TAMING OUR FEAR OF FLYING

BEST AIRLINE? SOUTHWEST ... WORST? UNITED — NM READER SURVEY
WHICH AIRLINES SERVE YOU BEST?

To get to the heart of the matter, we started off with these two questions: "Which airline do you typically travel with?" and "In your experience, which airline best meets your access needs?" The top three are: Southwest, by a large margin (37 percent for question one and 33 percent for question two); Delta (28 percent and 17 percent); and American Airlines (23 percent and 12 percent). As for the "friendly skies," while 26 percent of you fly United most often, only 11 percent of you say United best meets your access needs.

Sadly, some readers have given up on air travel. One person quipped that "Amtrak is my favorite airline, since I refuse to fly unless I absolutely must."

TSA: UP CLOSE, TOO PERSONAL?

How well is the TSA doing its job? Jane Holt travels cross-country several times a year, usually with no issues with the TSA agents who pull her aside for pat-downs. "But I had the worst one last time I flew," she says. New to the job, the agent was uncomfortably aggressive about using the back of her hand to swipe up the inside and underneath Holt's thighs and buttocks.

Also, it's very easy for small items to get lost during the pat-downs, says Whirlwind International's Ralf Hotchkiss, a para who lives in San Francisco. "Yesterday in Managua it was a Ziploc bag with all my liquid medications. Keys, wallet, coin purse, laptop, any tools, sweater, jacket, shoes, hat, gloves — all items that must be removed, stowed or arranged in trays for viewing are sent into the X-ray," he says. "I am not allowed to pick up my own items or deal with them until after the hand frisking, and by then there may be little time — so things do get lost."

Still, most of you think the pat-down process is handled well: 42 percent responded TSA agents are "thoroughly professional" and 38 percent said they are "usually satisfactory."

But 10 percent say they are "poorly prepared," 5 percent say they are "distracted," and 9 percent say they are insensitive. These numbers are still unacceptably high.

The TSA knows it has a problem and is taking action. A little over a year ago, the TSA approached disability advocacy organizations, including United Spinal Association, and asked for help training its employees. "We help them learn how to communicate with people with different disabilities, specifically to know things about people with disabilities going through security," says Kleo King, senior vice president of Accessibility Services and Able to Travel for United Spinal. "For example, we make them aware that some passengers who use wheelchairs may have balance issues and may have difficulty leaning forward to remove their shoes."

ON THE JETWAY

As expected, an overwhelming majority of you use an aisle chair to get to your seat on an airplane (71 percent) or need to be carried (20 percent). And here the numbers need a bit of explaining.

At first glance it might appear aisle chairs aren't that bad, as 46 percent of you said they are "safe, but uncomfort-
able.” But look again: only 9 percent said the chairs are “comfortable, safe, efficient.” And 30 percent of you chose to describe the experience as “uncomfortable and unsafe.” Also, 10 percent of you say the chairs are “in need of repair.”

The survey shows that for those of you who need to be lifted, the workers who hold you in their arms are in desperate need of better training. 47 percent say the workers are “eager but uninformed” and 21 percent say they are “poorly trained and clueless.” Only 27 percent find these workers to be “courteous and knowledgeable.”

Untrained or insensitive workers can be dangerous, says Dave Dumbrowski. “I was strapped into the aisle chair in the jetway when the ‘helper’ tried to maneuver the chair by herself and tipped me over. I tried to break my fall, but that was not going to happen since the armrests were down and the belts crisscrossed over my shoulders, but instinct kicked in. I hit my forearm and wrist on the way to the floor and nearly scraped my face on the wall,” says Dumbrowski, a para. “Without so much as an ‘are you OK?’ she quickly righted me with the help of a gate agent and pulled me on board. I was given no ice and no medical assistance to help me check for skin damage or bruising — until I requested it.” No doubt more training and evaluation of workers is necessary. But then, anyone ought to know if you drop someone who’s tied to a chair onto the floor, they’re probably hurt.

**EIGHT TIPS FOR EASIER AIR TRAVEL**

**BY MARY PETERSON**

Able to Travel’s Mary Peterson shares how wheelchair users can take control of their air travel experience. For more, go to www.abletotravel.org or call 888/211-3635. Also, be sure to catch her workshop at the Abilities Expo.

