

TIPS FOR AIR TRAVEL WITH A POWER WHEELCHAIR

By Howard Chabner
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I have **facioscapulohumeral muscular dystrophy (FSHD)**, began using a power wheelchair in 1990 and have used one full time since 1996. I've used a power wheelchair on all my trips involving air travel since 1990 - within the US and to Europe and Israel.

The two most difficult aspects of air travel are not being allowed to remain in one's wheelchair on the plane and the lack of truly accessible restrooms.¹ Two-aisle aircraft placed in service after 1992 are required to have an accessible restroom, but the standards for what constitutes accessible are very low (and bear little resemblance to those in the ADA access guidelines or California law), and the designated "accessible" restrooms are not really accessible. Some people who use power wheelchairs are able to transfer to an aisle chair, be pushed to these restrooms and use them, but that doesn't mean they are truly accessible. Realistically, however, the bottom line is that if you want to experience the joys of traveling to far destinations, you have to accept these disadvantages.

Consult your doctor. Depending on the nature of your disability, flying may pose particular medical risks. All air travelers are at increased risk of blood clots, for example, but the risk can be greater for those with limited mobility. For some, this can be mitigated by taking a blood thinner such as **Lovenox** on the day of a flight. If you are anxious about flying or unable to sleep on a flight, antianxiety medications or sleeping pills may help. Your doctor can evaluate and help you mitigate the medical risks of air travel.

Men should consider using a condom catheter when flying. Even for those who don't regularly use one, an external condom catheter can help men deal with the lack of accessible restrooms on airplanes. **Men's Liberty** by **Bioderm** is a superb product. For more information, see my memo about it.

Fly with a traveling companion. Air travel is difficult in a power wheelchair even with someone to help; traveling solo would be unimaginably difficult.

Only fly through major airports. Of course this is easier for people who live near major cities or are traveling to them, but for those who don't or aren't, it may well be worthwhile to drive or take a train to a major airport. Many small airports can handle only smaller aircraft, which may not have a large enough cargo compartment to accommodate your wheelchair. Small airports may not have jetway boarding, which means you would have to be carried up or

¹ Many of the greatest physical demands, most difficult problems and barriers, and greatest risks in air travel for passengers who use wheelchairs are caused by requiring us to get out of them. Air travel is the only essential, widely used mode of transportation where we have no choice but to relinquish our wheelchairs - unlike buses, streetcars, subways, light rail, intercity railroads, taxis, paratransit vehicles, ferries, cruise ships, riverboats, Venetian water buses, even funiculars, and even rides including the London Eye, where we remain in them. Whether this is humane, fair and reasonable, and whether the airline industry and regulators have seriously considered the issue in the past 20 years, are beyond the scope of this memo.

down boarding stairs. They may not have the right personnel or the right equipment to handle you and your wheelchair.

Consider the pros and cons of a nonstop flight. At each stop there is a chance your wheelchair may be damaged or delayed. More stops mean a greater risk of losing or forgetting important carry-ons. More stops also mean more transfers, which is more tiring. Depending on the fare, it can be worth paying more for a nonstop or fewer stops. However, the downside of a long flight is a longer time period without being able to use the restroom; some people choose instead to break up a long haul with a layover so they can use the restroom at the airport.

If you have a layover, allow adequate time. You are the first passenger on the plane and the last one off. (You might not be the first passenger on if things don't go smoothly, but you (and any other passengers who use wheelchairs) will always be the last one off.) It can take a while for your wheelchair to be unloaded and loaded again, even if you don't choose to have it delivered to the aircraft door. Your incoming flight may be late. The outbound gate may be far from the inbound one. Err on the side of too long a layover rather than too short. What is too short may depend on the airport, but I try to avoid itineraries with less than a two hour layover. Don't rely on what the reservation agent may say about whether a layover time is adequate - they generally don't know, and it is you who will pay if anything goes wrong, not the airline.

Avoid flights that arrive late at night. Depending on the destination, accessible transportation from the airport to your lodging may be limited and should be arranged in advance. It's likely to be more difficult, if not impossible, to arrange transportation if your plane arrives late at night. And if it's available, it may be more expensive. A late arrival time means less margin of error - even if you can arrange for accessible transportation at night, what if your flight is delayed? Consider also that if you're staying at an apartment, bed-and-breakfast or small hotel, they may not be set up for a late check-in. Also, if you are on a connecting flight and your plane arrives late and you miss the next flight, or your flight is delayed until the following morning, it may be quite difficult to find accessible lodging on the spur of the moment.

