

Feature

On a Wing and a Prayer

Seasoned air line traveller and bi-lateral amputee Diana Morgan guides you through the skies this summer

Whether you're an established amputee or recently suffering from limb loss, the prospect of booking a holiday and travelling by plane can be daunting. We have heard from LA members on a number of issues over the years, with the comments and complaints accelerating since 9/11, the 'shoe-bomber' incident, the stringent security measures that were imposed last year following further threat of terrorist attack and most recently, the latest baggage weight allowances.

The singular most important factor in booking flights is planning ahead. Air travel is unpredictable at the best of times but there are some things you can do to help control the potentially negative aspects of the unknown and make your trip more manageable and enjoyable. Being prepared and letting people know if you might need assistance in order to make arrangements in advance is the first and most important factor.

If you are booking your holiday through a travel agent, this information process will be facilitated, as long as you are clear about your requirements. For example, the ever-increasing size of airport terminals could mean that you now may need to book a wheelchair or buggy so that the possible stress of a long walk on your prosthetics is eased. At Heathrow and Gatwick, for instance, they estimate the walk from terminal to gate can average a 20-minute walk. Far better

to book wheelchair services in advance, than face the prospect of a long flight in possible pain.

However you book your flights, being self-prepared is vital. If you have diabetes, ensure that is under good control, if you need immunisation shots, try to get them well in advance so that if they make you unwell, you have time to recover. For the same reason, it's probably a good idea to see your prosthetist early enough before you leave to troubleshoot any potential problems and allow time for you to adjust to any repair or modifications. It's also possibly relevant, if travelling to a non-English speaking country, to learn a few vital phrases 'I have a prosthetic leg', for example, or 'I use a wheelchair.'

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Amputees travelling without some type of survival kit take the same risk as driving a car without a spare tyre. Residual limbs change under pressure, over time and especially under increased activity. Prosthetic parts can give out under extra wear and tear. What can be a minor inconvenience at home can be

disastrous abroad. Suggested items may include: adhesive membrane dressings for abrasions or blisters, wipes or antibacterial soap to keep your residual limb(s) clean, extra socks and liners, duct tape for temporary repairs and a small pair of scissors for cutting holes in socks. For ease through security, store all these items in your main suitcase, along with your swimming/shower/spare limbs. An extra tip is to pack the hollow in any spare limbs with underwear/swimming gear and then wrap the limb/s in a towel or clothing for protection. If you wish to take a spare prosthetic with your hand luggage, please check with the airline.

The airlines are continuing to permit prescription based medications and other liquids needed by persons with disabilities and medical conditions, and it seems advisable to continue carrying any vital medicines in your hand luggage. Essential medicines in liquid form must be sufficient and essential for the flight eg diabetic kit – as long as verified and authentic with a name that matches the passenger's ticket.

Which brings us to baggage weight allowances. These can differ, depending on the airline and even the class you are travelling in for example, with Easy Jet, currently each passenger travelling from the UK is allowed 50 kilos hold baggage, including any sports equipment, subject to available space. However, the normal

maximum weight for any single piece of baggage is 32 kgs. Passengers travelling with vital medical equipment – which prosthetics comes under – are allowed an additional 10kgs, but the total hold baggage must not exceed 50kgs. This could mean that you may need to be prepared to open your suitcase to show the ground staff the spare/swimming limbs in your luggage, so pack carefully. Under the codes laid down by the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (see below for more details), if you need to use or carry any medical equipment on the plane, you will need to check in advance with the airline. Different airlines will have their own rules for different equipment. All airlines will carry wheelchairs – in the hold, but may not take a scooter or buggy. If you need to take expensive disability equipment with you, make sure that it is adequately insured for loss or damage, mobility aids are unlikely to be covered by standard travel insurance policies, this is particularly important for wheelchairs, as compensation from the airline is currently based on weight, not value. Sometimes your household insurance may provide cover for these items but most insurers will quote separately. If you do use a wheelchair, it is always advisable to remove the seat cushion and the footplates before you hand it over to the baggage handlers.

Very often an amputee's disability is not obvious to other people, so make sure you explain your particular requirements clearly, this is particularly pertinent with regards to security or the airline screening process. If you use a wheelchair, it is obvious that you are going to set the metal detector ringing, and a same gender security handler will always screen you and your personal wheelchair. Screeners will frequently need to see and touch your prosthetic device as part of the screening process, but they do not, except in rarely heard of cases, ask you to remove it. We at the LA have heard of one instance of an amputee asked to remove his shoe, (following the shoe bomber incident, when security was at its highest) and

have heard on the grapevine about one other time when an amputee was asked to remove their prosthetic leg which came soon after reports of drugs being stored in a prosthetic, but in the absolute majority of cases you should not be asked to remove your prosthetics. If your clothing needs to be disturbed in any way for the screener to see or touch your prosthetic(s), you can request a private screening. Walkers, crutches and walking sticks and other devices that can fit through the x-ray machine must undergo x-ray screening.

For additional comfort, try to book your seats in advance, to trawl back a little extra leg room – right at the front of the plane section is best but be aware that passengers with additional needs will not be seated or in cross aisles that form part of the emergency exit routes.

Once aboard, if you can, take aspirin, to facilitate circulation and try to move your residual limbs as much as possible during the flight by tensing and releasing the muscles in the residual limb. Sitting in a pressurised cabin for a long time can make your ankles, feet and joints swell. If you take off a prosthesis during the flight to be more comfortable, you may find it very difficult to get it back on, especially in the limited space of a plane seat.

On a final note, some staff, who provide specialist services like driving buggies, handling mobility equipment such as wheelchairs, will have had extra training to make sure they have the necessary skills but please remember that this does not mean they are experts in all types of disability. Give advice and explain your personal requirements at every relevant stage of your journey as clearly as possible. All the major airlines have special assistance helplines – some of which are featured below, all of the airlines stipulate that these lines must be phoned if you require special assistance. Do your research, be prepared, be open with your information, and have a great flying time! This article first appeared in the Summer Issue of Step Forward Summer 2007.

With thanks to InMotion magazine

The government has worked with disabled people and the organisations involved in all stages of a journey by air. This guide is published by Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC): Access to air Travel: Guidance for disabled and less mobile passengers: Tel: 0207 944 8011 Web: <http://www.dptac.gov.uk>. It covers all aspects of air travel – from accessing information through to arriving at the final destination. It also covers the design of airports and planes with over 30 seats.

Association of British Travel Agents:
Tel: 0901 201 5050 Web: www.abta.com

Tourism For All: Tel: 0845 1249971
Web: www.tourismforall.org.uk

Commercial Tour Operators specifically geared towards people with mobility difficulties:

Access at Last
www.accessatlast.com
Tel: 0845 890 2120

Access Travel
Tel: 01942 888844
www.access-travel.co.uk

Accessible Travel and Leisure
Tel: 01452 729739
www.accessibletravel.co.uk

ATS Travel Ltd
Tel: 01708 863198
www.assistedholidays.com

Venture Holidays Ltd – Activity holidays for disabled (British run organisation working out of France)
Tel: 00 33 5 62 06 72 39
www.atventure.org.uk

Can Be Done
Tel: 0208 907 2400
www.canbedone.co.uk

Enable Holidays
Tel: 0871 222 4939
www.enableholidays.com

www.matchinghouses.com
This is a website for disabled people who wish to house-swap for their holidays.

Special Assistance Telephone Lines:

British Airways:
0870 850 9 850
EasyJet: 0871 244 2336
Ryan Air: 0871 246 000
Virgin: 0870 380 2004