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Smart Consumer Guide

Is there a fast way to load an airplane?

Airlines have been trying to figure it out for decades. They have agreed to disagree on the best method.

By [doubleace](#) Jun 27, 2011 2:56PM

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This post comes from Lynn Mucken at [MSN Money](#).

Inevitably, after I bump my way back to 27F, the prime window seat I secured by booking my flight about six years in advance, I hit the same roadblock: those dolts in 27D and E. They are settled in, strapped in and just a bit miffed that they have to unsettle, unstrap and push out into the crowded aisle to let me in.

"Idiots," I think. "They know someone is going to be in F -- F is never empty -- so why did they insist on boarding so early?" (No, I never wonder why I didn't board earlier, and, besides, that is not on the agenda today.)

As it turns out, the airlines have never quite figured out the best way to get their passengers aboard, and they've had 87 years to work on the problem. [American](#), for example, changed the way it loads passengers in May, and as a result, [writes](#) Hugo Martin in the [Los Angeles Times](#), "has either shortened the time it takes to load the planes or caused 'complete chaos' in the cabin." (The airline says it is working; the flight attendants think otherwise.)

It is in an airline's financial interests to shorten loading time. Wrote the LA Times:

The less time airlines spend boarding passengers, the more revenue-generating flights they can squeeze into a day. Every minute cut on boarding can save \$30 per flight, according to a 2008 study in the Journal of Transport Management.

That might not sound like much, but [Discovery News'](#) Eric Bland [did the math](#) and came up with \$200 million in savings per year for U.S. airlines if they could cut 10 minutes off each boarding.

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NOW PLAYING



According to the LA Times, all airlines load their first-class, premier club and passengers with children or disabilities first. After that, most have been loading in one of five basic ways:

No reserved seats

Southwest. You are placed in A, B or C queues based on when you secure your boarding pass, then take whichever unoccupied seat you want. The airline has an "EarlyBird Check-In" that lets you get a boarding pass 36 hours before departure instead of 24 hours, but you pay \$10. It doesn't guarantee you A-queue status, but increases your odds dramatically.

If you are anywhere in the A queue, you can score a window or aisle seat. Somebody has to be at the back of the C line, however, so if they are traveling with others, they probably won't get to sit together. In addition, those middle seats are pretty cramped, and the overhead bins above your row might be full. Passengers either hate it or love it. In the end, it probably comes down to whether you think it is worth the savings.

Random

American. You board in the order you get your boarding pass, regardless of seating assignment. You can have the seat you reserved and, if early enough in line, you can score baggage space right above your row, but it seems inevitable that there will be clogs near the front of economy class. Careful crowd control at the entrance probably is the key to making this work.

Back to front

Alaska, Continental, Delta, JetBlue and US Airways. Pretty simple: Those at the rear get on first, in theory never clogging up the aisles for those behind. The only problem is that this method is done by sections, leading to major congestion points that back up the traffic behind them.

Outside in

United. Window-seat passengers get on first, then those with middle seats, with aisle seats loading last. This makes perfect sense, but humans don't always see it that way. Travelers with separation anxiety don't handle this well.

Reverse pyramid

Currently, no airline. US Airways dropped this in 2009. According to [SeatGuru](#), "With the reverse pyramid, passengers simultaneously load an aircraft from back to front and outside in. Window and middle passengers near the

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back of the plane board first; those with aisle seats near the front enter the plane last." Confused?

Conclusions

According to the LA Times story:

Several academic studies suggest that the random and reverse-pyramid seating methods are faster than the back-to-front process. But the studies say those methods don't work well when loading families or groups of travelers. And some airlines say the random method can confuse and frustrate passengers.

"Our data confirms that pure random boarding is faster," said Sandy Stelling, Alaska Airlines' managing director of airport services. "However, we determined the negative impact, measured by our customers . . . was not worth the small gain in time."

In 2009, Jason Steffen, an astrophysicist at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory outside of Chicago, set out to mathematically determine which method was quickest.

"I was certain that the worst way to load the airplane was from front to back, so I ran my simulation in that configuration first to set a baseline," Steffen told [Physorg.com](#). "I was also somewhat convinced that the optimal way would be from back to front or something like it."

Instead he determined that back-to-front was the second slowest method, worse only than front-to-back, which no major airline uses.

The best loading method, [Physorg.com](#) said Steffen's studies showed, would have passengers board "10 at a time in every other row (since loading luggage requires about two aisles of space). This way, passengers could always be boarding luggage or sitting in their seats, rather than waiting in the aisle, as in the two previous methods."

Good luck keeping the herd organized for that.

All loading methods aside, there might be an easier answer. Wrote the LA Times: "One way to cut boarding time by up to four minutes, according to a study presented at the 2009 Swiss Transport Research Conference, is to reduce from 15% to 5% the percentage of passengers carrying two or more pieces of luggage."

Since most airlines have instituted baggage fees in the past two years, multiplying the number of carry-ons, that option doesn't seem feasible either.

