

RIGHT OF PASSAGE

How accessible is air travel for persons of reduced mobility?



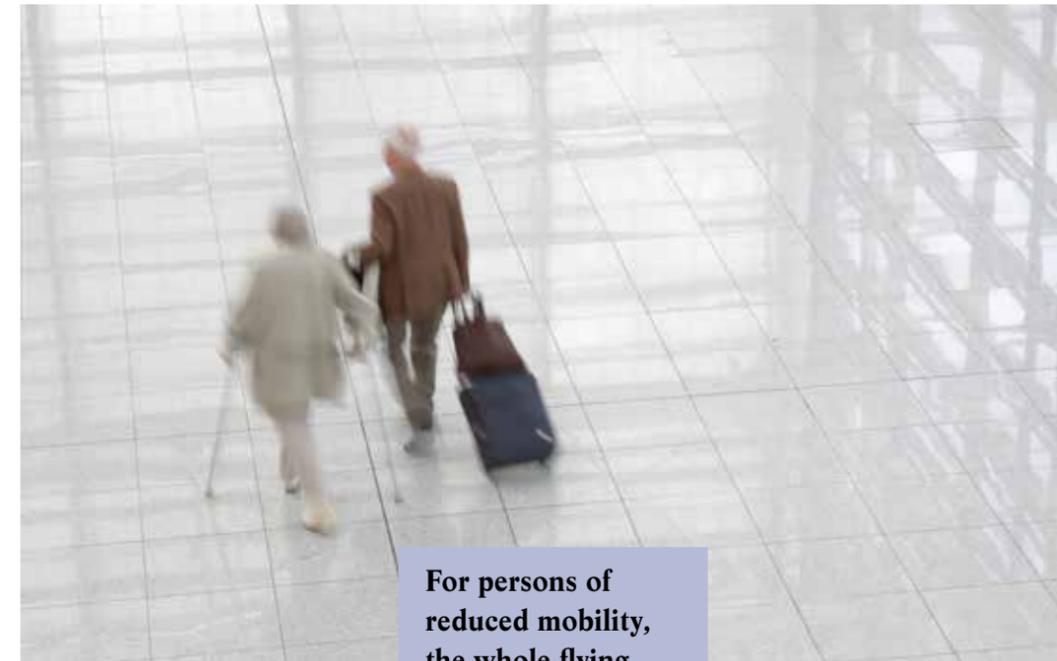
We all put up with inconveniences to jet around the world – hurried walks across labyrinthine airports, onerous security checks and being crammed with hundreds of others into a small metal tube for several hours.

Few of us, however, will have deliberately dehydrated ourselves before a flight because we know there will be no way to access a toilet on board. Or watched from our seat as every other passenger disembarked, waiting for our assistance to arrive. Or been left immobile in a new city because our wheelchair has been damaged or lost in transit.

For “persons with reduced mobility” (PRMs) with a permanent or temporary physical disability, the whole experience of flying – from passing through the airport and getting on to the aircraft, to travelling in a cramped seat and then getting off on the other side – can be fraught with difficulty. In a recent survey of disabled people commissioned by *Which?*, almost half of respondents said that a lack of confidence in accessibility services had limited their ability to fly in the past two years.

A *Business Traveller* reader who regularly flies using a wheelchair told us that while Emirates provides excellent service when getting PRMs on and off the plane, once luggage has been collected from the carousel at Dubai International, porters will not provide assistance unless paid in cash. On a recent trip, not having any money on him, he was refused help and had to be aided by police. He described the experience as “unbearable”. Emirates, which manages the service at the airport, confirmed to us that porters require a fee, adding that last month it introduced card payments.

MANUEL FABR ORTEGA/LAPPES/ISTOCK



For persons of reduced mobility, the whole flying experience can be fraught with difficulty

The *Which?* survey highlighted that it is not just PRMs for whom accessibility is a concern. A traveller who is blind and has Alzheimer’s was reportedly told at Manchester airport that he could not use the priority queue as he did not use a wheelchair, and was then left humiliated when a staff member shouted to a colleague that the passenger “couldn’t cope” with the boarding pass scanner.

