

ON LAND, AT SEA, AND IN THE AIR...

Experienced travellers with disabilities may have already been able to experience what their most comfortable way to travel is. Those with less experience might benefit from a few tips about choosing and booking a suitable means of transport.

This guide will help you choose a suitable means of transport to and from your holiday destination in Flanders. You will receive information about the advantages and disadvantages of the various means of transport. We also provide practical tips about booking your chosen means of transport and we indicate a few points of interest. If you are unsure about a suitable choice, it may be best to ask your treating physician for advice.

1. AIRCRAFT

Can I take a flight with my electric wheelchair? Can my guide dog come with me on the plane? Can I take my medication with me in my hand luggage?... Taking a flight for the first time, if you have a disability generates a lot of questions and concerns. With the following information, we try to help you prepare your flight as well as possible.

GENERAL

The airline may ask for a **statement** that the **passenger is sufficiently fit** to travel. **Ask your doctor about this well in advance**: the representative of the airline will need to approve your application first. Besides, it never hurts to have a statement like this. Some airlines also require that you are able to do certain things **independently**: eating and drinking, going to the toilet, taking medication... If you cannot, a **caregiver** must travel with you. In that case, check whether any **discounts** are available for caregivers.

Refusing people because of a disability can only occur for two reasons:

- a. A certain **official law, decree, or decision**.
- b. It is **technically impossible** to take the passenger on board. The airline must try to find a solution.

IN ADVANCE

A. Booking

- **Charter flights** are cheaper than scheduled flights, but often also **less comfortable** (less leg room, seats often cannot tilt, small toilets...). In addition, they often fly to airports that are located **far from the city centre**.
- Do not forget to check whether you can arrange **special transport** from the airport. Sometimes, you can also book the transport to your holiday destination with the airline. Ask for detailed information in order to determine whether this means of transport is **suitable for you**. Also

timely inquire about the transportation options **at** your holiday destination: is it easy to rent a modified car, are there sufficient public transportation options? ... It may be decisive for the choice of your holiday destination.

- With an **online booking**, check whether the website allows you to transmit all relevant information about your medical condition or your capabilities/limitations. If this is not the case, please contact the airline before booking.
- When booking, request **assistance** and/or a **wheelchair**. Are you travelling alone? Also request **help** with **moving your luggage**. It is best to have these requests confirmed **again two days before you leave**. Take these confirmations with you **on paper** in your hand luggage.

B. Seat reservation

- Are you travelling with a caregiver? Check whether you can book **two seats next to each other**.
- If it is not possible to reserve seats in advance, make sure you are **at the airport on time**.
- What seat is best to choose? The seat maps of different types of aircraft at www.seatguru.com can help you with your choice. Some things to consider are:
 - o The most comfortable seats for most people with mobile disabilities are in fact **'exit seats'**. However, for safety reasons, airlines often do not allow this. After all, in these seats, you need to be able to open the emergency exit door quickly.
 - o **Seats right before the 'exit-row'** often do not tilt.
 - o **Seats next to the passageway** offer you more room for your transfer. However, you may find it uncomfortable that you keep having to let your neighbours pass through.
 - o If you choose **a seat at the front** of the plane, you can often sit in your own wheelchair and avoid an additional transfer to a sky chair.
 - o Be careful with **'bulk head seats'**. These seats are in the first row (e.g. after the separation between business and economy class) offer more leg room, but are usually narrower.
 - o Also check whether the **armrests of your seat can go up and down**. This way, you are sure that your transfer to the seat can be done comfortably.
 - o If you have problems folding your legs, it is better to book **two seats in economy class**. A **business class seat** usually provides sufficient **additional leg room**.

C. Medication/medical equipment

- Take **enough medication and other medical supplies in your hand luggage**, in case your luggage is temporarily lost.
- Sharp objects do not belong in your hand luggage. If you need **injection needles** and such, during your flight, indicate this with your booking (and put it on paper). Make sure you are carrying an (English) medical certificate/prescription.
- Medication and liquid substances are kept in a transparent, **resealable plastic bag** in your hand luggage. It is helpful if you can easily take this out in case this is requested of you.

- For the **use of a stretcher, oxygen, or dialysis material on the plane**, there are special procedures. Request these at least 48 hours in advance, but it is even better to indicate this when booking.

