

Traveling With A Disability - Part II

By: Steven Nguyen & Elizabeth Heideman



A couple of months ago, I wrote an article entitled, ‘Traveling With A Disability: 6 Things I’ve Learned.’ In the article, I shared my experiences and tips, as a manual wheelchair user, hoping it would make air traveling less stressful for those with similar orthopedic impairments. You can read it [HERE](#).

As a continuation of that article, I reached out to my good friend Elizabeth Heideman and asked her to provide input from the prospective of a power chair user. Elizabeth is a recent graduate of Tulane University in New Orleans and had the opportunity to celebrate her accomplishments with a mother-daughter trip to several countries throughout Western Europe. She also has a lot of experiences with traveling to other states.

Q: As someone who uses a power chair, did you have to do anything different? Did you come across any obstacles?

A: So I am a power chair user, so flying definitely presents some challenges. Airlines are notorious for damaging chairs, so I have a list of precautions I always take before getting on a plane.

⇒ The first thing I do upon checking in at the airport is to unplug and detach my joystick and stash it in my carry-on luggage. Same goes for extra parts that are attached and may stick out or be vulnerable to snapping off, like cup holders.

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- ⇒ The next step will get you some funny looks, but airlines are so negligent when handling your chair that I do this just in case: I bring a box of saran wrap (*double layered!*) and wrap my chair from top, over the seat, around the electronics and basically everywhere I could reach. This adds some extra padding, helps make sure nothing flies off during transport, and also prevents from messing with buttons on your controls.
- ⇒ Lastly; before I leave home, I make a diagram of how to operate my chair and print the instructions in both English and whatever language is appropriate for the flight crew understands. Be sure to include both pictures and words and attach it to the front of your chair.

Elizabeth recommends reaching out to someone who knows the language for assistance with the instructions page. She says forums of native speakers online may be willing to help you, but programs like Google Translate should be the last resort – as it is not always accurate.

Q: Tell us about your experience getting through airport security?

A: Well, aside from getting groped by airport security, it isn't too stressful. I once traveled with my service dogs, and all the TSA agents were rude about that and insisted I keep her like a bazillion feet away from them, while I was unpacking my stuff – which made things tough for me.

Elizabeth recommends that you arrive extra early, especially if you have a lot of medical supplies and equipment that TSA will have to comb through and always call ahead before your scheduled flight for additional information and to let them know that you're coming.

When possible, find a flight with a non-stop flight option! It can mean the difference between having a functioning chair upon landing or not.

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Q: As far as accessibility in other cities, do you have any advice? Is there a particular site that you use to place your activities and stay?

A: I do extensive research on accessibility for months prior. I first Google “city name + wheelchair accessibility.” Then look for disabled traveler’s blog posts about their experiences there (there are usually some).

Then I expand my search to disability services for residents of that city, just to get a feel for how aware the city is (of individuals with disabilities). Finally I do a lot of exploring Google Maps Street View to check out whether the sidewalks have curb cuts, large cobblestone, etc.

Before you fly, it’s good to know your rights as individuals with disabilities and family members of individuals with disabilities.

The Air Carriers Access Act (ACAA) is a federal regulation that prohibits discrimination against air passengers with disabilities – whether mental, physical or both. You can read about ACAA by clicking [HERE](#).



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