

Crap! I've gotta go!

by [Guiding Eyes Hildy](#) and her scribe, Deni Elliott

Here's what to do when your new guide dog hunches over and poops in harness while she is guiding you on a moving walkway at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport:

1. Be grateful she started at the beginning of the walkway to give you time to react;
2. Pull out the poop bag you always keep in your front pocket;
3. Find the poop with your bag-mittened hand, grateful that she got no longer has diarrhea;
4. Keep smiling as you keep your left hand on the harness and the bag dangles from your right hand in the final seconds of your ride;
5. Be glad this dog has learned to find a trashcan when asked and is right on target;
6. In a soft voice tinged with horror and embarrassment, ask her "What were you thinking?" hoping the dog remembers that you have stopped in three different Service Animal Relief Areas (SARAs) in the previous 45 minutes where, each time, she insisted that the artificial turf and concrete floor alternatives were just too icky to use.

What Guiding Eyes Hildy was thinking is that she could wait for me to find her a better bathroom.

I could see Hildy's point. That day in January was just two months after she left Guiding Eyes for the Blind to become my fifth guide dog. In seven flight days at four different airports, she had already become my [best-ever travel guide dog](#): She slept through every flight, not moving if I got up to use the restroom. Faster than any guide before her, she learned to steer me through the Tampa airport to first check my suitcase at the Delta ticket counter and then lead me without additional direction up the escalator to the E gates where Delta flights depart. She wagged her tail and offered kisses during the TSA pat down. She then dutifully guided me to the SARA in the Tampa Airport E Terminal where she had a final chance to go potty. Usually, she quickly peed there before we hurried off to our Delta gate at the other end of the terminal.

I suspected that the problem was the security relief areas, not the dog. Some doggy potties are tolerable; most are not; others are nowhere to be found.

The investigation begins

Hildy agreed that she had made a colossal miscalculation that led to the moving walkway incident; I promised to be more patient when she struggled to use a SARA. We decided to do a field

study: For the next three months, we would visit at least one doggy potty in every airport where we departed, connected, or arrived and give an assessment.

Hildy and I checked out the SARAs doggedly, anonymously, like restaurant critics but at the tail end. We visited 45 relief areas in 12 airports on 18 flight days. Hildy stoically squatted in each with an improvised SARA stance, balancing with her nether parts in the air for photo documentation.

We came up with an objective ranking scale: 1-3 pts for smell; 1-3 pts for clean-up supplies and a sink that worked; 1-3 pts for aesthetics; and an extra point if the accommodation was within eight gates of our arrival or departure.

The results are in hand

We first made the hard decision to stick to the relief areas inside security. Hildy's preference, paws down, was for relief areas outside baggage claim that offered real grass. However, she conceded that "inside security" provisions were necessary when we had connecting flights.

That required us to eliminate four outlier airports that did not have inside security relief areas: Rapid City, Raleigh-Durham, Rhineland, and Savannah. We should note that for almost a decade, federal

law has required commercial airports with 10,000+ annual flights to have SARAs inside security. That's a topic for a different column.

The doggy potties we visited at Atlanta, Cincinnati, Minneapolis-St. Paul, NYC-LaGuardia, NYC-Kennedy, and Salt Lake City all ranked in the middle of the pack, each SARA scoring 3-6 points.

- Most failed the sniff test, even by human standards, not deserving the minimum 1 point we gave them. As I held my breath and blinked stinging eyes in the sealed rooms, I wondered how dogs, who detect scent 200x better than humans, could stand it.
- Many rooms were out of paper towels or poop bags or the sink didn't work.
- I added the aesthetics criterion as I wondered why every SARA has a red plastic fire hydrant as the unimaginative focal point. A little research revealed that federal law requires a fire hydrant or fake rock in each SARA but doesn't require ventilation. Apparently, someone at the Federal Aviation Administration convinced his colleagues that a fire hydrant or fake rock would encourage male dogs to urinate. Hildy and I, amused by this reasoning, wondered if he personally needed such encouragement.

As I couldn't ethically ding the SARAs for their lack of imaginative interior design, we gave full aesthetic points only when there was art on the wall, a window with a view, seemingly clean tile walls, or some other feature that made the SARA thoughtful and distinctive.

And the winners are ...

Tampa International Airport came in second.

The caged, outdoor, well-ventilated SARA on the gate level in Airside E is at the far south end of that terminal. The faint whiff of jet fuel is a breath of fresh air when compared to the indoor SARAs that smell like you've stepped into the basement of a porta-potty.

This Tampa SARA lost a point because Hildy and I nearly always fly from the far north end of that terminal, more than 10 gates away from the doggy potty. It nearly lost a point for uneven availability of paper towels and poop bags. Then we realized that, as TPA is our home airport, we certainly did some over-sampling here, so we chose not to deduct points for occasional lack of cleaning supplies. **TPA earned 9 out of a possible 10 points.**

Drum roll ...

The best in-security SARA in the US, based on our field research, is in the Missoula, MT airport.

This private, one-dog bathroom has self-draining turf and a large window. There was no offensive odor that I could detect or that appeared to offend Hildy. Ample cleaning supplies were on hand for every visit. It is an easy stroll to all four of the airport's gates.

MSO won easily in the aesthetics category for calling their accommodation the Service Animal **Restroom** and for tucking it appropriately between the men's and women's restrooms. The vacant/occupied lock system on the door was consistent with those in the human bathrooms.

MSO earned the only perfect score: 10/10.

Hildy and I will continue our study of airport dog accommodations across America and hope to find more SARA that deserve recognition. But for now, thank you to Missoula Airport Board members who appreciate that, indeed, dogs are people too.