

# VIEWS (without sight)

Meet the remarkable holiday company that puts blind and sighted walkers together for an experience that changes the outlook of both...

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HERE'S A GRAND view from Lindisfarne beach. The evocative ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle are a shattered stone coronet on the horizon to the south. The Farne Islands – one of Britain's top bird sanctuaries, and Sir David Attenborough's self-declared favourite place in the UK to see nature at its best – are a low-lying scatter several miles out in the North Sea. A long line of tall wooden poles pokes out of the sand between Lindisfarne and the mainland, marking the trail that pilgrims pace barefoot to reach England's Holy Island in ancient time-honoured manner.

But despite the impressive visuals, I'm pushing my *other* senses to bring this place alive for my companion Laura since, being blind, she can't see any of it. And suddenly I'm realising that, prioritising the views as we tend to do, sighted walkers sometimes miss out on the treasure trove of wonders that our other senses can provide.

Traveleyes has put that idea to the test since it was founded by blind traveller Amar Latif in 2005. Frustrated from years of being turned away from holiday opportunities unless he could go with a sighted guide, he created the world's first commercial travel company to make the world "a more accessible place for blind and vision impaired people". The clever approach involves offering sighted folk places on walking holidays at a significantly reduced price, in exchange for guiding visually-impaired travellers (VIs in the company parlance) on each day's explorations.

And if you think holidays for visually-impaired folk are bound to be cautious or mundane affairs,

think again. Traveleyes' 2017 summer trips include hanging out with fierce dragons on Indonesia's Komodo Island, tackling the gradients in Bulgaria's rugged Rila Mountains, or exploring the 'lost continent' of Madagascar. There are enticing British trips too. "Our April trip to Orkney sold out in 24 hours, so we arranged another one for September," explains Phil Adams, leader of the trip I've joined in coastal Northumberland.

This is my second time with Traveleyes but I still vividly recall my first-time nerves about, well, pretty much everything, as I tried to imagine my shame if my blind companion ended up in a ditch, a hospital or over the side of a cliff...

So, a few tips on guiding etiquette. Once you've been told your VI companion for the day, go and stand in front of them and introduce

## ▲ HOLY ISLAND

Settled by St Aidan in the 7th century, Lindisfarne is dominated by its 16th century castle.

## ▲ ARM IN ARM

Norman guides his blind companion Laura along the beach, sharing a sensory overload.



PHOTO: TOM BAILEY





#### ▲ SENSORY APPARATUS

The sighted and visually impaired walkers explore the textures, scents and sounds of Lindisfarne and Bamburgh Castle.

yourself in a warm and friendly manner: “Hello Laura, I’m Norman, and I’ll be guiding you today.” After introductions, nicely ask your VI companion how they would prefer to be guided e.g. holding your arm on their left or right side.

Once you’re on your way, you’ll soon get into the swing of scanning ahead for things to alert your new VI friend to, though for first-timers the odd stumble soon makes the point.

“Step!” is perhaps the most commonly spoken word by guides, but on a walking excursion you need to be aware of other guide warnings, from “big boulder!” and “low branch!” to a genuine example from my first trip: “200m drop into the sea on the left of the path, Dave – let’s keep over to the right...”

Down on Lindisfarne beach I’m pushing my own sensory awareness to find ways to bring the setting alive for Laura. Suddenly, things I would otherwise have barely noticed in passing become new opportunities for experience. As Morten Stroknes observed in his recent Nordic odyssey *Shark Drunk: The Art of Catching a Large Shark from a Tiny*

*Rubber Dinghy in a Big Ocean*: “The landscape is not in front of me. It’s all around me.”

I become more aware of the fabric of the beach, for starters. Our island guide, Mary Gunn, has explained how tiny fossil shells are embedded in flat platforms of sedimentary limestone left dotted around the beach by volcanic activity 300 million years ago, when Lindisfarne was hidden at the bottom of a prehistoric lagoon. Standing on one of these stony stages, I focus on the rock to pick out details for Laura of these reminders of ancient life.

Guiding her down to the waterline, we stand quietly to listen to the gentle lap of waves, and deeply inhale the sea air – as Saint Aidan would have done when he came to Lindisfarne to found its first monastery way back in the 7th century.

I’m reminded of my previous Traveleyes experience tramping the hill trails of Italy’s Cinque Terre, when I was quietly tutored in the appreciation of silence by my VI companion Paul. Asking me to stop in a hushed hillside wood, he got me to listen – really listen – to bird calls, undergrowth rustles and the whisper of a silver stream tumbling down the slopes. Paul recorded it all for a couple of mindful minutes, smiling as he created an aural *aide memoire* to conjure up this beautiful place back home. And he inspired me to do the same.

Stepping out along Lindisfarne beach, I guide Laura across mounds of olive-green seaweed, making jokes about quirky carpeting as we share

the change in texture beneath our feet. I scoop up some of the long seaweed strands and ask if Laura fancies trying one around her neck like a marine boa – a suggestion she laughingly declines. Instead, we run our fingers across the fronds, feeling their slick silkiness, pockmarked by little buoyancy bubbles. We even take a tiny nibble of salty tang, and decide we’ll wait for lunch.