Another of our readers, Brian Pope, struggles to walk long distances because of his age. He says that on a recent London-Bangkok trip – despite assurances from his airline that he would be assisted with a buggy while transiting – he was offered a wheelchair on his outbound journey, which he did not want to use, and no assistance at all on the inbound one.

ACCESS FOR ALL

Passenger numbers are on the rise, and they include not only PRMs but older people who may find airports overwhelming and planes uncomfortable; people with conditions such as dementia, autism or anxiety; people with visual or auditory impairments; or those recovering from an operation or stroke. According to

the UK’s Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), passenger numbers have increased by 25 per cent since 2014, while the number of people asking for airport assistance has risen by 49 per cent.

Adjusting to this demand is no small task. As Sara Marchant, Heathrow’s customer relations manager, points out, the airport is the size of a small city. Marchant is responsible for ensuring that the 80 million passengers moving through it each year come out with a positive impression, and at the latest count, about 1.5 million of them required special assistance.

In 2017, the CAA told Heathrow it was failing these people. In the regulator’s second annual *Airport Accessibility Report*, it ranked the airport’s service “poor”, along with that at Manchester, Exeter and East Midlands. Marchant accredits Heathrow’s rise to “good” in the 2019 report to measures such as establishing an advisory committee and extra staff training. She also chairs meetings several times a year with 12 other UK airports for sharing best practice. →



East Midlands was also ranked “good” last year, and Exeter “very good”. Manchester was judged “needs improvement”, amid reports that disabled passengers had been left waiting on planes for more than an hour for assistance to help them off. Last year the airport told *Business Traveller* that it was working with its own disability engagement forum to improve service, and has hired a new external special assistance provider.

This points to one of the key challenges for airports. Jack Bigglestone-Silk, Gatwick’s accessibility manager, says the airport has more than 20,000 members of staff, most of whom are employed by third-party partners. He says Gatwick has introduced a new accessibility training system for all staff, including security agents and other employees who may be external, and spread awareness of schemes such as hidden disability lanyards, which indicate that a passenger may need extra help. Gatwick has enlarged its special assistance seating area and is looking at how new technologies could help.

“There is a great appetite for innovation and so many people working on solutions,” Bigglestone-Silk says. He cites the location beacon technology now integrated in the Gatwick app, allowing passengers to look up a facility such as “accessible toilet” and then follow a route mapped out as a line to follow.

Heathrow has pledged to spend £30 million on new equipment and technology for accessibility this year, and is trialling an app called Navilens, which provides audible navigational information to visually impaired passengers in various languages. Despite improvements, it has evidently not solved all of its issues. In the *Which?* survey, 28 per cent of respondents were dissatisfied with the special assistance at Heathrow.

Since 2006, European Commission regulation EC1107 has required airports and airlines to provide PRMs with “opportunities for air travel comparable with those of other citizens”. The UK has no

legislation related specifically to air travel, although the 2010 Equality Act requires businesses to make “reasonable adjustments” for PRMs. Adherence to EC1107 is overseen by the CAA, although the future of this beyond 2020 will be decided during the UK’s Brexit negotiations.

James Freemantle, the CAA’s head of consumer policy and enforcement, said at a recent London event that he believed “reputational regulation” worked well to force change at airports, hence the launch of the annual report. Heathrow’s Marchant also believes social media has had an impact, providing an immediate way for airports to get feedback (and for passengers to highlight poor behaviour).

It goes without saying that passengers often don’t want to – and shouldn’t have to – use media or social media to demand better standards. Yet people we spoke to who had tried to report complaints said they had been passed between airports, airlines and third-party assistance providers, or told to use generic email addresses, often failing to get an adequate response.

