

# ***Traveling While Deaf: Handling Speed Bumps Along the Road to a More Accessible World***

## **About the ADA and the travel industry**

The travel industry *should* be all about making guests feel welcome and comfortable, giving them their hard-earned money's worth in hotels, on airlines, and on cruise ships—regardless of the guests' disabilities. While the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) has improved accessibility since its enactment, in our ever-evolving world, traveler's expectations often exceed the minimum requirements of the ADA.

True story: five years ago, a deaf guest came to a hotel that provided him with everything the law required, yet still left his needs unmet. He had selected the hotel because it advertised it had high-speed Internet access—a crucial communications link for FaceTime, Skype, and many of the other applications that are used now. Legally, the hotel met the basic requirements for high-speed Internet, but realistically, if the hotel was half-full and everyone was online, the communication speed was more like dial-up. The deaf man came to the front desk very upset because he could not Skype with his family. He thought the hotel had lied about its Internet service and wanted his money back. A major advantage of these apps is that you don't have to have an interpreter or relay service between you and the person you're talking to. The front desk clerk called the hotel owner and asked what he should do. The owner said to find the TTY machine. The clerk found it—covered with dust—and both the clerk and the guest had a good laugh about how nobody uses these things anymore. At the time, the ADA only required that hotels have a TTY. Whether this technology was current, useful, or obsolete is another matter entirely. Although the hotel had fulfilled the letter of the law, it completely failed to meet the guest's needs.

Fortunately, there are travel providers who do care whether or not you get your money's worth, and are striving harder than ever to accommodate guests with disabilities. Here are some recommendations for getting the most out of your travel, compiled from the experiences of a seasoned travel professional and several deaf and hard-of-hearing frequent flyers.

## **Hotels**

Hotels vary in the degree to which they meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. On one end of the spectrum are those who do the bare minimum to comply with the 1991 version of the ADA, in the middle are those who care about guests who have obvious disabilities, and the best care about all of their guests. Unfortunately, it just

doesn't register with some hotels that they need to address all of the needs their guests may have. If you are deaf or hard of hearing, you may not provide an obvious or immediate visual cue that you may have special needs.

By law, hotels must offer accessible rooms at the same price as standard rooms of the same type. For example, they cannot charge you more for an accessible room with a king bed than they do for their standard room with a king bed, even if the accessible room is bigger. Furthermore, the hotel must offer an accessible version of every type of room that they have. If they offer a standard room with two beds, they must also offer an accessible room with two beds. That being said, you may not always be able to get the kind of room you want. If you encounter a situation such as needing an extra bed for an assistant, caregiver, or traveling companion, and the room you have been given doesn't have one, suggest that you be given a connecting room so each of you will have a bed. Hotels should care that your needs are met.

Properties in the Wyndham hotel group (this includes Microtel, Hawthorne, and Wingate) and the Holiday Inn group are among the best at accommodating individuals with hearing loss. They have rooms equipped with flashing doorbells and amplified phones, and they have kits so that they can convert additional rooms if needed. Microtel offers lower beds that are easier to get into and out of.

Captions on hotel room TV sets seem to be especially problematic. Remote controls are frequently stolen from hotel rooms. Consequently, the remote in your room may not be specifically designed for the TV in your room, and even if it is, hotels tend to get TVs with the newest features, many of which may be unfamiliar to you. You may want to test the captioning on your set before 5:00 pm, while the maintenance staff is still available. The evening desk clerks may not have as much experience programming the TV.

In addition to improving accessibility for individuals with hearing loss, captioning is ideally suited for use in noisy places. Captioning on TVs in the public areas of hotels is a topic that will be addressed at the travel agent industry meeting in Fall 2015. It has been suggested that captioning on all hotel TVs should be left on by default.

### **Conference rooms**

Public meeting spaces are required to be ADA-compliant, and venues can get in a lot of trouble for not being accessible, yet many don't have items such as assistive listening devices. At conferences, it is the conference organizer's responsibility to ask whether you need reasonable accommodations under the ADA in order to fully participate in the meeting. At an international meeting held several years ago in the then-newly renovated Philadelphia convention center, assistive listening systems were provided in every general session room and breakout session, but more typically, you will need to provide the conference organizer with your meeting room assistive device requirements and

meeting itinerary in advance so that assistive listening equipment can be moved from room to room as needed.

## Airlines

At the airport, the announcements on the overhead speakers may sound like a jumble even to people without hearing impairments. To avoid missing gate changes and other important information, notify the gate agent that you have difficulty hearing. You might say something like: “You are going to call my zone and I am not going to hear you, so I’m going to sit right here (*indicate a seat near the desk*). Would you please let me know when it is time for me to board?” Delta and US Air have been very responsive to this approach, although this method does not always have the desired result. And of course, if you have impaired mobility or other disability and require extra time for seating, you should be placed in the first group to board. When self-identifying to the gate agent does work, often, he or she will also let the flight attendant know you have hearing loss.

If you are flying Southwest, you can ask for a disability pass at the gate, and that permits you to sit wherever you want, so you can sit close to displays or loudspeakers. On board the flight, tell the flight attendant you can’t hear, and that they will need to notify you if anything important is said. Sometimes you have to remind them.

## Cruise ships

The cruising industry has been remarkably responsive to the needs of accessible travel—they really “get it” and have gone out of their way to comply with ADA requirements. There are lifts and automatic doors and ramps to get through and around the ship, and accessible staterooms. For individuals with visual impairments, there is Braille signage throughout the ship. For individuals with hearing loss, there are assistive-listening devices, visual alerts in the rooms, and the portable room kits that essentially make any room accessible for someone that has a hearing impairment. They do have captioning. Sign language interpreters can be provided, but notification is required 60 days prior to the cruise. Interpreter services are shared, so if you are on a deaf group cruise, the interpreter may not be working with your group exclusively. Interpreters are provided for the large shows, such as the Broadway performances. To contact guest services, you would use the TTY provided by the ship. Royal Caribbean is rolling out high-speed Internet. Beginning in summer 2016, this service will be free on some of their ships. Norwegian Cruise Lines is another company that does a good job of accommodating guests with special needs.