A "redeye" flight has advantages for some people. Those who are able to sleep on a redeye may find the lack of restroom access less difficult than on a daytime flight.

Make sure your wheelchair will fit on the airplane. Before making a reservation, find out the aircraft and check online to find the dimensions of the cargo hold (cargo compartment) and the cargo hold door. On some airplanes the cargo hold door is wider than it is high, and if your wheelchair is too high, the baggage handlers will put it on its side, which is bad for the wheelchair. Putting a wheelchair on its side can bend the armrests, bend the frame, loosen cables and screws, and cause other damage. Even if a wheelchair may just barely fit the stated door height, the baggage handlers may put it on its side because they need room to maneuver. Two-aisle planes generally have larger cargo compartments and higher doors than single-aisle. For single-aisle planes, the larger the airplane, the better. I fly only **Boeing** and **Airbus**, and avoid **Embraer** and **Bombardier**.

Below is an example of airplane information available online:

<http://www.aircraft.airbus.com/aircraftfamilies/passengeraircraft/a320family/a320neo/>

Making a reservation. For international flights I make reservations by phone. For domestic I usually book online and call the airline after making the reservation. It's helpful to ask for the accessibility/disability office. Emphasize that you will be traveling in a power wheelchair and you cannot walk. Mention that the wheelchair has gel cell batteries (if true). (See below.) If you want to remain in your wheelchair until the airplane door and have it delivered to the door upon arrival ("**gate delivery**"), tell the agent. I describe the boarding assistance I need, emphasizing that it takes two strong men to lift me from my wheelchair to an aisle chair and from the aisle chair to an airplane seat. You may need to repeat many of these things at the airport, but it's good to get them on record when you make your reservation.

Choosing seats. **SeatGuru** has information about every aircraft, arranged by airline. You can look up the airline and airplane, and find a seat map and information about the dimensions of each class of seat. Different airlines often have different configurations, including seat width, on the same model of airplane. I always look at SeatGuru when making a reservation and choosing seats. www.seatguru.com

Many airlines reserve bulkhead seats that are not in an exit row for passengers with disabilities. (Per federal regulations, passengers who can't walk aren't allowed in an exit row because they would impede evacuation in an emergency.) Bulkhead seats involve a trade-off. They generally have more legroom, and there is no seat in front of you, so nobody can recline into your space. But the armrests are fixed. Transferring (or being lifted) to and from an airplane seat is much more difficult if the aisle armrest is fixed. And bulkhead seats are narrower because the tray tables are stowed in the armrests. The narrowness, plus the fact that both armrests are fixed, not only the aisle one, makes it more difficult and less comfortable to reposition and spread one's legs.

If you choose not to have a bulkhead seat, make sure that your seat is in a row where the aisle seat has a flip-up armrest. Over the years, as new aircraft are rolled out and old ones are refurbished, more aisle armrests flip up. (SeatGuru doesn't have this information; you need to ask the airline.)

It goes without saying that aisle seats are much better than middle or window for passengers who use wheelchairs. A few airlines, such as **Lufthansa** on its intra-Europe flights, assign window seats to wheelchair users because they want to make it easier for able-bodied passengers to go to the restroom and to exit in an emergency. In these situations I've always been able to insist on an aisle seat.

US federal **Air Carrier Access Act** regulation Section 382.38(a)(4) (14 CFR §382.38(a)(4)) requires that bulkhead seats or other seats with greater legroom be assigned to passengers whose legs are fused or immobilized if they so request in advance. Section 382.38(c) provides a lesser degree of priority to disabled people who state that they need a seat assignment accommodation in order to "readily access and use the carrier's air transportation services." The airline isn't required to offer the disabled passenger one of the seats blocked for passengers whose legs are fused or immobilized, or seats blocked for passengers with service animals, but is

required to assign him or her any seat, not already assigned to another passenger, that accommodates his or her needs, even if that seat is not available for assignment to the general passenger population at the time of the request. I believe the latter section requires an airline to assign a seat with extra legroom to a disabled passenger who needs and requests it even if their legs aren't fused or immobilized. Among other things, it's less difficult (although still difficult) to transfer or be assisted from an aisle chair into an airplane seat when there is more legroom - not only for the passenger, but for the assistance personnel. And there is less risk of injury for both. These requests must be made at least 24 hours before the flight, but it's advisable to make them as early as possible.

