

On the Road, Gluten-Free

Tips & Tricks of a Frequent Business Traveler

by Christopher Mirick

I travel a lot for work. That poses a unique set of challenges, because I have celiac disease. Not only do I have to worry about hotel reservations and connecting flights – I also need to wonder whether I'll be able to find food along the way that I can eat.

During the past five-plus years, I have had to travel for work several days a week. In that time, I've developed a handful of techniques that make my business travel easier. Some of them might work for you.

Two Key Assumptions

To start with, however, I'm going to make two assumptions. Those assumptions might say more about *me* than they do about people with celiac disease in general. Still, they're an important part of my approach.

The first assumption is that eating on a regular schedule is important. When I get hungry, I get grouchy, and I can't focus as well on the tasks at hand. So, for example, if I board a 10 a.m. flight that lands at 2 p.m., I'm going to need to eat during that flight. I can't wait until landing to have lunch.

The second assumption is that you're willing to speak up about your dietary needs. Having celiac disease or gluten intolerance is no longer considered strange or unusual. I'm often amazed by how many people have heard of it, and by how helpful restaurant wait-staff can be. Increasingly, restaurant servers are familiar with the ingredients of the dishes they serve, and they know which dishes are, or can be modified to be, gluten-free. For me, speaking up is

essential because when traveling on business, I can't risk a gluten "poisoning" that leaves me incapacitated for a day.

Okay, with those background assumptions – that you need food on a fairly regular schedule, and that you are willing to be an advocate for yourself – let's turn to three scenarios: eating while in transit; the in-office lunch meeting; and the business dinner.

Eating While in Transit

Our ancestors evolved as hunter-gathers, seeking out food in the wild where it either grew or hid. Because the federal Transportation Security Administration frowns on hunting in airport terminals, you may be reduced to gathering – meaning, poking among the Hudson News stands and the grab-n-go kiosks for something edible. (Okay, something *approaching* edible.)

Although I enjoy browsing for new gluten-free products when I have time, I don't want to rely on foraging while traveling. Sometimes, I'm cutting it awfully close and might miss my plane. Sometimes, there's really nothing that I can find to eat. So, I carry supplies when I travel, whether it's for a week or just a day. I would encourage you to do the same. Anyone with kids already knows this strategy: have some basic foods with you ... just in case.

Energy Bar Always on Hand – and Tuna

My briefcase always contains at least one energy bar. I tend to favor the **PureFit** bars, which have over 200 calories, taste good and are pretty durable. (They don't crumble into bits in the briefcase.) They're priced pretty reasonably, too, when you order them from Amazon in shipments that arrive automatically every few months.

Another favorite of mine are the **KIND** snack bars. They're less processed than many bars, and contain nuts and fruits. They are pretty widely available, so you might be able to pick one up while you travel. However, the KIND bars are lower in calories, so they don't tend to fill in for a meal. I also like **Detour** bars, some of which are gluten-free, and which range from about 200 to 350 calories.

I've also become a big fan of tuna fish packed in a foil pouch. I always keep one packet in my briefcase (in a Ziploc bag; a tuna leak would *not* be good!), along with some salt and pepper packets. If I'm rushing to catch a plane, I often can find a garden salad in the airport. Then, when I'm on the plane, I can throw the tuna on the salad, and – voila! – I have a solid meal with vegetables and protein. In a pinch, I'll eat the tuna by itself. (That's where the salt and pepper come in handy.)

Travel Kit for Comfort

My travel essentials are rounded out with a roll of antacid tablets (I prefer Tums peppermint, which can do double duty as breath mints), some Advil, and ear plugs. Granted, the pain killers and noise killers have nothing to do with being a celiac. They're just for my traveling comfort.

I will note here that it appears that the airlines and Amtrak are not required to know or disclose what is in the food they serve. In my experience, you absolutely cannot count on being able to eat anything served on a plane or train.

I often have asked a flight attendant or an Acela train staff member about the ingredients of the food they were serving. They simply didn't know, and they had no way of finding out. Even calling ahead or asking at the gate before you board doesn't help.

A Mysterious Snack Box

So, the sauce on that sliced steak salad could be fine ... or it could contain wheat and barley. There's just no telling. On a recent flight, snack boxes were available for purchase. But, there was no way to determine the ingredients of the items in the box without buying and opening it. So, my rule is to only eat things that are obviously gluten-free, such as fruit, nuts (in packages with ingredients), salads and yogurts.

My efforts to line up gluten-free meals in advance have been mixed at best. If an airline even offers a gluten-free meal (and most don't, unless it's a trans-Atlantic flight), they usually want at least two days' notice. If you change your flight, you lose the meal. At least once, I've had the experience of getting on board and being told that my meal didn't make the plane. So, now, I don't even bother.

On the Prowl

Instead, I try to get to the airport with enough time to find a meal I can bring on board. In a pinch, the tuna packet and garden salad will do. If I have some time, foraging for something better can be a bit of a sport.

There are **Wendy's** restaurants in many airport terminals. They often have baked potatoes, and two of those (one with bacon, one with broccoli) can provide a "balanced" meal for a dinner. Similarly, a **McDonalds Big Mac** (without the bun, of course) works well. Other go-to foods from airport stores include yogurt, bananas, nuts and **Cheetos**. (Okay, Cheetos aren't really a meal ...)

