

TRAVEL TIPS

Flying Tips for Wheelchair Users, From Wheelchair Users

Air travel can cause a great deal of apprehension for both seasoned and novice travelers. If you're taking that flight with a wheelchair — that's an added level of stress.

By Barbara Twardowski and Jim Twardowski

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People often say that traveling is all about the journey and not the destination, but for wheelchair users, navigating air travel is often more of an adventure than they would like.

Rolling through large crowded airports, hauling luggage, waiting in long lines, receiving a pat down, being strapped into a tiny aisle chair and then sitting for hours unable to move is exhausting. We've learned that the best way to circumvent some of the inevitable issues is to know what to expect, and prepare accordingly.

What to remember before you book

Before clicking the purchase button, even seasoned travelers should review the airline's policies regarding passengers with disabilities. John Morris, a triple amputee who has flown more than 850,000 miles in the past five years, writes about accessibility for his website [WheelchairTravel](#). He discovered, after reading AirAsia's website, that he cannot fly with the airline because his battery-operated wheelchair weighs more than the airline allows.

When choosing a seat, Mr. Morris prefers a window to avoid being crawled over by other passengers. Other travelers, particularly those who cannot transfer from a wheelchair to their seat independently, may prefer the aisle seat. The roomier bulkhead seating might be an option for some, just be aware the armrests do not raise.

Also, keep in mind that wheelchair users exit the aircraft last. The deplaning process can easily take 25 minutes or more, so when booking a connecting flight, always allow ample time. Mr. Morris recommends a minimum of 90 minutes. Considering that quick layover might be your only opportunity to visit a restroom, those extra few minutes are precious.

After booking your flight, contact the airline at least 48 hours in advance of departure and let them know you will need special assistance. If you must change airlines, which can be common on international flights, be sure to notify them, too.

Avoid wheelchair damage

"The way the airlines treat our equipment causes some wheelchair users to not travel at all, and that breaks my heart," said Sylvia Longmire, a former U.S. Air Force officer who travels the world solo on her small power wheelchair. Ms. Longmire also writes [Spin the Globe](#), an accessible travel website.

You can help prevent wheelchair damage by attaching written instructions explaining how to operate your chair, as well as how it folds and tilts. Before turning a wheelchair over to airport personnel, take off any removable parts such as the seat cushion, removable wheels and footrests. These items may be carried on the plane and do not count as baggage.

For your own baggage, carry as little luggage as possible. The airline's curbside baggage check can be helpful if available, or consider purchasing a rolling suitcase designed to attach to a wheelchair.

Finally, always carefully inspect your wheelchair for damage when it's returned to you and immediately notify the airline if there is a problem. Document any damage you find with photos that you can send to the airline, as well to file a compensation claim.

How to navigate bathroom concerns

Many domestic flights are on single-aisle planes which rarely have accessible bathrooms onboard. Even though wide-body planes (those with two aisles) are required to have an accessible lavatory, the tight configuration doesn't work for many travelers with disabilities. To avoid embarrassment, always confirm before departure that the plane has an onboard wheelchair. Flight attendants can push you to the bathroom. They do not assist with transferring to a toilet or providing personal care.

Better yet, consider that domestic airports are required to have accessible restrooms in all terminals; you will definitely be better off using the toilet before you depart. However, some small or older airports in the United States, and others abroad may not have them. Staff at the information desk in the airport can guide you to an accessible or family bathroom, or you can review the terminal layout on a nearby map or on your smartphone before you depart to find the closest accessible restroom. Although it isn't healthy, Ms. Longmire stops eating and drinking the day before a flight. Other travelers might choose to use a catheter or wear protective undergarments. [WheelchairTravel](#) has more information here.

What to do once you get to the airport

Upon arrival at the airport, remind your airline that you need wheelchair assistance. At the Transportation Security Administration checkpoint, passengers who cannot stand or walk go through a pat-down administered by an officer of their same gender. The T.S.A. website explains the process in detail. You may also call the T.S.A. Cares help line (855-787-2227) at least 72 hours before flying with any questions.

Once you get to the gate, tell the agent you have a disability and want to pre-board. Unfortunately, you cannot roll on the aircraft and remain in your wheelchair. Passengers who are unable to walk are transferred to a narrow, high-backed aisle chair with security straps. The preboarding is a safety measure that allows people with disabilities the additional time or assistance they need to get to their seats. The Air Carrier Access Act (A.C.C.A.) states individuals with disabilities are to board “before all other passengers, including first class passengers, elite-level passengers, members of the military, passengers with small children, etc.”

What to do if things go wrong

The A.C.C.A. prevents discrimination on the basis of disability and applies to all U.S. airlines and flights on foreign carriers that fly into or out of the United States. The Department of Transportation enforces the A.C.C.A.

If you encounter an access problem at the airport and the airline is unable to resolve it, ask to speak with the Complaint Resolution Official. Each air carrier is required to have one or more available on site or by phone. This specially trained individual has the authority to problem solve on the spot.

Barbara and Jim Twardowski write about travel, lifestyle and Baby Boomer topics. Given that Barbara uses a wheelchair and Jim is a registered nurse, they frequently cover accessible travel. Follow Barbara on Twitter at @BTwardowski.

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