D. Equipment

General

- When booking, check whether there are limitations regarding the **weight and dimensions** of your equipment.
- **Larger equipment** such as a walker and a manual wheelchair may need to be checked in separately.
- In case of **loss of or damage to equipment** to the extent that you cannot use it on arrival:
 - o the airline company must repair the equipment as quickly as possible or provide a replacement which meets your requirements, without charging additional fees.
 - o the airline company must fully reimburse the value of the equipment if it cannot be recovered or restored.
- A golden tip: **take a picture of your equipment before checking them in**. That way, should anything go wrong, you have evidence.

Wheelchair

- Sometimes, you can take your **manual wheelchair** into the **passenger cabin**. Check this in advance. **Electrical wheelchairs** always go into the **hold**.
- In addition to a wheelchair, other essential equipment is usually transported **free of charge**. For ancillary equipment (e.g. a handbike...), additional costs may be charged.
- Does the airline company allow an **electric wheelchair**? Usually, wheelchairs with a dry battery are no problem. However, if your wheelchair operates on a **wet battery**, you will need to provide more details (dimensions) in order to check whether the wheelchair can be brought into the hold and stay upright. Some airlines refuse this, others require you to rent a special container to prevent leakage.
 - o You need to be able to **turn off or unplug your batteries**. Since wrenches do not belong in your hand luggage, it is best to do this as soon as you get to the airport. You can then check in your tools in your luggage.
 - o If the **control panel** is detachable, it is wise to take it in the hand luggage. This prevents damage or loss.
 - o **Loose parts** such as a tray and headrest must often be detached in order to fit into the hold. Loose parts which can be lost during the flight (pump, cushion cover...) and **fragile parts** are also best to remove. To avoid damage or loss, it is safer to do this yourself. You can attach them to the wheelchair or keep them in the checked luggage or hand luggage. If that is not possible, a simple drawing may help the staff fold and remove the parts appropriately. Another useful tip is to label all the parts of your wheelchair: battery, fragile parts...

E. Assistance

- Since July 2008, all European airports have to provide free assistance to passengers with disabilities. You can get assistance **from your arrival point up to the aircraft, even during stopovers**. The airline company must provide the necessary assistance **on board**.
- When booking, always indicate **where and when** you want assistance: in the airport itself, for your luggage, when checking in, during the safety procedures, between two flights...
- Make clear agreements about **how** you can **sign in**. Should you call someone once you are on site, or can you sign in via an emergency phone?
- Are you providing your own assistance? Check whether any **reduction rates** apply for your company. Sometimes, you need a medical statement for this. However, people with a disability who have travelled alone before are not eligible for this.
- With the **assistance codes** of the professional association IATA, you can clearly indicate what help you need. Indicate your code with your booking.

MAAS	Passenger needs assistance (general).
MEDA	Passenger is receiving medical treatment, but has permission from their doctor to travel.
STCR	Passenger can only be moved on a stretcher.
WCHR	Passenger uses a wheelchair or other walking aid outside the aircraft, but can climb stairs and move independently inside the aircraft.
WCHS	Wheelchair user can move inside the aircraft without a wheelchair, but cannot climb stairs.
WCHC	Passenger can only move with the aid of a wheelchair (inside and outside the aircraft).
BLND	Passenger is blind and requires assistance.
DEAF	Passenger is deaf and requires assistance.
DEAF/BLND	Passenger is deaf and blind and requires assistance.
DPNA	Passenger with intellectual disabilities, requires assistance.

Assistance dogs

- Assistance dogs **cannot be refused**. You can and should **not be separated** from your dog.
- **No fees** may be charged for the carriage of assistance dogs.
- Make sure you can provide a **certificate** which proves that your dog has received **recognised training**.
- During the flight, the dog must sit on an **absorbent mat**, which is usually provided by the airline company. However, it may be safer to take one yourself.

F. Dietary meals

- Do you have specific **dietary needs** due to diabetes or a food allergy or intolerance? Inquire about the possibilities regarding dietary meals on board in advance.

IN THE AIR(PORT)...

