



Travel with a Disability: Easier than Ever

April 2024

Before You Leave Home

The Americans with Disabilities Act has greatly reduced barriers to traveling with a disability, and as the number of wheelchair travelers has increased, attitudes and conditions are improving worldwide. Pre-trip planning is important for all travelers, but absolutely crucial for those with disabilities. Equipped a little research, an assertive attitude and an adventurous spirit, and knowing your personal rights for individuals with disabilities, travel is becoming more accessible to everyone.

Air Travel

More individuals with disabilities are traveling by air than ever before, and experience many of the usual inconveniences that accompany air travel – late and canceled flights, lost luggage, cramped seating, narrow aisles and more. However, many individuals with disabilities continue to cope with unique disruptions, including:

- Damage to mobility aids in the plane's baggage compartment.
- Improper reassembly of power chairs or scooters by airline personnel.
- Lack of training for personnel who assist in transfers.
- Airline aisle chairs that are too narrow, missing seatbelts, and don't hold passengers securely.
- Seat cushions that are too hard, cutting off circulation and increasing risk of skin breakdown on long flights.
- Lack of access to onboard restrooms.

Seasoned travelers with disabilities have shared the following tips:

- When possible, fly direct. Be aware of your rights while flying and be prepared to demand the accommodations to which you are legally entitled.
- Arrive to the airport with plenty of time – up to two hours before domestic departure and three hours for international travel. Request to speak to supervisors to get what you're entitled to.
- Get seat assignments in advance and make sure the assignments are included in the airline's electronic record of your itinerary, including any assistance to get on and off the plane.
- Take extensive photos of your mobility aids and luggage before you get to the airport so that you have documentation if the items are lost or damaged in any way.
- Request to check your wheelchair or walker at the gate – not at the ticket counter -- and to have it returned to you on the jet way. This decreases the chances of your mobility aid being damaged. According to the US Department of Transportation, airlines are required to return wheelchairs to users as closely as possible to the door of the aircraft if requested.
- The Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) requires all airlines in the United States to have an in-cabin closet to store collapsible manual chairs or walkers. If there is more than one wheelchair user on the flight, access to this storage area will be granted on a first come, first serve basis.



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- Download and become familiar with your airline's mobile application. The app will inform you of any gate changes or delays, and most will indicate your baggage claim number. Knowing this is incredibly helpful for bathroom planning purposes.
- Before arriving at the airport, do an internet search for a terminal map of all the airports you'll be using. The maps will indicate where restrooms, including family restrooms -- standalone accessible bathrooms that include a changing table. This is especially useful when you have limited transfer time and if the wheelchair accessible stall is not available.
- Airlines are not allowed to charge a baggage fee for any mobility aid you bring.
- Bring a copy of the Air Carrier Access Act with you. Read it and learn about your rights.
- Most planes in the United States are equipped with an onboard aisle chair to assist in transfers to the bathroom, but airline bathrooms are almost never accessible so be prepared with a plan of action for getting in and out.
- If you have a layover, make sure you give yourself more than an hour to transit to your next flight. Passenger transport between flights is not the responsibility of the airlines and instead are run by contract workers. Most airports do not have enough staff to aid disabled passengers with getting off the planes and on to their next flight.
- About an hour before landing, ask the flight attendant to radio ahead for anything you might need upon arrival, including an aisle chair and your own chair brought to the jetway. And check your chair for damage before you leave.
- Whether the service is good or bad, get names and write them down. This alerts people that they will be held accountable, for better or worse, for their actions. If you do have a problem, save all tickets, receipts, dates, times and names.
- Make sure your chair has both your name and address and a proper gate tag to the right destination conspicuously attached to it. Secure any parts such as headrests or footrests that could fall off your chair or take them with you into the cabin. Don't forget to take photos and get a gate tag.

Buses and Trains

All buses ordered on or after August 26, 1990, must be accessible to people with disabilities. Transit authorities are supposed to provide comparable paratransit or other special transportation services to people with disabilities who cannot use fixed route bus services.

Many long-distance buses offer wheelchair lifts and the ability for passengers to remain in their wheelchairs or transfer to another seat. However, the drivers cannot assist in helping you transfer to the bathroom, and bathrooms onboard are as small as they are on airlines.

