

Indian parents of US professionals opting wheelchair to make journey trouble free

By Manju V, TNN Last Updated: May 28, 2016, 12:01 PM IST

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Synopsis

The passenger from the check-in right up to the aircraft door is aided by an airline assistant and they don't need to figure out which counter to go to.



<u>MUMBAI</u>: To the uninitiated, it would seem that by some strange quirk of genetics or probably destiny, parents of Indians living in the US develop some ailment that leaves them wheelchairbound, especially during summer when they are booked on an Air <u>India</u> flight to visit their children.

These days, on every AI flight from Mumbai or <u>Delhi</u> to the US, one can find at least two dozen passengers who have opted for the wheelchair facility. Sometimes, the number goes up to 35, which is about 10 per cent of the total seats onboard the B777-330 ER aircraft that usually makes these journeys.

Not all of them are mobility-impaired; most can walk freely. Opting for wheelchair assistance is just the one and only solution to ensure the parents - often travelling abroad for the first time or may be not fluent in English - have a stress-free journey.

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The passenger navigates the airport from the check-in counter right up to the aircraft door on a wheelchair, aided by an airline assistant. They don't need to read signage, figure out which counter to go to. They only walk the last leg of the journey, from wheelchair to aircraft seat. The process is repeated after the aircraft lands. Being escorted through a vast, foreign airport, albeit on a wheelchair, is priceless.

"None of the airlines charges for wheelchair assistance. It's understandable that the number of passengers who opt for it is on the rise," said a <u>travel</u> agent. Till last summer, each AI flight had an average of 10-15 wheelchair passengers; now it has gone up so much that the flight attendants have raised a red flag.

A senior AI flight attendant, requesting anonymity, said that this summer, on most of the non-stop flights from Mumbai-Delhi to Newark, New York, Chicago, San Francisco or even London, there were at least 25-35 wheelchair passengers. Their sole concern is the problems they would face during a planned evacuation.

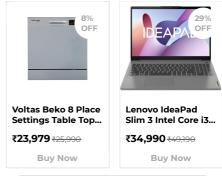
So what could be the problem? The names of wheelchair passengers are asterisked and labelled "WHCR" on the passenger information list that the crew carry, said a flight attendant. "Norms dictate that in an emergency, an aircraft should be evacuated in 90 seconds. So the rule in all airlines is that the wheelchair passengers should be made to evacuate last." That is because they might not be able to jump onto the evacuation slide as quickly as the others. They would want to sit down and slide onto the raft, which would slow the **speed** of evacuation.

"So we single out the wheelchair passengers and ask them to wait, while others evacuate first," he said. Now that would be easier said than done, especially when these passengers are not actually unwell.

Generally, the passengers who actually can't walk are very few. They are brought right up to their seat on a wheelchair. "The rest are healthy, but they are labelled as wheelchair passengers; so when we tell them to wait for evacuations, they surely will argue," the attendant said, adding that they wouldn't want to spend the time arguing with two dozen passengers.

In March, an AI flight did a planned evacuation in Bangkok following a bomb scare. There have been no instances of planned evacuation on non-stop flights to the US in the recent past.

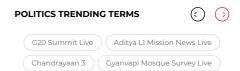
AI is the preferred airline for the wheelchair passengers to the US from India. "AI carries the largest number of wheelchair passengers. We don't turn away



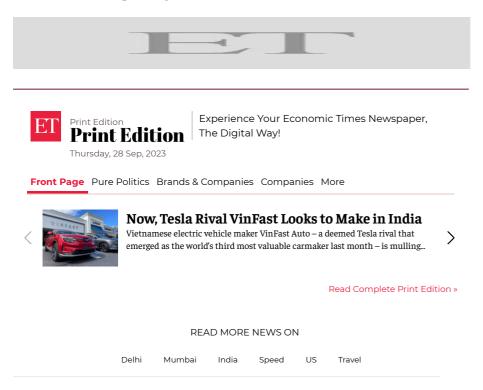
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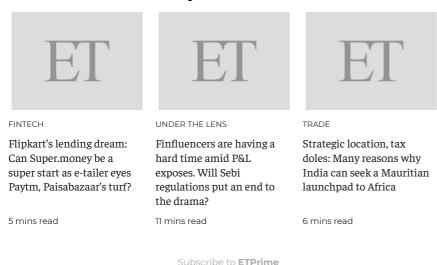
anyone," said a senior AI official. It costs AI \$15 to provide wheelchair assistance to each passenger in the US, he added.



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