

A Sikh Traveler's Guide to Air Travel and Airport Screening in the United States

Disclaimer: This information is provided for general background on the experiences of the Sikh American community. It is not intended to be nor does it replace legal advice from a licensed attorney. As this is general information, it focuses on experiences with American domestic air travel and does not discuss international airports or international travel.



General Background on Airports

An airport is a busy place, with many different groups of people coming together. When you come to an airport you will encounter many different companies and government agencies who each have their own policies, procedures, and area of authority. Knowing who you are interacting with can make it easier to resolve any problems that may arise.



Airport Layout

The airport can be divided into three major public/passenger zones:

Before Security



This is the public area of the airport. You may interact with airport personnel, airline employees, local law enforcement, and other companies in this area. Problems you may encounter in this area could be addressed to one of many government agencies, depending on the interaction.

The Passenger Security Screening Area



This is the secure part of the airport where you will interact with Transportation Security Agency (TSA) agents. Problems you may encounter here could be addressed by submitting a complaint to the TSA.

The Gate Area/ Post-Screening Area



This is the area after security with airline gates and other amenities. You will interact with airport personnel, airline employees, and a variety of other workers and passengers. Problems you may encounter in this area could be addressed to one of many government agencies depending on the interaction.



Important Groups at the Airport

Different government agencies and organizations are responsible for different parts of the airport. Some of the different groups you may interact with include:

Local Airport Authority

- This is the part of the local or state government that runs the airport and the facilities. The airport itself is subject to rules and regulations established by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and state law.
- Problems with the airport or airport employees may be submitted to them and/or the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

Local Law Enforcement

- This may be airport police, local, county, or state law enforcement. They are responsible for policing the entire airport.
- Problems with law enforcement should be submitted to the local police leadership and the airport.

Airlines

- The airlines are responsible for many services at the airport, in addition to your experience on a flight. They are subject to rules and regulations promulgated by the federal Department of Transportation (DOT). They work before security and in the gate area/post-screening area.
- Problems with the airlines should be submitted to the airline and/or the DOT Office of Aviation Consumer Protection.

Transportation Security Administration (TSA)

- This is a federal (national) government agency. They are responsible for passenger and luggage screening. At some airports, screening may be done by private companies, but they are subject to TSA policies and rules.¹ They are primarily in the Security Screening area and may conduct additional screening at the gate.
- Problems with the security screening process should be submitted to the TSA.

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

- This federal government agency regulates the airports, the design of the aircraft, and the safety rules on the airplane.² Their authority extends around the airport.
- Problems with accessibility around the airport should be addressed to them.

Department of Transportation (DOT)

- This federal government department regulates the conduct and operations of the airlines, including the passenger experience.³ Their authority extends primarily to the airline and the airline employees. The Office of Aviation Consumer Protection (OACP) has resources for passengers on anti-discrimination, accessibility, and travelers rights.
- Complaints about the airlines should be addressed to them.

Customs and Border Protection (CBP)

- This federal government agency is part of the Department of Homeland Security. They are responsible for securing the border, managing entry by individuals, and facilitating trade. You may encounter their officers at U.S. ports of entry, which includes many airports with international travel.
- Problems you encounter when traveling internationally into the U.S. should be addressed to them.



¹ <https://www.tsa.gov/about/strategy>

² <https://www.faa.gov/about/mission/activities>

³ <https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer>



General Practices Around Common Sikh Articles

All of your religious items should be treated with respect. If your items must be removed or examined, you should tell the agent that they are religious items, should be treated with respect, and not placed on the floor.



Turban/Dastaar and Kesh

You can wear your dastaar/turban or patka when flying. You may keep your hair in a joora and keep it uncut. However, you may have to undergo special screening as described below as some security technology may still alarm or indicate that the folds of the turban or joora are reflecting an anomaly on the screen.



Kanga

You can wear your kanga when flying. If worn under your turban, it may set off the alarm as an anomaly during the screening process.



Kirpan

Under current U.S. security policy, the kirpan cannot be worn when flying, carried on the plane, or going through security as a passenger. All kirpans or other talwars must be placed in the checked luggage, kept in the sheath, and securely wrapped.⁴



Kara

The kara can be worn in the airport and on the airplane. Agents may ask you to remove it when going through security as the metal can trigger the alarm. If you are unable to, you should tell them it is a religious object you cannot take off. They may ask you to undergo special screening to accommodate your kara.



