

## ADVICE

# Traveling abroad with disabilities: Here's a post-pandemic guide

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Traveling abroad with a disability was a challenge before COVID-19. But during the pandemic, things got even harder.

Jo Meleca-Voigt, a retired school teacher from Rochester, New York, remembers her recent flight to Aruba for her cousin's wedding.

"It was painfully apparent that the airport was understaffed," she remembers. "Airport employees had either forgotten their training regarding travelers with disabilities, or were new and untrained."

Meleca-Voigt says she felt "invisible" as the overworked airline employees failed to offload her wheelchair for her connecting flight and then repeatedly dismissed her concerns.

More than 25 million Americans have a disability that limits their travel, according to the Department of Transportation. That's just over 8% of the population. Most disabled travelers can get around with a cane or a wheelchair, but 3.6 million Americans say they don't travel at all because of their condition.

The challenges can be even greater when you're traveling overseas. Not only is it a longer trip, but there are also language and culture barriers to overcome – plus, the time difference that can drain your energy. If you understand the rules of traveling with a disability – especially the mask requirements – and can plan your trip sooner, you can avoid most trouble, experts say.

**'I'M OFTEN FORGOTTEN':** This traveler was left in an airport basement for hours

## Know the rules before you travel overseas

Meleca-Voigt took matters into her hands when she couldn't access her wheelchair at the airport. She sent a series of tweets to her airline, documenting its missteps and warning that it violated Department of Transportation rules.

"Read up on Department of Transportation and Federal Aviation Administration rules and regulations regarding disability and wheelchair travel," she says. "Bring a copy with you if necessary."

You can find the rules on the DOT site.

Meleca-Voigt's story has a bittersweet end. She made it to Aruba, but her wheelchair in the cargo hold was broken. It took four months and repeated emails to the DOT and her airline to get it fixed.

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## **Don't wait to plan your international trip**

Experts anticipate high demand for everything from disabled-accessible hotel rooms to vans equipped with wheelchair lifts. The sooner you book, the better your chances of getting one.

"Last minute bookings will be difficult to fulfill," says John Sage of Sage Traveling, an agency specializing in travel for the disabled. "Travelers with disabilities should make their accessible travel arrangements far in advance."

How far? This is the right time to think about your summer vacation.

## **If you have a disability, you need a Plan B for your trip abroad**

International travel always has required an extra layer of planning. But as the pandemic loosens its grip on the world, disability experts say you have to take your planning to the next level.

John says things have shifted during the pandemic. He recalls one trip to Saudi Arabia where the airline lost his luggage for four days.

"Wearing a mask while pushing a wheelchair in the heat can be very uncomfortable. Handwashing stations are not all accessible. Some health and safety devices interfere with accessibility in hotels," he says.

**TRAVELING ABROAD?** Create a Plan B in case you get COVID

The likelihood of canceled and delayed flights is higher this spring and summer, according to Sage. He says if you're traveling abroad with a disability, you'll need to anticipate a disruption.

"Have a backup plan in case you miss a flight," he advises. "This includes backup accessible accommodation and transfers."

A travel advisor can help with a backup plan. You can find one at the American Society of Travel Advisors site. Under "Specialties," click on "Accessible/Special Needs."

Advisors can also connect you with the right services. For example, maybe you don't know that Norwegian Cruise Line has a team of accessibility coordinators to help passengers with disabilities. But your travel agent does.

"The accessibility coordinators will contact travelers before their cruise to ensure a seamless vacation," explains Harry Sommer, president and CEO of Norwegian Cruise Line. They provide a dedicated point of contact onboard to support special-needs passengers throughout the journey.

## **Pay attention to the mask rules before you leave**

"There are a lot more safety protocols in place that make planning a little more difficult than it was pre-pandemic," says Dina Farmer, a certified autism travel advisor. "Things to navigate such as COVID-19 testing, masking and restrictions can be very difficult for some autistic individuals. For those with sensory aversions, it can be difficult to keep a mask on for long-haul flights or tolerate testing."

Her advice? Don't assume you know the mask requirements before you leave, because they are constantly changing. That's particularly true when you're traveling abroad, where mask and vaccine requirements can change as you cross the borders. If an airline requires masks onboard but you are unable to wear one, find out how to apply for an exemption.

"Plan early and be as flexible as possible," she adds.

**'DON'T STARE BUT DON'T IGNORE:** What disabled travelers want you to know

## **Now is the time to plan your overseas trip – especially your accommodations**

Speaking of booking early, if you're wondering when to plan that trip abroad and you have a disability – the answer is now.

"As international travel increases this year, hotels and vacation rentals will fill up more quickly," says Narendra Khatri, principal of Insubuy, a travel insurance company. "If you require certain amenities due to your disability, they may be harder to find on short notice."

Booking your hotel or vacation rental now instead of waiting until closer to your departure date will increase your chance of reserving a place that can accommodate your disability. And just in case something goes wrong, Khatri recommends a particular kind of travel insurance – a "cancel

for any reason” policy that lets you cancel and recover between 50% and 75% of your prepaid, nonrefundable expenses.

So if you're traveling abroad and have a disability, you'll want to remember the rules, plan early, make allowances for something to go wrong and pay close attention to those ever-changing mask requirements.

Come to think of it, that's good advice for anyone traveling abroad this year.

## **Expert tips for planning a trip abroad with a disability**

**Set realistic expectations.** That's the advice of Emily Labéjof, who recently made an overseas trip with her disabled sons. There was a higher chance that something will go wrong, with the lower staffing levels and higher COVID confusion. "We all agreed that if something went wrong, we would roll with the punches, find an alternative solution and still enjoy our vacation," says Labéjof, a marketing director from Las Vegas.

**Get vaxxed and boosted.** "There are very few destinations left where you can travel without being vaccinated," says Kimberly Davis, CEO of Trouvaille Travel International. Also, pay attention to the medical coverage in your travel insurance policy. "Travel insurance with extensive medical and evacuation coverage is absolutely necessary, as is reading the fine print to ensure pandemic and quarantine coverage."

**Be proactive.** The pandemic was a challenging time for some people with disabilities, but now that we're coming out of it, experts say it's time to speak up and be proactive. "Persons with special needs need to become more vocal and assertive with regards to their rights," says Kunal Sawhney, CEO of the Kalkine Group, which consults with travel companies. "It is time you don't feel uncomfortable when demanding things like a wheelchair."

*Want more information on this topic? Check out "Traveling with disabilities," a 10-part series focusing on the experiences of travelers with disabilities. This is part of our continuing mission to highlight underrepresented communities in travel. If you'd like to contribute to our reporting and share your experience as a source, you can fill out this quick form.*