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MINDFUL TRAVEL

Flying as a wheelchair user is never easy—but these 6 tips help me every time

From the items to pack, to knowing your rights, avid traveller Cory Lee shares his tips for safer, more comfortable, and less stressful flights with a wheelchair

BY CORY LEE

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The world has become more accessible since the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Destinations are adding smoother curb cuts, **wheelchair-friendly attractions**, and accessible transportation to better welcome travelers of all abilities.

However, despite these societal adaptations, wheelchair users are presented with another problem: How do we get to **these destinations** without our wheelchairs getting damaged during flight? Airlines damage an average of 29 wheelchairs per day, and it's something I worry about every time I fly

—when it comes to protecting yourself, your chair, and reducing stress and discomfort during the journey. Below, my top eight tips for flying as a wheelchair user.

1. Call the airline

As soon as you've booked your flight, call the airline directly. Remind them of when you are flying, giving them your confirmation number, and explain that you will be bringing your wheelchair. Let them know details of your chair—height, weight, length, and width—to minimize issues when you arrive at the airport. If you have a powered wheelchair, you will need to let them know if your

battery is either wet, dry, or gel cell. (If you're not sure what type of battery you have, call your wheelchair supplier to find out.). Tell the airline about any personal needs as well, like if you need the aisle chair to board the plane, or if you will need assistants to help transfer you into your plane seat.

2. Store any removable wheelchair parts

Once you are at the plane door and ready to board, remove any parts of your wheelchair that you do not want the airline or ground crew to damage. I always remove my headrest and knee supports, but some wheelchairs also have a joystick that can unplug and detach (if yours does, I'd suggest removing it).

I always bring a tote bag to store these parts in, and I carry my cushion with me onto the plane and place it in my seat. The closet on the plane is the perfect spot to hang your spare parts, so they are safe during the journey—flight attendants are always happy to assist with this. Removing parts before boarding allows me to be most comfortable during the flight and less stressed about what might get damaged.

3. Pack a backpack with quick-fix supplies

After flying time and time again, there are several items I will no longer fly without. I always pack a backpack with several “quick fix” supplies. Zip ties and duct tape are useful for a quick repair if your wheelchair gets slightly damaged during the flight. I also like to pack bubble wrap, masking tape, and a plastic bag so that I can seal my joystick (since mine does not easily remove) by wrapping the bubble wrap around it, putting the plastic bag over that in case it is raining at the destination upon arrival, and then wrapping the masking tape around the bag to hold it in place. Several strips of velcro in different lengths can also come in handy if the aisle chair does not have enough straps to help you feel safe or if extra “harnesses” are needed throughout your journey. I would also suggest packing straws in your carry-on bag if drinking without them can be difficult for you, as most airlines no longer have them onboard.

4. Purchase a sling or lift

If you are unable to assist with transfers, you may want to purchase a sling with handles to place underneath you. This will allow airport staff to best help you into your airplane seat without uncomfortably manhandling. I have two slings that are both perfect for an easy transfer: One is the [ableSling](#) and the other is [The Perfect Lift](#). Both are comfortable when underneath me and have handles that the airline staff can use, and they allow me to stay in a seated position while transitioning from the wheelchair to the aisle chair and then the aisle chair to the plane seat. Everyone's needs are different, so the most important thing is choosing a transfer sling that works best for you.

5. Plan for your restroom needs

As a wheelchair user, being able to access the restroom while flying can be more than challenging. Restrooms on planes are very small, and if you need to transfer onto the toilet there's not a lot of room to manoeuvre within the space. Even worse than that, if you are not able to transfer yourself and need total assistance, the space for the extra people just doesn't exist. Until the day comes when airplanes are fully accessible, there are only a few options for us wheelchair users that can help.

Personally, I choose to begin dehydrating myself the day before my flight. Although this is not ideal for my health, it works for me. I also cut back on my meals and eat light foods the day prior to flying. I eat things like grilled chicken breast, cheese, and crackers. The less I can eat the day prior, the better for me—these are my “safe” food options. I do not want to eat a heavy, greasy meal the day before or the day of my flight as it may upset my stomach. I also wear a brief for travelling just in case of an emergency. Other options that may work for you are condom catheters for men or a urinal jug, while covered with a blanket at your seat. While none of these options are ideal, the inaccessibility of airline restrooms has given wheelchair users no other options. It's important to plan ahead.

6. Report any chair damages before leaving the airport

When you reach your destination and your wheelchair is returned to you, always inspect it to see if there has been any damage during the flight. If there are issues, notify airport staff immediately. After they make a report at the gate, continue down to the baggage claim area and request a Complaint Resolution Official (CRO). With the CRO the report of damage will be filed, and you will receive a reference number for your claim. Although the airline may offer to repair your damages, heads up: they may not be completed as quickly as you need. If flying within the US, you should go online to file a report with the Department of

Transportation. [On this website](#), just select “file a consumer complaint” and fill it out. Everyone hopes to avoid damages, but if they do occur, it's important to take the proper steps to get your chair repaired as quickly as possible.

Although flying can come with its challenges as a wheelchair user, being prepared and knowing your rights can reduce the stress (somewhat)—plus, you can be your best advocate for what you want and need from your flying experience.

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