

Disability Campaign.org

Air Travel with a Motorized Wheelchair or Scooter



Image: Joni and Ken Tada at the airport

Reserving the flight

1. **Contact your airline carrier.** It is recommended you contact airline carriers prior to making a purchase—especially if you are not familiar or have not travelled with a particular airline carrier in the past. Make the effort, if possible, to check their website page on accessibility and accommodations and contact them via phone to ask any questions, confirm accommodations, and go through the procedures on how to check-in your mobility device. Depending on your mobility and your needs, you may be asked to travel with a companion. Above all, communicate how important your mobility device is to you. This is your sole means of transportation and you absolutely need your wheelchair or scooter.

2. **Consider consulting a travel agent or agency that specializes in travel for people with disabilities.** They will be able to provide assistance in addition to that which you will receive from the airline carrier. For some people with disabilities, using a travel agent or agency that specializes in disability travel reduces stress and helps to minimize problems with accessibility or accommodations.
3. **Make sure that they can accept your type of motorized assistive device** (style, size, weight, etc.). Know all these details ahead of time.
4. **Consider flying first or business class.** These seats may be more accessible in that they offer extra space and added comfort (for some, the extra expense is a worthy investment).
5. **Keep in mind layover times and airport sizes.** Layovers can be stressful, especially for those with motorized wheelchairs or scooters. You will probably be the first to board the plane, but the last to get off the plane, meaning you will need more time to get to a gate. Consider how much time you will have, whether you will be transferring from one airplane to another, and ask for help if needed. If you are able to contact the airline and airport ahead of time, they may be able to arrange employees to assist you in making your connection.
6. **Upon reserving the airline tickets, study the accessibility of your aircraft carrier.** Know where the restrooms and emergency exits are, and what seats will provide greater comfort to you. Make sure your caregiver or traveling companion knows these details as well. Know the size of the aisle chair and if your flight seat has a removable or movable arm rest.
7. **Inform the airport and airline carrier if you are bringing a caregiver or assistant to help you get to the airplane.** Inform them this is not a travel companion who will be on the flight with you and make it to your final destination; this is someone who will only assist you from your home to your airplane seat prior to the flight takeoff and you need this person's assistance. This person may require a special security pass.



Photo: BTMagazine.nl

Preparing for Travel

1. **Know your wheelchair or scooter.** Become familiar with the different parts of your wheelchair or scooter. Learn how your wheelchair can be safely disassembled and assembled. If you and/or your caregiver or traveling companion know how your wheelchair works, you will be able to provide appropriate instructions to those handling your wheelchair at the airport. Along with a friend or caregiver, practice assembling/disassembling your wheelchair or scooter and giving instructions on its assembly/disassembly. Check your owner's manual or contact your medical supply provider for detailed instructions.
2. **Attach disassemble/reassemble instructions to your motorized wheelchair or scooter.** Included in those instructions should be the battery type, the weight of your wheelchair, if the scooter is key operated, how to release the brakes/wheel locks, which parts fold or collapse, which parts are removable, tools required, and any other additional instructions or precautions. You may want to laminate these instructions and then attach them to your wheelchair. Consider writing these instructions in English and in a foreign language if you will be traveling out of the country. Also, your wheelchair manufacturer or vendor may already have an instruction or wheelchair parts diagram of which you can make copies.
3. **Ask to speak to the airline baggage service supervisor.** If possible, explain to the supervisor how your wheelchair should be handled. The more information you give to those handling your wheelchair, the better.
4. **Make sure your battery and wheelchairs are in good condition.** Airlines will not transport damaged or leaking batteries. Any loose parts may be lost during the transport.
5. **Take pictures of your wheelchair** as evidence of how it looks, what pieces it has, etc. in the case that it were to be damaged or lost in the process.
6. **Carry tools with you.** If possible, carry a small set of tools in your carry-on luggage. Make sure to check with TSA on what tools are permissible for carry-on.

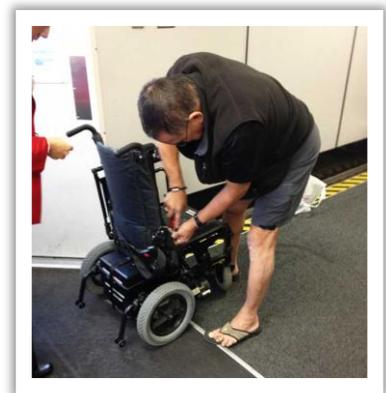


Photo: Ken repairing Joni's wheelchair

7. **Consider using a second wheelchair.** If you have more than one wheelchair, you may want to use one for travel (in the airport) and then package your day-to-day wheelchair to be used when you reach your destination.
8. **Locate a medical supply or wheelchair repair company in close proximity to your destination.** You cannot be without your wheelchair or scooter, and if something were to go wrong, you need to have a backup plan. Make sure that you have arranged for accessible transportation at your destination and that there is a supplier nearby you to assist you if you were to need to rent a wheelchair or scooter. It's also a good idea to know what hospitals and pharmacies are near your destination as well, in case of an emergency.
9. **Pack smart and be prepared.** Carry your air cushion pump and patch kit, tools, photos of your wheelchair, medications, personal care equipment, and an extra duffle bag/carryon bag.

At the Airport

1. **Be completely toileted before boarding your flight.** You want to have as few inconveniences as possible while on board.
2. **Be ready to be transferred to your airplane seat in an airplane aisle wheelchair.** These are narrow and uncomfortable chairs. Provide the airline employees assisting you with instructions on how to transfer you, even if you have an assistant. Bring a transport board if you have or use one.
3. **Wear comfortable and practical clothing.** You won't be in your wheelchair, so you may not be as comfortable. Carry a scarf or blanket in case you get cold. Wear shoes with straps on them that will not fall off easily when you're transferred to an aisle chair.
4. **Communicate with airline employees how to handle your batteries.** If something does go wrong, this is where it will most likely happen. Communicate instructions on whether your battery can/should be removed based on the battery type.



Photo: Thomas Ondrey, Cleveland.com

5. **Carry your wheelchair parts with you on the flight.** Wheelchair parts are considered assistive devices and do not count as carry-on luggage. Remove any mirrors, cushions, leg rests, arm rests, etc. and put them in a duffel bag that will go with you on your flight.
6. **If your device is damaged or lost, report it.** If things do go wrong, communicate the issue at hand with an airline or airport representative and complete all necessary paperwork. In the case of a lost, damaged, or destroyed wheelchair or scooter, be ready to provide documentation of your loss to process a claim. After your claim has been submitted, contact the airline carrier to check on its status. Most times, airlines are cooperative, but legal assistance may be necessary if not.

Know that things may not go as planned. As much as you try to think ahead or communicate your needs and as much as an airline may train their employees or reassure you that they are there to serve you, things may go wrong or different from what you expected or wished for. We've come a long way thanks to the ADA in that airlines and airports are more accessible and educated about disabilities, but there is still much room for growth. Make every effort to be as patient and kind to those who will be serving you, while being clear and detailed when you communicate your needs. We can educate the minds of society on disability, but it is through our humanity that we will connect to their hearts in the hopes of fostering empathy and good-will.

For more information on air travel with a disability, visit the United States Department of Transportation website at <http://www.dot.gov/airconsumer/disability>.

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P.O. Box 3333, Agoura Hills, CA 91376

www.joniandfriends.org