

Trailblazers top tips

Taking your wheelchair abroad: flying

The airline

It is a good idea to contact the airline you are flying with at least 48 hours before you fly, so they are aware when you are arriving, and which flight you are taking. You can confirm they have made the right adjustments for your travel needs. The airline should be notified in advance of the type of transfer you're going to need to board the aircraft, such as needing an on-board wheelchair for transfers.

- On the day of your flight, make sure you arrive as early as possible at the airport. This allows extra time for not only everything that needs to be organised but also for resolving any confusion or miscommunication that the airport or airlines staff could have.
- If you're travelling with your manual wheelchair, this can be stowed in the on-board coat closet, although there is often only room for one wheelchair in there. Most airlines work on a first-come, first-served basis. If the space is already taken, your manual wheelchair will be stored with the main luggage. Your luggage allowance is not affected by this.
- It is up to you whether you feel comfortable leaving your cushion and footplates attached to your manual or powered wheelchair. One option is to use masking-tape to fix the cushion and footplates to the wheelchair or to detach them completely and carry them on as hand-luggage. Either way the airline will leave it up to you to decide.

The airport

Make sure you arrive at least an hour before the usual check-in time, as checking in with a wheelchair can take a longer time and, of course, going through security always takes time. As a plus, you can use any extra time to make the most of the duty free shopping and buy any last-minute holiday items you might need!

- If you need extra assistance for transferring and collecting luggage, make sure you put in a request for extra people to help you throughout your travels in the airport. Be firm in making sure they stay with you.
- At check-in, you can request taking your wheelchair right up to the boarding gates and for it to meet you at the airplane door upon arrival at your destination. Stand firm in your choice.
- Often in the departure lounge there is a designated area for those needing assistance to board the plane. The airline staff will ask you to wait in this area so they will know you need to be boarded first.

Tip: As with all luggage, make sure you tag your wheelchair with all your contact details, name, address, telephone number and hotel address in the unlikely event that your wheelchair goes missing.

Trailblazers top tips

Taking your wheelchair abroad: flying

Boarding and leaving the plane

- Airport staff will meet you at the designated special assistance area to board you on the flight. Often airlines will give priority to disabled passengers, allowing time to board them first.
- Airlines and airports can differ in their boarding procedures; be prepared for possible delays in getting you on the aircraft, resulting from transfer equipment not being ready or finding the right staff to assist.

Tip: If your wheelchair requires any special equipment for disassembling, discuss this with the airline in advance so they accommodate your needs.

Tip: Disconnecting the power of the wheelchair, or turning off a mobility scooter by its key and putting it into manual, will prevent anyone from driving the wheelchair from its control. Also, taking off the joystick and carrying it on board can prevent it from being broken during transfers on to planes.

- The process of boarding and disembarking from the aircraft can vary from airport to airport; this is often because of where an aircraft is parked at the airport.
- If the aircraft is parked and connected to the airport by a tunnel bridge, you can take your wheelchair right up to the door of the aircraft. Here, the airline staff will transfer you on to an aisle wheelchair, which is narrow enough to fit down the aisle to get you to your seat.

Tip: If possible, detach and carry your wheelchair controller on as hand luggage.

Tip: If you're able to, you can remove other pieces such as footplates, headrest and backrests to avoid damage in transit. Take a bag in which you can fit the various detached pieces of equipment; this will make boarding and unloading easier.

- If an aircraft is parked closer to the runway, away from the main airport, then a shuttle bus may be needed to get to the plane. If the shuttle bus isn't accessible, then you may be directly transferred into an airport ambulift; a vehicle similar to a mobile cabin that can be boarded either directly from the ground or by a platform lift. This cabin is then driven alongside the plane and is raised up on its axis to meet the cabin door, where you will be transferred on to an aisle wheelchair seat. Make sure they have strapped you in, and that you feel safe first before being wheeled on to the plane. Your wheelchair, left in the ambulift, will then be taken to the cargo door and loaded into the plane.

Tip: This is what an ambulift looks like.

Trailblazers top tips

Taking your wheelchair abroad: flying

Tip: When booking your tickets with your chosen airline, check what their boarding procedure is like; that way you can be prepared for any adjustments that may need to be made.