Bottom line: Don't count on being able to find food on planes and trains. Carry provisions with you, or forage (and hope for the best!) in the terminal.

In-Office Meetings

The phone call goes something like this: “Let’s meet on Tuesday and spend all day going through the project. We’ll have lunch brought into the conference room, so we can work straight through.” Sounds like a productive day, right? Except for that little issue about whether the lunch is going to include anything you can eat.

Most often, a conference room lunch consists of sandwiches, salads, and chips or cookies. If necessary, I will take apart a sandwich and eat what was in the middle, as long as I can leave behind a layer of whatever was touching the bread (the lettuce, for example). Two of those on a pile of green salad works pretty well, although I recognize that I’m running some risk of cross-contamination.

If there’s nothing I can eat (it’s a pasta salad, for example; or maybe they ordered pizza instead of sandwiches), there’s always the energy bar and tuna in my briefcase. That energy bar also comes in really handy when lunch isn’t going to arrive until 1:30.

People Are Happy to Help

However, rather than just hoping that the lunch will include something I can eat, a better strategy is to try to coordinate the food in advance. It’s my experience that clients, opposing counsel and business contacts are more than happy to make sure a gluten-free meal is available. Often, it’s a salad with some sort of protein in it.

All that being said, the point of a conference room lunch is to work. The food is just a convenience. So, if there is no gluten-free meal, just roll with it.

Breakfast Meeting Options

One exception on conference room meals: I’ve rarely had success with a special order for a conference room *breakfast* meeting. Often, the folks organizing the meeting plan to serve

only bagels and muffins. In that case, it's hard to ask for a gluten-free meal. So, I tend to eat before the meeting.

Sometimes I'll bring a bag of gluten-free granola, put it in a coffee cup, and add some milk or half-and-half. And, since fruit is often served with breakfast at these meetings, even if I ate in advance I can still have a plate of something in front of me while the other people are eating. If I really luck out, and they're serving bacon, eggs and potatoes, I'm not above having a second breakfast!

Two Kinds of Business Dinners

There are two types of business dinners that I attend, and they call for different strategies: the conference/event meal, and the restaurant meal.

The conference or event meal takes planning. This is what used to be called "the rubber chicken dinner." You're in an event hall, with eight to ten people per table, and a speaker who is competing with everyone's Blackberry for attention. The servers are under a tight deadline, and they have a limited ability to deal with special requests on the spot.

Running the event, however, is a catering company or hotel restaurant that undoubtedly will know how to deal with a gluten-free request, given enough notice (a few days to 24 hours – more is better!). I generally work through the conference or event organizer.

Get an Email Confirmation

I find that email works best for coordinating the gluten free meal. You don't need to catch the person at his or her desk, as you would with a phone call, and you can be very specific about your needs. Then, once you get the "You're all set!" email reply, you can show that to someone at the event and say, "I was told by X that there would be a gluten-free meal for me. Can you check?"

The gluten-free meal generally doesn't reach the table at the same time as the other meals. Often, it comes in the second wave, along with the vegetarian and other special-request meals. Encourage your table-mates to start on their meals, and sip an extra glass of wine while you wait. Check your email, or (novel idea!) pay attention to the speaker. You might be one of the few people actually listening to him or her!

A Conversation With Ming Tsai

A business meal in a restaurant is by far the easiest meal on the road. Wait-staff, chefs and managers are increasingly familiar with gluten issues, and they will work to provide you with an excellent meal and a wonderful experience.

On a flight not long ago, I happened to set next to Ming Tsai, owner of the **Blue Ginger** restaurant in Wellesley. He explained that his restaurant maintains a detailed list of the ingredients in each dish on the menu, and that the kitchen can customize any dish to eliminate any allergens. Many other restaurants now offer gluten-free menus, or at least know how to address gluten issues.

Working With the Waiter

Your time to speak up is when the waiter arrives to take drink orders or to describe the daily specials. Explain your situation. I tend to say "I'm a celiac, which means I have an allergy to gluten, the protein in wheat, rye and barley. I'll need a gluten-free meal."

I ask for help in identifying the items on the menu that are definitely gluten-free, and the ones that I must avoid. Raising this need early allows the waiter to check with the kitchen without slowing down the ordering process for your dining companions.

I use the term "allergy" when describing celiac disease to a waiter, even though we all know it is an intolerance, not an allergy. However, "intolerance" may connote to some people

that you just don't *like* the thing. ("I'm not tolerant of it.") In my experience, waiters pay more attention when you call the condition an "allergy," which helps to ensure that I get the meal I need.

Planning and Attitude Are Key

Traveling for business as a celiac can add complexity. However, with planning, a flexible attitude, and the willingness to explain your dietary needs, the challenges can be easily met. Then, you can get back to the, um, *glories* of business travel. Day trip to Houston, anyone?

Christopher Mirick is an attorney in the Boston metro area and a frequent volunteer at Healthy Villi meetings. His wife Catherine is a member of the Healthy Villi board.