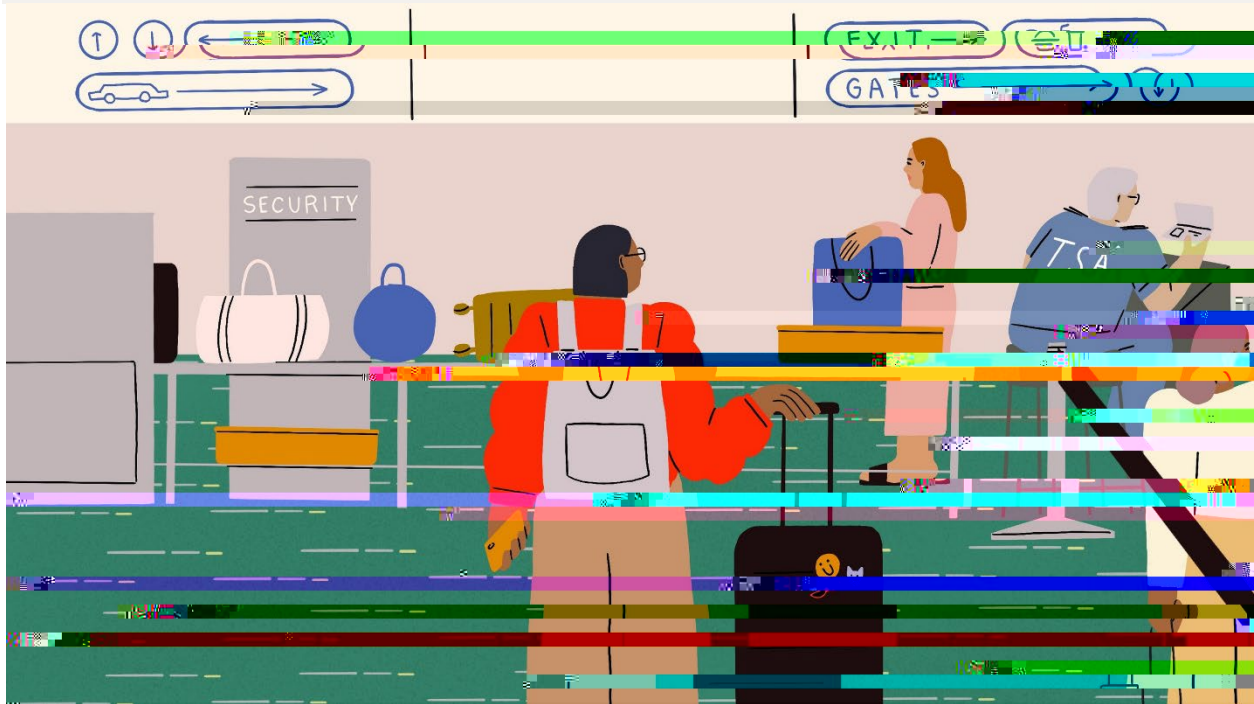


# The Unique Anxiety of Traveling While Transgender

Everyone hates going through airport security. But if you're trans or nonbinary, it's a completely different ballgame. Writer Kam Burns details the specific challenges you may encounter as a gender-nonconforming person — both abroad and stateside — while offering tips to ensure your vacation is the relaxing trip you deserve.

BY KAM BURNS



Courtesy [Stephanie DeAngelis](#)

People tend to look at me funny when I tell them I love flying, but it's true. I always have. I've gotten my packing process down to a science and airports give me an excuse to put my phone on airplane mode for a few hours and catch up on reading without distraction.

But as I left for a recent work trip, I was unable to ease my travel anxiety. My palms were sweaty, I felt vaguely nauseous, and the closer I got to the airport, the more my heart began to race. It was my first flight since I started my transition, so for the first time in a long time, I had no idea what to expect. Even trans person I know has an airport story, often involving an inadvertent misunderstanding with a TSA agent, others with more intentional malice and discrimination.

As it turned out, my experience ended up being pretty uneventful. When the agent scanning my boarding pass examined my passport, a flicker of recognition crossed her face ~~before~~ she let me go without a word. I went through the body scanner knowing I would probably be fine because I've had top surgery, and I was right. I'm one of the lucky ones.

## **Flying When You're Trans or Gender Non-Conforming**

ProPublica recently reviewed all data that's publicly available regarding complaints against the TSA and found that five percent of civil rights complaints with the TSA between January of 2016 and April of 2019 were from trans and gender-nonconforming individuals, despite the fact that we make up less than one percent of the population. And that was just of the people who chose to report.

The TSA body scanners that are used in standard security protocols in airports were not designed for people with bodies that are ~~are~~ gender-nonnormative. TSA agents have just a few moments to hit a blue or pink button before a person steps into the machine. If there's a penis or breasts where the machine thinks there should not be, an alarm goes off.

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you're unsure of. If you have a medication that requires syringes (like testosterone), have the prescription on hand so you can show an agent if the syringes are flagged.

For those who choose to wear a packer, a binder, or any other restrictive or enhancing garment, know that there's a chance it will set off the machine. If that happens, respond as directly as possible and in a straightforward way. For example, if you're wearing a binder, pull the agent aside and say, "This is a chest binder I wear to make my chest appear smaller, because of my gender identity presentation." Having a prepared response in advance can alleviate anxiety, and if you can provide an answer with confidence, you may be able to avoid further questioning. If the TSA agent continues to make it difficult for you to move forward, providing concise yet honest answers will also likely give you more success in filing a complaint later.

## **How to Be Helpful If You're a Cisgender Person Traveling With a Trans Friend or Loved One**

### **Ask for their input on travel plans**

If you're cisgender and traveling with someone who is trans, be mindful they experience things you don't have to deal with or think about. Talk to them before booking travel if you're planning the itinerary, as some airports and airlines have better reputations with trans customers than others. Ask if they would like you to intervene should a case of misgendering come up. Go through security together, if possible, and if they have asked for your help, advocate for them when and where you can. In some cases, there won't be much you can do (as people are often pulled into separate rooms if security is an issue), but just knowing there is a friend nearby can make things a little easier.

### **Know what to do if something does happen**

If you or a friend ends up having a negative or unsafe experience, it's important to know your rights. The National Center for Transgender Equality has a guide on who to talk to and how to file a report in the case of discrimination. There's even an app called FlyRights that will let you file a report from your phone immediately.