- With regards to toilet requirements, most airplanes will have an on-board aisle wheelchair that will enable you to transfer from your plane seat to the toilet. Some airplanes may provide a privacy screen around you if you are unable to transfer to an aisle wheelchair. Again, check with the airline you're booking with what their toilets are like and what on-board support they can provide for you.
- Be prepared that some airports may take some time unloading you, and getting your wheelchair to meet you at the airplane door could take a while depending where it has been placed in the cargo hold. Do check in with the airline and airport staff on your flight while you wait, as they will be able to let you know where your wheelchair is or if there are any hold-ups.
- If you have a connecting flight, your airline carrier is responsible for assisting you through the airport to your connecting flight. When boarding the plane, make sure the airline staff are aware that you have a connecting flight so they can radio ahead to the connecting airport, to make sure they are ready for your arrival.

Other related links

This factsheet is designed to be used to be alongside the following helpful links and publications:

Air Canada – Customers with special needs

www.aircanada.com/en/travelinfo/before/specialneeds.html

Air China – Passengers needing assistance

www.airchina.com.cn/en/contact_us/special_passengers_transport.shtml

Air France – Reduced mobility and other disabilities

www.airfrance.co.uk/GB/en/common/guidevoyageur/assistance/pmr_reservation_airfrance.htm

American Airlines – Special assistance

<http://www.aa.com/i18n/travelInformation/specialAssistance/main.jsp>

British Airways – Special assistance

www.britishairways.com/en-gb/information/special-assistance

Bmi regional – Special travel needs/Wheelchair users

www.bmi regional.com/en/top-menu/travel-information/special-travel-needs

www.bmi regional.com/en/top-menu/travel-information/special-travel-needs/persons-of-reduced-mobility-and-electric-mobility-aids

Trailblazers top tips

Taking your wheelchair abroad: flying

Civil Aviation Authority – Passengers with disabilities and reduced mobility

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) is the UK's aviation regulator. Follow the link below for information for passengers, your rights as a passenger with a disability, and how you can make a complaint should you encounter problems.

www.caa.co.uk/default.aspx?catid=2800&pagetype=90

China Airlines

www.china-airlines.com/en/check/check_ba3-1.htm

Delta Air Lines – Travellers with disabilities

www.delta.com/content/www/en_US/traveling-with-us/special-travel-needs/disabilities.html

easyJet – Information for disabled passengers and passengers with reduced mobility

support.easyjet.com/case-5759#Powered_wheelchairs

Emirates – Special needs

www.emirates.com/uk/english/plan_book/essential_information/special_needs.aspx

Flybe – Passenger assistance

www.flybe.com/assistance/

Gulf Air

www.gulfair.com/English/info/Special/Pages/Special_Assistance.aspx

Lufthansa – Travellers with special needs

www.lufthansa.com/uk/en/Travelers-with-special-needs

Mobility Equipment Hire Direct

Provides quotes and sources mobility equipment for hire to be delivered to your holiday destination.

www.mobilityequipmenthiredirect.com

Muscular Dystrophy Campaign – holiday information

Our factsheet also contains a list of insurance companies.

www.muscular-dystrophy.org/how_we_help_you/publications/1917_holiday_information

Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, Commercial Air Travel: A handbook for people with neuromuscular weakness

At the back of this handbook, you'll find a list of travel insurance companies that will insure people with existing health conditions.

www.muscular-dystrophy.org/get_involved/campaigns/campaign_news/7677

Trailblazers top tips

Taking your wheelchair abroad: preparation

Qantas – Specific needs

www.qantas.com.au/travel/airlines/special-travel-needs/global/en

Ryanair – Special assistance/Request

www.ryanair.com/en/questions/contact-for-special-assistance-requirements/

www.ryanair.com/en/questions/special-assistance/

Singapore Airlines – Special assistance

www.singaporeair.com/en_UK/travel-information/wheelchair-mobility-aids/

Southwest Airlines – Customers with disabilities

www.southwest.com/html/customer-service/unique-travel-needs/customers-with-disabilities-pol.html

Thai Airways – Special request/Assistance

www.thaiairways.co.uk/en/plan_my_trip/travel_information/Special_Request-Assistance.page

United Airlines – Special travel needs

www.united.com/web/en-us/content/travel/specialneeds/default.aspx

Virgin Atlantic – Special assistance

www.virgin-atlantic.com/gb/en/travel-information/special-assistance.html

Here for you

The friendly staff in the care and support team at the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign's London office are available on **0800 652 6352** or **info@muscular-dystrophy.org** from **8.30am to 6pm Monday to Friday** to offer free information and emotional support. If they can't help you, they are more than happy to signpost you to specialist services close to you, or to other people who can help.

Thank you for your support