

Get Rolling: Travel Tips

PLANES, TRAINS, BOATS AND AUTOMOBILES

By Anne Cohen,
Disability and Health Policy Consultant,
Disability Health Access, LLC
Prepared For
Independent Living Resource Center San Francisco, (ILRCSF)

Travel Resources

Like any good traveler, it's important to do your homework on the accessibility of the locations, activities and transportation options for places you are going. Nothing is perfect and you may encounter surprises along the way, but with some planning you can manage these challenges. It can be helpful to have copies of your travel documents, medical records and prescriptions, names of several hotels, identify transportation options and even local contacts that can help you if you need advice, or help you if you get into trouble.

Many people who use wheelchairs travel regularly, even to hard to reach international locations. We worked with these well seasoned travelers to develop tips to help make your vacation easier including links to travel guides, going on cruises, accessible transportation options and dealing with airlines.

Tips for Flying with a Wheelchair

People are constantly hearing horror stories about flying with a wheelchair. You might think flying is impossible. Don't let fear of dealing with airport security and airlines prevent you from traveling. While airlines are notorious about damaging wheelchairs, we have developed some tips from other wheelchair users that will hopefully make the process of flying a bit smoother. First, it can be helpful to understand the legal requirements around accessibility and how to file a complaint if you have a problem.

Legal requirements for accessibility of airlines and airports are managed by the Department of Transportation. In the document, *New Horizons for the Air Traveler with a Disability*, the Department explains the Air Carriers Access Act regulations that came into effect in March, 1990, as well as the changes resulting from the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). This document will also give you information on accessibility of airports and aircraft; requirements for advance notice, attendants and medical certificates; handling of mobility aids and assistive devices; and much more, including how to file a complaint

<http://publications.usa.gov/USAPubs.php?PubID=3209>

Any problems with your flight need to be reported first to the airline, then contact the Hotline for Disability-Related Air Travel Issues.

<http://airconsumer.dot.gov/hotline.htm> The department of Transportation, The Office of the Assistant General Counsel for Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings offers a toll-free number that consumers who experience disability-related air travel problems may use to obtain information and assistance. This service provides general information to consumers about the rights of air travelers with disabilities and assists air travelers in resolving time-sensitive disability-related issues that need to be addressed in real time. This service is available seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. ET. The toll-free number is 1-800-778-4838 (voice) or 1-800-455-9880 (TTY).

You can also talk to your airline and ask to talk to a complaints resolution official (CRO). All airlines are required to have one.

Everyone's travel experience is different, and you are the best expert on your needs and preferences for a safe and smooth trip. Below are a few tips on flying from wheelchair users who are frequent fliers: ^{i ii}

1. Make sure your chair has been serviced before you leave: If your chair has not been serviced recently, send it to a repair shop for a general check over. This extra effort can save the heartache of suffering a breakdown; and save the time wasted trying to locate a repair shop and waiting for the repair.
2. Any property handed over to the airline should be tagged and you should include your name and contact information. Place your name and address on your wheelchair and on all removable parts before leaving home. A return address, sticky mailing label covered by a piece of clear tape works well. It's important to label your chair because some people have had manual chairs taken by airline staff because they think it's an "airport chair." It's helpful to ask the person who brings your chair to the jet-way to stay with your chair until you arrive to claim it.
3. Tape a list, in large fonts on brightly colored paper, with the instructions and cautions for ground crews at both ends of the flight.
4. If your wheelchair is equipped with pneumatic tires, bring along a small repair kit containing the items necessary to change a flat. Bicycle repair shops have all types of nifty, compact repair kits you can bring along, including a small air pump. You can get ones that are about 7 inches long and about 1 inch in diameter. Do not let the airline deflate your tires. If they insist, make sure there is a plan to inflate them when you arrive. Document the names of airline staff that asked you to deflate your tires. ⁱⁱⁱ
5. Arrive early to allow for all the logistics of getting you through security, getting on the plane and having the airline get your wheelchair on the

