

Favorite Hacks of a Blind Air Traveler

By Pat Pound, Consultant
Open Doors Organization

March, 2022

Most frequent travelers develop ways of doing things that make their travel experience more enjoyable. This is true for myself, and many hacks relate to my blindness and what I need to do to fly successfully. Each person's habits or hacks may be different and equally useful.

Important Definitions

Air travel uses some terms that have specific meanings. Here are some that come to mind

Departure: Plane leaving from the airport

Arrival: Plane getting into the airport where you are going.

Checked Luggage: Most frequently a paid service, this means that you give your luggage to the airline once you attach identification tags with your name and address. Airlines have size and weight restrictions on this baggage. The airline becomes responsible for that baggage even if you change planes. The next time you see it will be in the baggage claim area at your destination airport.

Carry On items: These are items you do not check but decide to keep with you around the airport and inside the plane. You may not leave these items unattended. Airlines have size restrictions on such items, and sizes can differ depending on the size of your plane.

Before you Go

The first step once you decide where you are going is to purchase your ticket, by phone, website or airline app. On the phone be sure and tell the agent that you are blind and specify assistance you need such as a guide to and from the gate. This is not required but can greatly facilitate timely services. If you book on a website or app, indicate services you need if you find a place to do so. Be aware that additional charges can occur at the end of ticketing such as a charge for certain seats with more leg room and/or luggage charges. Review the final cost carefully before finalizing the purchase. Keep receipts from your ticket purchase.

Make notes of the flight number and departure and arrival times in Braille or large print in case your phone or computer has a low battery. Charge all devices fully before you leave and take battery banks if you have them.

Plan and pack for your trip including getting low denomination bills to use for tipping service personnel.

You may also want to wear clothes with pockets while in the airport making retrieving IDs or travel information easier. Wear comfortable shoes that are easy to put on or take off, as distances in airports can be quite long. Some people use a lanyard with a pocket to keep their ID and boarding pass safe.

Some travelers pack one extra pair of clothes in their carry-on bag along with essential toiletries in case their checked luggage gets lost.

Many blind travelers use backpacks so our arms are free for guiding etc. I select unique colors of luggage so mine is easy to see by whoever is helping me retrieve it. I also put a Braille ID tag on my checked baggage. Some travelers use electronic tags they can beep with their phones.

Be sure to review the TSA requirements regarding electronics and liquids. Pack things you must remove at TSA in easily accessed pockets of your backpack. BeSome people use the same pockets every time and use bags that are easy to tell apart. ready to take off your shoes. Some travelers bring empty plastic water bottles and fill them up once they get through TSA. I also always pack protein bars as you cannot always count on having time to get food.

Within 72 hours of your flight you can sign up for extra assistance through security called TSA Cares by calling 855-787-2227. You can also get a TSA Cares card where you can describe disabilities or conditions you would prefer not to disclose verbally.

Download the airline's app to your phone and sign up for an account. Most such apps allow you to check flight status, check in 24 hours before your flight, and get text messages about changes to your flight.

At the Airport

However you get to the airport, you will need to tell the driver on which airlines you are flying, and once there you may want to ask them to assist you to the outdoor kiosk or the indoor ticket counter for that airline. At either place they can check luggage if you wish, print your boarding pass, and call for your guide to your gate.

They will need to know your flight number and times or your ticket locator number that the airlines sent with your receipt. Once you check a bag, which often costs, the airline is responsible for it and you will not see it until you arrive at your destination.

They will give you a boarding pass which you will show at TSA and your gate. You may have already gotten your boarding pass on your phone. Once your guide comes you

can proceed to TSA.

You should tell your guide how you prefer to be assisted such as taking their arm, following them, or getting verbal directions. Sometimes your guide will show up with a wheelchair and encourage you to sit in it. You may do this if you wish, but you can make the choice of walking. This may mean that they have to find a place to stow the wheelchair.

Getting Through TSA

At the beginning of TSA an agent will review your ID card and boarding pass. Next you should estimate how many plastic bins you need for things you have to remove to go through the scanner, such as laptops or medical devices. Liquids, aerosols and gels must be in bottles no bigger than 3.4 ounces and collected into one 1-quart clear plastic bag. You can buy toothpaste, mouthwash, hand cream in such small bottles.