1. **COMMUNICATION IS KEY.** When you make your airline reservation, give the airline all the necessary information regarding your disability and mobility device. This information will be stored in your flight record. When you arrive at the gate, make yourself known to the gate agent and give them your boarding pass. The agent should then look at and read your flight record. To be on the safe side, make sure you let them know you will require assistance transferring and how many personnel you will require for a safe transfer.

2. **KEEP YOUR WHEELCHAIR UNTIL YOU’RE ON THE JETWAY.** The airline may want you to transfer to a boarding chair at check-in, but it is usually best to keep your mobility device until you are on the jetway and ready to board the aircraft.

3. **PERSONALIZE YOUR WHEELCHAIR.** Let the baggage personnel know, “This wheelchair is my mode of transportation and it is an extension of me, so please be very careful when stowing it because if my wheelchair does not work, neither do I.” Let the handlers see the human side.

4. **DON’T LET ANYONE LIFT YOU UNLESS IT IS THE WAY YOU WANT TO BE LIFTED.** You know what your limitations are, how you want to be transferred, so prior to being transferred, tell them what works best. A good way to be lifted is to have one person in front grab you underneath the knees while a person in back lifts from under your armpits. Your arms will be crossed over your chest.

5. **PUT A LUGGAGE TAG ON YOUR WHEELCHAIR THAT INCLUDES YOUR NAME, EMAIL AND ADDRESS.** Also, in the event something happens in transit, it is helpful to have the following: a small manual specific to your mobility device, its serial and model number handy, and knowledge on how to engage/disengage the battery. Even though most power wheelchairs use gel cell batteries, the handlers might take the battery off the wheelchair, so all pertinent information will be helpful when you reach your final destination.

6. **PUT POWER WHEELCHAIRS IN NEUTRAL.** Make sure you know how to disengage your power wheelchair — otherwise they’ll push it in drive and ruin the whole system. If it does get damaged, carriers are responsible for fixing your wheelchair. It is important to make a claim with your airline before you leave the gate area. Foreign carriers have a limit on what they will reimburse you, while American carriers must reimburse the cost to repair the mobility device.

7. **KNOW BATHROOM BREAKS ARE ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE.** I have clients who will dehydrate themselves on long flights. If you are able, the airline personnel will assist you to the lavatory using an on-board wheelchair but will not assist you in the lavatory. An aircraft with two aisles must have an accessible bathroom. Unfortunately, the size of an aircraft cannot always be guaranteed. For example, if the flight is not full, they may switch to a smaller aircraft — which will not have an accessible bathroom.

8. **KILL THEM WITH KINDNESS.** You may get an agent that is very pleasant or someone who has already had a bad day and has a bit of an attitude. So be kind, be sweet! If you do run into a problem with airline personnel and you don’t think the issue will be resolved, ask for a complaint resolution officer — every airline has one.
SHOW ME TO MY SEAT, PLEASE

Where do you prefer to sit? A roomy bulkhead seat is preferred by 42 percent of you. Aisle seats are preferred by 46 percent while 25 percent prefer a window seat to avoid people climbing over you. And many of you wrote us a note to remind other readers to request a seat with an armrest that lifts.

Nick LiBassi, a T10 para from Rochelle Park, N.J., is one of those who prefers a window seat. "When I first started traveling I had an aisle seat," says LiBassi, who travels extensively as part of his job as director of special projects for United Spinal Association. When an elderly couple took the seats next to him and the wife needed to go to the bathroom, LiBassi tried to lift himself a bit but obviously didn't stand up. "Her husband said, 'What kind of man are you, you don't get up for a lady?' I was forced to tell him I was paralyzed. So I get to the window seat now and I don't have to worry about anyone getting up asking me questions. Fortunately the armrests lift up so I just scoot over."

We also asked how likely it was that you'd get the seat you requested: 64 per-

ADVENTURES IN CRIP FLYING, EPISODE 5,732,987

BY ELLEN SAMUELS

Me: "Hi, I'm disabled. I need some help putting my bag in the overhead compartment, please."

Flight attendant: "We can't help you, but you can ask a gentleman to help you."

Me: "A gentleman? You mean a passenger? But aren't you supposed to help disabled passengers? And how will I get it down at the end of the flight?"