My guess is that we will continue to wait in line to go through security, wait in line at the terminal's [Starbucks](#), wait in line outside the gate, wait in line on the ramp and wait in line in the aisle of the plane -- which, by the way, flies very fast between distant cities, making all the waiting worthwhile.

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35 Comments

NEWEST OLDEST **BEST** WORST CONTROVERSIAL

Mukilteo Man (Wanna Be Rich)

Jun 27, 2011 4:14PM



I'm surprised that no one suggested stop charging for checked bags and charge for carry-on bags instead. Get rid of the bags on the plane during the loading process - should speed up the seating process immeasurably...altho am sure the airlines are "hooked" on the \$3.2B fees they charge on checked bags. Don't think the carry-ons would equate to the same...as more bags would then be checked.

I also agree that random seating would seem to go faster - and even more so if it were truly random (no special seating except for first class).

This may not be too popular - but it seems to me I see more and more people abusing the policy of

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42 1 | Replies (0)

Someone

Jun 28, 2011 11:51AM



No matter what process airlines try to implement, there will always invariably be selfish people who take their dear sweet time and space, and everyone else's, to get on the plane, stow their bags, get situated, and get as comfortable as they possibly can, all while standing in the middle of the aisle, ignoring the crowd of people stacking up behind them, likely bumping, nudging, or sticking their rear end in the face of anyone unfortunate enough to be sitting near them. Airlines need to start charging stupidity fees.

26 1 | Replies (0)

mike robichaux (timetostanduptosomething)

Jun 28, 2011 9:32AM



Why don't airlines get smart and start charging customers who bring huge baggage on board a fee. This would drastically eliminate the need for people to try to cram bags into the overhead compartment and make them check them below. That would speed the loading and unloading procedure immensely.

24 1 | Replies (0)

Lv It Or Lvt

Jun 28, 2011 12:39PM



Best way would be, no carry-on baggage,period ,sit the F down and be quiet.

26 4 | Replies (0)

proud to be tex- american

Jun 28, 2011 11:18AM



One of the problems I have frequently seen with boarding back to front is those people sitting in the back will place their carry-on bags in the overhead storage at the front of the plane. When so many of them do that, by the time the people in the front board, there is no room left in their bins. They have to put theirs further back which makes it difficult to get to when the plane lands. I feel that the flight attendants should enforce that people need to use the bins directly over their seats and only use another if theirs has filled up. This issue alone would save quite a lot of time. They also tell you that your carry-ons can be one case within the size limits and one PERSONAL item such as a purse, briefcase, backpack. Only one should be placed in the overhead bins and the other under the seat. Yet, I see all the time where people carry 2 full size carry-ons, so both go into the overhead bins. Again, I think it is up to the airline to enforce the rules so that they apply to everyone fairly (since

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20 0 | Replies (0)

V767

Jun 28, 2011 9:57AM



When airplanes had front and rear stairs they use to unload thru the front and load thru the back and

could get a full 68 seat airplane back in the air in under 15 minutes. That's when the overhead rack had only hats and coats (a lot safer) and bags were in the cargo holds.

13 0 Replies (0)

CANTSAVEAPROPERNAME

Jun 28, 2011 9:47AM



A lot of people are just slow in action and thought.

13 0 Replies (0)

yankee707

Jun 28, 2011 5:25AM



I fly US Air all the time and I never saw them load a plane back to front....they actually do the exact opposite and go front to back...which creates major problems for those who board last. One way to improve the boarding process is to enforce the baggae size poicy they supposedly have. I know nobody wants to deal with lost baggage issues when you get to your destination but some of these people get out of hand with what the bring on as "carry on". They should also have an employee situated in the middle of the plane to help the boarding process rather than someone on the speaker reminding people to hurry up....

12 0 Replies (0)

CANTSAVEAPROPERNAME

Jun 28, 2011 9:45AM



You can spot these people on every flight. They are the ones who jump up and get in line when they started boarding by sections, and their seat is nowhere near that section, but they stand in line and make people have to get around them. They are also the first ones to hope up into the aisles as soon as the plane stops when everyone knows that it will take 5 to 10 minutes to get off.

I just relax and get on and off at the end and my time spent making congestion is non-existant.

12 2 Replies (0)

chirpy

Jun 28, 2011 11:05AM



I just like the people who try to carry on a huge bag that will no way fit in the carry-on fit test device. Then they spend 5 minutes trying to hammer it into the overhead compartment and wind up breaking something else stuff.

10 0 Replies (0)

theincredibleshrinkingwoman

Jun 28, 2011 5:43AM



The window, middle, aisle idea sounds good. As for adults with "separation anxiety" - grow up! This single 43 y.o. woman thinks people like you are pretty lame.

There will be exceptions; connections today are tight, so some people have to board late. That's the airlines' fault, not theirs.

And, no more babies on laps. If you have to pay for an animal, you should pay for a baby.