- plane. Go to the ticket agent (even if you have your boarding pass already) to let them know you'll need assistance, get seats in the front, and tell them you'll need to gate check your wheelchair.
6. Notify your airlines in advance that you are traveling by wheelchair. Inform them if you are traveling with a manual wheelchair, an electric wheelchair, or a scooter. When reconfirming your flight, ask the airline for "maximum assistance" at all airport terminals. Reconfirm your request for "maximum assistance" when you arrive at the airline ticket counter.
 7. At the airport, ask the ticket personnel to "gate check" your wheelchair and obtain a luggage claim receipt for your wheelchair. When you "gate check" your wheelchair it allows you to roll your wheelchair directly to the fuselage of the plane where you will either walk to your seat or transfer into an "aisle chair" for assistance to your seat. It's important to arrive early and discuss your needs with gate agents. Make sure you discuss your ability to transfer to an "aisle chair." sometimes the airline will want to take your chair early (before they are ready for you to board).
 8. When you get to the gate, tell them you'd like to speak to the ramp agent (the person who will take your wheelchair down to get it on the plane), to get them instructions
 - a. For manual chair you can show them how to fold the chair.
 - b. For power chairs you should show them how to put it in manual or drive. Remind them to put it in drive when it's on the plane, because that sets the brakes. They will usually ask if your power chair has wet or dry batteries. Most now are gels, but tell them the batteries are dry, because they will deem them safe to leave in the chair. Removing them risks damaging the chair and can be difficult to reassemble.
 9. Before handing your wheelchair over to the airline staff, remove your leg supports and portable seat cushions and carry these into the plane, these do not travel well when attached to your wheelchair and are likely to be lost. Bring a small nylon sports bag large enough to hold the leg supports that is also light enough to fold into your carry on luggage when not in use. This lightweight sports bag keeps your leg supports in one place and hopefully prevents them from falling out of the overhead luggage bin onto someone's head. If your wheelchair folds, collapse the wheelchair together and use a small strap or a piece of "duct tape" to hold the sides together. This process makes for a compact wheelchair that is less likely to be damaged with airport handling.
 10. When possible pack spare parts such as power chair charging cords, fuses and cables that may become loose or damaged during the transport.

11. Make sure you bring all medication and spare medical supplies (such as catheters) on board to make sure you have what you need for the flight and in case the checked bag gets delayed or lost.
12. If you have a power chair or scooter there are additional tasks you need to make sure the airline does.
 - a. Airline staff needs to inform the pilot that a wheelchair with batteries is going to be put in baggage on this flight. The pilot works with the ground crew to make sure the chair is secure in the cargo. Of course this is important for any wheelchair but for power chairs and scooters with batteries this is especially important. If the pilot has concerns that the wheelchair is not properly secured they will not take off because of safety concerns. This can cause flight delays. When you book your ticket you can notify the airline and also arrive early and inform the gate agents to make sure it's in the pilot manifesto. It is strongly recommend that your electric wheelchair or scooter be equipped with "gel cell" or "dry cell" batteries. "Wet cell" batteries, like the ones used in automobiles, are strongly discouraged since airlines must separate these from your scooter or wheelchair and store them in a leak proof container.
 - b. Scooter travelers who "gate check" their scooter should assume that some member of the airline staff will be appointed to drive your scooter into the belly of the plane. Before handing your scooter over to the airline staff, place a piece of removable tape on top of the throttle control and secure the throttle control in the slowest position. This tape should read "Do Not Remove." Make sure your key, or power pin, is well secured to the scooter. Use a strong, durable cord to attach your key or control pin. Do not use a rubber band or an elastic strap to secure your key to the scooter. To secure your key or power pin to your scooter, such as a 12 or 14 inch "60 or 80 pound steel leader" obtained from a fishing supply store. To avoid getting lost, remove any removable baskets and portable seat cushions and carry these into the plane.
 - c. Electric wheelchair travelers who "gate check" their electric wheelchair should assume that some member of the airline staff will attempt to drive your wheelchair into the belly of the plane. This is when your chair is most likely to be damaged. You want to have someone push the chair, rather than drive your chair with your joystick or other alternative controls. In order to do this, switch your chairs' transmission into "neutral" so it can be easily pushed. Inform airline staff that the chair is in neutral so it can be pushed. Unplug

the battery connection between your chair and the battery and place a short piece of electrical tape over both connector ends. Better yet, if the power cord is easily removed take it with you in your carry on bag. If your "joystick control" can be easily removed, remove it! If not, then loosen the knob that positions the joystick control and point the joystick downward, towards the ground. Or last, unscrew the "joystick knob" from the control base and carry it with you into the plane. These steps will prevent your joystick from being damaged. This is one of the most common things to be damaged on your chair and will make your chair unusable once you arrive at your destination.

13. When you get off the plane, often they will want to have you get into an airport wheelchair and then get your own chair at the end of the jet way or even down at baggage claim. Do NOT let them do this, insist that you need your chair right up until you get on the plane, and you cannot get off the plane until your chair is at the door of the plane. Once you are off the plane, you are no longer the flight crew's responsibility. But while you are there, the crew will make sure you get what you need because they want to get off the plane too and can't leave until you do.
14. If you get off the plane and there is any problem with your chair, go to the baggage claim office and tell them you have a problem. They'll fill out the paperwork you will need to file a claim. Get a phone number of who to call to get your chair repaired, to see if there is a certain repair shop you need to go to, or how they handle repair expenses.

