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Can You Hear Me Now? How The Travel Industry Is Answering That Call

by Stephen Frazier

Telecoils, embedded in personal hearing aids, have long been a discreet way for people with hearing loss to improve the quality of the sound they hear—whether it be in a noisy train station or on a city walking tour. Today many venues—from airport terminals to hotel conference rooms and theaters—offer a next level hearing experience using a ‘hearing loop’. The loop transmits sound via an electromagnetic signals to personal hearing devices with receivers called telecoils, boosting volume and clarity while eliminating much of the background noise. With microphones turned off and telecoils turned on, travelers can hear public address systems, tour guides, ticket agents and others as though the person speaking was within inches of their ear. Most background noise that can otherwise cover or interfere with speech is eliminated and sound is customized by the hearing aids to match the hearing loss pattern of each individual user, giving an extra boost to those frequencies that person has the most difficulty hearing. *Sounds great right?* The only problem: Most people aren’t aware of how many places now use hearing loop technology and skip out on experiences they think they won’t enjoy, particularly when traveling abroad. Here’s what you need to know:

Where they are: In the U.S., a growing number of airports have installed the technology at departure gates and ticket counters. All New York City subway information and fair booths now feature hearing loops and all new taxicabs are fitted with them. Many places of worship, museums, theaters and other “must see” destinations now utilize this technology at ticket counters, for performance, walking tours and other activities. Even the 12,000 seats in the Breslin Center at Michigan State University offer hearing loop access to sporting and other events held there. All hearing loops use the same frequency in the US and throughout the world. Whether you are at Domodedovo airport in Moscow, visiting Westminster Abbey in London or enjoying the Sydney Opera House in Australia, there are loops.

How to know if there is a loop: The presence of hearing loop technology is usually announced by the display of this international symbol. If it carries a “T” the venue is either looped or provides neck loops to visitors. In the U.S. it is the standard blue and white disability signage colors but abroad it can be any number of different colors. For travelers who have cochlear implants or telecoil equipped hearing aids experts encourage people to purchase their own personal neck loop. Virgin Atlantic provides passengers on their international flights the choice of earphones or neck loops to connect to the aircraft’s sound system to listen to music or watch TV. On other airlines personally owned neck loops will work as well or better. They also work anyplace that has an earphones jack be it an airplane, an FM receiver for a guided tour or theatrical production, or to listen to the TV in a hotel room.

When to ask for a personal neck loop: Whenever a receiver and earphones are offered travelers

should ask if neckloops are available. Being able to hear better could help to ensure even greater satisfaction from a planned trip to any location in the US or abroad. 2010 revisions to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandate that any public "place of assembly" with a functioning public address system must also have an assistive listening systems (ALS) that can wirelessly connect to the telecoils in hearing aids. This requirement applies to any new or significantly upgraded PA systems so more and more venues now feature it whether it be the neck loop option at a multiplex or the looped US Supreme Court chamber.

Additional information on hearing loop/telecoil technology can be found at Hearing Loss Association of America. To find places that use them check www.loopfinder.com/, www.aldlocator.com/ and www.time2loopamerica.com/loop-locator/

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His articles pertaining to hearing loss issues have appeared in such publications as Hearing Journal, Sound and Communications, Technology for Worship and other periodicals and are available for review at www.sofnabnq.com. He has served the Hearing Loss Association of America in a variety of capacities at the local, state and national levels and was a founding member of their national 'Get in the Hearing Loop'" steering committee. He is the founder and co-chair of the Committee for Communication Access in New Mexico and director of Loop New Mexico.