GETTING ON BOARD

Once it is time to board, things can get even more difficult. Personal wheelchairs must be placed in the hold, which is both inconvenient and potentially disastrous if chairs are lost or damaged. When no airbridge is available, PRMs must get up a set of narrow stairs using devices such as a stairclimber – a separate chair that can be lifted up and down – or a lift. At the door of the aircraft, they swap to a narrow onboard chair that can fit down an aisle. All of this is generally overseen by third-party assistance providers employed by the airport.

Passengers must then find a way to manoeuvre on to their seat, either

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alone or with the help of a carer or assistance providers (crew are not permitted to lift passengers, and the more spacious bulkhead rows can often not be used by PRMs for safety reasons). The onboard wheelchairs are then folded and stored until required to take passengers off the plane or to the washroom – unless they are travelling on a single-aisle aircraft, in which case it is all-but impossible for any wheelchair to get into the toilet.

Emma Muldoon uses a powered wheelchair full-time, and blogs about her experiences at simplyemma.co.uk. Boarding and deboarding is generally

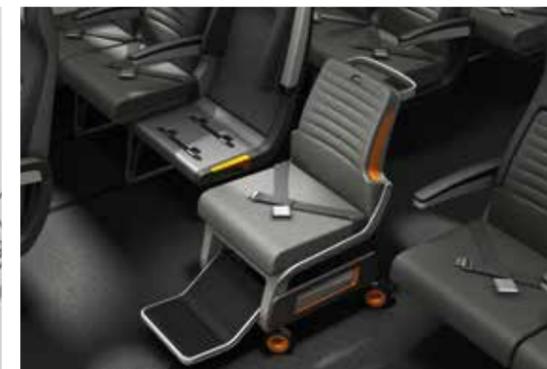
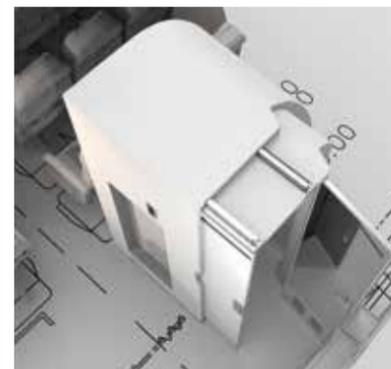
TIPS FOR AIR TRAVEL

- Check airline policy before booking. Can everything you need be accommodated in the hold or on board?
- Let your airline or travel agent know during the booking process of any access requirements. Some airports require 72 hours’ notice to provide assistance.
- View airport maps online in advance. Check for any tools you can use, such as Heathrow’s Navilens app.
- The CAA has told UK airports that they should provide clear and detailed information for people with disabilities ahead of time, and provide clear images and audio messages throughout the airport to help you navigate. If they have failed, let them know.
- Useful websites and blogs about accessible travel include tryb4ufly.co.uk, wheelchairtravel.org, spintheglobe.net and simplyemma.co.uk.
- Share your experiences at businesstraveller.com/forum, or email talktous@businesstraveller.com.

like many others, dehydrates herself before a flight despite the health risks.

Christopher Wood, whose two children use wheelchairs, describes a 2015 flight to Mexico with his daughter as “horrendous” – so much so that he eventually left his job to become a full-time aviation accessibility consultant. “I thought, how can we be so behind?” he says. “For 30 years, the aviation industry has reconfigured cabins with more seats and adapted them. Yet, probably because it hasn’t had to as it is self-regulating, nobody has come up with solutions for improving mobility onboard.”

The ideal for both Muldoon and Wood would be for passengers to be



ABOVE LEFT: Accessible toilet by Acumen
ABOVE RIGHT: Concept seat by Priestmangoode

“stressful and unsettling”, she told us, but especially when there is a lack of training, staff, equipment or just basic empathy and communication. She cited a recent experience at London City: support staff who were brusque; being put into a stairclimber with no headrest, which she requires; being asked to wait in a small, cold corridor alone before the flight. The airport told us it was addressing the points raised and investing in its services.

