

AIRLINE SEATS

THE PLANE TRUTH

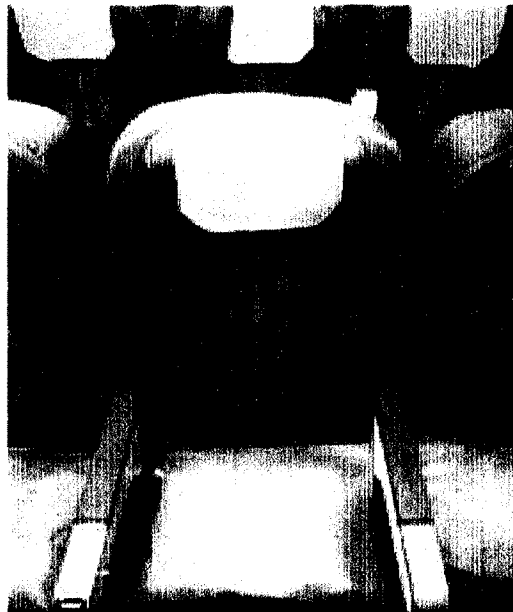
Getting stuck in a lousy seat on a long flight is no picnic. Squeezed between fellow passengers like the filling in a DoubleStuf Oreo, prevented from reading or eating by the person whose seatback lies in your lap, and bathed in fumes from the lavatory, you can only pray that the plane will land early.

To help you avoid such misery, we examined economy-class seating on long-haul aircraft of 11 top U.S. airlines as well as Air Canada. (On short-haul flights, generally those lasting less than 5 hours, reliability is more important than comfort for most people.) We found that on the same airplane, there can be significant differences in seat size and roominess—albeit in inches—that can make that long flight more tolerable. A seat's position in the plane can also spell the difference between agony and, well, non-agony.

Here is how to identify good and bad seats as well as those most people think are good, but really may not be. On page 25, you'll see the seats you want to avoid (and why), and on page 26, What You Can Do to get what you want without sharpening your elbows before boarding.

COMFORT BY THE NUMBERS

The airline industry uses two standard measures to assess comfort: "pitch," a term for seat-to-seat spacing from one row to the next (see top diagram, opposite page); and seat width, which is the distance between two armrests. But other factors



can affect comfort: the location of the seat in the airplane and your sense of spaciousness or crowdedness.

Pitch. The pitch airlines choose determines how many passengers they want to accommodate in economy-class cabins. The smaller the pitch, the greater the number of coach passengers the carrier can pack onboard. That translates into more profit for the airline, but cramped quarters for travelers.

Among U.S. carriers, pitch has largely settled on a tight norm of 31 to 32 inches. However, a few airlines routinely offer an extra inch or two, which provides more leg room for taller travelers. For example, the economy-class seat pitch on some planes in Delta's 767 fleet varies from 30

inches to a more generous 33 inches.

Last year American completed its much-advertised more leg room campaign, removing some 10,000 seats from its fleet to add inches to every row. Coach seating on American now offers a minimum pitch of 33 inches, except for some Hawaiian flights.

American doesn't have a monopoly on more generous leg room. Over the years, Midwest has garnered a loyal following of travelers who prefer its relatively roomy 33- to 34-inch pitch. This year, the airline is adding 717s to its fleet, and the good news is that pitch on these new planes is also 33 to 34 inches. Unfortunately, Midwest operates a limited number of flights from its Milwaukee hub, so it's not an option

for many travelers. All US Airways' A330-300 aircraft also offer a pitch of 33 to 34 inches in economy. Air Canada has 33- and 34-inch pitch on some aircraft, but some seats on its 747s and 767s have just 31 or 32 inches.

Width. Americans are getting larger, but airline seats haven't expanded with them. Most airline seats are 17 inches wide, although a few airlines will occasionally deploy 16-inchers. If these measurements seem narrow, that's because they are. Cushion width on many office chairs is 20 inches. And the cushion width on Amtrak's long-distance trains is 23 inches with a pitch of around 51 inches.

Among the U.S. airlines we looked at, Midwest's economy-class seats are the

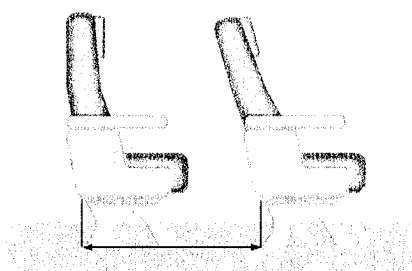
clear winners. Economy seats on its MD-80s are 21 inches wide, and seats on the new 717s are 20.5 inches wide. Low-fare carrier JetBlue comes in second, with 18.5-inch-wide seats on all its Airbus 320s.

SQUEEZED IN THE BACK

Klaus Brauer, a Boeing interiors project director who studies seating, says he subscribes to the philosophy that comfort can be defined as the absence of discomfort. With that in mind, you'll probably want to avoid the rear of most economy cabins, because that's where you'll find discomfort aplenty. Travelers seated in these areas may have to deal with increased foot traffic, noise, and even obnoxious odor, as flight attendants rush to and from the galley and other passengers pace the aisles, chat on public telephones, and wait in line for the lavatories.

