

# Air Travel with Mobility Aids

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Excerpted from her forthcoming book, *Help Yourself! Living Well with a Chronic Condition*

Travel within the USA has become much easier for a person with a disability. Most hotels and motels, even in smaller cities, have at least one or two wheelchair-accessible rooms. The major auto rental companies have vehicles with hand controls and there are lift- or ramp-equipped vans available to rent at most destinations. Cities are more likely to have curb cuts and you should not have to look far to find restaurants without steps at the entrance.

Travel outside the USA is more challenging. The ADA-mandated changes that we take for granted have not made the leap to Europe, Asia, or the Middle East. But if you are flexible, resourceful, and have a sense of humor, experiencing the charm and beauty of other countries and cultures is well worth the effort.

When making travel plans, consider the availability of ground transportation at your destination. A folding manual chair will fit into the trunk of most cars, so transportation problems will be minimal inside and outside the USA. Although scooters can be disassembled, the largest component may not fit into the trunk of small foreign cars. Power chairs and scooters require a van with a lift or ramp and are available for rent in cities throughout the USA but are less common in other parts of the world.

## MAKING AIRLINE RESERVATIONS

If possible, take a flight that is either nonstop or direct (where you can stay on the plane at intermediate stops). If it is necessary to change planes, ask your travel agent or the airline reservation agent to put "MAAS" (meet and assist) into your reservation record to help you get to your connecting flight. It is best to use the same airline for all flights, if possible; then one airline has the responsibility of getting you to your next flight on time.

If you are ambulatory but will need wheelchair assistance to get to the boarding area, ask for this information to be put into the computer. Let the airline know exactly what equipment you will be bringing on board – manual wheelchair, power chair, or power scooter, and have the dimensions ready to give them if they ask. Tell them whether you need an aisle or bulkhead seat; however, people with disabilities are not allowed to sit in exit rows due to safety reasons. For ease in transferring, ask if any aisle seats are available with lift-up arms.

Tell the airline agent whether you can walk short distances or if you will need an onboard wheelchair for boarding and using the restroom. While regulations vary, most airlines require at least 48 hours' advance notice if you will need the use of an onboard wheelchair, will need to use oxygen during the

flight, will require ventilator hook-up to an aircraft's electrical power, or will require the packaging of a wheelchair battery for shipment as checked baggage. If you need oxygen during the flight, the airline will supply it and will charge you for onboard oxygen service. For safety reasons, you cannot use your own oxygen unit or the aircraft's built-in oxygen.

Keep reconfirming your seat arrangements until the time you leave. Sometimes airlines have to substitute an aircraft with a different seat configuration and the computer changes the original seating plan.

For overseas flights, arrive at the airport three hours early. Larger aircraft can store one folding wheelchair in the passenger area, but if you are not the first person to check in with a wheelchair, yours will go into the baggage compartment. Power chairs and scooters always go into baggage.

## BEFORE YOU LEAVE

Write to the tourist offices of every country you will be visiting to request information on travel for the disabled. Be sure your equipment has gel batteries. Acid batteries will be taken off the chair or scooter and packed in a separate box before being loaded into the baggage compartment. This is a time-consuming stressor that will not add to the enjoyment of your trip. If possible, carry printed information that confirms that your batteries are the gel type. Also, carry a copy of the USA government's publication, "New Horizons: Information for the Air Traveler with Disability."

Put identification tags on any parts that could become separated from your chair or scooter. Have bungee cords ready for strapping loose parts to your equipment after you reach the boarding area. Make two copies of your travel documents, credit cards, passport, and traveler's check numbers; carry one set in a separate place from the originals and leave one set at home.

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For more information on energy conservation from Grace, check her Web site at [www.geocities.com/HotSprings/4713](http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/4713).



## At The Airport

When you check in at the airport, have baggage tags placed on your equipment stating that it should be delivered to the arrival gate.

Now here is the most important travel tip I can give you. Do not surrender your chair or scooter at check-in. Stay in it until you are ready to board the plane. This is not usually a problem, but occasionally the check-in person will want you to check your equipment along with your luggage and then have airport personnel push you to the boarding area in a manual wheelchair. Do not do it! This will only increase the chances of your equipment being misdirected, mishandled, or damaged, and if you use a power chair or scooter you will not have the independence to move around while you are waiting to board your flight.