A. Checking in

- Make sure you are at the airport on time, ideally **two hours beforehand**. Also keep in mind that you will often need to board the plane 10 to 20 minutes before other passengers.
- There is often a **separate queue** for less mobile travellers or you can join the '**priority**' queue.
- Insist that your wheelchair is not checked in with the rest of your luggage, but only on embarkation. That way, you only need to transfer to a 'sky chair' (see below) of the airline at the gate and you avoid the additional transfer to a wheelchair from the airport.

B. Safety

- Are you travelling alone? Check whether someone can assist you through the **safety procedures**.
- Indicate it if your **pacemaker or prosthesis** may be affected by the metal detector.
- If your wheelchair does not fit through the metal detector, someone will guide you through an alternative route and use a **manual detector**.
- The alarm may go off when you go through security with your wheelchair.
- If a frisk can cause pain or spasms, do not hesitate to report this to the security officer.

C. Gate

- **Go to the gate on time**. After all, you will be the first one to board. There is a separate queue.
- If you need to go to the toilet, it is best to do so at the gate. The toilets on the plane are usually smaller and less comfortable.
- If you were unable to reserve seats, indicate at the gate where on the plane you would like to sit.
- At the gate, you have to transfer into the so-called **sky chair**. After all, the aisle of the plane is too narrow for a standard wheelchair. A sky chair is not comfortable, but normally you do not need to sit in it for a long time. The transfer takes place out of sight of the other waiting passengers. Do not hesitate to ask for assistance during your transfer to the sky chair.

ON THE PLANE

A. Boarding

- At larger airports, embarkation usually takes place via an air bridge (jet way) which connects the aircraft directly to the departure hall. In case of stairs, **manual carrying chairs or a motorised lift (see photo)** are used.
- Tip: take your **wheelchair cushion** on board. This way, it cannot be lost in the hold and you can sit on it during the flight.
- Have you reached your seat? Taking advantage of the opportunity to **get comfortable** without prying eyes.
- If you take **aids such as crutches** into the passenger cabin, keep track of **where** they are **stored**. This way, you can use them during the flight if necessary.

B. On board

- Ask whether a sky chair will stay on board. If so, you can also move while on board.
- Please note that the **toilets on board are very small**. Usually, there is just enough room for your sky chair, but not for a companion. Sometimes, you can leave the door open and a curtain can be pulled down. If you are really worried, visit your doctor, who may be able to place a temporary catheter or prescribe self-performed enemas or medication for fluid restriction.
- During long flights, it is not uncommon for your legs and feet to swell a bit. You can ask someone to help you take off your shoes.

C. Landing

- Have you requested a **wheelchair at the destination airport**? Ask the staff on board to check with the airport whether it is ready for you.
- Did you put your own wheelchair in the hold? One of the cabin staff will take the wheelchair to the right place and if necessary, help you transfer to the chair. Equipment such as a sliding mat or lift can be used for this.
- If you were able to take your manual wheelchair in to the passenger cabin, it will be available to you immediately. If not, you can use your own wheelchair from the door of the aircraft or from the baggage belt.

D. Transfer

- With **shorter flights**, it is **best to avoid transfers**. After all, the transfer requires a lot of energy.
- With **long-haul flights**, it may be useful to insert a **stopover**. This allows you, for example, to have a more comfortable toilet stop.
- Keep in mind that you will be the last to disembark and the first to board again. **Therefore, make sure there are at least three hours between flights**.
- If you check in any equipment or your wheelchair, check the code they attach to them. **If you need your equipment during the stopover, make sure they take note of this**. Otherwise, you will not receive them until you reach your final destination.
- Optionally, you can plan an **additional night or day**. Look on the bright side: now you can add another holiday destination to your list.

2. TRAIN

Although the train is not immediately known as the most accessible means of transport, you certainly should not immediately rule out this option. Despite some obstacles, the train may be the best choice of transportation for some people and some holiday destinations.

Below, we note some points that you should consider when travelling by train.