Worse, some airlines squeeze a few 16-inch seats in rear rows, where the aircraft may be narrower. And some rear seats don't recline or have less-than-standard recline. Nonreclining seats become really uncomfortable when the person in front of you lowers his seat, reducing your

THE MEASURE OF COMFORT Seat pitch measures the distance between a point on one seat to the same point on the next seat. Most U.S. long-haul flights have tight seat pitches of 31 to 32 inches. By contrast, Amtrak long-distance trains have much more capacious seat pitches of 51 inches.



upper-body space by up to 20 percent. "The domino effect is fine when everyone wants to do the same thing at the same time," Brauer says. "But if someone wants to sit up and work, that's a problem."

Stiff-backed seats are found in other areas of the plane as well: the last row of a cabin section or just forward of emergency-exit doors. That's because seats

installed in front of bulkheads may not have enough room to lean back all the way or at all. And seats in rows ahead of exit doors are often frozen upright to ensure that there's enough room to access the exits.

THE ROOMIEST PLACES

Even though fewer people are flying these days, planes may still be crowded. That's because airlines cut back on the number of flights, particularly on less-traveled routes, to respond to any drop in business. So the plane you travel on may still be full at a peak hour or day. There are places you can find more room, but they have their drawbacks.

Exit-row and bulkhead seats. Many travelers prize seats in these two zones for their extra knee room. But both bulkhead seats and exit rows are usually near lavatories and galleys. Exit-row and bulkhead seats often have immovable armrests housing tray tables, which make some travelers feel confined. Couples and families traveling together often prefer to raise the armrests between them, which isn't possible in many of these seats. And

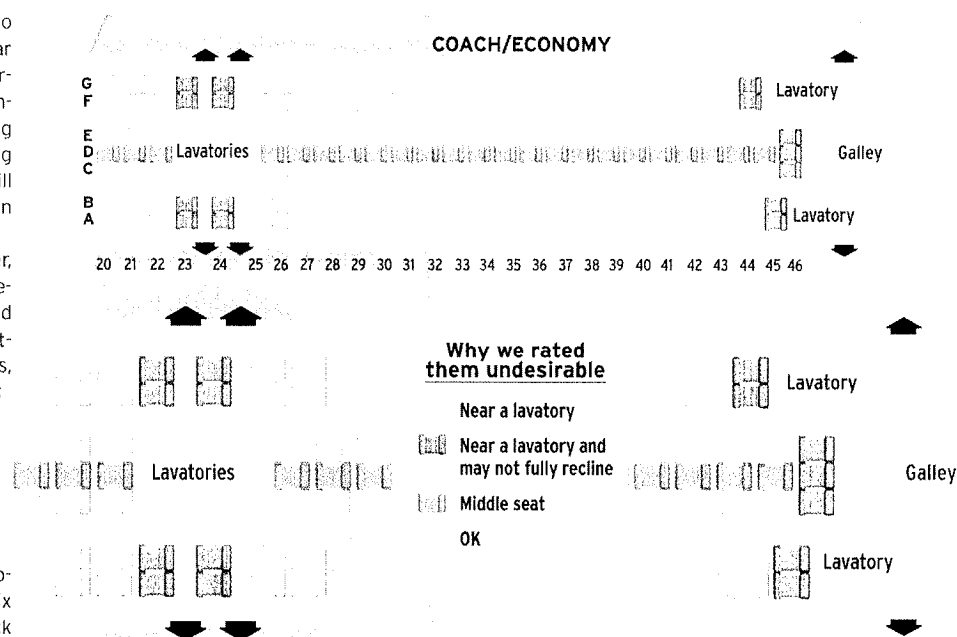
closeup

WHERE YOU DON'T WANT TO SIT

Identifying specific seats to avoid by row number is near impossible because each carrier devises its own seat configuration, even when using similar equipment. So seating on American's 767-200 will be different from seating on Delta's 767-200.

In this diagram, however, we created a prototypical wide-body airplane and identified seats that may be uncomfortable: those near lavatories, where foot traffic is high; nonreclining seats offering passengers almost no wiggle room behind passengers reclining in front of them; and middle seats, where many people feel crowded.

For a row-by-row description of seat comfort on six major domestic airlines, check out www.SeatGuru.com.



some seats are out of view of in-flight movie screens. Also, since there's no underseat space in front of bulkhead seats, long-legged travelers may find they can't stretch out their legs comfortably. For the same reason, carry-on luggage has to be stowed in overhead bins.

Exit rows from which passengers deplane in an emergency also have far more leg room. Travelers in such seats are required to help the flight crew and fellow passengers in an emergency, and so must meet Federal Aviation Administration suitability guidelines. They require that such travelers, among other things, be able-bodied and at least 15 years old.