Over the past several years, at my request **United Airlines** has assigned me and my wife **Economy Plus** seats at the same fare as regular economy seats. Economy Plus seats have more legroom than regular economy seats. If I've made reservations online and paid extra for Economy Plus, I've been able to email or call United and get a refund. Economy Plus is United's name for economy class seats with extra legroom; many other airlines have analogous seats.

In May 2017 we flew United to Paris on a **Boeing 787 Dreamliner**. The Dreamliner air quality is noticeably better than on other planes. The ceiling of the airplane seems higher and the overhead compartments (both in the middle and the sides) are recessed deeper into the ceiling. The configuration is 3-3-3. The rows of seats are offset against each other by half the length of the seat, so if you are in an aisle seat, the passenger on the other side of the aisle isn't directly at your side, but offset, which makes it feel less crowded. We had Economy Plus seats, which had excellent legroom. There were no brackets on the floor from the seats in front of us, which other airplanes sometimes have, even on Economy Plus, so there were no brackets for my legs to get caught on. My wife and our friend didn't care for the actual seats, but I found them more comfortable than the typical seat. A drawback, however, was that the armrests are a bit less deep (they don't extend as far forward). On most airplane seats the upright position is best for me, but on the Dreamliner I was more comfortable with the seat reclined a bit and an **REI** blowup cushion behind my back.

Although I had to wait a long time to get my wheelchair at both arrivals, the actual flights were better than many in the past, and I felt less jetlagged after both flights. This was my first experience with a Dreamliner. Bear in mind that other airlines may have different configurations and dimensions on their Dreamliners.

Request boarding assistance from the service provider at your local airport. At most US airports and many foreign ones, boarding assistance is provided by a third-party contractor, not the airline. Many of the assistance personnel mostly push people in wheelchairs who can walk but can't handle long distances; many of them aren't strong enough or trained to lift and transfer passengers who can't walk. If you fly even moderately frequently from your local airport, it's worthwhile to get to know the service provider so they know your needs. (I'm 6 feet tall, not light and I need to be lifted, and I emphasize that it takes two strong men to get me on and off the plane.) Over the years I've gotten to know the managers and assistance personnel at the service provider at **San Francisco International Airport**, where I fly out of, and I email them in advance of a flight, explain my assistance needs and tell them the departure and return

flight information. (It's important to include the return flight information - they won't get it from the airline.) I ask for a couple of the assistance personnel by name, with whom I've had good experiences and established a relationship. That has resulted in much better service for me and less risk of injury for both of us.

Use gel cell batteries. Gel cells are non-spillable and safer than wet batteries. I believe that airlines will only accept wheelchairs with gel cell batteries. Gate agents always ask what type of batteries you have. My sense is that gel cells are by far the most common wheelchair battery. For a discussion of the pros and cons of gel cells, see:

http://www.mkbattery.com/content_container.php?page=downloads-and-technical-reference-faq#faq2

Bring the right battery charger and plug adapter when traveling abroad. Electrical supply in the US is 110 Volts (nominally 120 V), while in most other countries it's between 220 and 240 V. Research the voltage at your destination and, if it's more than 120 V, buy a charger with the right voltage, typically 220/240. Chargers with dual settings (110/120 and 220/240) are also available. **Lester Electrical** (whose chargers are made in the US) and **MK Battery** make chargers for wheelchair batteries.

Electrical outlets/plugs vary from country to country. Research the plug at your destination and buy an appropriate plug adapter before your trip. Although you can buy one at your destination, you'll save time and hassle if you buy it at home before your trip and you'll be able to charge your chair the first night at your destination.

Bring tools, a few tire tubes and extra wheelchair parts. Many power wheelchair users routinely carry these items all the time. It's even more important to have them when traveling.

Research wheelchair repair companies. In advance of the trip, research wheelchair dealers at your destination that can repair your brand of wheelchair. Although you can do this online at your destination, it's better done in advance than in the midst of an emergency.

Write handling instructions. Write brief instructions for handling your wheelchair, have them laminated and attach them to your wheelchair. State your name and the make and model of the wheelchair. Specify the weight of the wheelchair in pounds and kilograms. State that the wheelchair should not be put on its side or lifted by the seat. I doubt whether most airline personnel read the instructions, but if anything happens to your wheelchair you can truthfully say that you gave the airline instructions. When traveling to France or Italy I include instructions in French or Italian.