BOOKING

- Not only check whether the train itself is accessible for you, but also check the **accessibility** of the **departure, arrival**, and possibly the **intermediate station**.
- Is the train station at your final destination not accessible or can assistance not be provided there? Choose a **nearby, accessible station** and travel from there with, for example, a taxi service.
- On some trains, there are a number of **reserved seats** for wheelchair users, so that you do not have to transfer into a train seat. Inquire about this.
- If the toilet on your booked train is not accessible, plan a stopover. Do not forget to check whether there is an **accessible toilet** at that **intermediate station**. 40 minutes of transfer time is not an excessive luxury.
- Sometimes, the doors and walkways on the train are too narrow for your wheelchair. Ask whether a **narrow wheelchair** is provided **on the train**, so that you can move around on the train.
- Can you safely leave your electric wheelchair or mobility scooter on the train?
- **Two days before departure**, you can contact the train company again to **reaffirm** all the **agreements** made.

ASSISTANCE

- Do the departure, arrival, or intermediate stations offer assistance? Not every station is manned all day through. Furthermore, not everyone is qualified to manually lift a traveller.
- Clearly indicate where you want to receive assistance: with getting on or off the train, during a stopover, with your luggage...?
- Are you travelling alone and do you need assistance on the train as well? Do not forget to ask whether the train company can also provide **assistance on the train**, e.g. with taking you to the toilet.

AT THE STATION

- The route from parking to the terminal building, the counters, and the platform sometimes have **narrow passages, stairs, lifts...** To reach the platform, you must often cross the tracks via a tunnel or bridge. Sometimes, there is a lift as an alternative to the stairs, but you can only use it under supervision.
- If you do not immediately find a **low level counter** for wheelchair users, ask for help.

ON THE TRAIN

- Make sure you take all **agreements** made **on paper in your hand luggage**.

- While getting on and off, the narrow doors, high steps, and open space between the train and the platform may form an obstacle. You can usually use a **ramp** or a **lift**, but do not forget to ask for assistance in advance.

3. CRUISE SHIP

Cruise companies have an accessible reputation. Since this is a combination of transport and accommodation, the latter may not be disregarded. Nowadays, many cruise ships have one or more accessible rooms. Even so, it is important to check what obstacles are present, such as small corridors, way of boarding, and transport to destinations on land...

BOOKING

- Contact the cruise line and state exactly what your disability is and whether you use equipment. Check whether any **medical statements and forms** must be completed. Most cruise lines require a **statement that the traveller is independent or is accompanied by a companion** who can provide care and assistance.
- Get detailed information about the accessibility of the ship and your cabin. What are the **doorway widths** to your cabin, the toilet, restaurant, and other common areas? What are the dimensions of your room? Can you easily move around the bed? Is there a spacious bathroom with modified shower? Are there steps or thresholds? Is there an accessible pool on board?
- A lot of **equipment** which makes the accommodation more accessible **is allowed on board**: portable ramps, mobile lifts, narrow wheelchairs to manoeuvre in narrow places, raised toilet seats, special pillows... With these, the cruise can still be comfortable.
- About **two days before departure**, contact the cruise liner to **reaffirm all requests**.
- Test the programme to your potential. If you want to take it easy, ask whether there is a **modified programme**.

MEDICAL FACILITIES ON BOARD

- Every cruise ship is required to have **medical facilities** on board such as a doctor, nurse, and an extensive pharmacy.
- It is often asked to complete a **medical form**. This way, the doctor on board is aware of any treatment and what to do in an emergency.
- Note: this does **not** mean **daily care** is possible. Those who need daily nursing and need help with personal care need to take their own attendant.
- It pays to ask whether - for an additional fee - **certain treatments** can be administered **on board**, such as insulin injection, dialysis, and so on.
- Take your **own medication and medical supplies** with you. On the ship and abroad, they are often more expensive (and sometimes difficult to obtain).
- Keep your **medication in your hand luggage** in case there is any delay with the checked luggage.
- Make sure you take the **agreements made on paper**.

TRANSPORT

- Check whether the transport **between the airport and the ship** (usually coach) arranged by the cruise liner or the tour operator is accessible. If not, arrange an accessible taxi and ask at whose expense this is.
- Check whether the transport **to certain destinations on land** is accessible.

4. FERRY

Travelling by ferry can be compared to the cruise ship.

- The comfort of old and new ferries varies widely. With old ferries, definitely check whether all passages are wide enough and if there are any barriers or steps. **Request detailed information.** Do not settle for a general statement that the ship is accessible to persons with limited mobility.
- With a longer journey, it is advisable to book a **cabin**. This is because the lounge chairs often do not offer the desired comfort. The backrest is not always adjustable.

