

**TRAVEL & HOLIDAYS**

**FACTSHEETS**

**sia** spinal  
injuries  
association  
FOR LIFE AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY



**PREPARING FOR  
A HOLIDAY ABROAD**

## Preparing for a holiday abroad

There are many things to think about when planning and taking your first, or next holiday, where, what, why, who with, when and how are all questions that will need answering.

In years gone by the first question was 'where can I go that is wheelchair accessible?'. In this day and age the majority of countries will have some standard of wheelchair access, whether for their own nationals or to attract tourists, and the key will be finding accommodation that meets your particular needs, in an area which boasts the type of activities you are interested in.

Firstly, is your passport up to date? Does the passport expire soon? For more information, please visit:

[www.direct.gov.uk/en/TravelAndTransport/Passports/index.htm](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/TravelAndTransport/Passports/index.htm)

### Decision Time

You need to decide what you want from your holiday. Do you want to enjoy cultural events and sight-seeing, feel the sun, see the sea, take part in sporting events, be surrounded by snow or do you just want to get away from it all?

The next decision is how you want to book your trip. You can book a package through a travel agent after choosing from a brochure, use a travel company which puts a package together for you, a specialist accessible travel company, or an online travel site. Or, you can book accommodation and flights yourself, separately, creating your own package.

Consider the type of accommodation you want - a hotel, a villa, a B&B or for the more adventurous, a campsite. And do you want to be self-catering, B&B, full board or all inclusive? Do you need a double bed, a twin bed, single bed or sleeping bag?

What do YOU need on holiday besides accessibility, to make it a worry-free holiday? A shower chair/commode perhaps, a powered wheelchair/scooter, if so, you will want to find a local company that hires equipment. All these things and more need careful thought but are not insurmountable problems.

Our SIA fact sheet, [Hiring Aids and Equipment in the UK and Abroad](#) may be helpful if you need to hire equipment.

If you have made up your mind as to your destination, try to get as much information as possible eg brochures from travel agents, disabled holiday websites and best of all, word of mouth.

Have a look through the holiday articles written by SIA members and available through the Holiday Section on the SIA website:

[www.spinal.co.uk/page/articles](http://www.spinal.co.uk/page/articles) .

### Information & Confirmation

Most brochures should advise you whether the accommodation has wheelchair access, but please, don't assume that this is correct. Ensure the travel adviser making the booking contacts the hotel direct for confirmation. Get the hotel/travel agent or tour operator to put it in writing that the hotel and your room are accessible. If you are making the booking direct with a hotel or B&B yourself, get them to send a confirmation email.

Make sure that you take a copy of the booking confirmation or email with you just in case the accommodation is not what you asked for, as you now have proof of what you have been told.

### Visa

To enter certain countries, you may need to apply for a visa. For more information on the visa service, please complete the short questionnaire on the Home Office UK Border Agency.

[www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-visas-and-immigration](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-visas-and-immigration)

### Insurance

Travel insurance is essential so ensure this is in place before you travel. The insurance offered by many travel agents and tour operators is often the most basic cover, so you should analyse the policy and ensure it covers your disability. If not take out your own cover with a specialist agency (the SIA has a factsheet on Insurance companies). When organising insurance you should always inform your insurance company that you have "*a pre existing medical condition.*" This may mean that you pay extra to have your SCI included but, if you do not inform them of your SCI medical problem, you will not be covered.

Don't forget to take a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) with you if you are travelling in Europe. This will allow you to access the state healthcare in most European countries at a reduced cost or sometimes free of charge. For more information please visit:

[www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcareabroad/EHIC](http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcareabroad/EHIC)

### Contacting your airline

When you book the holiday, whether through a travel agent or directly, the airline will need to know that you have a disability and use a wheelchair. Some airlines will send a questionnaire for you to complete and return. These forms may be described as INCAD forms.

They will want to know a little more about your disability and the wheelchair you use e.g manual or powered wheelchair, width, height and length and weight and whether you would need assistance onto the plane.