We leave the beach via steps cut into a 20m high ridge, though not until we’ve caressed the striking square geometry of the exposed volcanic cliff face – a cubic basalt formation reminiscent of the Giant’s Causeway. Gusts of wind whistling across the ridge provide a fresh sensation. Laura turns her face towards them, while I scan the view over Lindisfarne’s ruined priory. Launching into a description of its ancient reddish stones, I pick out details I would otherwise have barely noticed.

Walking down to Lindisfarne’s little fishing harbour, our guide Mary tells us how, in her 20s, she had worked on the boats over island summers, helping land the prized local lobster and crab.

For Laura and I, the harbour is a fresh sensory playground. Running her hands over the giant rusty coils in a pile of ship hawsers, Laura tells me about the joys of visually-impaired sailing – hoisting and winching, as well as taking a turn at the helm. Boats with tillers are particularly good for giving VI mariners a greater ‘feel’ for the movement of the boat, while adaptive equipment – auditory compasses or talking GPS – help too. ►

## ‘A blind guy who wants to show you the world’

**Amar Latif**, who founded Traveleyes in 2004, explains how it all came about: “By the age of 18 I had lost 95% of my eyesight. Yet I knew that beyond the mist that now surrounded me was a world waiting to be discovered.

“As a young adult I found myself crossing the jungles of Nicaragua on foot, along with 10 other disabled people, for a BBC series called *Beyond Boundaries*. I then set out to explore more of the world, but no travel company would cater for an independent blind traveller.

“So I launched Traveleyes to make the world more accessible for people like me. Our holidays focus on experiencing the world with all five senses. The great thing is that sighted people enjoy our holidays too, sharing their sight with others and seeing the world from a new perspective.

“Traveleyes has now grown to become a team of travel experts, all sharing a real passion for travel. Together, we lead blind and sighted travellers across the globe, making memories of a lifetime along the way.

“Travel is more than just the seeing of sights, and when you start looking with your other senses, the world becomes more alive.”



“Asking me to stop in a hushed hillside wood, he got me to listen – **really listen** – to bird calls, undergrowth rustles and the whisper of a silver stream tumbling down the slopes.”

Colourful lobster pots are piled like sculpture installations all around the quay, beckoning us for some more poking around. I guide Laura's hand around the structure of one, showing her where the tasty crustacea are tempted in by pungent bits of fish. We both agree the whiffiness of a lobster pot compares badly to the lush perfume of the Gertrude Jekyll climbing rose we'd sniffed and caressed earlier on the outer walls of a Lindisfarne cottage, running our hands through dense pink frilly petals like a vintage crinoline dress.

Before anyone thinks having sight gives me an undisputed sensory edge, Laura outdoes me when Mary points out one of the island fishing boats making a high speed return to harbour – Laura picks out the throaty growl of its engine while I'm still struggling to see it.

After coffee at Pilgrims Cafe – good enough for sighted and VI alike to agree on the joyful aroma of damn fine caffeine – we depart Lindisfarne for the short drive to Bamburgh Castle.

Perched atop towering sand-dunes on one of Northumberland's finest stretches of silky-white sand, its roots date back to the pre-Saxon 5th century, when a Celtic Brittonic fort known as Din Guarie rose here to protect the coast. It didn't do much good, though, when the Vikings came and destroyed it in 993AD. Eventually the Normans came along and put up another one.

It's big enough that there's some real walking to be done as we make our way around the extensive battlements, through ancient arches and onto squares of greenery fronted by massive cannon pointing out to sea. Plenty to describe too, as I swap

“On a trip like this you really become **immersed in the setting**, taking the time to learn, and to feel.”



VI companions to guide history enthusiast Jean, who is in her element here. From atop the walls, I tell her about the waves rolling onto the strand, and the folk wandering amid the dune system, as we stroke the gnarly metal of old cannons.

Walking round the castle, it's amazing how much more deeply I end up experiencing it. Forget just a cursory reading of the information boards; on a trip like this you really become immersed in the setting, taking the time to learn about it, and feel it.

For many VI travellers, a company like Traveleyes has transformed their experience of the wider world. As one regular client puts it: “I was just about going insane with my inability to travel the world independently when Traveleyes burst onto the scene. I have now been on 15 holidays with them, both in Britain and abroad.”

Trip leader Phil says many first-timers (both blind and sighted) try out UK trips like this before committing to an overseas one.

And the crucial thing, he says, is that it proves that being blind doesn't mean you can't be a hardy and adventurous walker.

“What we find with VIs is that they want to walk twice as far as everyone else,” he laughs.

Amen to that. **CW**



#### THE POWER OF WORDS

Laura and her guide step carefully on the sloping paths of Bamburgh Castle.



#### ▲ COLD STORAGE

On Holy Island, upturned fishing boats have served as sheds for centuries.



#### ▲ SWEET REWARD

Blind or sighted, there's no hiding the joy of Lindisfarne's famous honey mead.

### Find out more

**i** You can find full details on the **Traveleyes** website: [www.traveleyes-international.com](http://www.traveleyes-international.com), or contact them on 0113 834 6094. An eight-day trip to the **Orkney Islands** costs £1199 (standard blind price) and £699 (discounted sight price). The package includes three or four-star B&B accommodation, five dinners, excursions and local guides. Transport to and from the destination is not included. Overseas trips for 2018 include **Fuerteventura** in February (blind price £1099, sighted price £599) and **New Zealand** in April (blind price £4499, sighted price £2999).