FA: "You can ask a gentleman to get it down for you. If you can't lift your bag, you should have checked it. We aren't allowed to help you."

<Later>

Me: "Hi, I paid $9.99 for on-flight wifi so I could look it up and show you that United's stated policy on your website is that you assist disabled passengers with their carry-on luggage."

FA: "Oh really? That's good to know. That must be a new policy."

Me: "Actually, it's the law. I looked that up, too."

FA: "That must be new. That wasn't the law before this year."

Me: "Well, actually it's been the law for a long time."

FA: "What I mean is, it may have been the law for a long time, but United just started following it."

<Awkward pause>

Me: "So, you'll make sure someone helps me with my bag when we land?"

FA: "Sure." Big fake smile.

Me: "Thanks." Bigger fake smile.

<THE END>

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cent said it was ready and waiting for you, and 13 percent said your assigned seat was better than the one you requested. On the other hand, 15 percent said your assigned seat was worse than what you requested.

HELLO? WHERE'D EVERYBODY GO?

We asked how long you had to wait on the plane after you reached your destination, and the results were mixed. The majority of you (57 percent) have not waited more than 15 minutes after everyone has left the plane, and 19 percent have never waited that long. Unfortunately, 19 percent report having to wait over 30 minutes until you were deplaned!

One respondent pointed out that delays are to be expected. “I am amused by wheelchair travelers who are upset to be deplaned last,” says Michael Yoxall, a C-6/7 complete quad who lives in Dallas, Texas, and flies out of Love Field. “Why should an entire plane load of folks have to wait several minutes while a wheelchair is brought up and loaded?”

Still, 30 minutes of waiting is inexcusable when it takes no more than 10-15 minutes for an entire plane to empty.

Yoxall mostly travels on Southwest, which received the highest percentage of responses for “airline that best meets your access needs.” He also says his chair is waiting for him in perfect condition each time, an experience shared by 41 percent of respondents.

Unfortunately, 42 percent say their chair is waiting for them but some assembly may be required; 9 percent say their chair is inoperable when they reach their destination; 8 percent say their chair is not waiting for them and they need a loaner. And, believe it or not, 2 percent say someone else’s chair is waiting for them. One respondent joked, “I’m sorry but I am afraid

FILING COMPLAINTS

New Mobility asked Keo King, senior vice president of Accessibility Services and Able to Travel for United Spinal Association, to share her experience on the Air Carrier Access Act, the Transportation Security Administration, and airline accessibility.

NM: There have been some high profile instances of disability discrimination in the media recently. Is it getting worse or are these isolated incidents?

KK: I think it’s getting worse. When the Air Carrier Access Act was passed in 1986, things were progressively getting better, then it plateaued, and now we’re getting more complaints again.

NM: How important is it to complain?

KK: DOT must investigate all complaints — the more they receive, the more likely DOT initiates an action against the airline. Usually DOT fines the airlines a large amount, but it will also take a lesser amount and have the airline put the rest into a training program [See News, “US Airways Fined $1.2 Million”]. In the past, airlines sought out training from disability groups, but now they do everything in-house. Are they really doing the training, and are they following up when incidents occur?

NM: How much compensation may the passenger receive?

KK: No compensation, since they can’t sue in court. Of course, if someone got dropped and broke their leg, that’s a personal injury matter, whether they have a disability or not. The ACA was passed in ’86, so when ADA came along in ’90, it excluded airlines. Airports are covered, so the airport itself has to comply with ADA requirements, but the services of the airlines are covered by the ACA.

NM: United Spinal is now training TSA agents. How did that come about?

KK: About a year ago TSA came to us as well as other nonprofits around the nation to say they want to train all their employees on how to interact with people with disabilities going through security, with managers getting a higher level of training so they are a little bit more in tune to the needs of people with all types of disabilities.

NM: What changes would you most like to see?

KK: Real accessible restrooms on the new large-body aircraft. Also, a plane designed so it’s more user-friendly for everybody. Revisit storage, too. Planes have to have storage area on board for a folding, collapsible wheelchair, but most people don’t use folding chairs anymore. [And now that they’re going to have wi-fi on aircraft, there is no excuse for not being able to communicate with a person with a disability. If it’s announced verbally, it ought to be shown on a display, too. Then if you miss it, you can see it on a screen.]