Salai (Baaj)

A salai can be carried in the checked baggage and carry-on baggage. You may be stopped as the officer may not be familiar with it, but it can be described as similar to a sewing needle, which is permitted.⁵



Gutka

A gutka can be carried on the airplane. If agents remove it as part of an inspection of your baggage, you may tell the agent that it is a religious item and should be treated with respect, such as not being placed on the floor.

Reach out to TSA Cares prior to your trip. They can answer questions about screening, carrying items, or arrange for help in advance before you get to the airport.

<https://www.tsa.gov/travel/tsa-cares>

(866) 289-9673

⁴ <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/security-screening/whatcanibring/items/kirpans>

⁵ <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/security-screening/whatcanibring/items/sewing-needles>



Navigating Passenger Screening

The passenger and baggage security process can be intimidating and complicated if you are wearing articles of faith or have special screening needs. Understanding the procedure, stages, and terms can help you navigate the process and ensure your rights are respected.

Responsible for Screening

The Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) policies and officers are responsible for passenger and baggage screening at the airports. TSA officers are distinguished by their uniforms. At some airports, there may be outside companies hired by the airport to do the security screening but they must follow all TSA policies including religious accommodation and non-discrimination.

Primary Screening

Primary screening is what most people experience when they go to the airport. This screening occurs in the security screening checkpoint and includes when individuals are subject to additional screening, such as a private pat down.

Document Check

When you arrive at the screening area, you will be asked to present valid identification and a boarding pass or electronic boarding pass. TSA officers will verify the documents and ensure they match the passenger's identity.⁶



⁶ <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/security-screening/identification>



Standard Screening Lanes

General Information

Passengers proceed to a security checkpoint, where they are required to remove items from their pockets and place them in a bin. Coats, jackets, belts, and shoes are also removed and placed in bins for X-ray screening. Liquids (in compliance with the 3-1-1 rule)⁷, laptops, and other large electronic devices must be removed from bags and placed in separate bins for screening.

More information about the screening process and items you can bring is available here: <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/security-screening>

Passenger Screening

Passengers will be asked to walk through the screening technology, typically metal detector, millimeter wave technology, or other alternative imaging technology.

Resolving Alarms and Additional Screening

If an alarm is triggered during the screening process, the passenger will be asked to resolve the issue. This may involve additional screening, opening bags for inspection, or removing certain items. An alarm may not be audible or visible to you.

You may also be selected for additional screening, even if you do not set off an alarm on the machine. The TSA selects individuals to go through additional screening based on policies such as concerns around bulky clothing, if you are unable to remove your headwear, such as your turban, or based on random selection (such as after a certain number of people have passed through the checkpoint).

TSA PreCheck

General Information

TSA PreCheck, or TSA PreV[®], is a trusted traveler program in the United States that provides expedited security screening for eligible passengers at participating airports. The program provides participants with a more streamlined screening process, allowing them to keep items in their bags and not remove certain items of clothing.⁸

Passenger Screening

Passengers will be asked to walk through the screening technology, typically metal detector, millimeter wave technology, or other alternative imaging technology.

Resolving Alarms and Additional Screening

If an alarm is triggered during the screening process, the passenger will be asked to resolve the issue. This may involve additional screening, opening bags for inspection, or removing certain items. An alarm may not be audible or visible to you.

Wearing a dastar does not automatically trigger additional screening in the TSA PreCheck program. However, even if you do not set off an alarm on the machine, the TSA randomly selects individuals to go through additional screening.

⁷ <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/security-screening/liquids-rule>

⁸ <https://www.tsa.gov/precheck>



Additional Screening, Bulky Clothing, and Dastaars

Due to the headwear and bulky clothing policies or if you alarm the screening technology you may be asked to undergo additional screening. If you are required to go through additional screening of your dastar or other item, you may be asked to undergo one of the following procedures.

Pat Down & Wanding with a Metal Detector



The TSA agent will ask to pat down or squeeze your turban. They will then scan your turban with a handheld metal detector by waving it around your head.

If the agent conducts the screening, you may ask them to put on a clean pair of gloves as they are touching a religious article. You may ask if you can conduct a self-pat down of your turban under their observation. You can also refuse and request to be subject to another screening method.

Chemical Swab



The TSA agent will ask to conduct a chemical screening of your turban or item. The TSA agent will ask to rub your turban or item with a clean testing strip. They will then place it in a machine that will analyze the substances it picked up and deliver a result.