### Powered Wheelchairs

Airlines may differ in the way they transport Powered Wheelchairs.

The majority of battery powered wheelchairs may not need to be disassembled but must be deactivated (switched off). Airport staff may ask you for instructions on how to deactivate your equipment.

It would be very useful to have the original or a photocopy of your instruction manual/booklet, with instructions on how to disassemble/ assemble the chair.

You must advise the airline and airport staff to whether the batteries are wet/acid cell (spillable) or dry/gel cell (non-spillable).

Battery packs showing cracks and/or damage may not be accepted for transportation.

**Spillable Battery:** Wet cell batteries are considered spillable and special provision must be made before wet cell batteries can be transported by air. The battery will be accepted for carriage providing the following conditions are met:

- Visual inspection including removal of the battery, where necessary, reveals no obvious defect;
- The battery is disconnected and terminals are insulated to prevent short circuits;
- The wheelchair or mobility aid can be loaded, secured and unloaded in an upright position.

**Non-Spillable Battery:** Dry cell and/or gel cell batteries are considered non-spillable and fewer requirements are necessary for carriage by air.

If a non-spillable battery powers your wheelchair the battery may not need to be removed providing the following conditions are met:

- There must be at least one effective means to prevent possible short-circuiting and unintentional operation (i.e. all motors must be rendered inoperative). If this is not possible, then the battery cables must be disconnected and the battery terminals must be insulated to prevent short circuits;
- The battery must be securely attached to the wheelchair and fully enclosed in a rigid housing that is properly marked.

The majority airlines may ask for these details over the phone or online, at the time of booking. Some airlines combine the INCAD form with a form requesting medical information from your doctor (MEDIF), to ensure that you are fit to fly.

Tell the airline that you will need assistance boarding the aircraft, but that you want to remain in your own wheelchair until the door of the aircraft. If you are unable to transfer yourself you will need to tell them that you require lifting in and out of the airline seat.

### Ventilator

If you are travelling with electronic medical equipment, such as a Ventilator, please contact the airline as early as possible to discuss your needs. The airline may require further information ie serial number etc and the type of battery they use. The ventilator should go on as hand luggage.

If you are traveling on a long haul, you may want to consider taking two ventilators, in case there is a problem with one of them. The spare ventilator can be placed under the seat in front of you.

Whatever process is involved it is important that you are in contact with your airline in plenty of time before you fly.

### Frequent Traveller Medical Card

The MEDIF and INCAD forms mentioned above, only last for one journey. If you are a frequent traveller, you can get a Frequent Traveler Medical Card (FREMEC). This is available from many airlines and gives the airline a permanent record of your specific needs. This means you won't have to fill in a form and make special arrangements every time you fly. However, before you travel with a different airline from the one that issued your FREMEC card, you should check that they will accept it.

### Seating on a plane

Contacting the airline well in advance also enables them to allocate you the most appropriate seats, usually near the front of the plane and relatively close to the exit. However, people with reduced mobility are not allowed to sit in seats which allow direct access to emergency exits.

If you need extra space (for pressure relief or PA access) request bulkhead seating when you contact the airline. You will probably be told that bulkhead seating is reserved for mothers with infants needing sky cots and that bulkhead seats are only allocated at check-in, but it is worth having a note made against your reservation that you have requested these seats. Some airlines (eg Monarch) assign disabled passengers priority seating with extra legroom (seats that usually cost more) free of charge, but you do have to provide a doctor's letter. This letter should state your disability, the fact that you need someone to travel with you (otherwise they will make that person pay the extra charge), and the fact that your disability is permanent so you will need priority seating each time you fly. The airline will hold this letter on file for subsequent flights so, although time-consuming to arrange, it is a one-off. Please note that the majority of toilets on a plane, whether they have a disabled symbol on the door or not, are quite small and only have room for one person (the user), also, the airline doesn't usually carry an aisle chair for you to use to get to the toilet.