Also, currently 50 percent of aisle armrests have to be movable. Why 50 percent? Why not 100 percent? They’re building more planes with smaller space that are lighter and use less fuel, but they’re not charged with coming up with a plane that has a whole new form of access. We need to connect with engineers who think outside the box and who know how to do this for us. Accessible Air Travel can be downloaded for free from www.unitedspinal.org.

Disability discrimination complaints can be filed with the U.S. DOT by using this form: airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/escomplaint/es.cfm

Transportation Security Administration, www.tsa.gov/traveler-information/travelers-disabilities-and-medical-conditions

“The Strength Coach” Greg Smith’s chair was trashed by US Airways while he was on his way to a gig. Stuck without his headrest for days, Smith endured tremendous neck pain and couldn’t work. The kicker? It could have been avoided if the ground crew had followed Smith’s instructions.

32 NEW MOBILITY
of jinxing myself if I answer this question.”

Yoalkall may have better luck because he has extensive experience. “Up until two years ago I maintained my A-list status with Southwest each year by flying 16 round trips annually. So I know the drill,” he says. “I had my current Ti-Lite built specifically to be 1 to 2 inches narrower at the hand rims than the typical SWA aisle width. I back down the aisle and two gate agents (or even an occasional flight attendant or pilot) lift and swing me over onto the first row aisle seat and I slide over to the window. My ROHO cushion stores in the overhead and the chair goes to the cargo hold.”

Others aren’t as lucky. “Once I watched with horror to see my $5,000 wheelchair chuck out of the side of the plane to the baggage rack below,” wrote one survey respondent. “Luckily just the brake got banged up and was easy enough to repair.”

LiBassi found a way to minimize these types of mishaps. “I made up a laminated sign in bold letters saying something like: ‘Please be careful with this chair, it doesn’t have wheel locks or brakes, the wheels do not come off, it does not fold.’” The sign is Velcroed to his seat sling, so when he removes his cushion to take with him on the plane, the sign becomes visible.

**AIR TRAVEL IS FUN! NO, REALLY...**

Sure, air travel can be tough on disabled people, but it’s not usually awful. Survey respondent “ChairLady” reminds us that it can even be pleasant. “I love flying,” says ChairLady, who has MS and travels with her fiancé, a quad. “Some stewardesses are very nice and most of the captains are, as well. We meet them upon departing since they are held up at the end of flight while we are waiting for our wheelchairs to come up.”

LiBassi, too, says air travel is usually pretty good. “I had a great experience a month ago coming from Puerto Rico visiting our NSCA chapter. I traveled into Newark, N.J., on JetBlue during severe weather and my family was texting me, ‘Are you going to make it?’ I was hanging out with the pilot and he assured me we would. He was a really nice guy, made sure I got on OK, treated me like a rock star. He said he’d check on me midflight. Sure enough the attendant blocked the aisle with a beverage cart, and the captain walked to my seat, ‘Nick are you all right, is everything OK?’ It was pretty cool, he was a really nice guy.”

**DELTA REACHES OUT TO PASSENGERS WITH DISABILITIES**

BY GLEN W. WHITE

In April 2008, Delta and Northwest Airlines announced they were merging, and the Northwest Customer Advisory Board was moved under Delta Air Lines. Delta’s reformulated Advisory Board on Disability held its first meeting in April 2009. I was asked to join the ABD and I accepted.

The ABD is a cross-disability, voluntary board with 13 members, 11 of them with disabilities. I have to say that I am really excited about this independent living application in the corporate world. As a passenger, I have experienced my share of problems and challenges with air travel. Now, we who serve on the ABD board are empowered to do something about the problems that have affected us and our peers with disabilities.

I would like to share a few committee initiatives. The Research and Quality Assurance committee developed the Delta Task Analysis Assessment Tool, which examines the “travel ribbon” — the travel experience from the beginning to the end of a trip, from arriving at the curb to arriving at your destination. At each point along the travel ribbon, we analyzed what problems could occur, who might be responsible and how to fix them. Elements identified about travel problems and suggestions for how to address them are now being integrated into thorough two-day compliance audits in airports where Delta has a high concentration of travelers with disabilities.

Following up recent ABD discussions, a white paper on Wheelchair and Assistive Device damage was written to develop a comprehensive strategic plan to reduce damage. This internal Delta document contains a root cause analysis of personal and environmental factors contributing to damage of passenger’s personal equipment and strategies to be implemented to address the contributing factors.