Travelling with a smaller type ferry can be compared with a flight. You should inquire about the following matters:

- How does embarkation and disembarkation occur?
- Can you stay in your own wheelchair or do you need to transfer to a seat on the ferry?
- Can you reserve a seat with extra legroom or near the toilets?

If you are travelling with your own car, make sure there is a **lift between the car deck and the passenger deck**.

5. COACH

Like the train, the coach has a reputation for being inaccessible. For certain persons and certain types of trips, however, this may be the chosen means of transport. For instance, there are **coaches with a lift and room for wheelchairs** but keep in mind that these are usually only used when multiple persons with limited mobility are travelling by coach or if it is a specific group trip.

If you want to travel by coach, consider the following obstacles:

- A coach generally has a **narrow entrance** and a **narrow walkway**. If there is no lift available, there are also steps to tackle.
- Compared to airlines, trains, ferries, and cruise lines, there are generally **less standard facilities** in terms of equipment and staff to facilitate embarkation and disembarkation.
- For commercial reasons, not all companies are equally ready to give up multiple regular seats in order to accommodate a wheelchair user. Also, not all companies invest in a coach with a lift for general travel.
- Coaches often have a toilet, but they are usually not accessible to wheelchair users or other persons with limited mobility.
- It is not easy to ascertain whether **facilities** such as toilets and restaurants **at the stops** and the bus stations are accessible.

Some tips that may help you better prepare your journey by coach

BOOKING

- Contact the bus company and clearly state that you have limited mobility and what your needs and requirements are. Explain in what way you are limited and what your specific requests are.
- Inquire about the accessibility of the coach itself:
 - o Is there a **lift** for getting on the bus, or are there some steps to tackle?
 - o Are there **separate wheelchair spaces** on the coach? If so, do you want to stay in your wheelchair or would you rather sit in a seat?
 - o Do you have a **preference** for sitting in a certain **place** on the bus (front, first row, centre?) If so, ask whether you can indicate this preference.
 - o Is any **assistance** provided? Can someone assist with getting on and off the bus and/or storing your luggage on the bus?
 - o Are there any restrictions in terms of size/weight for equipment or electric wheelchairs? Where can you store your **equipment**? In the luggage compartment?
 - o Is there a **modified toilet** on board?
- Check the facilities in both the departure, arrival, and intermediate stations on the planned route:
 - o Can **assistance** be provided at the stations on the route, with going to the toilet, getting on and off, with the transfer to your wheelchair, with your luggage...?
 - o Can your **equipment** be taken out of the luggage compartment every time?
 - o Are the **facilities** such as restaurants and toilets at the stations on the route accessible?
- Try to book a **direct trip**: bus transfers require time and energy. On the other hand, with long journeys, it may be wise to have **stopovers** or transfers in places where there are **accessible toilets**.
- **Reaffirm all requests** with the coach company two days before departure.

- Always have a **written confirmation** of your requests at hand. Also, make sure you have the **contact information** of staff that are aware of the agreements.
- Make sure you are at the station/meeting place **early**. Especially if you need assistance to get on board or need to get on board first.
- If a distinction is made between hand luggage and checked luggage, make sure any **medication is in the hand luggage**.

6. RENTAL CAR OR CAMPER

Travelling with a rental car means you have great freedom. You can make as many stops as you want and even at your holiday destination, you are not dependent on the special transport options available there.

The choice of your rental car will depend largely on the available boot space. **Additional boot space** or a **roof box** may be necessary. Do your wheelchair and/or equipment fit into the car?

- Do you have a manual or electric wheelchair? What are the dimensions of the wheelchair? Can you fold it? If so, what are the dimensions of your wheelchair when folded up?
- Are there any other aids you would like to take? If so, what are their dimensions?

You can choose between different **options**, think about these before you book: air conditioning, automatic door openers, swivel chairs, wheelchair lift... Sometimes it may be preferable to choose a **three-door car**. The two doors in front are usually much wider, which allows wheelchair users to get in more comfortably or load the wheelchair more easily.

Would you like to be a passenger in the car, or would you rather drive yourself? Which **driving system** would you like to use: automatic clutch, power steering, hand controls on the steering wheel for controlling the gears and brakes... With hand controls, it is important to indicate whether you are left or right handed.