Clearing security. Clearing security is one aspect of flying that has steadily improved since 9/11 for travelers who use wheelchairs. The **TSA** agents in the US and their counterparts in Europe have become more experienced, empathetic and efficient in dealing with passengers in wheelchairs.

Most airports now allow travelers in wheelchairs to go to the front of the line, recognizing that this saves time for everyone and reduces the risk of flight delay due to the extra time it takes for a passenger in a wheelchair to pass through security and the extra time required to load a wheelchair and get the passenger on board the plane. Even though you may be at the front of the line, it can take time for a security agent of your gender to be available to pat you down. Often the security agent will ask if you are traveling with anyone, expecting that your traveling companion will take off your shoes and jacket, and help with your carry-on items. I say that I am traveling with someone but she has her hands full with her own items and cannot help the security agent. In most cases, especially in recent years, the security agent will allow me to keep my shoes and jacket on. The security agent will remove any backpacks, carrying cases and the like from your wheelchair and put them in the x-ray machine. I explain that there are wheelchair tools in them, and I try to keep an eye on these items. I've never had a security agent refuse to put them back in my wheelchair's carrier compartment, even though they include wrenches and pliers. Besides physically patting you down, the agent will swab your wheelchair in several places with cloth pads and run the pads through a detector machine.

TSA PreCheck is a program of TSA that offers expedited security processing, and enrollees don't have to remove their shoes, belts, light jackets, liquids and laptops. On a recent round-trip from San Francisco to Chicago my wife and I were treated as PreCheck passengers at both airports even though we hadn't enrolled; clearing security was quick and easy. Enrollment requires completing an online application and having a brief in-person appointment that includes a background check and fingerprinting.

<https://www.tsa.gov/precheck>

Remain in your wheelchair until you reach the airplane door, and ask for gate delivery. This is a matter of personal preference. The other alternative is to be transferred at the front of the airport from your wheelchair to an uncomfortable manual wheelchair that doesn't have a seat cushion, has a minimal backrest and doesn't have adjustable armrests or footrests. From there you would be pushed to the boarding area and airplane door, and then transferred into an aisle chair, and from the aisle chair into the airplane seat. You would lose your independent mobility for a longer time, sit in an uncomfortable wheelchair and have an additional set of transfers. It would be more difficult to use the restroom at the airport. Also, your traveling companion would have to carry more items through the airport, including removable parts of your wheelchair. If you remain in your power wheelchair, some carry-on items can be hung on the backrest.

For domestic departures, I remain in my wheelchair, proceed to the boarding gate and tell the gate agent that I want to remain in it until the door of the airplane. For international departures, where one must check in at the front of the terminal, I tell the check-in agent the same thing. Tell the agent your wheelchair has gel cell batteries (assuming this is the case). Make sure the gate agent puts a "**gate delivery**" tag on your wheelchair. On arrival, your wheelchair should be delivered to the door of the airplane. Unfortunately it can take a lot of time for your wheelchair to be delivered; this depends on the airport, the equipment and personnel available, where the arrival gate is, and other things. Shortly before landing I ask the purser to

contact the ground crew, or to ask the pilot to do so, and to tell them that my wheelchair should be brought to the airplane door as soon as possible after landing.

Over the years at some foreign airports I've had to fight to be allowed to remain in my wheelchair at departure and to have it delivered to the arrival gate. Sometimes, especially on a layover, my wheelchair hasn't been delivered to the arrival gate even though the gate agent at departure told me it would be. Some airports, and some airlines, are more reasonable, accommodating, empathetic and proficient than others.

In my experience **Frankfurt Airport** has been far better than **Paris Charles de Gaulle**, **Rome Fiumicino**, **London Heathrow** and **Amsterdam Schiphol**. Frankfurt has been excellent - there is someone to meet you at the landing gate and escort you to a special lounge for elderly, disabled and families with small children, where there is a good accessible restroom, free drinks and other amenities. The men who have helped me get off and on the flights in Frankfurt are strong and speak English well. (I believe that Germany has required military service, one of the alternative service options is caregiving for disabled people, and many of the assistance personnel are performing their alternative service.) It's been several years, however, since I've flown through Frankfurt.