Of note, Royal Caribbean has provided extensive training to their staff, including care workers and nursery attendants, in handling the needs of autistic travelers. Additionally, they have a special version of their light show that avoids the use of bright flashes of light that may trigger difficult behaviors in autistic individuals. This special version of the

show is also popular with families with young children who may be frightened by the regular show.

### General benefits of using a travel agency

Why use a travel agency when you can just book your own travel on Expedia or one of the other websites? Although these sites have their place (even travel agents use them sometimes), if you prepay for a hotel room through these sites, technically, you are not a customer of the hotel: instead, you are a customer of Expedia, etc. Suppose you make a mistake while booking your reservation, and book a room with just one bed instead of two. Even a front desk clerk or general manager who is eager to help you cannot do so—contractually, they are required to put you in a room exactly as you booked it because you did not purchase the room from them—Expedia, Orbitz, or Travelocity bought it, then sold it to you. So your complaints need to go to the website. Travel agencies can book rooms at the same price you can get from going to the hotel directly.

If you do want to book your own room, you may be better off booking directly with the hotel. The price that you book online is the exact same price the hotel is selling it to the online booking websites. For online bookings, the website keeps 20% of the cost, the hotel gets the other 80%. The hotel would prefer that you book through them so they can keep 100% of what you pay. If you do book your own room, be aware that a hotel's star rating (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 stars) is often supplied by the hotel itself. American Automobile Association ratings are an exception to this rule—AAA bases their ratings on visits to the hotels. Also be aware that the pictures you see online may be years out of date.

### Specific benefits of accessible travel agencies

Some travel agencies specialize in accessible travel, and belong to an industry association called the Special Needs Group. Look for the symbol shown below to find agencies that have met SNG's certification requirements. Certificate holders receive



special training so they know what specific questions to ask travel vendors about their offerings, based on the types of needs that have to be accommodated. SNG group members visit hotels and verify they have the ADA rooms they are required to have.

Packaged tours, cruises, and other vacations that combine hotel stays with excursions cost a lot of money, and you want to be sure you get everything you pay for. Have an open and honest conversation with your travel agent to ensure you have all the equipment and services you need to enjoy your trip. The agent should be able to arrange for everything from a simple wedge to keep your head raised while you

sleep, to medical treatments such as dialysis. For individuals with impaired mobility who will be going to the beach, ask about beach wheelchairs that have big inflatable tires to roll over the sand easily. If you need an interpreter, be aware that a 60-day advance notice may be required. Ask whether the interpreter will be provided on all excursions, or only selected activities. If you are planning to bring oxygen on a cruise, bring a letter from your doctor certifying your need for it, because some ports of call are hesitant to permit it without one. If you are on a cruise and need dialysis, the equipment can be provided on-board. Many other types of medical services are available at ports of call within the United States.

Be aware that not every request will be free; some will incur extra costs. For example, wheelchair-accessible rooms, roll-in showers, and interpreting services (with advance notice) are covered at no extra cost, but items such as oxygen tanks, beach wheelchairs, and dialysis would cost extra.

### **Your role in improving accessibility**

It is high time that hotels and other travel providers understand that they make their services available to everyone. Why are hotel owners so resistant to improving accessibility? As is so often the case in life, it comes down to money. The costs for upgrading to high-speed Internet service (a new ADA requirement) and adding a lift to the pool to accommodate wheelchairs can easily run into the tens of thousands of dollars. Some hotel owners gamble that the chances of someone staying at their property needing a lift or other equipment are small. The chance that those people will complain is even smaller and the chance that complaining customers will take them to court is even tinier. So they are willing to take their chances with complaints and even lawsuits.

For change to take place, it is just a matter of people using their voice to say, "You need to do this; we are not going to take it anymore." If your complaint never goes further than the front desk, nothing will change. If you use a travel agent, let the agent know about your experience. Information is the greatest tool to know where people can go and get their money's worth. Travel agencies have the buying power to let travel providers know they need to "get it right." Because until the providers do, the agencies won't book more business with those providers, and the providers know it.

### **To probe further**

Air travel and the ADA, <http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/publications/horizons.htm>

ALDA-Peach (Atlanta), an active chapter of the Association of Late-Deafened Adults, <http://www.aldapeach.org>

Signs of Travel, an SNG-certified accessible travel advocate, <http://www.signsoftravel.com/home>

Special Needs Group certification requirements,  
<http://www.specialneedsatsea.com/certification-program/professional-standards-for-cata-eligibility/>

## Recommended Travel Vendors

The companies listed below have distinguished themselves in accommodating the needs of the deaf and hard of hearing. Listings are alphabetical within categories.

- Airlines: Delta, Southwest, US Air
- Cruise lines: Norwegian, Royal Caribbean
- Hotels: Hawthorne, Holiday Inn, Microtel, Wyndham

This document is based on a transcript of an ALDA-Peach (Atlanta) chapter meeting held on August 8, 2015. Tim Cheek, an SNG-certified travel agent who has over 20 years' experience as a front desk clerk, hotel general manager, accountant, corporate operations staffer, and travel agency owner, was the presenter. Additional comments and questions from meeting attendees have been incorporated.

Tim is always open to questions and discussing travel options with anyone. He especially welcomes all inquiries concerning accessible travel. Tim can be reached at:

Tim.Cheek@signsoftravel.com