



MZURI
— TRAINING —



by **Julienne Verhagen**

Comprehensive Tried and True Tips For Traveling By Plane With A Disability

Plane travel is a more common reality for people with disability; and while it's totally possible, there are some traps and pitfalls that I've learned the hard way that it's better to avoid.

Booking flights

1. Some airlines – Like Virgin Australia – now have 50% off flights for companion carers. Similar to a companion card – you might be able to take a companion with you for a huge discount. Find the flights you want (either online or with a travel agent) then get the travel agent to call the 'special services' section of the airlines you've booked with to request special seating and the wheelchair to be loaded onto the plane. Ensure that you book an aisle seat if requiring difficult transfers, and that your companion is seated next to you. Make sure you book inter-connecting flights with at least twice the normal time required. Most people with wheelchairs or other disabilities are first on the plane and last off – meaning you must allow plenty of time to change planes. If you have to change terminals you also need to allow extra time to find and wait for lifts and wheelchair accessible transport.
2. Does the airline allow you to stay in your wheelchair all the way the gate, before transferring into their special wheelchair to get you onto the plane? Some airlines insist on you changing into their standard wheelchairs at check in – something many people cannot do. There are no straps, no padding, terrible armrests etc., especially if you need to be in it for an hour or more prior to getting on to the plane. If you can use these wheelchairs then this will not be an issue for you. (In general, Jetstar require people to check their wheelchair and change into the airport wheelchair at check-in, whereas Virgin and Qantas usually allow people to stay in their own chairs if required until the gate. Qantas have an amazing hoist which goes onto the plane – meaning there's no need to manually lift anyone in or out of their chair. It's awesome, though it does take more time than just picking someone up, or doing the plane wheelchair transfer.)

Plane accessibility – things to consider

If you or your person with disability uses a wheelchair and requires accessible support, here are your tips to a smooth experience.

3. If your mobility restricts you from manoeuvring yourself into the airline seat, you will need to be at the gate at least 10 minutes before the stated time and be ready to board the plane first. Trained flight attendants can assist you with the use of a slide board, and are usually helpful, but are not technically allowed to lift anyone themselves. Most wheelchair users travel with a companion to



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support them transferring from their own chair to the airline’s especially narrow chair to take them along the aisle of the plane to their specific seat. These narrow wheelchairs usually do have basic straps but they’re not enough for anyone with cerebral palsy or other muscular conditions, so bring your own if required. It usually takes 3-5 minutes to wheel the chair on to the plane, where you then need to do the second transfer to the assigned seat. This all happens the same in reverse at the end of the flight – once everybody else has disembarked from the aircraft. While this is a good thing, as there are less prying eyes to worry about, it does add up to an hour more time that you’re sitting in your airline seats.

Accessing planes around the world varies. Not all flights board via an aerobridge. It’s best to only book planes that do guarantee an aerobridge boarding and disembarkation. If that’s unavoidable you will need to book lift assistance if you are unable to manage steps.

The airlines tend to put people in wheelchairs in the catering lift, which can mean long journeys through the airport to gain access to it, transferring your person with disability to the airline narrow wheelchair in a corridor, or on the tarmac somewhere, then awkwardly being lifted (outside in the weather) up to the top stair height, via the lift – and onto the plane. This either happens while holding up the entire plane wanting to board, or long after everyone else has been seated. It is doable, and sometimes there’s no choice, but if there is, I advise avoiding the situation. Also, some airlines may charge a fee for this lift – and you will need to allow at least 30 mins extra time at each end of the flight.

- 4 If you need to take your wheelchair apart in order to put it into the cargo hold – there are several things to consider. For safety reasons, all motorised equipment must have all batteries disconnected and the connections taped and covered. This ensures they do not accidentally turn on during the flight or run the risk of short circuiting and causing a fire. While most airlines include wheelchairs without excess baggage charges, it doesn’t hurt to check first. Remember to always label your mobility aids and their mobile parts (Arm and foot rests, head-rests or special seats from your wheelchair can each get misplaced during flights).

Practice taking the wheelchair apart and putting it back together before you get to the airport. You can feel rushed at the time, as you’ll have your person to take care of and there’ll be a million other things going on – with an entire plane-load of people waiting behind you to get on the plane. Another consideration when travelling with mobility aids is having information about your equipment with you if you need to troubleshoot an issue. Spare tools to disassemble specific parts, straps to hold parts together, cloth tape for emergencies and protective covers are all things I recommend you take with you. Given the previous sentence I know this might sound contradictory, but I recommend you pack as light as possible! I know that this is really tough, but there’s a wheelchair to push or walk alongside of and then there’s all the luggage, including hand luggage to carry. Use airline trolleys to help, but try to pack light in the first place!