The Education and Outreach committee is developing a “Traveling Tips for Passengers with Disabilities” booklet to help passengers advocate for themselves. Also, Delta conducts education and outreach programs designed to familiarize individuals with newly acquired disabilities or first-time flyers with disabilities with a behind-the-scenes tour showing them what to expect.

In November 2013 ABD created a Special Projects committee to help Delta enhance its connections with people with disabilities and family members. Our most recent collaboration is with the Annual Family Café, a gathering of people with disabilities in Florida who meet annually to learn, grow, advocate and gain encouragement from others’ life experiences. Over 8,000 people are expected to attend this event in June 2014.

Over half a billion passengers flew across all domestic carriers in 2013. Estimates suggest that passengers with disabilities represent about 15 million of these travelers and of those, Delta carries about 1.6 million each year. Given the sheer magnitude of passengers traveling, the odds are that there will be problems for some passengers — including those with disabilities. Statistics are all well and good, but when you become the statistic, this issue gets up close and personal. Most reasonable travelers with disabilities realize this. However, if they see evidence that the airline does not care, then it would be appropriate to advocate with the airline’s complaint resolution official.

Well prepared travelers with working knowledge of the travel ribbon do not fear air travel but work together with airlines to receive reasonable accommodations and the same opportunities that any other traveler would expect. The travel ribbon is flexible, but can become frayed from too much stress, or even snap under extreme tension. Several of the ABD initiatives help to reinforce the travel ribbon. Delta still has lots to do to level the field, but the airline is trying to show that they can make “the Delta Difference.”

- Family Café, www.familycafe.net

Glen White is a behavioral community psychologist and professor in Applied Behavioral Science. He also directs a NIDRR-funded Research and Training Center on Independent Living at the University of Kansas and is the current Chair of the Delta Advisory Board on Disability.
When traveling in a manual wheelchair, ideally it is most convenient to have someone drop you off at an airport or use an airport shuttle service such as Super Shuttle. The next best option may be to take some form of public transportation, but then you’re responsible for transporting your own luggage. Lastly, you may have to drive yourself. Long-term parking is costly, but some airports allow people with a disabled placard or plates to park in the short-term lot for a lower fare. Both lots should have ADA accessible parking.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no service that provides you with an airport attendant at your vehicle to assist with your luggage to the airport.

Clever packing and luggage carriers enable you to maximize carrying space and keep your hands and lap free. Some people will even bungee a suitcase with wheels to the chair itself. Specially designed bags and water bottle holders are available for manual wheelchairs. You can also utilize the space underneath the chair with a pouch, shelf, undercarriage net or a combination of these. I routinely use a backpack on the back of my chair as my carry-on and place my main bag on my lap and personal bag around my shoulders.

The sooner you can receive assistance with your luggage is at the curbside check-in. Ask at the desk and someone will assist you or find the appropriate airport personnel who can. They can carry your bags or push you, but if you want to use the restroom or grab a bite to eat, then you will need to manage your carry-on items. To minimize dealing with your carry-ons, check them as luggage — many airlines do not charge a baggage fee for medical equipment.

Some airports have wide security checkpoint lines accessible to wheelchair users — otherwise look for the designated line. Within reason, your traveling companions are also able to go through this line with you. Often designated lines are a shortcut through security checkpoints and a perk of being a wheelchair rider.

The screening process by TSA should take no more than a few minutes. I leave my shoes on and place the rest of my belongings in the basket as instructed, then inform them that I need a “female assist” for my screening. I am usually asked if there is anyone else with me to watch my belongings. If not, then the agent will grab your things once they’re on the secure side and place them near you.

You should always be asked if you would like a private screening. I have never opted for this and instead get straight to business. I spread my arms as wide as I can while the TSA agent gently pats my body with her hand in search of restricted items, namely weapons. Before the pat-down begins, notify the TSA agent of any sensitive areas if you are not asked first. Afterwards, my chair and I will be scanned for destructive chemical residue by an agent grazing a cotton-like swab lightly on my hands, clothing, shoes and chair (some manual chair users have been delayed at this point because their hands picked up something off their wheels). Once this swab clears, then you are free to go.

