

United's stopping 'surprise-and-delight' upgrades on the Boeing 767

(Courtesy of Zach Griff, The Points Guy)



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If you're looking for a fancier seat on your next United Airlines flight, you'll need to pay up.


Starting in August, the Chicago-based carrier will no longer offer "surprise-and-delight" upgrades from extra-legroom Economy Plus to premium economy aboard the Boeing 767-300ERs and 767-400ERs.

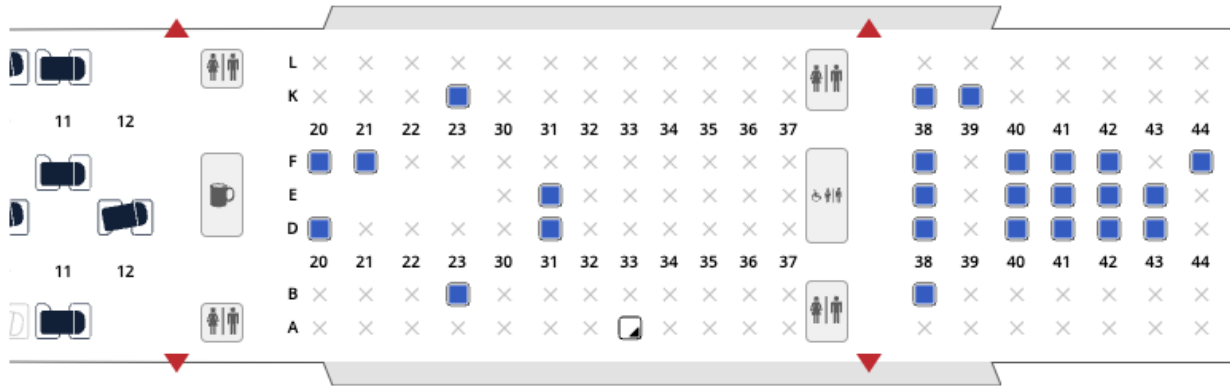
From now on, you'll need to pay for the cabin experience that you're looking to fly — whether you pay cash, [redeem miles](#) or [apply PlusPoints](#), United's upgrade currency.

Until then, lucky flyers can still select seats in the premium economy section for the same cost as Economy Plus within a few days of the flight. That's because only a subset of United 767s features these "purple seats." Until the [retrofits are completed across the fleet](#), United is marketing this upgraded cabin as Economy Plus.

São Paulo, SP, BR (GRU) to Washington, DC, US (IAD)

UA 860 | Boeing 767-400ER

 This seat map is for viewing only. You'll select your seat at a later time.



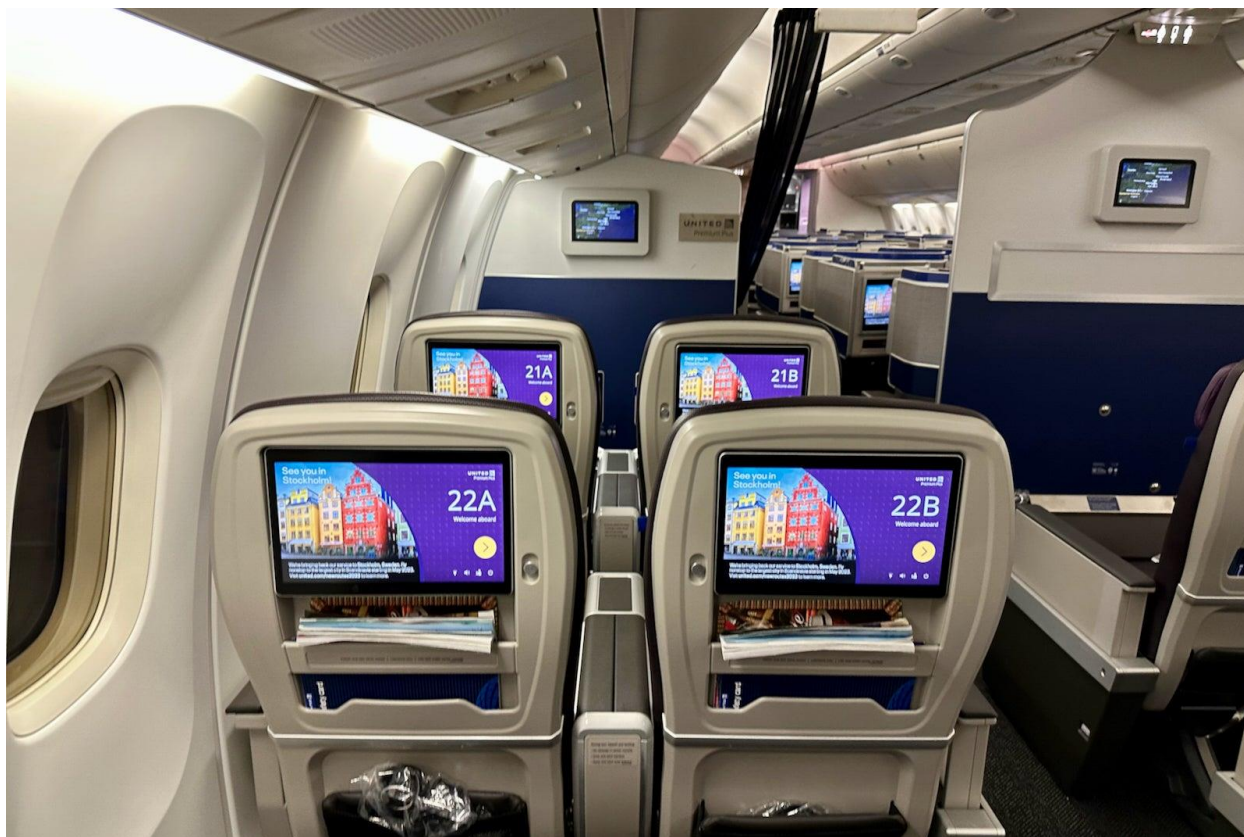
Rows 20 through 23, which feature Premium Plus seats, are marketed as Economy Plus. UNITED

