



[Above] A recent wildlife holiday up in the Gorges du Verdon

GO PROVENCE

Planning holidays can be a stressful task at the best of times. Researching hotels, trying to find the cheapest flights, ensuring the accommodation is suitable and ensuring there is enough to do to keep you all amused. If you have a learning disability or if you have a child with learning disabilities this task can be even more daunting as the logistics of travel and support can become overwhelming.

Step in holiday company, Go Provence.

Go Provence is situated in the beautiful Gorges du Verdon in Provence, the South of France and provides fully supported holidays to adults and children with learning disabilities. From your initial booking to returning home, Go Provence will provide a helping hand and practical support every step of the way, they will even meet you at Gatwick airport to assist with check-in, airport security and the flight to France.

We caught up with founder of Go Provence, Ian Callen to find out more about where the idea came from to start [↗](#)

[Below] Kayaking in the Gorges du Verdon



this supported holiday company and what it offers holidaymakers.

“The idea for Go Provence came about after I had been living in France for two years. The international school for children with dyslexia that I had worked in, had sadly closed and I found myself pondering my future. I was married with two young children (I now have three) and we did not want to move back to England. One morning on a walk with Anna, my wife, in the sunny, spring hills of the pre alps, I remembered an idea I had had back in England. It was when I was working on a farm in Bristol, where I taught people with learning disabilities, horticulture and conservation. I was teaching on my last day at work and one by one, people were coming into the

So, falling back on this idea, in the summer of 2009, I thought I would run a pilot holiday week. I got back in touch with all my previous students and a group of seven wanted to come down and spend a week with us. I knew we would need more help with support so I got in touch with an old friend, Neil Manser, who still lived down in Port Grimaud, an hour and a half away from us. He said he would love to come up and help for the holiday, that was in 2009.

In January 2010, we launched, Go Provence Supported Holidays. Our aim, to offer non-patronising, supported holidays to people with learning disabilities/difficulties and autism, using the backdrop of the Gorges du Verdon, Provence (the biggest and, some would say, the most beautiful gorge in Europe) and its culture that we have found so life affirming.

Many ideas are born on our holidays from holidaymakers. I put this down to a change of environment and the fact that holidaymakers have the space and time to get inspired. A new idea can result in a massive change back home in the UK for our holidaymakers. They could be inspired by Neil’s (our chef) cooking and decide to take up catering at college and throw their life in a new direction, so we try to naturally draw out ambitions and ideas from our holidaymakers during the holiday as this is a great opportunity for change.

We offer support from Gatwick airport, down to Marseilles, and back again when the holiday is finished. This can take the sting out of any anxiety around travelling abroad. It also means that clients have less to organise for the trip, they just have to get themselves to Gatwick. We meet the group at the check-in desk, support clients to check in their luggage, then support everyone through security. This is an exciting hour or so and a group can start to get to know each other in the departure lounge. We then support our clients on the one hour and thirty-minute flight, to Marseilles, Provence. We do the same for the return journey.

We have many different types of holidays at our large country house. The house sleeps up to fifteen people and we work on a ratio of seven clients to five support staff. We are based near a lovely, historical village called Moustiers Sainte-Marie, in the Gorges du Verdon. Our holidays range from wildlife photography to world cuisine themes. Adventure to art. Trekking to water. The great element of our holidays is that anyone would enjoy them.

[Below] White water rafting in the gorge



[Above] Founder Ian with little boy, Alex, who was visiting with the Brandon Trust

classroom (glorified shed) saying goodbye and wishing me luck in France. I would reply to their good wishes, ‘well you know you will have to come down and visit me’, and at the same time wondering if they ever could, as travelling for people with learning disabilities can be complicated and expensive, depending on the support and individual needs. It was then that I had the idea of setting up a supported holiday company, there in that shed.



We also have a carer/family separate accommodation about a 30-minute drive away in the perched village of Rougon. This works really well for people who have never been on holiday by themselves before as they know that someone they know is nearby, which relieves anxiety for both the carer and client. This can help clients to develop another strand in their lives of independence, supporting them to have a holiday without mum/dad or carer. The flip side is that mum/dad or carer gets a much needed holiday too. Something that can be very hard to come by.

We arrange our support through dialogue with the client and their support network. This is carefully done through a health questionnaire and telephone conversations. Our support is as unintrusive as we can safely and comfortably offer.

Go Provence gives us a great platform to help others realise their dreams and goals. We had a client on holiday with us, Ed, a great photographer, who had won awards for his work but couldn't find anyone to give him wall space for an exhibition. When he was with us, we arranged with a local restaurant owner, Jean Jacques, in Moustiers Sainte-Marie, for an exhibition to take place in his restaurant, Le Belvedere. We had an opening evening, the local press turned up and Ed sold five photos. As you can imagine Ed was a very happy man, and all of this happened whilst Ed was on holiday with us. I love that, ideas coming from nothing.

THE FUTURE

We want to branch out to holidays outside of Provence, wildlife photography holidays in Canada, supported backpacking around Europe, Northern Lights in Sweden, volunteer working in developing countries. We want to change the way people with learning disabilities can travel and increase their opportunities, so that access to travel becomes the norm. Travel is so important to one's sense of well-being. This is why we feel our holidays are so valuable."

If you would like to find out more about the holidays available with Go Provence call 00 33 (0) 4 86 56 65 61(France), email ian@goprovence.co.uk or visit www.goprovence.co.uk.



[Left] Griffon Vulture – taken by Michael Jenkins, a 10-year-old boy

WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY HOLIDAY

A supported wildlife photography holiday with Go Provence gave way to some amazing images being captured by the holidaymakers themselves. Ian explains what prompted the introduction of a wildlife photography week:

"This holiday came about because Neil Manser, friend and Go Provence director, and I got talking to Chris Sperring, a parent of a young man who has autism, who was on a supported holiday with us back in the summer of 2014. Chris is a naturalist and a BBC broadcaster for wildlife. He also understands people with a learning disability and together we hatched an idea for a supported wildlife photography holiday in Provence, South of France. We wanted to pitch the feel

of the holiday at a high level, and we thought that with the right support, clients could achieve, not just top level images, but an education about ourselves and the world we live in. We have run one of these holidays for the past two years and they are a huge success. The holidaymakers that come love it and I think this is mainly because we don't patronise them with the support that we give. This works so well in photography because in photography there is no right or wrong image, a finished image is so subjective. There are few techniques to master with the camera definitely, and once that is achieved we work towards getting the clients close to the wildlife, either physically, or through their camera zooms and the wildlife always gives us drama to capture.



[Clockwise from top left] Red Squirrel – taken by clients with Hugo Apps; Mountains surrounding The Gorges du Verdon – taken by Ed Phippen; Scarce Swallowtail butterfly – taken by Jay Hardiman