
Business travel

Five tips for travelling at the back of a plane

How to make flights easier in an age of on-board austerity

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Steve Martin and John Candy enjoy economy class travel in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987) © Alamy

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Travellers whose finance directors or financial circumstances force them to fly at the back of the plane took another knock last week. It is one thing for British Airways to offer an inch less legroom to some of its economy passengers than budget airline Ryanair does — and to charge for food on short-haul flights. It is another for the Emirates airline to look at making passengers pay for its on-board “frills”.

BA boasted of being “the world’s favourite airline” of the late 1980s; Emirates has long since usurped its role as the carrier to emulate. But Emirates’ profits plummeted 82 per cent over the past year as a result of an

economic downturn and political tension in the Gulf and a laptop ban on flights to the US. Like most US and European carriers, it is having to cut costs.

When Emirates starts charging for frills, we know that life at the back of the plane has got even nastier. For those in first or business class, flying is still bearable, even if BA has stopped putting flowers in the first-class toilets. But it is increasingly tough for everyone else.

So how can air travellers make life at the back less awful? Here are five suggestions, developed over the airline austerity years.

- **Employ the Saturday night ploy.** Airlines usually charge less if your trip includes a Saturday night. A premium economy round trip that includes a Saturday night is often cheaper than economy flights during the week.

Several airlines have premium economy sections. They have two-and-a-half advantages over economy. First, your seats are a little roomier, with more leg room. Secondly, premium economy flights give you more frequent-flyer points, whose importance for comfort I discuss below.

Another advantage of premium economy is that you usually get some of the perks, such as flight socks or a disposable toothbrush and toothpaste, which we used to take for granted in ordinary economy. You also often get better headphones. As you can pack your own, superior, socks, toothbrush and headphones in your hand luggage, I count this as only half an advantage.

But the legroom and air miles are worth having if you do not mind the extra day or two away from home. An additional advantage is a Sunday spent recovering from the flight and sightseeing.

The extra hotel nights sometimes eat up the price saving, but, if not, most reasonable finance departments can be persuaded that a cheaper premium economy ticket is better than a more expensive economy one.

- **Study the seats.** The seats at the front of the economy section feel less claustrophobic. Against that, the armrests are fixed and thicker, making the seats feel more cramped. If you want legroom, the economy seats next to the emergency exits have enough to practise place kicking from a sitting position. But not all of them. The ones closest to the windows sometimes have a piece of the emergency door that makes them even more cramped than those further back. Download an app such as SeatGuru that gives you information about the comfort of each of the seats on your flight. The more frequent-flyer points you have, and the higher up you are on the airlines' loyalty programme, the quicker you can reserve your seat. Do it as soon as you can.

- **Never pay for in-air food.** Economy airline food has been grim for decades. Having to pay for it adds to the insult. Buy your food before you board, or bring it from home. Best of all:

- **Use the airline lounge.** For those who have longed for admission, airline lounges can disappoint. Quality varies, and the lounges are often as crowded as the seating areas outside. But you can have a shower between connecting flights, the WiFi is free, and you can avoid the need to eat on the plane by having a hot meal, often pretty good, before you board.

You can pay for lounge access at many airports, but, if you fly enough, you can earn free entry through frequent flyer programmes. Some travellers dislike the idea of being tied to one airline, especially if it persistently lets them down. But you don't have to stick to one to earn your frequent-flyer points.

• **Try the alliance partners.** You can earn your points by flying on any of the member airlines of one of the international networks such as One World and Star Alliance. So you can try a variety of airlines while accumulating points with the one you registered with. Even in these frills-cutting times, some airlines in each alliance are far better than others. Shop around and encourage the airlines that impose less pain on their economy passengers by flying with them.

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