If you use crutches or canes, they can be placed in an overhead compartment after you board the plane. If you use special cushions, take them on the plane with you.

When you get to the boarding area, remind the personnel that you need to board first and estimate how much extra time it will take you to do it. Early boarding for people with disabilities and parents with small children is supposed to be done automatically, but sometimes this rule is forgotten or not enough time is allowed. On one of my recent flights, the call for early boarding was announced, but before I was halfway down the jet-way the regular passengers were allowed to proceed and I was soon engulfed by people. Sit close to the door so you can begin as soon as early boarding is announced.

Have clear instructions for disassembling and assembling the equipment attached to the chair. When you are ready to board the aircraft, supervise whatever dismantling is necessary before you get on the plane. Remember that the crew at the arrival airport has not witnessed

this process, so providing clear instructions with diagrams are crucial.

At your destination it is difficult to predict whether your power chair or scooter will be brought to the arrival gate (even though it is tagged) or will be taken to the baggage claim. I have seen it done both ways. If it goes to the baggage claim area, airline personnel will bring a wheelchair to the plane and push you to baggage claim and stay with you until you find your chair.

Make a thorough inspection of your equipment. Document any damage in writing and do not use the word "minor" on your report. Obtain a claim number and a phone number to call for follow-up on having your chair repaired. Do not leave the airport until this is done. Every USA airline is required by Federal law to always have a designated Conflict Resolution Officer (CRO) available, by phone

or in person. If you cannot settle a difference, you have the right to discuss the problem with the CRO. Ask for a copy of the outcome in writing in case you need it for future reference.

With advance planning, you can enjoy the rewards of new sights, new friends made, and new experiences. Bon Voyage! ■

**Horizons: Information for the Air Traveler with a Disability.** Published by U.S. Department of Transportation. Topics include accessibility of airports and aircraft; requirements for advance notice, attendants, and medical certificates; handling of mobility aids and assistive devices; and much more, including how to file a complaint. Order from Consumer Information Center 2-D, P.O. Box 100, Pueblo, CO (Colorado) 81009.

## Accessible Car and Van Rentals

### UNITED STATES

**Adapted Car Rentals.** Rental cars with hand controls are available at most airports and major cities. To reserve ahead, call: Alamo (800-327-9623), Avis (800-331-1212), Budget (800-527-0700), Dollar (800-421-6868), Enterprise (800-736-8222), Hertz (800-654-3131), National (800-328-4567), Rent-A-Wreck (800-944-7501), or Thrifty (800-367-2277). Call ahead to make arrangements for hand controls to be installed in the car you plan to rent. If you load your wheelchair into the back seat, specify that you need a two-door car.

**Wheelchair Getaways, Inc.** is a national network of franchises providing wheelchair accessible van rentals throughout the United States and Puerto Rico ([www.wheelchair-getaways.com](http://www.wheelchair-getaways.com)).

**Scoot-Around North America** will locate a scooter to meet your specific needs and deliver it directly to the location of your choice (888-441-7575, 204-772-6499 fax, [info@scootaround.com](mailto:info@scootaround.com), [www.scootaround.com](http://www.scootaround.com)).

**Accessible Vans of America.** Nationwide provider of accessible vehicles for rent or sale (888-AVA-VANS; [www.accessiblevans.com](http://www.accessiblevans.com)).

**Wheelers Accessible Vans.** Serving 120 cities and 35 major airports across the United States, including Hawaii (800-456-1371; [www.wheelerz.com](http://www.wheelerz.com)).

### OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES

**Wheelabout Van Rentals Pty. Ltd.** Wheelchair accessible van rentals in Australia ([www.wheelabout.com](http://www.wheelabout.com)).

**Wheelchair Travel.** Rental of self-driven, lift-equipped minivans, hand-controlled cars, and accessible cars in the United Kingdom (+44 1483 233640, [info@wheelchair-travel.co.uk](mailto:info@wheelchair-travel.co.uk), [www.wheelchair-travel.co.uk](http://www.wheelchair-travel.co.uk)).