct kicked in and I managed to steer us backwards and sideways to safety fairly quickly, nearly having a heart attack in the process. It was good to know that I could handle the situation safely, and the instructor Ross reassured me.



Alex got another run out of it so he was happy, and I had another go and we all made it to the top that time. I needed a large alcoholic beverage afterwards!

Last Words

I didn't manage to ski with everyone, but it was great sticking to some of the same people so I could see them progress through the week.

It was a very intense week with little downtime but very fulfilling getting to work with such great people and being a small part of enabling such joy in a sport that I love too. The inclusivity that no matter what your mental or physical ability, we can all get out and enjoy the feeling of sliding around on snow, is so special. What a lovely, lovely bunch of people and an awesome charity for bringing us all together.