US federal **Air Carrier Access Act** regulation Section 382.125(c) (14 CFR §382.125(c)) requires airlines to provide for the checking and timely return of passengers' wheelchairs "as close as possible to the door of the aircraft, so that passengers may use their own equipment to the extent possible." (emphasis added) except where this would be inconsistent with federal regulations regarding transportation security or hazardous materials. This applies to US and foreign carriers at US airports, and doesn't apply to flights that are entirely outside the US. For a flight that originates in the US and lands abroad, it applies to the departure but I don't know whether it applies at the destination.

Remove the backrest of your wheelchair. If the backrest of your wheelchair is removable, have your traveling companion remove it on the jetway before relinquishing the wheelchair to airline personnel to be loaded. Removing the backrest may not be difficult in the comfort of one's home, but it is stressful on a narrow jetway with impatient crew and passengers hovering, carry-ons to deal with and the clock ticking. It's advisable for your traveling companion to practice at home. If removing or reattaching the backrest of your particular wheelchair is complicated, it's a good idea to write instructions for your traveling companion to have handy.

Even if the plane has a high cargo hold doorway, it's advisable to remove the backrest because there will be less chance the baggage handlers will put your wheelchair on its side. Also, although reclining the backrest would reduce the height of the wheelchair, it would increase the length, make it more difficult to load and increase the chances of a mishap.

Bring the backrest on the plane - don't allow it to be placed in the cargo hold.

Remove other removable parts and bring them on the plane. If your wheelchair has other removable parts (headrest, seat cushion), have your traveling companion remove them at

the airplane door and bring them on the plane. There is less chance of them being lost or damaged (and, if it's raining, less chance of getting wet when being loaded or unloaded from the cargo hold - I learned the hard way that a wet seat cushion is not comfortable). It's challenging for you and your travel companion to handle and keep track of these items in addition to other carry-ons, but it's better than the alternative.

If you use a CPAP or BiPAP, a shower/commode chair, or other medical equipment, bring them on the plane. They are too important and fragile to be transported in the cargo compartment. Security agents know that these devices are important medical equipment, and they're experienced at dealing with them. I travel with a shower/commode chair that is large even when disassembled, but it fits in the overhead compartment (sometimes just barely) and no flight attendant has ever refused to allow us to bring it on board. **Air Carrier Access Act** regulation Section 382.121 (14 CFR §382.121) requires airlines to permit disabled passengers to bring folding or collapsible wheelchairs and other assistive medical devices in the aircraft cabin, provided they fit in priority storage areas, overhead compartments or under seats; these items don't count toward a limit on carry-on baggage. Also, if the passenger pre-boards, these devices get priority in the cabin over items carried on by other passengers or by crew members.

Instruct the baggage personnel on how to handle your wheelchair. After being transferred out of your wheelchair at the airplane door, explain to the personnel who will be taking your wheelchair down for loading, how to handle it. This may be better done by your traveling companion.

Ask for confirmation that your wheelchair has been loaded. After you board, ask to speak to the purser. Tell the purser that you would like the captain to confirm that your wheelchair has been loaded before the flight takes off. Before landing, ask the purser to communicate with the destination ground crew, or ask her to ask the pilot to do so, to make sure that your wheelchair will be brought to you at the door of the airplane as soon as possible after landing.

Air Carrier Access Act of 1986 (49 USC §41705) (ACAA). This is the US federal law governing air travel for passengers with disabilities. The **Americans with Disabilities Act** doesn't apply to air travel. Although the ACAA regulations have been clarified and strengthened over the years, in my opinion they are still substantively weak. Importantly, the ACAA, unlike almost every other civil rights law, doesn't provide attorney's fees for a successful plaintiff, so very few lawyers are willing to take an air access discrimination case, even public interest lawyers. It also doesn't provide damages to a successful plaintiff. The **US Department of Transportation** is responsible for writing the regulations and enforcing the law. In my experience DOT is understaffed, not rigorous in handling complaints, and hasn't imposed meaningful penalties on airlines for clear violations of the ACAA. Below is the relevant DOT webpage:

<https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/passengers-disabilities>

Complaints resolution officials. Each air carrier must have at least one **Complaints Resolution Official (CRO)** available at each airport in person or available by phone. If you

believe an airline is violating the ACAA you can ask to speak with a CRO, who has authority to resolve complaints but cannot countermand a safety decision made by the pilot.