BOARDING THE AIRPLANE

Most airports have carpet, which slows down manual chairs. Occasionally you will find people movers that you can take advantage of, and if no one else is in front of you, you can pick up good speed. Once you reach your departure gate, it is imperative that you check in at the desk and get your chair tagged. The brightly colored tag is attached to the wheelchair and identifies the owner and notifies the ground crew that upon landing, the chair is ready to be unloaded. The wheelchairs are loaded last and unloaded first. If you are flying internationally, you may need to provide proof of your destination and flight number and who you are traveling with. You need not worry about your credentials — the airport’s computer system will handle this for you.
needs to be brought up from the plane’s carriage immediately.

Speak up if you need assistance on the jetway. With smaller planes there may be no jetway, in which case you will be manually lifted up the stairs. Some airports have hoists or lifts or long ramps to accomplish this.

Southwest is the only airline that has enough space in the front bulkhead seats for my manual wheelchair to get close enough to the seats to transfer, so I do not need an aisle chair. For all other airlines an aisle chair is needed to board the plane. You need to tell the airline what assistance you will need when making the reservation, but more importantly, you need to bring this up again when you check in for your flight. There are a limited number of aisle chairs in any given airport, and hunting one down on the spot can delay the flight and require you to board last instead of first.

If you need assistance with transferring to an aisle chair and know the best method, then speak up, but do so kindly and use hand gestures if helpful. Once on the aisle chair, you will be secured with seatbelts. Sometimes the ground crew is right there to take your chair. I remind them that no luggage should be placed on top of a wheelchair as it can cause damage. If the ground crew isn’t there, then I tell whoever takes the chair to please relay the message. You can also attach any directions (sometimes in different languages) to the top of the seat. Waterproofing the directions isn’t a bad idea, either. I am usually assured that nothing is ever placed on wheelchairs, which I do not entirely believe, so just in case I always bring Allen wrenches in my carry-on.

Typically manual wheelchairs are stored in the cargo compartment, but if your chair can collapse enough to fit in the priority stowage spaces in the plane, then you have this right under the Air Carrier Access Act, but flight attendants are not always eager to comply with this. Rely on the flight attendants to assist you with your carry-on items. In addition to bags, these items are anything that could fall off of your chair, like your water bottle holder and side-guards. Be sure to also carry on your necessary medical supplies and medications. And for optimal protection against skin breakdowns, sit on your seat cushion for the plane ride. If using an air cushion, monitor the air pressure during flight, deflating a little if needed, and be sure your pump is packed with your carry-on in case more air is needed once you’ve landed.

At your seat a flight attendant should be able to assist you in lifting the armrest for a clear transfer. However, not all attendants have this knowledge and not every seat has an adjustable armrest. If available, a seat with this feature can be arranged ahead of time.

ON THE PLANE

During flight it may be possible to use an onboard aisle chair to use an “accessible restroom” with grab bars, a call button and a lever faucet. Planes with more than one aisle are required to have an onboard aisle chair and accessible restroom, and planes with 60 or more seats that have an accessible restroom are also required to have an onboard aisle chair.

There is no standard design for the onboard aisle chair. Some are more comfortable than others and some may or may not have a footrest. When you are in need of it, you simply notify a flight attendant, but the attendant cannot assist you in the transfer to the onboard aisle chair. The attendant or your companion then pushes you into the restroom where you have to be able to make a frontal transfer using a small handrail or the countertop.

Some people have been known to use a leg bag just for the flight or catheterize themselves under a blanket at their seats.

Just before landing, remind the crew that you have a gate-checked wheelchair and whether you’ll need an aisle chair. When the flight is over, you will be the last to disembark, which is good to keep in mind for transportation plans or if you have a brief layover. You can ask the attendants for assistance through the airport and they will call for airport personnel.

If a problem does occur, contact the airline’s complaint resolution official who has been specially trained about Federal Aviation Administration and Department of Transportation disability regulations. You can also get travel insurance specifically for your wheelchair or bring a spare for extra added security.

Most importantly, if you need help, ask for it and know your rights.

RESOURCES

- Transportation Security Administration, “Travelers with Disabilities and Medical Conditions,” www.tsa.gov/traveler-information/travelers-disabilities-and-medical-conditions
- Wheelchairtraveling.com

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