Once on board, she says the main issues are the seats, which “lack any kind of support for disabled people who are immobile”, and toilets. She,

able to stay in their own wheelchair, but this would require airlines to take radical action. Almost no chairs would fit down current aisles or be able to be adequately secured to the floor. Brian Richards, who invented the Airchair used by several carriers, estimates it would cost US\$100,000 to certify one chair for use on board (he would like to see several seats on each aircraft with more room around them for PRMs to get comfortably in and out).

A concept for a process somewhere in between was unveiled by design firm Priestmangoode in 2012. Its Air Access seat sees passengers use the

same chair in the airport and on the plane, which can be attached and detached to a fixed-frame aisle seat on the aircraft, avoiding the discomfort of passengers being lifted on and off.

Yet the firm says that despite “really positive feedback” from the industry and the public, there have been no orders to date, and further investment into certification will still be required.

CHANGE IN THE AIR

The US has led the way on legislating for change. Since 2009, all airlines operating into and out of the US have to fit all new aircraft with at least 50 per cent moveable aisle armrests that allow “reasonable and dignified access” into and out of the seat.

Geraldine Lundy, an aviation accessibility consultant who worked on initiatives for Virgin Atlantic for 21 years, says that in her time at the airline this led to significant change. It became a given that when they approached manufacturers, more accessible seats would be readily provided (although many question how “dignified” the access in and out of such seats is).

The US Department of Transportation is seeking input on a plan to require airlines to include one accessible toilet on all narrow-body aircraft entering their fleets, as they must on wide-bodies. The lack of accessibility on these single-aisle planes is of increasing concern as they fly longer distances than ever before.

For the past year, UK firms ST Engineering and Acumen Design Associates have been collaborating on such a product, which is set to be shown at the Aircraft Interiors Expo in Hamburg at the end of the month.

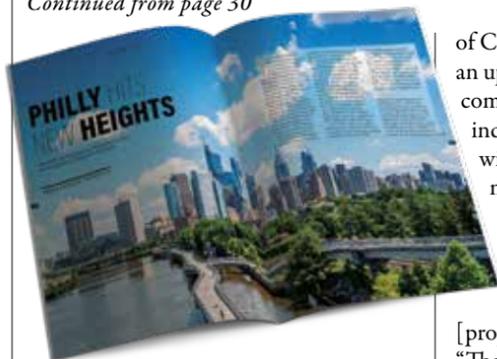
“Even on a wide-body right now, the toilets are essentially just bigger with a second seat that comes down. They don’t give easy access; they don’t have proper grab handles; wheelchairs need to be left outside,” says Daniel Lucas, senior designer at Acumen.

Acumen’s design fits in the same footprint as a standard toilet on a narrow-body such as an A321 or B737, but the back wall can be expanded → CONTINUED ON PAGE 74

PHILLY HITS NEW HEIGHTS

BOOSTING INNOVATION IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

Continued from page 30



→ One such example is the university's Pennovation Works, a nine-hectare technology park that aims to transform innovative ideas within the industries of biotech, robotics, AI and medicine into economic opportunities for the neighbourhood. The site houses a combination of offices, labs and co-working areas, occupied by both start-ups, who are drawn to the site's various accelerators, and companies Johnson and Johnson and Hershey's. Sorrentino sums it up as "emblematic of the new Philadelphia knowledge economy, shifting away from the older industrial economy".

Greater Philadelphia also retains 54 per cent of its college graduates, according to Campus Philly's *Philadelphia Renaissance 2019* report.

CONTINUOUS REINVENTION

For a city that could feasibly rely on its history to attract visitors, Philadelphia doesn't sit idly by. "All of America's history started here, so you'll always have that core foundation, but the city continues to reinvent itself [through] all the cultural institutions and world-class art," Ben Shank, general manager of the Four Seasons, says. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, for instance, is undergoing a US\$196 million renovation by Frank Gehry that will add more than 2,000 sqm of gallery space this autumn. The Penn Museum is undergoing a phased transformation, set to finish in 2023, while the city's former opera house reopened as concert venue the Met Philadelphia in 2018.