At the airport

- 5 Getting to and from the airport: Hotel and airport shuttles usually do not have accessible solutions – so accessible/wheelchair/maxi taxis are the way to go. Trains are also really good because they are pretty much always accessible. Arriving at airports can be both exciting and stressful – and the level of activity at the airport maybe overwhelming, especially for someone with dementia or cognitive conditions. Prepare ahead of time, look up airport layouts, lift locations, suitable restaurants and quieter places to go to. I find that using things like headphones with calming music can also really help.

6. Getting around the airport: Ask if airport escort services can help you get from the check-in counter to your gate, and from the plane – to your transport from the airport. When traveling internationally having an escort can be very handy to cut cues. Even without an official escort, the wheelchair is often the golden ticket and helps get through customs and security cues quickly. That's great, but then it can take ages for the security officers to become available, glove up and then slowly check every part of the person and their wheelchair. This all makes it take about the same amount of time as usual, so allow for this.

Also – the whole process, while usually very respectful, is done in full public view – which can create embarrassment and feeling uncomfortable for the person in the chair. Discussing this with them prior to arrival, so that they can prepare themselves for this, might help. Also, as the companion, it's helpful to co-ordinate the security check times so that you can be with them as much as possible during the manual inspection of them and their wheelchair – if they need that reassurance.

On The Plane

7. Sitting well and behaving well on the plane: If it's not obvious, I recommend discreetly explaining to gate staff and flight attendants that you are traveling with someone who has special needs such as dementia, anxiety or behavioural concerns. I'd also be aware that while most planes have their own "harness" to assist with keeping travellers balanced in their seats, they are very loose and – for anyone requiring genuine physical support - next to useless. I invented a specific harness to keep my brother supported in his seat – particularly for the 14-hour long-haul flights he's endured. It has to be soft but strong fabric and it needs to attach to the seat, without disturbing the tray table of the person behind him, and be able to Velcro him in – so it can be released in a second should there be an emergency. I took three goes to get it right, but his harness keeps him very comfortable until about the 5 hour mark – then we then need to give him a stretch.

Behaviour issues can occur due to the length of a flight and the constant noise and restriction of movement. Entertainment and comfort is key to keeping anyone calm on a flight – so being fully prepared with neck pillows, noise-cancelling headphones, favourite music or movies on a USB, toys, snacks, books and games can all help in getting through the flight. Pick the most favourite, and the lightest! My brother also loves wearing an eye-patch while trying to sleep during a flight. He gets all snuggled up and with his neck pillow, eye-patch and blanket and he's set!

8. Toileting issues when flying: The Qantas A380 long-haul plane has a terrific disabled bathroom feature. (It joins two toilet cubicles together – creating on double-sized bathroom) It's still not long enough to lie any adult down to change a pad, but does allow more than one person to be in the toilet with someone who may need assistance.

I know of people who – even on long flights – ensure they go to the toilet just before boarding – but have not had anything to drink for an hour prior to the flight – and don't drink until the last part of the flight – to avoid having to use the toilet. For long-haul flights this is almost impossible, but limiting the times you have to get out of the plane seat is helpful. If using a convene system, I recommend a taking a coloured collapsible water bottle with you. There are soft plastic ones that fold up small, but can be used to subtly collect urine from the bag while your person is still in their plane seat, and take to the bathroom to empty.



Re avoiding bowel movements – there are a couple of options: We have used over-the-counter medications to clean out one’s system prior to getting to the airport – particularly for long-haul flights. Just be sure to take it long enough prior to the flight so the bowels have been truly emptied prior to the flight. Then we’ve found that you can pretty much eat what you want and be able to avoid having to go to the toilet until landing.

9. Food: Pre-ordering a specific meal type will ensure that your person with disability will get fed first, (giving you time to support them before you own food comes). It also ensures you’ll get closer to what you require. If you need to vitimize their food, you can try asking the attendants for help, but I recommend taking your own food on board with you. We always struggle with utensils, and my brother bites through plastic cutlery, and we can’t take a metal spoon on board with us. We also take his spouted cups. Remember, it can be tricky feeding someone when you’re stuck in a seat next to them and can’t face them like you normally would. Taking your own food or snacks also means you can eat when needed rather than being at the mercy of the often bizarre times the flight attendants feed you, especially on long-haul flights.

Flight delays, airport time and stop-overs.

10. Consider what your needs will be if you have a stopover or long layover. You may need to make other arrangements if you do not have access to your normal mobility aids. You may also need specific snacks, toileting aids or medications if you experience any unexpected delays. I take a rolled up yoga mat with us so we can change my brother’s pad, or just lie him down to stretch out no matter where we are. It’s much better to be safe than sorry.

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Melbourne Office

Level 9, 440 Collins St,
Melbourne, Vic, 3000

Phone: (03) 8692 7237

Mobile: 0421354332

Email: julienne@mzuritraining.com.au

www.MzuriTraining.com.au