### At the Airport

Getting from the airport to your holiday destination and back to the airport, is the next issue to consider. Ask your booking agent if a taxi is provided or even better, a wheelchair accessible vehicle. You may have to look on an appropriate website for wheelchair accessible vehicle transfers and book it prior to your holiday. The same applies to returning to the airport after your holiday.

The normal procedure is that you make sure you get to the airport in plenty of time before your flight - at minimum, two hours before your flight, and book in at the designated check in desk. Hand over your tickets and passports and check your luggage in and remind them again that you need assistance getting on the plane.

Most airlines allow disabled people an unspecified medical baggage allowance, which means that if you need to take extra equipment such as shower chairs, hoists and general equipment (leg bags, night bags, catheters etc) you should not have to pay excess baggage charges. This can be found on the International Air Transport Association website: <https://www.iata.org>

Once checked in, they will tie or stick a label on your wheelchair (this will either be done at the check-in desk or the boarding gate), to notify the staff that your wheelchair needs to be placed in the hold. If you have a folding manual wheelchair it may be possible for it to be placed in a cupboard on board the plane, so ask. You will be told where to be at a certain time.

It might be Special Services or the boarding gate number, either way they should be expecting you.

The check-in desk or the Special Assistance desk will advise you of the gate number and the time you should be at the gate, ready for boarding. You should be (but not always) taken down through the jet-way to the plane by the assistance staff, before the rest of the passenger's board.

If there is no jet-way, the assistance staff will take you to a vehicle (Passenger Assistance Unit), which will drive to the side of the plane and will raise to the same level as the aircraft door

However you get to the door of the plane you will then need to transfer into a narrow "aisle chair". As the "aisle chair" is narrow, you may want to strap your legs/knees together, to stop them flopping about. You will then be pushed through the plane to your seat and transferred into the aircraft seat. If you are not able to transfer yourself you will be lifted by two passenger assistance staff (generally one lifting your legs & one lifting your body under your armpits). Be sure to make them aware of your lack of balance. If you have a preferred way of being lifted, tell them.

Please note that airlines do not usually have access to a hoist to lift you to your seat, and will not let you use your own portable hoist. The special services staff perform the lifting and/or transferring.

The same happens in reverse when you get to the airport of your resort but you will be the last to disembark.

When you arrive at your destination ask the airport staff if they can get your chair from the hold and bring it to you at the Aircraft door rather than disembark you in an airport wheelchair. This way you know that your chair is safe and will not be dumped onto the luggage carousel where it is likely to be damaged. Always check for any damage as soon as you can. If this doesn't happen automatically you can insist on waiting until your chair is brought to the door.

The same procedure should happen for the return journey.

### Cushions

Always ensure that you take your wheelchair cushion with you onto the plane and don't leave it on the chair. If you don't take it with you, it will go into the hold and may become separated from your wheelchair and will never be seen again. Some people leave their cushion securely fastened to the wheelchair and take a second, more suitable cushion on board the aircraft

The seat cushion on the aircraft seat is a flotation cushion that is only held in by Velcro, so it is possible to remove this cushion and replace it with your pressure relieving cushion directly on the aircraft seat base. This will mean that you are able to sit on your own cushion and still be at a comfortable height in the aircraft seat.

Please note that certain cushions may need to be deflated, for guidance please contact your local wheelchair services.

Roho cushions will need the air pressure adjusted due to the cabin pressure at high altitude. Air will need to be removed as the plane reaches high altitude and re-inflated on arrival.

Be very careful if using a Vicair cushion. There is little allowance for the changes in pressure within the individual air pockets. (Take advice from your Wheelchair Services or Pressure Clinic if you want to consider removing some of the air pockets while at altitude).

### Deep Vein Thrombosis/Pulmonary Embolism (DVT/PE).

It is important that you are aware of this condition and how it may impact you as an individual. Speak to your GP or your Spinal Injury Centre, for their advice on the prevention of DVT.