Shoes and backpacks do not have to be put into bins. I always ask my guide to keep their eye on any valuables such as electronics as they move through the TSA process., definitely not a foolproof process.

Just before you pass through the scanner your things like shoes and backpacks and your bins get put onto rollers that move them through. The guide may do this for you or assist you to do it. Tell your guide that when it is your turn to walk through, they will need to place you facing the opening and let you know when to reach out. the TSA agent will reach their hand through to guide you. Try not to touch either side wall of the pass through as that will set off an alarm.

You may have to wait on your guide to get through TSA as they are probably behind you. You then collect your stuff and repack.

On to the Gate

Your guide is required to help you find the entrance door to restrooms and to make a short stop for carry-out food as you travel to your gate.

If the gate agents for the airline are at your gate when you get there I recommend introducing yourself to them and asking to pre-board. You may also want to ask them to confirm that you are all set for your guide once you get to your destination.

You may want to ask where the best place is to sit for them to see you. Once seated, you can release your guide after tipping them.

Using the airline app, you should sign up for text notices . This way you can problem solve if there is a delay or a gate change. If your departure gate is changed, it is often easier to ask a fellow passenger if you can walk to the new gate with them, because

waiting on a guide might not get you there in time.

Pre-board

When they announce pre-boarding, they should come over to assist you. They will help you scan your boarding pass. Once you get to the plane, the gate agent will leave and you should introduce yourself to the first flight attendant you find, and ask them to help you find your seat.

They are also supposed to advise you of the number of seats to the emergency exit and describe emergency procedures, including allowing you to feel the oxygen masks. They may additionally include directions to the restrooms and/or in-flight entertainment system access.

You should stow your backpack, knowing that keeping up with it is your responsibility, not the airlines. Once seated, stow your cane either under the seat in front of you, folded up or when in the window seat, laying along the side of the plane on the floor. You may want to feel along the bottoms of the seats as some planes have electric plugs where you can charge your phone. Check your phone battery levels often and stop using it if you have limited amount left as you will need it when you get to your destination.

Once they announce they are beginning the landing procedure, you may want to ask the flight attendant to confirm that your guide has been requested. This way they may be more likely to be at the gate once you deplane.

If they are not there you should locate any airline personnel and have them problem-solve.

Once connected with your guide, they will also be willing to show you the door to the restroom and assist you with retrieving checked baggage.

They can also assist you to passenger pick-up for taxis or transportation network companies. They will wait with you until your ride arrives. Remember to tip for such services.

Problem-Solving

If your guide does not understand your requests or directions due to limited English skills, you should reword what you are saying. If this does not work, and if you are feeling out of control, consider coming to a complete stop and telling your guide that they need to ask for a supervisor to assist with communications. This is not always possible due to time constraints. Coming to a stop is important because so long as you are moving they don't understand that there is a problem.

If you reach a point with airline staff where problem-solving fails, you should ask for a Complaint Resolution Officer (CRO) which is an airline staff person trained in disability issues.

Useful Travel Tools

Beyond phone apps for airports and airlines, many additional apps exist to make traveling easier. One of my favorite is called Triplt and it scans your e-mail inbox for plane and hotel reservations. Then it automatically extracts the necessary information putting it all on one line in the app. It also orders the info putting what you need first at the top.

There are also apps for ordering food and other items at the airport. This can make picking them up with your guide take less time. Some of them deliver to your gate. One such app is called Grab. It lists all stores and restaurants giving which gate is nearest to their location. Even if you do not order, this is an easy way to discover what establishments you will pass by as you go to your gate. You can also see their menus and prices. I often review this before leaving home so I have a good idea about what I want to order from where.

One of my favorite apps and services to use in the airport is AIRA. Some airports purchase AIRA making this service free to blind flyers while in their facilities. I have used AIRA totally independently from airlines services, navigated from the front door all the way to boarding my plane. You can call AIRA and e-mail them your flight information making it easier for the agent to look up your gate and find it on an airport map. I use a phone lanyard as I do not have a free hand to hold my phone. Even if I do not use AIRA to get to my gate, I often have lots of time to kill waiting until pre-board. I use AIRA to walk about, often finding food or other items I want to purchase. Many AIRA explorers end the phone call just before going through the TSA pass through and call again from the secure side. You can determine if an airport has free AIRA services by searching in AIRA access partners in the AIRA app.