If the agent conducts the screening, you may ask them to put on a clean pair of gloves as they are touching a religious article. You may ask if you can conduct a self-pat down of your turban under their observation and have them swab your hands with the test strip. You can also refuse and request to be subject to another screening method.

Removal



You may be asked to go to remove your turban for inspection. You should be offered to do this in a private room. You never have to remove your turban in public.

You do not need to place your turban on the same x-ray machine as people's shoes. You can always ask that your item be treated with respect and wrapped in some cloth or given other protection. You should be offered items such as a mirror so you can retie your turban; if not, please request one.

Know Your Rights at Airport Security

When going through any level of screening for any reason, you can always ask:

- To undergo screening in a private room/area
- To be screened by a member of the same sex
- To be provided with items such as a mirror, should you have to remove your turban
- To be treated with respect



Secondary Screening

Secondary screening is a designation that you will undergo a more thorough security screening. This can include an inspection of every item in your bag, a physical pat down of your body, in addition to going through a metal detector or hand wand and chemical swabs. You may be asked to remove your turban.

Secondary screening may occur in the security screening area or at the gate. Typically, individuals who are flagged will have 'SSSS' on their boarding passes. However, anyone may be subject to secondary screening even if they do not have the mark on their pass.

Other Special Considerations

Language Access/Assistance in Punjabi

TSA has an extensive language access program, including translations in Punjabi. To request you can ask for a translator or ask for the "I speak" guide, which has information in multiple languages that the agent can use when you go through security.

Disability, Medical, and Special Accommodations

Individuals requiring special accommodations, with assistive technology, or with medical devices, may be required to alternative special procedures. TSA provides a number of accommodations such as chemical swabbing of assistive devices, exceptions to the liquids rule for medications and baby food, and screening of service animals.

Individuals requiring special accommodations are encouraged to inform the agent when they enter the screening area and leave additional time for the process. You can present a TSA Medical information card or contact TSA Cares before your trip.

For more information on your specific situation, including guidance for travelers with disabilities or medical conditions, seniors, children, religious or cultural items, military, and transgender/gender non-conforming passengers, please review the advice at: <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/special-procedures>

TSA Cares: Special Assistance for Travelers

If you need assistance when traveling and going through security, we encourage you to reach out to TSA Cares at least 3 days before your trip. The program will connect you with agents who can help you with your accommodations while going through security.

They can be reached at:

<https://www.tsa.gov/travel/tsa-cares>
(866) 289-9673

International Airports

When you are flying from an international airport, they will follow local security rules set by their national government. The TSA and U.S. laws do not apply. Thus, you may encounter different screening procedures and be required to remove your 5ks. You should ask to conduct your screening in a private room.

Entering the United States: Customs and Border Protection

When you enter the United States from abroad, you may undergo screening by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers as many airports are also U.S. ports of entry. This screening can include inspection of your documents at passport control (immigration) and/or inspection of your baggage (customs). The policies and procedures followed can vary based on multiple factors, including one's citizenship status, type of entry, and the current interpretation of federal law by the courts.



Complaint Procedures

If you have to file a complaint or wish to share your feedback, it is important that you reach out to the correct agency. In addition, you can share your experience with SALDEF at <https://saldef.org/report-an-incident/>

Transportation Security Administration (TSA)

What They Cover

Comments about the passenger security screening process should be directed to the TSA. We encourage you to also share your experience with SALDEF or reach out to us should you need assistance filing your complaint.

How to File a Complaint

It is important to provide as much detail as possible, in an organized manner, to ensure that your complaint is responded to promptly.

Website: <https://www.tsa.gov/contact-center/form/complaints>

Items to include:

1. File your complaint within 180 days to help preserve any information.
2. Select the appropriate category. In most cases it will be a 'Civil Rights and Liberties' complaint.
3. Select why you felt like you were treated differently, such as 'Religion'
4. Provide a complete description of the incident, including:
 - The airport
 - Your flight information
 - The date and time you went through security screening
 - A description of what occurred, for example:
 - How were your articles of faith treated?
 - Were you provided with an explanation?
 - Were your questions answered?
 - Did you get a private room?
 - Were you treated with respect?
 - Why you felt like you were treated differently (i.e. due to your perceived faith, national origin, etc.)