### Fluid input and output

To avoid dehydration on the flight and on you holiday, please make sure you drink plenty of fluid (not alcohol!).

It is not normally possible to access the toilet during the flight whether long or short haul. You may want to consider attaching a night bag if you are on a long flight which can be concealed inside a carrier bag and placed under your seat. Please note, the cabin staff are unlikely to be prepared to dispose of urine for you.

As we are all individual, you will need to decide which equipment you need to take with you in respect of your bladder and bowel management.

### Problems

If you have any problems i.e. - the hotel bathroom is not accessible although you booked an accessible hotel room/accommodation, or, the room is poor, or the airline has damaged your wheelchair, please, please take photos to enable you to prove the problem to the relevant person rep/manager/travel agent/airline

### Accessories

You may want to consider taking wheelchair accessories i.e. spare inner tube, pump, puncture repair kit adjustable spanner.

### Do's and Don't's

- Do take any correspondence with you which confirms booking accessible accommodation
- Do take your travel insurance policy with you
- Don't put your home address on the suitcase label but a phone number
- Do make sure that your wheelchair is tagged on the main frame as this will go into the baggage hold
- Do check with the airline regarding restrictions on carrying liquids onto the aircraft and also check with the relevant Embassy or High Commission whether there are any restrictions on taking your medication into the country you are visiting.
- Do make sure any medication you are taking with you is clearly labelled with its contents, preferably in its original packaging. Take enough with you in your hand luggage on the plane to last a couple of days in case you or your luggage gets delayed. A Medical Validation Certificate or doctor's letter certifying that you are taking prescribed medication would also be helpful.
- Take a copy of your prescription with you in your hand luggage – useful if, for some reason, your medication and you part company.

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### Disclaimer

This factsheet has been prepared by SIA and contains general advice only which we hope will be of use to you. Nothing in this factsheet should be construed as the giving of specific advice and it should not be relied on as a basis for any decision or action. SIA does not accept any liability arising from its use. We aim to ensure the information is as up-to-date and accurate as possible, but please be warned that certain areas are subject to change from time to time. Please note that the inclusion of named agencies, companies, products, services or publications in this factsheet does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement by SIA.

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## About SIA

The Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) is the leading national user-led charity for spinal cord injured (SCI) people. Being user led, we are well placed to understand the everyday needs of living with spinal cord injury and are here to meet those needs by providing key services to share information and experiences, and to campaign for change ensuring each person can lead a full and active life. We are here to support you from the moment your spinal cord injury happens, and for the rest of your life.

For more information contact us via the following:

Spinal Injuries Association  
SIA House  
2 Trueman Place  
Oldbrook  
Milton Keynes  
MK6 2HH

T: 01908 604 191 (Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm)

T: 0800 980 0501 (Freephone Advice Line, Mon – Fri, 11am – 1pm/2pm – 4.30pm)

W: [www.spinal.co.uk](http://www.spinal.co.uk)

E: [sia@spinal.co.uk](mailto:sia@spinal.co.uk)

Charity No: 1054097

Brought to you by:





## Please support SIA

SIA relies on fundraising, donations and gifts in wills to provide services that help spinal cord injured people rebuild their lives.

With your help, we can provide the right support to spinal cord injured people and their families and friends so they can enjoy a full and independent life after injury. Your donation today will go towards changing someone's life.

I would like to give: £15  £20  £53  other amount £.....

### Method of payment

I enclose a cheque/postal order/CAF voucher made payable to Spinal Injuries Association.

I would like to pay by Mastercard/Visa/Maestro/Switch (delete as appropriate)

Card number

Start date

Expiry Date

Security Code

Signature

Date. .... / ..... / .....

Name.....

Address .....

.....

Postcode ..... Tel no.....

Email address.....

Please gift aid my donation

If you tick the box it means for every £1 you donate we can claim an extra 25p from the taxman, at no extra cost to you. You need to pay an amount of income tax or capital gains tax at least equal to the tax we reclaim from HM Revenue and Customs – currently 25p in every £1 you give.

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