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Don't Let Holiday Crowds Handicap Your Travel Plans

by Adam Lloyd, Editor
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Venturing out for the holidays?

More power to you; you're going to need it! Going on a trip at this time of year can be a huge hassle for the most hearty of travelers, let alone those with disabilities. High gas prices, overcrowded roads and planes, weather delays, striking airline workers and diminishing luggage allowances might just make you want to huddle up at home and hibernate. However, if you're like the 5 million plus of us who will be heading elsewhere to celebrate the season, you'll be happy to know there are ways to help ensure the smoothest transit possible.



No holiday joy here

The first trick in minimizing your travel worries is to schedule your trip for the right day. Do not start your journey when everyone else does; stretching your vacation by half a day may cost you more time in the end. Rather than traveling on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and returning that Sunday, two of the busiest travel days all year, try going early Thursday morning and head home Saturday night. You may lose a few hours visiting with your family, but you'll save yourself many hours of aggravation in traffic or delayed flights. The same is true of Christmas; slide your holiday plans

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forward or back a day to avoid a travel crunch.

If you plan on flying, there are a few tricks to guard against the chances that your flight will be delayed or canceled. In general, nonstop flights cause the least problems. Connections, or even just lay-overs at an airport, can result in missed flights or your plane's getting caught in a morass of backed up flights. If you must take a flight that stops enroute, try to find one with that goes to the least trafficked airport with the most temperate weather. Another tip is to get an early flight; the later in the day, the more chance that previous delays will impact the departure of your plane.

On the days you do travel, call the airline to check your flight's status, and make sure you arrive at the airport extra early. Flights are regularly over booked during the holidays and showing up early is your best defense against being bumped. Try checking your luggage curbside. Besides being quicker, the skycaps don't work directly for the airlines and, with a nice tip, are often more willing to overlook bags which exceed the airline's weight limit.

While making your reservation you should have alerted the airline to the nature of your disability and any assistance you'll require. Reconfirm this upon check in, along with a review of the equipment you use (wheelchair batteries which comply with flight regulations, service animals, oxygen, etc.) so that everyone is clear about the procedures well before boarding.

Airlines often cut carry-on limits to a single bag during the heavy holiday season. Equipment necessary for a disabled traveler does not count against this limit, nor the two checked bag limit. So, if you carry-on a bag of fragile components detached from your wheelchair, you are still entitled to another carry-on, despite the one bag rule.

If your flight is delayed, try to find out how long the delay will be so that you can make other arrangements if necessary. If worst comes to worst and your flight is canceled, or you miss your connection, airlines will rebook you on their next flight if space is available, or will refund your ticket. An option you can request, however, is for your airline to see if there is space on another airline's flight. If there is, they may then endorse your (non-electronic) ticket to be used on the other airline at no additional expense to

you.

After reading all this, you may decide that flying during the holidays isn't for you. Depending on the length of your trip, you might want to look into traveling by train. Amtrak has made a concerted effort to accommodate disabled passengers, going so far as to offer a 15% discount to them and an accompanying passenger.

With regard to early arrival, off peak travel days, and prior notification of a disability, the same rules apply to both air and rail travel during the holidays. Although less popular than catching a plane, trains do fill up and delays aren't uncommon. However, the trade-off for the slower speed of travel is an often more comfortable trip.

Wheelchair users are able to remain in their chairs with ample seating spaces in coach and accessible overnight compartments. Unlike most planes, the bathrooms on Amtrak trains are accessible with grab bars and extra space. For those with non-mobility impairments, Amtrak also provides TTY phone jacks, space for service animals, special dietary requirements and allows users of oxygen to bring and use their own equipment - a far cry from airline policy.

Still, many, many Americans will choose to hit the pavement and drive to their holiday destination. Traffic this holiday season is expected to be at an all time high, or low depending on your perspective.

For those planning on braving the freeways, try to leave either very early or very late so as to avoid as much traffic as possible. Don't over pack your vehicle. The last thing you need on a long drive is an obscured view or cramped interior. Be sure to get plenty of sleep before you set out, map your route accurately, and set specific times or locations to stop and refresh yourself. You may also want to map some alternate routes in case you run into unexpected traffic or road closures. Additionally, it is a good idea to carry a cell phone for emergencies.

No matter what, if you're traveling for the holidays you are going to experience crowds and delays, but knowing what to expect and taking steps

to insulate yourself from unnecessary problems can make all the difference between feasting on turkey and feeling like one.

For more information on travel issues for people with disabilities, visit Adam Lloyd's website at www.GimpontheGo.com or email Adam at Editor@GimpontheGo.com

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