

Practice Flights and Calm Spaces: Making Room for Neurodivergent Travelers

Airlines, hotels, theme parks and others are working to ease the challenges of travel for people with autism, A.D.H.D and other “invisible disabilities.”

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After decades of caring for his autistic son, Ryan, Adam Murphy, a 51-year-old father of three from Gloucestershire, England, noticed that Ryan, 27, was becoming a bit more open to trying new things. His son, Mr. Murphy realized, might be able to take his first airplane ride.

But traveling would not be without difficulties.

“Going to our local supermarket could be a challenge,” said Mr. Murphy. “So how do you do that?”

Travel, by nature, brings with it changes in routine and environment, unpredictable situations, and oftentimes, sensory overload — all of which can be overwhelming to neurodivergent children and adults, which can include those diagnosed with disorders including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and autism.

Some 78 percent of families with autistic members, as well as people who are themselves autistic, said they were hesitant to travel in a 2022 survey by the [International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards](#), an organization that trains and certifies travel professionals to assist families and individuals with special needs. But 94 percent of those surveyed said they would travel more if they had access to options that are certified to recognize and understand the needs of people with autism.

Those options are increasing. In recent years, the travel industry has worked to become more inclusive of neurodivergent travelers, with airports offering sensory rooms and trained staff, hotels and resorts changing booking processes and accommodating those with special needs, and destinations becoming certified, by autism specialists specifically, to serve autistic visitors.

But travelers and families still need to choose itineraries that fit their needs, factoring in details like flights, hotel menus and floor plans, noise and crowds, and proximity to activities.

Mr. Murphy prepared for about 12 months, starting with the choice of destination: Torremolinos, a resort town in southern Spain where English is widely spoken and familiar brands of products can be found on store shelves. Torremolinos was also accessible by a direct flight from a nearby airport.

“We basically were us, but in a different country,” Mr. Murphy said of their vacation experience, “which may sound kind of dull and boring to a lot of people, but that’s exactly what we needed.”

Here is a sampling of the changes that various sectors of the industry are making to welcome neurodivergent travelers and their families.

airlines and airports

Flight rehearsals, sunflower lanyards and new specialists

For anyone, flying can be an intense experience. At the airport, there are crowds, blaring noises and few easily accessible spaces to find calm. Flights can be delayed or canceled. On the plane, there is the unpredictability of a flight — turbulence and other flight disruptions — and the tensions that can arise in a cabin packed with dozens of strangers. All of these sensory stressors are [magnified for neurodivergent travelers](#).

For years, airlines, airports and nonprofit organizations have hosted [practice events](#) for travelers and their families to familiarize themselves with flying, including hosting [mock flights](#) in real airplanes.

For Mr. Murphy, a vital aspect of his travel preparation was to familiarize Ryan with the trip and its intricacies beforehand. Mr. Murphy contacted his local airport in Gloucestershire and [Fly2Help](#), a charity program based at that airport, to bring Ryan there and familiarize him with an airplane. Mr. Murphy looked up videos of plane sounds on YouTube, including a plane toilet flushing, for Ryan to hear.

Mr. Murphy also requested a sunflower-decorated lanyard, from the [Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program](#), for Ryan to wear while flying. These cheerful lanyards, recognized at more than 240 airports worldwide, discreetly signal to staff that these travelers might need extra help and time in the airport.

At airports in the United States, the Transportation Security Administration provides [assistance to](#) individuals with disabilities or medical conditions [during the security screening](#) process, and officers with specialized training to assist and communicate with these travelers. Sensory rooms, or calm spaces designed to thwart overstimulation, have proliferated. Rooms have recently opened at [George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston](#) and at Newark Liberty International Airport's Terminal A.

But for some travelers, improvements could be as simple as better signage.

Aneisha Velazquez, a 33-year-old from the Dallas-Fort Worth area who works in bookkeeping, was diagnosed with autism and A.D.H.D. in 2021. She feels that airport signage is inconsistent, which makes getting through the buildings, particularly security, confusing and stressful.

"I usually just err on the side of taking out all electronics," she said, as she often doesn't know which devices need to be scanned separately. "It'd be easier if there was a sign with pictures as a reminder."

Airlines are creating visual guides to consult before flying. One, [from British Airways](#), describes the requirements of international air travel, from going through security to collecting bags. Emirates also has a [planning guide, tailored to trips through Dubai International Airport](#), and in recent years the airline has [trained thousands of its employees](#) to recognize and aid neurodivergent travelers.

Jackie Dilworth, a spokeswoman for [the Arc](#), a national organization that supports people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, emphasized that air travel accessibility still varies widely, depending on airlines, airports and staff.

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Hotels and resorts

Certifications, inclusivity and 'autism concierges'

Is the hotel in a busy part of town? What do the room designs look like? Which rooms at the hotel are quietest, and where on the property are they? What kinds of food do they serve and at what times? Does the hotel staff have anybody who can help with specific questions or requests?

These are the kinds of questions that someone traveling with neurodivergent family members may ask when searching for lodging.

In Spain, Mr. Murphy booked a family-friendly hotel — one that was part of the [Meliá brand](#) and had a few properties in the vicinity that they were free to explore. It had a pool, a nearby beach and plenty of activities that Ryan could choose from. Ahead of visiting, he called the hotel, let staff members know he would be traveling with his autistic son and asked for an up-to-date menu so Ryan could know what he'd be eating that week and at what time each meal would be served.

Once in Torremolinos, Ryan loved frequenting the hotel buffet and trying all the different food. The hotel offered a kids' club, and Mr. Murphy would sit at a table and watch Ryan "just happily joining in with everybody else, wanting to give high fives to the mascots and grinning and laughing away."