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

What They Cover

The FAA will respond to complaints about discrimination and accessibility at the airport, by the airport's authority, and business at the airport. These includes violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act (discrimination on the basis of disability), Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, and language in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance), the Age Discrimination Act (discrimination based on age), and the Airport and Airway and Improvement Act of 1982 (discrimination based on sex and creed).⁹

How to File a Complaint

It is important to provide as much detail as possible, in an organized manner, to ensure that your complaint is responded to promptly.

Website: https://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/acr/external-discrimination-complaints/form



⁹ https://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/acr/airport-civil-rights-policy-and-compliance



Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) (continued)

Items to include:¹⁰

1. File your complaint within 180 days to help preserve any information.
2. A written statement and any supporting documentation.
3. Your contact information: Phone (type: cell/home/business), Email Address (if applicable), and Mailing Address.
4. Sufficient details for an investigator to understand why you believe an Airport or Airport Tenant has violated your rights, with specifics such as dates and times of incidents.
5. Your statement must include the specific allegations of discrimination or allegations of violation(s).
6. Your complaint must allege discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, creed and/or gender, or noncompliance with ADA or Title VI Regulations.
7. Any related correspondence from the Airport or Airport Tenant.
8. The complaint must be signed and dated (if submitted via letter).

Department of Transportation (DOT)

What They Cover

The DOT's Office of Aviation Consumer Protection (OACP) will address all complaints related to the airline. This includes consumer complaints, discrimination complaints, and accessibility complaints.¹¹ The OACP also provides information on your rights as a consumer and passenger.

How to File a Complaint

It is important to provide as much detail as possible, in an organized manner, to ensure that your complaint is responded to promptly.

Complaints must be shared in writing, either online or directly to the agency. They will be reviewed by a DOT staffer and may be forwarded to the airline for a response. Their response will be evaluated by the DOT staffer to determine the outcome.¹²

Website: <https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer>

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)

What They Cover

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) investigates complaints of violations of rights or discrimination by officers of Customs and Border Protection (CBP). This includes discrimination at a port of entry, lack of language accessibility, other issues surrounding detention, and other violations of rights. The ability of officers to question a person and search and seize items at the border can vary based on multiple factors, including one's citizenship status and interpretation of federal law.¹³

How to File a Complaint

It is important to provide as much detail as possible, in an organized manner, to ensure that your complaint is responded to promptly.

Website: <https://www.dhs.gov/file-civil-rights-complaint>

Items to include:¹⁴

1. File your complaint within 180 days to preserve any information.
2. Your contact information: Full name; date of birth; alien registration number or passport number, if applicable; phone number; mailing address; and e-mail address, if available.
3. A written description of the circumstances. This should include:
 - The date, time and location

¹⁰ https://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/acr/external-discrimination-complaints

¹¹ <https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer>

¹² <https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/complaint-process>

¹³ <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/what-do-when-encountering-law-enforcement-airports-and-other-ports-entry-us>

¹⁴ <https://www.dhs.gov/submit-civil-rights-complaint-through-email-fax-phone-or-postal-mail>



U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)

(continued)

- A description of what occurred. For example:
 - What questions were you asked?
 - Did they mishandle religious items that were in your baggage?
 - Why you felt you were treated differently (i.e. due to your perceived faith, national origin, etc.)
 - Name(s) and contact information of any witness(es)
 - Names, titles, and agencies of government officials or officers involved, present, or whom you believe violated your rights
4. Relevant documents. Copies of any paperwork related to the complaint or its circumstances.
 5. A summary of other steps taken, if any, to try to resolve this complaint prior to submitting it through this form.
 6. If you are writing on behalf of someone else and wish to receive information which relates to them or their complaint, you must provide express written consent from that individual authorizing the Department to share information with you about the complaint. You must also provide your name, organization (if any), and contact information.

¹⁵ <https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer>

The Airlines

Each airline has their own complaint and customer service contact information posted on their website.¹⁵

State and Local Authorities

You may file a complaint with the local agency, state department of transportation, or other authority. Contact information should be displayed on posters within the airport or on their website.

You may also file a complaint with the appropriate federal agency, as described above.

About SALDEF

SALDEF (The Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund) is the nation's oldest Sikh American civil rights and advocacy organization. Based in Washington D.C. SALDEF works to build Sikh American capacity through education, fostering community, and civic engagement. To learn more please visit www.saldef.org

