A GLASS ACT

Carole Edrich has finally found a Christmas activity that works for everyone by GlassDeva, a company offering workshops for a range of celebrations.


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At Chester's Media Gateway press junket with 200 other travel writers, I am at the back for the obligatory group photograph, while not wanting to be seen. The person to my right doesn't seem keen either. Bonding instantly over our shared discomfort, we start to chat. She runs GlassDeva, a glass-art shop.

"Are you accessible?" I ask, with my Disability Review Magazine hat on. "Yes, we are."

Everywhere claims to be accessible these days. They mostly aren't, so I've developed a less-than-healthy cynicism.

But something about Neela Chatakondu's enthusiasm made me curious.

Walking to the shop, I do a double-take. Two Roman soldiers are wandering down the street! Just another day in Chester, where the city's heritage often breaks through into the 21st century. The Romans built their largest British fortress here. They called the place Deva, meaning 'the holy one', after the River Dee. It feels like they never left.

From the minute I walk in, my cynicism crumbles. The warmth hits first. Not the physical warmth, but the genuine friendliness. Neela talks me through my options and offers a drink. I choose a proper cup of tea. The shop is great, with aisles wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs (not the token 'technically accessible' width that requires a 24-point-turn to navigate), good natural light, and a well-organised workshop area. It really can accommodate 6-8 wheelchair users at once (there's a wheelchair-accessible loo 3 minutes away) with provisions for Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and blind people.

"We structure it differently for different needs," Neela explains. She's not pitching anything, it's a simple fact. They work in 15-minute bursts with clear transitions for Autistic people who may need more structure. There's music to help those with ADHD.



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Can't manage the fine motor control for paintbrushes? There are sprinkles and spoons. Sensitive to noise? Let them know in advance, and they'll tell you the quieter times.

Watching Amanda, Jennifer, and Gillian drives it home. This three-generation family are celebrating Jennifer's 80th birthday. No fuss, no hovering, no othering or segregation, and they're having fun. I make a glass tile featuring my cat in a pose that causes more double-takes. I collect my masterpiece the next day and give it to a friend who appreciates questionable art.

GlassDeva's Christmas potential is enormous. Delicate glass wreaths that catch the light, ornaments for trees, decorative pieces for Hanukkah and Diwali, paintings, panels, presents, and more, all refreshingly reasonably priced. Sessions start from around £12; most Christmas ornament projects are between £15 and £25, family groups get discounts, and they're transparent about costs.

Neela's background (she's a part-time GP turned glass artist) explains why she understands different needs, but not why it feels more like visiting a creative friend who has thought of everything in advance. As I leave, passing another cohort of Roman re-enactors, my cynicism is gone. This is a Christmas activity that works for everyone. Not "everyone except..." or "everyone if they can manage..." but everyone. And they serve proper tea.

For more information, please visit ***glassdeva.co.uk/workshops***


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