

Airports accommodate people with chemical sensitivities

Airports in Canada, Denmark, Sweden and Finland are beginning to accommodate people who are sensitive to fragrances.

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Airport terminals are often large buildings with tall ceilings and tiled floors, which helps improve the air quality inside. But a particular problem is the duty-free shops in international airports.

In order to boost sales, passengers are forced to walk through the duty-free shops on their way to the plane. Many of the shops sell fragrances and pollute the air with their wares. Walking past these pungent sales displays is a hazard to people who are chemically sensitive and a nuisance to many others as well.

In response, a few airports have provided sensitive passengers with alternative routes. It's a start, though airports and airlines still have a long way to go.

Copenhagen airport

The Copenhagen Airport in Denmark was the first airport to address the problem by creating a complete bypass of the duty-free shopping area in 2011. This was done by allowing passengers to use an existing corridor for the use of staff and air crews to quickly get past the shopping area.

The entrance to this corridor is right inside the security checkpoint and is marked with the logo of the Danish asthma & allergy patient organization.

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The entrance to the bypass corridor, marked with the logo of the Danish asthma & allergy patient organization. Picture taken 2013.

Unfortunately, there are no English language signs and only the Danish part of the airport website even mentions it. This lack of clear signage is probably due to commercial considerations, as they would not want many people to use this faster route to bypass all the shops.

Vancouver Airport

In 2016 Vancouver International Airport in Canada created a fragrance free route through their duty-free shopping area.

Clearly visible decals guide passengers through the shopping area on a path that avoids the fragrance vendors. Since passengers are still forced through the shopping area, this method should be more acceptable to the airport vendors.

Swedish airports

Some of the larger Swedish airports have staff trained in helping disabled people of all kinds get to their plane. These staffers have great leeway in doing their jobs and people with MCS (and electrical sensitivities) have used this service to largely bypass the entire airport terminal in some cases.

Helsinki airport

The airport in Helsinki, Finland has instructions on their website how people hypersensitive to fragrances can bypass the airport fragrance shops.

In one terminal they suggest using a separate security checkpoint for families with children, which lets people bypass the shopping area.

In the other terminal, hypersensitive passengers can ask shop staff to guide them through a bypass that is otherwise not open to the public.

They also point out an outdoor waiting area near one of the gates, though that may not be so helpful due to the jet exhaust.

Commentary

These developments are highly welcome, especially the Vancouver method that doesn't have to be hidden due to commercial considerations.

Travel by airplane remains very difficult for highly sensitive people. The air quality inside airplanes continues to be poor, as very little fresh air is added to the recycled air coming out of the overhead nozzles and there can be fragranced passengers just inches away.

The restrooms on the planes are cramped spaces that are usually heavily fragranced and equipped with fragrant soap. This makes them unusable to fragrance-sensitive people, which is a major problem. These fragrances are also carried into the rest of the plane through the ventilation system.

The cabin crew is also frequently heavily fragranced, further adding to the fetid air and is a real problem in such enclosed spaces.

People with MCS sometimes have to use respirators or oxygen masks, though most prefer to suffer in silence rather than look weird — or even scare their fellow passengers. Some people with MCS simply cannot travel by airplane.

The situation has deteriorated since the 1990s, when aircraft were not so heavily fragranced. It is apparently cheaper to cover up with fragrances rather than let in fresh air (which costs fuel, since the air must be compressed). Also, clever advertising has created an artificial “need” as well.

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A cheap and simple non-toxic alternative is to place used coffee grounds in the bathroom instead — something the cabin crew has on hand anyway. Drop the toxic soaps and encourage the cabin crew to lay off the heavy stench, too, please!

Airports also need to clean up their restrooms. Fortunately, many family restrooms are not scented, but can one rely on that after a flight with essentially no bathroom on board?

People with severe electrical sensitivities are often completely excluded from air travel due to the very high radiation levels from electronics built into the headrest, hidden power cables and electronic gadgets used by their fellow passengers, all trapped inside a metal hull.

Some have managed by researching what aircrafts do not have electronics built into the headrests, which flights have few passengers and then suffer through it as best they can.

This writer has not flown for twenty years and doesn't expect to ever do it again.

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