

# Accessibility Horror Story

## Personal information

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- **Your accessibility needs or how are you related to accessibility:** Manual wheelchair user with a SmartDrive power-assist device.

## Your horror story

At last, after nearly three years of, first, staying full-time at home and, then, reducing my social life to mostly none, all due to the pandemics, just getting out for medical reasons or exercising outdoors to try to keep in shape, I was taking a plane and traveling again.

To get back into the tourism business, I decided to start with a familiar place, a wheelchair friendly hotel in the south of Tenerife, where planning for accessibility and potential issues would be far easier, as I had already been there a few times. Actually, I say tourism business, but the idea was not to do any tourism at all. As I already knew the island, truth is I just wanted to relax, regain the feel for travel and see how I could manage with the new health restrictions.

Anyway, despite going to a familiar destination, I did prepare a bit beforehand. For instance, I bought a tracker for my wheelchair, so as if it got lost during the flight, as getting it broken is not the only concern when flying, at least I would know its estimate whereabouts. Once, a few years back, when going to Paris, my suitcase was sent instead to Rome and was only able to recover it two months later after they were able to find it and send it back. Imagine having a similar issue with your wheelchair...

So, with the tracker set, a backpack for luggage, my FFP3 and a week's worth medication, plus a few extra just in case, I got to the check-in counter a bit more than two hours before the flight. The process was slow, as always when traveling with a wheelchair and a battery powered assistive device. This time, though, I just showed the battery compliance certificate with all its specs and, surprisingly, I didn't have to wait for them to call a dozen times to make sure about what all the numbers meant and whether it should travel in the cabin or in the hold. Is it that difficult to know that current air regulations say that a battery under 300 watts per hour is alright and that it should be always carried with you in the cabin?

Well, as I was saying, the check-in process, as well as the later security check (also thrilling when traveling with cables, mobility devices and the likes) and the boarding process, went as smoothly as they could. Once on the plane, I checked the location of

the wheelchair and, at least, the map showed that it was near me, so hopefully it was also on board. A bit later, a flight attendant came and told me that in case of emergency I should stay in my place and, after evacuating everyone, they would come for me. It was the first time in dozens of flights that they told me something like this. I found it a bit weird. I imagined the plane burning after an emergency landing or something and me waiting in place. Sure, they would come for my ashes.

Anyway, after three hours and a half of reveling in the comforts of air travel, as comfortable as seating can get when you're one meter tall and all the curves in your body are in the wrong places, we landed. I waited for everyone to get off the plane and for the assistance to come. It took some time, so I decided to check back on the wheelchair tracker. The map showed that the wheelchair was still in Barcelona. I panicked a bit, but took a deep filtered breath, and looked again. Sometimes, data takes some time to update and, for the tracker to work, it needed a phone nearby to pick on its location. Now the map showed that the wheelchair was in Tenerife. I felt relieved, but, unfortunately, things had just started...

The assistance arrived and they led me to my wheelchair. Just as I stepped on the footrest, it fell apart. At first, I thought that its screws might have come loose, so I took the Allen wrench that I carry on it to tighten them. As I was going to do it, I realized that two out of three, as well as a few pieces, were missing on the left side. The assistance guy looked at me with a shrug. For the time being, it would have to do with the single screw. As I had to really tighten it with my bum fingers, I worried that my index might pop out -listen to the horror story on episode 5 for more context-, so I went for the custom made hand brace that I use in these occasions. It was not in the pouch under my wheelchair. Great. It had fallen during the trip. The only way that it could have fallen was if the wheelchair had been shaken upside down... anyway, my mistake, I should have taken it with me.

Getting over it, I did as I could and screwed the screw trying not to screw it. It barely held with the footrest tilted and unable to bear any weight on it. I managed to hold my feet high, resting them a bit on the sides of the wheelchair frame. An unridable position while going downhill, uphill or while crossing a mere curb cut. It could only work for a short while in the smooth pavement of the airport. If I couldn't fix it, my vacation was over before having started.

I spent the next hour going to the airline booth and filling complain forms. They told me that the next day I could leave the wheelchair on a repair shop of their choosing (your extra common wheelchair repair shop that you can find on any run of the mill small town...) or that I could wait until I went back to Barcelona, fix it there and send them the budget. I would not spend my relaxing vacation going back and forth to said repair shop that for sure would be in the capital, a 100km away from my hotel, waiting for them to repair my custom footrest and, at best, wasting a couple or three days, plus precious energy in the process. I told them that I would do the second and started thinking how to

solve it on my own. Actually, I'm very bad with my hands, but I usually don't lack on crazy ideas. I had a bit more than an hour on the way to the hotel and, by the time I got there, I had a plan in mind.

As I got to the room, I did my best impersonation of MacGyver. I took a better look of the footrest and realized that one of the two missing screws was in fact broken and stuck inside the frame of the chair. How the hell do you break the shaft of a nearly 1cm wide screw in half? By throwing the wheelchair from a few meters high? By ramming a 100kg suitcase into it? Whatever...

I spread my emergency kit tools on the floor, the Allen wrench, a multipurpose star with different size screwdriver heads, a few velcro strips, duct tape and some cable ties. I decided on the cable ties, as the screws were missing or unusable, and the velcro and the tape would not hold well while bearing weight. Thus, I took three cable ties and looped and chained them to make a cord with open ends. Then, I threaded it into a hole onto the side of the footrest and looped the other end to the wheelchair frame near the seat. Little by little, I tightened it and carefully redid the remaining screw. I stepped on the makeshift footrest and it held. I stood on it, as I always do to reach hotel sinks (even accessible ones), and it held.

Actually, it held for the whole week and, after a good night's rest, I was able to enjoy my relaxing holiday and rekindled my love for travel. When I came back, I indeed went to my wheelchair shop and they were able to properly fix the thing. By the way, after nearly six months, I'm still waiting for the airline to pay for the repairs. It doesn't look that they will... but that's another story...