Other hotels are also catering to neurodivergent guests.

[Beaches](#), an international chain of all-inclusive family-friendly resorts under the Sandals brand, has had [I.B.C.C.E.S. specialists](#) train its staff in sensory awareness, communication and program development for guests. Beaches also offers autism-friendly experiences and sensory guides, as well as restaurants that cater to those with special dietary needs.

Staff members at [Karisma Hotels](#), which includes brands like the Nickelodeon, Margaritaville and Azul resorts, were trained and certified by [Autism Double-Checked](#), another organization that focuses on autism awareness and education in the travel industry. Karisma offers an “[autism concierge](#)” to aid families traveling with guests who have autism, as well as to help support them as they plan their vacation. The company also allows guests to fill out an “[autism passport](#)” that details individual needs, such as their sensory sensitivities, emotional triggers and calming strategies.

Larger hotel chains are also responding. Nearly 40 properties under the Hilton Hotels & Resorts umbrella across Europe and the United States participate in the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program, and the company is actively adding more throughout the year.

Last April, Hyatt Hotels worked with New York University and [KultureCity](#), a nonprofit that trains businesses in sensory accessibility, to identify ways its properties could better accommodate neurodivergent guests.

Among the changes [their research proposed](#): providing visuals of a property’s floor plan in advance, so guests can familiarize themselves with the layout; amenities — like weighted blankets or noise-canceling headphones — that help with sensory overload; and contact-free check-in and checkout.

Mark Vondrasek, Hyatt’s chief commercial officer, said the company was working to apply these new practices across its properties.

“It makes great business sense,” Kaushik Vardharajan, an associate professor at the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration, said of the industry becoming more inclusive. “If you can now suddenly provide solutions and cater to that segment, then you become the most popular brand, or become the most popular hotel, to those customers.”

People with “invisible disabilities” like autism often don’t know what kinds of

accommodations are available to them, and how to go about asking for them, said Rose Ernst, a 46-year-old writer and consultant from Alaska. Ms. Ernst was diagnosed with autism in 2022.

“Making this more obvious would be a great first step,” Ms. Ernst said. “The second is to understand a basic principle of disability justice: The ‘accommodations’ made for disabled people often make everyone’s lives better.”

theme parks, and state and national parks

Special access, special rooms and an autistic muppet

Many theme parks in the United States now offer a range of services to reduce the stress of visiting for neurodivergent travelers and their families.

Before visiting Universal Orlando Resort, guests can download a [guide](#) that describes what to expect at each park ride, including whether there will be strobe effects or loud noises, and lists the quiet areas where neurodivergent visitors can rest. If parents are worried about how their children will handle the long lines for rides, they can request an [Attractions Assistance Pass](#), which allows guests to return at a specific time for a ride instead of waiting in line. To receive the pass, guests need an [Individual Accessibility Card](#) issued by the I.B.C.C.E.S. within 30 days of their visit.

[Six Flags parks](#) also provide sensory guides and sensory-friendly spaces, and Sesame Place Philadelphia offers noise-canceling headphones, a ride accessibility program, an accessibility [guide](#) and low-sensory dining options. At the park, Sesame Place guests can also meet Julia, a 4-year-old autistic Muppet from Sesame Street. At SeaWorld Orlando, Sesame Street Land is a [Certified Autism Center](#), staffed by specially trained employees, and guests can take advantage of the park’s [quiet rooms](#) and the [Ride Accessibility Program](#), which allows guests to request a boarding time rather than wait in

line for certain rides.

At [Walt Disney World](#) and [Disneyland](#), neurodivergent visitors can get around long lines by registering for the [Disability Access Service](#), Disney's equivalent of the Universal Attractions Assistance Pass. Revamped this year, the pass is only for those with a "developmental disability like autism or a similar disorder," and eligibility must be determined by a Disney worker before enjoying the rides. [Disney World](#) and [Disneyland](#) also offer guides that list locations where guests can rest and offer tips for neurodivergent tourists.

State and national parks are making moves as well, opening new trails and providing special access passes.

One of the most accessible spots for neurodivergent tourists is the [Autism Nature Trail](#), which opened in 2021 at [Letchworth State Park](#) in western New York and was designed with guidance from the autism researcher [Temple Grandin](#). Beginning and ending in the same place, the flat, mile-long trail evokes a sense of calming predictability. Along the path are eight interactive [nature stations](#), including a "Celebration Station" with chalkboards for recording impressions or feelings, and a "Music Circle" with three nature-inspired instruments.

For entry to all national parks, neurodivergent visitors can apply for a [free lifetime Interagency Access Pass](#). Some parks provide more. Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky equips neurodivergent visitors for the dark and sometimes crowded cave tours by offering [detailed descriptions](#) of what to expect while underground. Similarly, visitors can plan ahead for a trip to [Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Park in California](#) by viewing its accessibility film [series](#), featuring in-depth tours of park locations. And at [Big Thicket National Preserve](#) in Texas, families receive Velcro task boards to plan how they will explore the park's forests, bogs and bayous.

When touring [Death Valley National Park](#), visitors can obtain sensory kits from the visitor center, which include communication cards, noise-canceling

headphones, backpacks and other items. Jeremy Buzzell, branch chief for the [National Park Service's accessibility management program](#), said some staff members have undergone a seven-part training series to learn how to better accommodate neurodivergent guests.

"We want to make sure that we can welcome all visitors," Mr. Buzzell said. "We've got to be ready to accommodate whatever needs a person has."

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