Train Travel

Train travel can take a long time but if your schedule is flexible it can be a beautiful scenic way to see the US and an efficient way to travel internationally.

Amtrak: Train Travel in the US

Accessible seating and accessible restrooms are available in at least one Coach car on all trains. Most Lounge cars and Café cars have accessible seating, too. And one accessible bedroom is available in each Sleeping car. In order to obtain accessible seating and facilities during your vacation, be sure to make your reservations early since these rooms and seats are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Amtrak trains accommodate most wheeled mobility devices in use today but check with Amtrak to make sure.

For more information on accessibility of Amtrak and planning your trip see:

<https://www.amtrak.com/wheeled-mobility-device-services> and
<http://www.amtrakvacations.com/trip-planning/accessibility-special-needs/>

Also see this article describing one person's experience with Amtrak and some helpful tips. <http://www.gimponthego.com/travel-reviews/travel-reviews-north-america/dest22a.htm>

Eurail: Accessible Train Travel in Europe

Eurail is the common term for train travel in Europe. You can get a "Eurail Pass" that allows you to travel on different trains in countries throughout Europe. Most railway companies in Europe have wheelchair accessible trains. Standards vary between countries. Services vary between countries and railway companies, but in many cases you can expect the following:

- Special train compartments for wheelchair users
- Lifts or mobile ramps to access the train
- Assistance boarding the train by trained staff
- Wheelchair accessible toilets

You usually need to request assistance in advance. Find out about the arrangements per country on the railway company websites. Please note that Eurail does not manage the services provided by the railway companies at the stations or on board the trains. For questions about wheelchair accessibility see the railway company in each country. See link <http://www.eurail.com/europe-by-train/trains/participating-railway-companies>

For a guide about train travel in Europe see: <http://www.wheelchairtraveling.com/access-to-europe-train-travel-the-eurostar-and-eurail/>

Cruises

The Port of San Francisco hosts over 80 cruise ship calls and 300,000 passengers annually at the James R. Herman (Pier 27) and Pier 35 cruise terminals. Itineraries include round trip cruises from San Francisco to Alaska, Hawaii, and Mexico, as well as repositioning calls and coastal voyages in the spring and fall.

Cruises are an excellent choice for an accessible vacation, particularly international travel as most of the newer cruise ships have good access. Below is a list of tips for planning a cruise vacation. ^{iv}

- Contact the cruise line's Special Needs Department for detailed access information and disability accommodation access requests.
- Remember to request pier assistance when you book your cruise. Disabled passengers are given priority boarding upon advance request.
- Most ships have wheelchairs that can be borrowed for embarkation, but if

you need one full-time or ashore, arrange for a rental to be delivered to your cabin. Contact the cruise line for a list of their approved vendors.

- Some cruise lines can also provide special equipment, such as a commode chair or a shower chair, upon advance request.
- Don't assume all accessible cabins are the same. If you need a specific feature, such as a roll-in shower, ask if it's available.
- Plan ahead! Accessible cabins are in short supply so try to book at least 6-9 months in advance to get your first choice of sailing dates. Accessible balcony cabins on Alaska cruises go like hotcakes, so book those as soon as they become available.
- If you use compact folding scooters, make sure cabin doorways are wide enough to accommodate them, as most cruise lines don't allow scooters to be parked in hallways.
- If you use a power wheelchair or scooter, make sure the electrical supply on the ship is compatible with your battery charger. It's also a good idea to pack an extension cord and a power strip, as electric outlets are limited.
- If you take along a manual wheelchair, mark it clearly with your name or personalize it in some way, so it won't be mistaken for one of the ship's wheelchairs.
- Take a tour of the ship on the first day and locate the accessible restrooms on each deck. Make note of the locations for future use.
- Become familiar with the tendering procedures of your preferred cruise line. Some cruise lines hand-carry wheelchair-users aboard tenders, some use mechanical devices and some do not permit power wheelchair-users to tender at all.
- Ask a lot of questions about ship sponsored shore excursions. In most cases you have to be able to climb up the steps of a tour bus in order to participate. Do your research and plan your own accessible shore excursions.
- Finding accessible transportation can be difficult in some ports. It can be helpful to look for ports where the town is easy to access from the ships terminal; Alaska ports have some good options.
- If you need transportation, arrange in advance to make sure it's accessible. For example, it is unlikely that if one mode of transportation isn't accessible another one probably is at the last minute. Even finding accessible transportation for power wheelchair users in this country can be a challenge, let alone in places where disability laws are not the same. It is important to plan and then be as flexible as you can.
- If you use a power wheelchair or scooter and can transfer, it can be helpful to bring along a manual wheelchair for use in port. This is especially helpful in Caribbean ports, where it's difficult to find lift-equipped

transportation.

