

## TRAVEL INSIDER

### Making seniors' travel less harrowing

By Diana Dawson

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Reuniting the entire family for the holidays may be a warm and fuzzy concept, but it unravels many seniors' security blankets. To many of them, the challenge of getting to a gate on time or winding their way through airport security is enough to keep them home alone.

Even younger family members who deal professionally with senior issues may have to come to grips with worries of elderly relatives.

Like Andrew Crocker, who lives in Amarillo, Texas. As a gerontologist, Crocker regularly teaches county extension service classes and gives year-round workshops showing seniors how to overcome obstacles in their lives.

His lessons came home as his grandparents prepared to travel during the Thanksgiving holiday.

Even though his 82-year-old grandfather, Gene Crocker, of Shreveport, La., is a strong-willed former Marine, only the thought of seeing a roomful of grandchildren in Connecticut forced him to put on the hearing aid and glasses he needed to make it from one airport gate to the next.

"My granddaddy wanted to make this trip and see those grandchildren," said Andrew. "The end result was the impetus. He knew in order to do that he had to get on that plane."

Traveling is a different story for his 73-year-old grandmother, Pat, who had a double hip replacement. "Before she had her hips replaced, she'd argue that others needed a wheelchair more than she did, and she'd worry about getting to the gates. Now, she'll accept the help and travel anywhere."

The U.S. Transportation Security Administration assures that it can work around metal walkers, pacemakers, canes, seniors who can't bend down to put their shoes back on, those who have trouble standing in line, artificial hips and just about anything else.

"When we go into the holidays or the summer travel season, we often encounter people who have not traveled since before the Sept. 11 attacks, and air travel has become significantly different since then," said Nico Melendez, TSA spokesman in Los Angeles. "The most important thing is to educate yourself."

"Grandma always told us stories of beautiful castles..."



With planning, preparation and making use of some new services, you can help reduce the uncertainty and make the logistics of any senior's trip home easier on everyone.

For example, remind older travelers of the 3-1-1 rule: Each passenger is allowed to carry on as many liquid containers of 3 ounces or less as will fit in 1 zip-lock bag of the 1-quart size. An important exception, Melendez says, is that medications in their original containers are allowed as carry-on luggage, no matter what the size. Seniors should also be aware that their valuables are much safer in their carry-on luggage than rolled in three pair of socks in their suitcase.

Older relatives need to understand not to lock suitcases (unless they have TSA-approved locks) because they may be opened and inspected. They should forget getting that Christmas bow just right on the grandchildren's package because security may rip it open. Encourage them to ship presents ahead of time or wrap at their destination.

If you call the airline in advance, you may arrange for an airline employee to meet a grandparent curbside with a wheelchair and escort them through screening and to the gate. Doing that eliminates any concerns about stamina and provides them with an escort through the screening maze.

You may also ask the airline for a pass allowing you to accompany your relative through screening to the gate. "You just have them put on your ticket that you need assistance and don't become a victim of your own circumstance," said 76-year-old Lucy Hack of Houston, who has continued traveling after suffering a heart attack. "I keep a lot of \$1 bills in my pocket and I grease the way with tips."

If you'd rather count on more than a pocketful of tips, Doug Iannelli takes care of every detail of a senior's trip from making reservations to getting the traveler to his or her destination's doorstep. As owner of Flying Companions (which is bonded and insured), he'll get travelers checked in, go through security with them, handle their carry-on luggage, sit next to them on the airplane and get them through ground transportation.

He updates those waiting at the other end of any flight delays or cancellations.

"I saw the need for people to continue to be able to travel as they get older," said Iannelli, whose business ([www.flyingcompanions.com](http://www.flyingcompanions.com)) is based in Atlanta. "This has made a tremendous difference in the way people can remain independent."

It's important to remind older travelers that everyone must remove their shoes for screening, so a pair of slip-ons might make life easier than orthopedic lace-ups.

No worries if they don't have the dexterity of 20-somethings they see slipping shoes on with one hand while lugging a computer case with another.

"They can sit down in the chair by screening to put their shoes back on," Melendez said. "Nine times out of 10 I'll see a screener lean over and help them."

Any traveler with a pacemaker shouldn't step through the screening gate because the machine may offset the calibration of the pacemaker.

The metal parts in replaced hips and knees will set off screening alarms.

It works best for these passengers to present a pacemaker identification card or note from their doctors

about implants at security or simply request a secondary pat-down screening. For extra privacy, travelers may ask that the check be done behind a screen.

Once the devices are screened, all wheelchairs, walkers, prosthetics, personal oxygen canisters and just about any other medical gadget are allowed beyond security. (The TSA Web site says there may be a limitation on the size of the oxygen canisters.)

"This is about performing a security function while allowing passengers to maintain dignity," said Melendez. "Screeners at one point found a 67-year-old man with a 10-inch military knife in his hollowed-out prosthetic leg. Everyone needs to be screened."

When booking travel, older passengers should consider their seating priorities. Weak bladder? Advise them to take an aisle seat so they won't have to climb over other passengers on their way to the restroom.

Hearing aids? If theirs amplifies noise and doesn't filter background static, suggest they sit next to the window. They can keep one hearing aid on and one off to reduce static.

"Tell them even if they have to turn off the hearing aid, they're not going to miss anything from the announcements," Crocker said. "They'll know something serious is going on if they see the yellow masks drop."