17 8 Replies (0)

moneyhawk

Jun 27, 2011 8:36PM



Sorry, but the idea that other people have to move out of their seats and into the aisle so that you can get to your seat is ridiculous. That tells me that the seats are WAY too close to each other. Reminds me of why I don't fly anymore.

11 2 Replies (0)

Mulski

Jun 28, 2011 11:16AM



Back to front and outside in makes the most sense; however, the one thing I haven't seen commented on yet is, those idiots that put their bags in the overhead at the first available space, rather than near where they sit.

On just about every flight I've ever taken, there are ALWAYS bags in the overhead just behind 1st class (and they are not crew bags), even though there are no people there. Besides being inconsiderate, this also causes a delay in the both the boarding/unboarding process, as the people sitting up front now have to fight their way to the back to **hopefully** find a space in the overhead for their bag. If there is no space in back, now they have to carry their bags back to the front so the

attendant can give them to the ground crew to be stowed underneath.

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9 1 | Replies (0)

mewaslucky

Jun 28, 2011 12:09PM



Make it a race. Board from the Back to front, but time people. The fastest into their seat and buckled up gets their fare refunded. You watch how fast people can move then!!
But seriously, Spirit charges for bringing luggage on board. I was upset with this at first, but after a few flights and seeing how much it speeds up the boarding, it may be worth it.

8 2 | Replies (0)

PJ Thornton

Jun 28, 2011 5:12AM



I think the passengers should be preloaded in "assembles" and then inserted into the plane like luggage. It would require a complete reconfiguration of an airplane, but would be worth it. Everyone arrives early; plenty of room to GYST; you are then inserted into a small soundproof compartment with catheters already in place. Equipment would lift you up and insert you into the plane. Hook up the main hoses, and the plane can then take off. Each of these compartments would have a hatch that the flight attendants could open from their fixed interior access aisleway. That way they could pass you your bread and water. Well, maybe not bread, but probably water would be available for a "nominal" fee.

7 1 | Replies (0)

calijim

Jun 28, 2011 12:56PM



How stupid is it to charge fees for checking bags and allowing carry-on bags for free? Looks like the brainiacs at most of the airlines can't figure out that if you charge to check a bag, people will bring them as carry-on bags and the loading process will deteriorate.

The ultimate problem is the way the aircraft is designed. With the ultralight composite materials that are so strong today, why not contemplate a full re-design of the aircraft concept that would create self contained passenger and luggage "pods" that can be attached to an aircraft framework?

You could load the passengers and luggage prior to the othe aircraft's arrival, then lift the "pod" containing the arriving passengers and luggage and put the departing "pod" in place. As a great side

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7 2 | Replies (0)

Thinkaboutit-156

Jun 28, 2011 11:39AM



Most planes have doors at the front and rear - USE THEM!

Jet Blue does this occasionally at Long Beach, and it's really fast. I'm sure they make ramps that service both the front and back of the plane so you're not on the tarmac, they should start using them.

6 1 | Replies (0)

LTCSTAN

Jun 28, 2011 10:23AM



How about quitting the idea of trying to fly the entire country. Raise the price, reduce the number of passengers and bring back the service airlines used to provide. There are other forms of transportation. You don't need to fly a family of 6 with 15 pieces of luggage. Flying used to be relatively enjoyable, now it's a cattle call, and that's and that's an insult to the cattle. The planes have becomes the passengers' dining room, telephone booth, office, dressing room and garbage can. I would rather fly with a plane full of civil people smoking than the current crop of pigs that fly today. The airlines need to get back to basics.

14 10 | Replies (0)

ColoradoEA

Jun 28, 2011 10:58AM



I have had enough issues with checked bags being delayed that I try not to check bags, however I have done so at the gate if (when) the plane is packed. Unfortunately, I have about a 50% ratio of delayed bags when I have done this if I have a connection which is 99% of the time. So I am one of those miserable people that charge my fare on the airline loyalty cards so I can get an early board place and find overhead room for my bag (which is regulation size). and I usually try to get a window seat so I can be in place and sorted out before my seatmates show up. I have flown first class on occasion and always take priority boarding because I like to be comfortable and have a drink before

taking off. Things will not change as long as the airlines are making money and not breaking any federal regulations by doing what they do unless people stop flying and tell them why. I haven't flown on a plane with more than one or two empty seats in several years now, in fact most of the time they

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4 0 | Replies (0)

NCCobalt

Jun 28, 2011 3:03PM



My two biggest complaints are people that sit in First Class who get on first are still putting their crap away while everybody from the back of the plane is trying to get on. You got on first put your crap away and sit down. Oh and dont hang over into the isle I will wack you with whatever I have...seriously. Second gripe people who wear big coats and sit down with them on (I guess they forget) then realize they have them on and stand up again while people are trying to sit so they can stuff them in the overhead to take up even more space. I am pretty sure nobody has ever frozen to death going from the airport to their car so leave the coat home or packit.

Oh and recently on an AA flight the attendants starting serving the first class passengers juice while once again everybody else was trying to get to the back. So we had to go around her as well.

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