Most Amtrak stations in major cities across the country are now accessible, and all Amtrak trains have at least one coach car with accessible seating and an accessible restroom. Overnight trains offer accessible seating and restrooms in at least one coach car and an accessible bedroom in each



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sleeping car. Amtrak recommends that passengers with disabilities make their reservations early due to limited availability of the accessible sleeping accommodations. Accessible seating includes space for a passenger using a wheelchair, a transfer seat and storage for the wheelchair.

Amtrak trains can accommodate most wheelchairs in use today, provided they meet the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) definition of a "common" wheelchair-up to 30 inches wide by 48 inches long (76 centimeters by 122 centimeters), both manually-operated and battery-powered. Passengers using common wheelchairs, including battery-operated chairs, can remain in their wheelchairs en route. If you choose to transfer to a seat, power chairs can be checked as baggage, and manual chairs can be stowed in the car or as baggage.

For passengers who do not require their wheelchairs while on the train, Amtrak's baggage service will accept manual and battery-operated wheelchairs. Be sure to confirm wheelchair arrangements with the Amtrak agent before your trip. Meal service is available to all Amtrak travelers with disabilities.

Cruise Lines

Wheelchair travelers report that the cruise industry has made great strides in improving access to their ships. Many offer staterooms designed for people with disabilities that include roll-in showers, lower beds, flashing alarms, TDD devices, TV remotes, and directional and room signage in Braille and raised lettering. Some cruise lines offer reduced rates for caregivers and attendants. Princess cruise lines have special wheelchair-transportation gangway mechanisms on most of their ships, making it easy for wheelchair travelers to embark and disembark in port.

While many modern cruise lines are completely wheelchair accessible, some are not. Work with a travel agent with experience in booking cruises for travelers with disabilities. You might want to go straight to the source: ask the travel agent for names and phone numbers of former cruisers who use similar equipment to yours or have similar abilities and disabilities. Call them and ask them to share (off-the-record, of course), their experience with the cruise line and ship. If you live near a port, arrange to inspect a prospective cruise ship yourself: rooms, bathrooms, elevators, pool area, and restaurants. Confirm that you will be able to embark and disembark when you want to. Generally, newer ships are more accessible.

Lodging

Accessibility may mean something different to a hotel reservations agent than to you. But a meeting of the minds is crucial here, since the last surprise you want after a long trip is finding that you can't use the bathroom in your supposedly accessible hotel room.

No one knows your traveling needs better than you, so speak with on-site hotel manager. The toll-free reservation agents are often based remotely and unfamiliar with the specific accessibility features of the



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hotel you are interested in. Tell them exactly what you need to know: How wide are the doors? Does the bathroom have a roll-in shower and grab bars? Does the hotel have shower chairs or TDD? What about a handheld shower spray? Many hotels now have the shampoo/conditioner/shower gel fastened to the wall. Request to have all three removed from the wall if you can't reach it, or to provide bottles that you are able to reach. Ask on-site hotel staff about the accessibility of their restaurants, pools, and shops.

Confirm every reservation in writing through a letter or fax. If you're traveling overseas, send your message with the international wheelchair symbol on it to remind the hotel that a disabled person is heading their way.

Helpful tips and websites

Review the following tips to get you where you're going and enjoy yourself once you get there:

- Bring basic tools for wheelchair repairs, such as Allen wrenches, a handheld pump, and tubes.
- Identify the closest bike store. Most bike shops are happy to help with a flat tire or a bent brake.
- Plan ground transportation in advance. Reserve accessible cabs in advance.

Become familiar with these resources as you plan your next trip.

- Wheel the World - <https://wheeltheworld.com/>
- Sage Traveling - <https://www.sagetraveling.com/>
- Travel for All - <https://travel-for-all.com/>
- Amtrak - <https://www.amtrak.com/accessible-travel-services>
- United States Department of Transportation
 - <https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/passengers-disabilities>
 - <https://www.transportation.gov/individuals/aviation-consumer-protection/wheelchairs-and-other-assistive-devices>

Revised by Donna Cruz Jones

This information does not constitute medical advice for any individual. As specific cases may vary from the general information presented here, SBA advises readers to consult a qualified medical or other professional on an individual basis.