

# The call of the wild

Clare Allen tells **No Limits** how she prepared for her four-month trip down under...

**T**ravelling abroad for short periods of time when you have arthritis isn't really a problem – there are the obvious considerations, such as how much medication you'll need, as well as the hassle of wrangling with your airline for extra leg room etc... But what happens if you want to travel for longer than a few weeks? What happens if you're 18, and, like any other gap year student, you hear the call of the wild? Well, it seems you might come up against a few obstacles.

This is the position I found myself in when my A-levels were over, and the year ahead stretched in front of me with nothing but visits to the pub and Job Centre to keep me busy.

I'd always dreamed of travelling to Africa and Malaysia. My passion for development meant I was keen to get my hands dirty building wells and schools, but as I'm on methotrexate for rheumatoid arthritis (which I've had since I was 13), immunisations were out of the question. I had to re-think my options. New Zealand was a natural choice for me

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as my uncle lives in Wellington and the friend accompanying me had always fancied Australia. So, our destination was decided.

First off, I went to see my rheumatology team for guidance, but it seemed that no one had ever come across a teenager with arthritis wishing to travel for this length of time.

The only thing they could tell me was that it would be possible for me to get my four-month supply of medication free on the NHS. However, this would not be simple. I take etanercept, an anti-TNF drug with which I have to inject myself once a week [other people may inject twice a week]. It has worked miracles for me and I would never consider coming off it, but, as it has to be kept between 3-8°C, a giant cool bag and endless supplies of ice would be in order.

I contacted the manufacturer of

etanercept, who confirmed that it would be best for me to take my medication from the UK as, although etanercept is available in Australia and New Zealand, it is very expensive and I would have to purchase the drug after obtaining a prescription from a local physician.

I began to enquire about sharps disposal for my etanercept injections; the only alternative being to go into a clinic or hospital for the injections, and dispose of the sharps afterwards in their facilities. I thought that this might not always be convenient and could be costly, so I ordered a travel-size sharps container to be sent straight to my uncle's house.

When I returned to the hospital, they still had little information to offer me. However, I felt confident enough with my own findings to have booked the flights by this point, making it a little difficult to



**Before you strap on that backpack, take a look at Minal Chande's checklist for a stress-free, fun-packed trip.**

Whether you're going to be backpacking across Asia or inter-railing through Europe, put in an early visit to your doctor to discuss how the trip will affect your arthritis.

give in. The conversation centred on blood tests, with the registrar agreeing that I could have two done in the 15 weeks I was away – one in either country. I would have to go to the local hospital's A&E department with a letter from my hospital, specifying the tests I needed and why.

Other doctor's notes I needed included one for customs and the flight, specifying why I had to carry my medication in my hand luggage, and one outlining my diagnosis and medication in case I had to be admitted to hospital. My next appointment was booked for two weeks before I departed.

Although I have a pre-existing medical condition, since it is well controlled and considered unforeseeable that I would need treatment whilst abroad, I was able to get a standard insurance policy. However, I did save up some extra money in case I had a flare-up and needed a steroid injection in a hurry.

After all that careful thought and preparation, I felt armed and ready to start my travels.' ■

- Your medications might not be available abroad, so it might be easiest to take them with you. Ask the relevant embassy and check your drugs are permitted in the countries you are visiting
- Take enough medications for your trip plus some extra in case of travel delays
- Make sure any medications are clearly labelled and placed in your hand luggage – check with the airline before you travel in case of new security regulations. Like Clare, you may need a doctor's note to explain why you need to keep your drugs with you.
- Find out before you leave how you can get medical help abroad – it might be costly and slow, so make sure you are up to date with blood tests etc before you go
- When planning where to go, bear in mind that you cannot have some immunisations when you are taking certain medications
- Insurance is a must – what happens if you need to come home urgently or need treatment abroad? Even a simple treatment can cost a lot in different countries. Sort it
- If you are travelling to Europe make sure you get a free EHIC card, which entitles you to reduced or free medical treatment in EU countries if you are a UK resident. Apply through your local post office or the Department of Health website ([www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)).