



THE ABLE DIABETIC

Able Guide No. 20

T1D and Travel: the Practical Essentials

What to know, what to carry, and how to think about it

Why this guide exists

I have travelled to sixty countries. In my 3 decades as a t1d I have backpacked alone across Asia and Australia over many months. I have travelled the world extensively on business. I have done city breaks, camping trips, long-haul flights, and everything in between. T1d has come with me for most of that.

This guide is the distilled version of what those thirty years of travel with this condition has taught me. It is not a list of reasons to be cautious. It is a practical framework for travelling well, being prepared and confident, and not leaving anything important to chance.

1. Before you leave: the preparation that actually matters

Your supplies

Carry more than you think you need. My rule is to take double the insulin I expect to use. If I need one cartridge of each type, I travel with three. Supplies can get lost, damaged, or stolen. Insulin is not something you want to be short of in a country where your brand is unavailable or sold under a different name. Do not rely on sourcing anything critical at the destination.

Split your supplies across bags. If you are travelling with someone, give them some of your insulin and your fast-acting sugar. A single bag theft should not be able to wipe out everything.

Your insulin and temperature

Insulin must travel in your hand luggage, always. The hold of a long-haul flight can drop well below freezing, and frozen insulin is ruined insulin. I know this because I learned it the hard way, not on a plane, but during a winter road trip in the northern United States, when the extreme cold froze the insulin in the boot of a car without my realising. It took me several days to understand why nothing was working as it should. It is not a mistake I have made twice.

For heat: I love Frio pouches. They keep insulin cool through evaporation and require only water to activate. I use the large size for insulin cartridges and the slim version that fits pens exactly. I don't rely on hotel room fridges, which have frozen my insulin on occasion. Frio bags are reliable.

Your documentation

Get a doctor's letter before you travel. In thirty years I have never once been asked to produce mine - but some destinations require it at customs, and it smooths airport security considerably if anyone wants to look more closely at what you are carrying. Carry it with your passport, not packed away.

One practical note: getting this letter is not as straightforward as it sounds. GP services are stretched, and getting a letter written and issued takes time. Do not leave it to the week before you fly.

Also carry: a copy of your prescription, your travel insurance documents, and your emergency contact information. If you are travelling with someone, make sure they have copies of the key documents too. Bags get lost. It happens.

Your insurance

Standard travel insurance frequently excludes or limits cover for pre-existing conditions. Read the policy carefully before you buy it. There are insurers who specialise in cover for people with long-term health conditions, and it is worth taking the time to find one that actually covers what you need.

2. Flying: what to know

Insulin and all diabetic supplies travel in your carry-on, not the hold. In the UK and EU, medical supplies are exempt from standard liquid restrictions - you do not need to fit your insulin into a small liquids bag. In the USA, the TSA specifically exempts insulin and diabetic supplies from the liquid rule. You can carry what you need.

If security wants to look at your kit, let them. A calm explanation and your doctor's letter, if asked for, will resolve most situations without difficulty. It is worth checking the specific regulations for more far-flung destinations.

Time zones

If you are crossing time zones on a basal-bolus regime, the dose adjustment is genuinely complex. Travelling east shortens your day; travelling west extends it. Both affect how much insulin you need and when. Do not try to work this out in your head when you are tired and in transit. Work it out on paper before you leave, and note it down clearly.

3. At the destination: the ongoing calculation

The practical question every time you leave the hotel is: what is the minimum safe kit for this afternoon, and what stays in the room?

There is no fixed answer. It depends on where you are going, how long you will be out, and how easy it would be to return if something went wrong. What I have settled on after thirty years is this: the minimum kit is always more than it sounds. Fast-acting sugar, at least one pen, your CGM reader or phone, and something to treat a hypo with. That much stays on my person, always.

On the subject of fast-acting sugar: I carry sweets, not juice. Liquid sugar has largely been ruled out by airport security restrictions, and sweets travel everywhere without difficulty. I carry more than I think I will need, and I have never once regretted that.

4. The mindset that makes travel work

Preparation is what gives you the freedom to relax once you are there. The t1ds I know who travel well are not the ones who worry least - they are the ones who have prepared most thoroughly and can therefore stop thinking about logistics and get on with the trip.

There will be mini-disasters. I have left insulin at home. I have run out of test strips mid-walk. These things happen, and they are manageable, because I have never taken a risk I genuinely couldn't recover from. There is a difference between catastrophising about travel and preparing for it properly. The preparation is what makes the difference.

T1d does not have to be the reason you do not go. In my experience, it rarely is.

Based on Sarah's lived experience of over 30 years of travel with Type 1 diabetes. Not medical advice. Every t1d is different. Always work with your diabetes team when planning significant trips.

Want to understand more?

Read the blog: "My Holiday Packing List" at theablediabetic.com

Coming soon to Able Guides: T1D and Business Travel; T1D and Adventure Travel.

Contact Sarah at sarah@theablediabetic.com

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