Empty adjacent seats. Passengers with empty seats next to them report much higher levels of comfort, the equivalent of an extra 4½ inches of seat width, according to Brauer's research. A few airlines will block seats adjacent to their most frequent flyers. For most travelers, however, getting assigned next to an empty seat is a matter of luck.

To ensure that the seat next to you is empty, you can redeem frequent-flyer miles for a second seat or buy a second ticket. Some airlines urge wide-bodied travelers who anticipate they will encroach onto the next seat to purchase a second ticket. The carriers specify no upper weight or girth limits, however. Some airlines will refund the second fare later if the flight is not full.

Travelers who want an adjacent second seat must call the airline and ask for it. Airline reservations agents should check that armrests on the reserved seats are movable. A fixed armrest defeats the purpose of having a second seat.

Premium economy. Among U.S. airlines, only United has a premium-economy class, called Economy Plus, but it is also available from a few international carriers, including British Airways and Virgin Atlantic. A step above economy class, United's Economy Plus offers a pitch of 34 to 36 inches. But it isn't installed on all the airline's long-haul aircraft, and reservation agents can't be certain that it will be available on a given flight. Economy Plus seating is assigned on a first-come, first-served basis to United's most frequent flyers and passengers who pay full fare—a high price for a few extra inches. □

what you can do

LANDING THE SEAT YOU WANT

A whole lot more goes into your decision to select a particular flight than the width of the seat. The price, your destination, and departure times are factors that limit your choices. Nonetheless, if you settle on your travel arrangements early and take a few smart steps, you're more likely to snag a comfy berth onboard. Here are some strategies that may work.

BEFORE YOU GO

Select your seats when you buy airline tickets. If you can't reserve seats, the flight may be oversold. Airline reservationists will tell you if that's the case—but probably only if you ask. Some airlines may not allow you to reserve seats for deeply discounted tickets, for example, those from Hotwire, Priceline, or consolidators. If those are what you've bought, plan to check in at least two hours before the flight to get the best seats left.

Fly off peak. If your schedule is flexible, consider flying at an unpopular time. For domestic flights, that means midday and midweek flights, rather than early mornings and weekends. For international flights, avoid Friday and Sunday evenings.

Ask for the seat you want. If you're familiar with the airline you'll be flying and know which seat you'd like, ask for it.

Quiz reservation agents. Ask whether your seat fully reclines and whether it is near the lavatories or a galley. Agents may be able to help you steer clear of trouble zones. If you're traveling with family, you might want to ask about movable armrests as well. Don't rely on seating charts displayed on the Web; they don't always show details that could affect your comfort, nor do they typically disclose locations of the dreaded nonrecliners.

Move up. Airlines reservation computers may be programmed to book seats from the back of the cabin forward, so you might be offered seats farther back when seats closer to the front are still available. (Airlines may do just the opposite, too, and fill up the front seats first.) If, like Greta Garbo, you want to be alone, ask the reservations agent if there is any place on the plane with fewer passengers. But be clear that you don't want a nonreclining seat next to the lavatory. Also, if you have a tight connecting flight, request a spot near the front so that you can exit promptly.

Plot to get an empty adjacent seat. Airline reservationists generally assign middle seats only after aisle and window

seats are full. If you're traveling as a couple, select an aisle and window seat; it's possible that the middle seat will go empty. If it doesn't, the newcomer probably won't object to switching to the more comfortable aisle or window. Another good bet: the aisle seat of the center section on a wide-body plane. If the plane isn't full, your chances of having an empty seat alongside of you are high; most people don't want the seats in the middle because they'll have to climb over fellow passengers to get to the lavatory.

Choose airlines with good on-time arrival records. Researchers at Boeing have found that late flights suffer a reverse halo effect: Passengers delayed 30 minutes or more reported dramatically diminished seat comfort, regardless of actual seat differences. When you book, ask reservations agents about a flight's on-time performance. You can lower the likelihood of a late arrival by avoiding oft-delayed late-afternoon and evening flights and by steering clear of connecting flights that pass through airports prone to frequent weather-related delays.

AT THE AIRPORT

Get there early. Airlines may hold about 15 percent of their economy-class inventories for day-of-departure assignments. Early birds can swap less-desirable seats for better spots that get snapped up quickly, for example, exit row and bulkhead seats and rows near the front of the aircraft. Other held-back seats are the worst—nonrecliners and seats that can't view in-flight video screens, for example. These seats are typically given out last. Southwest Airlines flyers don't get pre-assigned seats, but board the aircraft in groups according to check-in time.

Get seat assignments for your entire itinerary. If you have a lousy seat for a connecting flight, request a new seat assignment for that connection when you check in for the first leg of your journey. Ask check-in agents to secure the new seat before canceling your assigned seat, or you may end up at the rear of the cabin, even if you booked months in advance.

Switch seats onboard. If, despite all your efforts, you've landed a dud seat, keep your eye peeled for a better one after you board. When you spot one, ask the flight attendant if you can switch. You may have to wait until the doors close to make sure that nobody else has been assigned that seat, but a polite request may ensure that you have first dibs.