- For assistance in planning contact the cruise ship company, they may have names of transportation companies that have accessible transportation. Also see link to “Gimp on the Go” website that has a list of ground transportation and tour operators.

National and International Accessible Travel Guides

The following are excellent travel guides that can help you plan.

Emerging Horizons

<http://emerginghorizons.com>

Quarterly magazine about accessible travel. Website has database on accessible travel world-wide.

Gimp on the Go

<http://www.gimponthego.com>

Web’s most comprehensive list of disability-friendly ground transportation and tour operators for the most common ports of call for both sea cruises and river cruises world-wide! Also has lots of information on accessible travel in general.

Rick Steves Tips for Travelers with Disabilities

Rick Steves is a well known European Travel Writer and TV Host. He and Susan Sygall, of Mobility International (<http://www.miusa.org>) wrote an excellent guide on international travel. <https://www.ricksteves.com/travel-tips/trip-planning/travelers-with-disabilities>

Mobility International

If you are a student or a professional who wants to work on advancing the rights of people with disabilities globally, you should know about Mobility International! Mobility International is a disability non-profit that helps people with disabilities do international exchanges. <http://www.miusa.org/our-work>

Accessible Travel Guides

[Access Northern California](#)

[Access Santa Cruz County](#)

[Accessible Nature Travel](#)

[Accessible San Diego](#)

[San Francisco Access Guide](#)

[A Wheelchair Rider's Guide to the Los Angeles and Orange County Coast \(interactive guide, pdf version\)](#)

[A Wheelchair Rider’s Guide: San Francisco Bay and Nearby Coast](#)

Accessible travel

<https://wheelchairtravel.org/top-accessible-travel-tips-from-7-disability-wheelchair-travel-bloggers/>

Van Rentals and Public Transportation

Access Options- <http://www.accessoptions.com/index.php>

Serving primarily South Bay and Monterey Counties, Access Options sells and rents accessible vehicles. 877-358-6722

Accessible Vans of America <http://www.accessiblevans.com/>

Ramped minivans for rent daily and weekly rates, airport delivery for a fee. Information Phone: 866-224-1750

Mobility Works <http://www.mobilityworks.com/mobilityworks-locations/SanJose.php>

Ramp-equipped van rentals and sales. They are based out of San Jose and serve Oakland, San Jose and San Francisco airports. 1-877-275-4915

Sacramento Van Conversions and Mobility Services <http://sacvans.com>

Primarily a van modification company but they also rent accessible vans. Will pick up and deliver to San Francisco and Oakland Airports. (800) 795-0888

Wheelchair Getaways <http://www.wheelchairgetaways.com>

Ramped minivans for rent daily and weekly rates, airport delivery for a fee. Information Phone: (800) 642-2042

South Tahoe Express <http://amadorstagelines.com/lake-tahoe/>

Lift-equipped shuttle service between Reno/Tahoe airport and 6 S. Lake Tahoe casinos.

Project Action

<http://www.projectaction.org/ResourcesPublications/FindingAccessibleTransportation.aspx>

A database of accessible transportation nation-wide.

Travel Equipment

Haseltine Systems <http://haseltine.com>

Specially constructed Polyethylene protective cases for transporting your wheelchair or scooter.

Nuprodx

Offers lightweight and easy to transport shower and commode equipment.

Disclaimer: This article is a general summary of accessible recreation activities. This article is for informational and educational purposes only and is not intended to certify the accessibility of locations, programs, facilities or legal requirements for airlines and transportation companies. Please contact the

organizations directly to get more information in how to participate.

ⁱ Accessible Travel Tips: What you need to know before you go.

<http://www.disabilitytravel.com/accessible-travel-tips.htm>. Accessed June 30 2016.

ⁱⁱ Responses to Facebook post requesting tips on flying, names omitted for confidentiality, July 1st 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with wheelchair user, July 2017

^{iv} Cruise Tips for Wheelchair-Users and Slow Walkers

Candy B. Harrington November 10, 2015

<http://emerginghorizons.com/cruise-tips-for-wheelchair-users-and-slow-walkers/>