

Challenges of Traveling during the Covid-19 Pandemic When You Have a Hearing Loss

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The writer in full head gear – face mask with filter and a face shield

Fastening my seatbelt, settling in for my flight home, it feels a bit tight around my waist. Like the fabled “Freshman 15,” I think I have added the “Covid-19” since my last flight way back in the Before Times. For once, I was not envious of the people in first class. That section was pretty full and the rest of the passengers schlepped and bumbled by them by to get to their seats. Or maybe that was just me. With my mask and face shield secured to my face, dangling my carry-ons in front of and behind me, and trying to keep my cochlear implant processor and fogged-up glasses from falling off, I was less than graceful. I could barely see where I was going. Even in the best of times, I am not much of a traveler.

I was flying back home to Dulles Airport after driving across the country to Denver from Virginia, during the pandemic and shortly before the recent election. My daughter needed to move to this new city. She and I had been quarantined together for months prior and we felt safe driving in her car. We made stops in Indiana, Illinois and Nebraska and ventured out of our car only for a few rest stops and to purchase food. About 1 in 5 people in those areas wore masks.

Once we arrived in Denver, the reverse was true, almost everyone wore masks both indoors and out. We were off to find an apartment and all the rental agents wore masks, the sounds in the empty units echoed and bounced and blurred, and it was tough to follow what was being said, though my daughter did her best to keep me in the loop with signs and fingerspelling. Eventually we found a unit that can be her home and her remote workspace. Mission accomplished.

Before leaving for the airport, I downloaded the app for the airline I was using and checked in. Having my boarding pass on my phone reduced my anxiety of checking in at the airport and possibly not understanding the attendant. The app also alerted me to gate changes and delays. I definitely recommend deaf and hard of hearing travelers avail themselves of these types of apps.

When everyone wears a mask, it makes it tough to read facial cues. I’ve gotten grudgingly used to not having access to the emergency instructions spoken by the flight attendants, the announcements by the pilots and the headset entertainment systems that don’t offer captioning, but the masks really add another layer of hard to the plight of hard of hearing and deaf travelers. The emergency instructions are still available in print though no other reading material is provided anymore. I miss those reading materials that used to be there.

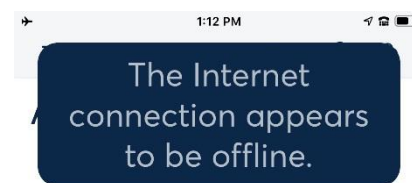


The writer's daughter in Indiana enters her car to take her turn driving



A stewardess in a mask explains emergency procedures. The airplane seat pocket holds only a guide on procedures.

I thought I would try out my Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) apps, like *Google Live Transcribe* (for Android phones), *Otter*, *Ava* and the like. These apps have proven helpful in other situations but alas when you are on a plane your cellphone needs to be on “airplane mode” so your apps won’t work in flight.



The notification that the app doesn't work in Airplane mode

While my specific flight did not have in-seat entertainment options, [recent regulations](#) require certain movies and shows to display captions if the media has them available. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advocacy Network ([DHH-CAN](#)) of which the Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons ([NVRC](#)) is a member, continues to work for access in this area. The National Association of the Deaf [NAD](#) website has more information on air travel access and a link for people who wish to [file a complaint](#).



Statue of astronaut John Swigert, Jr at the Denver Airport

This is a photo of a statue of astronaut, John Swigert, Jr. that I took at the Denver Airport. Swigert was one of three astronauts aboard the Apollo 13 Moon mission and was the astronaut who first announced, "Houston, we've had a problem here." (Yes, this is the actual [quote](#) though the “Apollo 13” movie quote is different.) As we know from history books, he and his team made it home safely.

I can only imagine how nice it felt for him to take off his helmet and protective gear when it was safe to do so, and it sure doesn’t seem like a lot to ask of us to wear face masks in comparison!

NASA paved the way for humans to access space despite incredible obstacles. We need to address and repair the accessibility challenges faced by air travelers so that we can all make it home safely when it’s safe to travel again.