At the same time, the working class neighbourhood of Fishtown, northeast

of Center City, has transformed into an up-and-coming hotspot. Formerly a commercial fishing base, the district's industrial warehouses are now filled with lively restaurants, galleries and music venues. When Shank first started out in Philadelphia, "it was one of those areas you wouldn't have gravitated towards, but now it's exploding with residential [properties] and restaurants", he says. "That's what's neat about the city. It keeps pushing out really great areas."

Comcast founder Ralph Roberts once said: "A business is only as strong as the community it operates in." This seems to be a recurring theme in the so-called City of Brotherly Love, a name that initially meant little to me but personified the area rather well by the end of my visit.

Take the dining scene, which extends far beyond Philly's famed cheesesteaks and cream cheese. Shank says: "A lot of chefs train in high-profile restaurants in other US cities but return to Philadelphia because it's more affordable." Kimberly Barrett, international communications manager for the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, adds that many restaurants are owned and operated by chefs rather than chains or outposts. "Everyone is very supportive of one another and that's what makes the culinary scene so successful," she says. Award-winning chefs Michael Solomonov and Greg Vernick have both set up several acclaimed restaurants here, while the Four Seasons has brought Jean-Georges Vongerichten's haute cuisine to the city.

Then there's the more casual but no less enticing fare on offer in Philly's many bakeries and markets – Reading Terminal Market, one of the oldest in the US, warrants multiple visits to sample some of its 80 stalls. On my last day in the city, I took a detour here to stock up on some snacks for the journey home. When I had arrived a few days earlier, my cab driver had warned me that I would gain "a few pounds" during my stay. Armed with a gigantic lox bagel and cinnamon pretzel, I did indeed return home a little wider – and historically wiser – than before. **BT**

RIGHT OF PASSAGE

MAKING AIR TRAVEL MORE ACCESSIBLE

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→ into the aircraft door area to allow enough room for a PRM and a carer, increasing the space by about 40 per cent. Access is through the corner, providing more wheelchair room, and the door fully closes behind two people. It has numerous grab rails, bright lighting, and taps are reachable from the toilet. Feedback from a group of PRMs is being used to fine-tune the prototype.

There is a sense that change is in the air. Lundy says five or six years ago she would never have had schedule clashes when giving talks on access, yet recently she has found herself speaking at three events in a day. In November last year, IATA (the International Air Transport Association) held a symposium on the issue in Dubai. Used to seeing the same 30 or so people at events, Lundy says it was "amazing" to see more than 150 attendees.

It came after IATA passed a resolution committing members to providing "safe, reliable and dignified travel" for those with disabilities. It also asked the UN's International Civil Aviation Organisation to "help harmonise national legislation and regulations which otherwise could create a patchwork of confusing or even contradictory requirements for passengers and airlines". In short: to produce a clear rulebook on the standards and services airports and airlines should provide, wherever a passenger is travelling.

Heathrow's Sara Marchant believes the outlook is positive. "We're on the crest of a wave, there's such momentum behind it," she says. "People's expectations have changed, and they expect things to be done in a way that suits them best."

Christopher Wood is more cautious. "There were a lot of soundbites [at the IATA meeting] but we will see what happens," he says. "This is a trade association with 290 airlines. If they turned around and said, 'We are going to make our aircraft accessible,' something would immediately get done. I was at the symposium, and I had lots of conversations. But I'm getting tired of conversations. We need to stop talking and start creating." **BT**



Image: © Torsten Dickmann

The Seychelles - Perfect!

With almost year-round sunshine and a backdrop of endless blue sea and sky, the Seychelles Islands are just perfect!



Image: © Chris Close



Image: © Chris Close



Image: © Ennio Maffei

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