

Travel with a Disability:

Easier than Ever

With a little research, an assertive attitude and an adventurous spirit, backed up with knowledge of personal rights for individuals with disabilities, travel is becoming accessible to everyone.

In the air

Although more Americans with disabilities are traveling by air than ever before, many wheelchair flyers encounter problems in flight and on the ground. Actually, all flyers are reporting more problems—late and cancelled flights, lost luggage, cramped seating, narrow aisles and more—to the point where the government is considering legislative solutions.

According to new mobility, travelers with disabilities report having run into the following:

- Damage to wheelchairs 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 and that 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

Here are some hints from travelers with disabilities on heading off trouble before it starts:

- Try to get your seat assignments in advance and get everything put into your computer record.
- Arrive with plenty of time—up to two hours before departure—and talk to as many supervisors as necessary to get what you're entitled to.
- Bring a copy of the Air Carrier Access Act with you.
- 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.

On the ground: 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. Most Amtrak stations in major cities across the country are now accessible.

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 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 ADA definition of a "common" wheelchair—up to 30 inches wide by 48 inches long (76 by 122 cm.), 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.



At sea: 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.

Many modern cruise lines are totally wheelchair accessible, but some are not, so you will have to do a little investigating before you book one. One safe approach is to work through 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 up and ask them to share, off-the-record, of course, their experience with the cruise line and ship. Or 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.

At your hotel

Accessibility may mean something different to a hotel reservations clerk 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.

Try to talk to people who work at the hotel where you'll be staying. The 800 numbers are often manned by reservation clerks who aren't located anywhere near the hotel, who may well be clueless about your room's accessibility. Instead, call the hotel's direct number (which you can get from the 800 line) and ask to speak to the manager. Tell him or her exactly what you need: How wide are the doors? Does the bathroom have a roll-in shower and grab bars? What about a handheld shower spray? No one knows your traveling needs better than you, so if you need a shower chair or TDD, it's up to you to make sure that the hotel actually has it.

Every reservation should be confirmed 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.

Bed & Breakfasts and small inns are also becoming more accessible. The June 2001 New Mobility featured an article on romantic getaways, including a charming bed & breakfast in Wisconsin, a lodge in Alaska and a mountain hideaway in Georgia—all completely accessible. A good online site is www.1-888-inn-see.com, which will search for accessible B&Bs and inns at your target location.

Before you leave home

The ADA has 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. The Internet will simplify your research considerably, and there is a wealth of very helpful information out there.

The following are some general tips that will help you get where you're going and enjoy yourself once you get there:

- If you're a travel novice, don't stray too far from the beaten path at first. Attractions such as Disney World have the resources to offer fairly complete accessibility.
- 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 at the airport early. If you're flying with a wheelchair or scooter, make sure to get a gate check tag during check-in, so the ground crew will bring your chair to the gate when you arrive rather than to baggage claim. You might want to bring a few basic maintenance tools with you.
- Plan out ground transportation in advance. If you will need accessible cabs, try to reserve them ahead of time.

When checking out possible hotels, don't forget to ask about the accessibility of their restaurants, pools and shops, in addition to confirming the accessibility of the room itself.

- Enjoy yourself!