

8 Ways To Avoid Getting Stuck In The Middle Seat

(Courtesy of Matt Moffitt, SMARTERTRAVEL)

Most travelers would say that the middle seat is the least preferable compared to an aisle or window seat. (That's even though flying etiquette suggests that the middle seat passenger gets access to both armrests, whereas the others only get the armrest on their outside.)

But it doesn't all have to be left up to chance. There are a number of easy methods you can employ to increase your chances of getting a window or aisle seat.

Pre-select Your Seat

The most surefire way to avoid the middle seat is to pre-select a seat during the booking process.

With most airlines moving towards charging for extras (at least on domestic flights), you might have to pay somewhere between \$10 and \$80 to preselect a seat. On international flights, there is more of a chance that you can select a seat for free.

You'll find that seats with extra legroom, like those towards the front of the cabin and in exit rows, are priced higher; you can usually snag a cheaper seat towards the back of the plane.

Check In Early

Your best chance to get a preferred seat—for free—is to check in right when the window opens, which is usually 24 hours before departure.

On fuller flights, there is less of a chance that you get your preferred seat as many are already pre-assigned. However, if your flight is emptier, then you may be able to snag an aisle, window, exit row or extra legroom seat for free.

On Southwest flights, checking in early is crucial. Southwest is an outlier in opting for open (instead of pre-assigned) seating. That means that you won't know which seat you'll be sitting in until you step onboard the plane.

The best way to increase your chances of getting a preferred seat on a Southwest flight is to check in right at 24 hours before departure. This increases your chances of being assigned a higher boarding position number, which will let you board earlier.

Avoid Basic Economy Fares

The cheapest Basic Economy tickets usually do not include free seat selection. Therefore, it may be worth paying more for a regular Economy ticket so that you get this bundled in.

A welcome exception to this rule is Alaska Airlines, which, unlike other major carriers, allows Basic Economy ticket holders to preselect a seat for free.

Choose Smaller Planes

The majority of aircraft flying domestically between large cities are the Boeing 737 and Airbus A320, both of which have six seats per row with a single aisle in the middle. That means that you have a 1 in 3 chance of being assigned a middle seat.

However, smaller regional jets like those produced by Embraer and Bombardier tend to have only four seats per row, with one aisle. This 2-2 configuration means that you are guaranteed a window or aisle seat.

On longer (usually international or transcontinental) flights, look out for the Airbus A330. This jet tends to be set up in a 2-4-2 configuration with two aisles, meaning there are generally no middle seats on each side of the plane.

When booking your ticket, you should be able to see which aircraft will be operating the flight by clicking on 'Flight Details' or (something similar).

Reach out to the airline on Twitter or Facebook Messenger

Your chances of success with this method are low but are worth a try, especially on longer flights.

If you want to ensure you don't get stuck in a middle seat but aren't able to, or don't want to pay to, pre-select a seat, you could try reaching out to the airline on social media. This is more time-efficient than calling them.

Just send the airline a direct message on Twitter or Facebook Messenger (make sure you don't post on their public wall/thread with your personal details). Include your booking reference number, passenger name and preferred seat/s.

Be prepared that they may come back to you to say you can pre-select your seat on their website (for a fee), but it's worth a try!

Sit Towards The Back Of The Plane

The back half of the plane tends to fill up less than the front half because passengers prefer to be able to deboard earlier. That means that the chances of there being empty seats are higher towards the back of the plane.

If you're not in a rush to deboard for a connecting flight or to exit the airport, then you may prefer to sit in the back half of the plane.

Use Your Elite Status

If you hold elite status with the frequent flyer program of the airline you're flying or a partner of theirs, you should be able to pre-select a preferred seat for free.

If you aren't able to do so on the airline's website, contact the airline on social media (using the instructions above). Be sure to also include the frequent flyer number, status level, and program that you hold elite status with.

Ask The Gate Agent

Whilst you may be assigned a middle seat at check-in, there are often changes to the aircraft type and/or passenger list in the lead-up to boarding. When you get to the gate, you could ask the gate agent to move you to a window or aisle seat. Just be aware that gate agents have a lot of pre-boarding tasks to complete, so they may not be able to fulfill your request.