Over the past few months, United has been busy [retrofitting its Boeing 767s](#) with the addition of a Premium Plus cabin.

When first retrofitting its fleet of 37 Boeing 767-300ERs a few years ago, United split these planes into two batches: 24 of them are now ["high J" versions](#) (featuring 46 Polaris business-class seats, 22 Premium Plus recliners, 43 Economy Plus seats and 56 economy seats) and 14 of them are in a less premium "standard" configuration that features 30 Polaris pods, 46 Economy Plus seats and 138 economy seats.

Notably missing from the latter batch was a Premium Plus cabin. While United originally planned for this to be a more leisure-focused configuration, there's recently been an [appreciable uptick in demand](#) for these upgraded seats.

Instead of letting competitors pick up that demand, United decided last summer to [add a Premium Plus cabin](#) to these 14 jets.



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This retrofit project has been in the works for the past few months, and now, the [airline estimates completion in August](#).

With the updated timeline, it makes sense for the airline to start charging for the Premium Plus seats, especially given the recent focus on capturing the growing market of premium revenue that's flourished among high-end leisure travelers during the pandemic.

The fate of United's 16 Boeing 767-400ERs was uncertain in 2020. The pandemic initially sent this fleet into long-term storage. However, the robust demand recovery, coupled with aircraft delivery delays from Boeing, meant that United didn't have much of a choice in bringing these roughly 22-year-old jets [back from the desert](#).

When the planes reentered service, they brought with them the legacy United cabins that didn't feature a premium economy section or the latest Polaris business-class pods.

However, now that the carrier plans to keep these jets in its fleet for the foreseeable future, it is breathing new life into its 767-400ERs with the installation of these cabins, among [other nose-to-tail improvements](#).



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Just like the 767-300ER, United hasn't been assigning the newly retrofitted 767-400ERs to specific routes, so flyers sitting in Economy Plus could select a Premium Plus seat for free within a few days of departure.

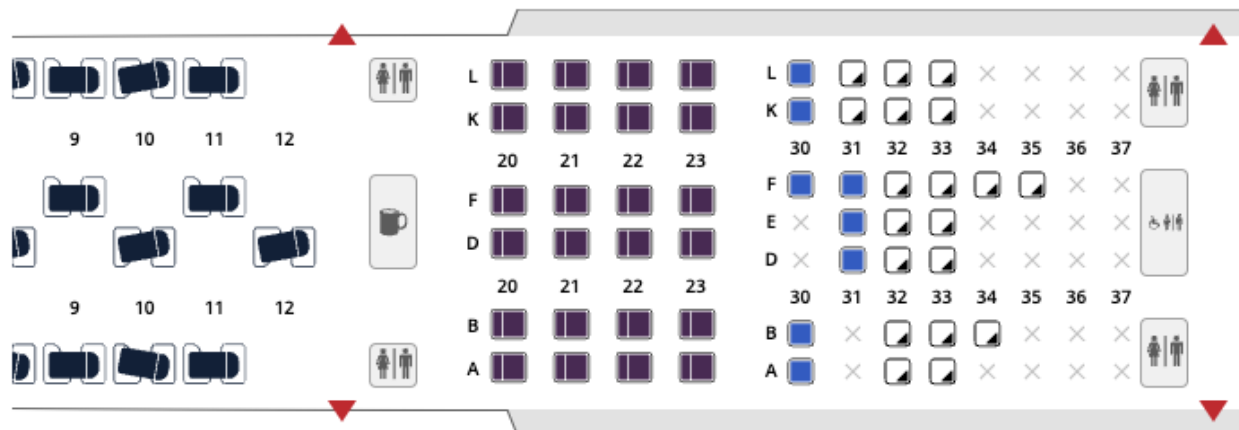
While this "surprise-and-delight" solution was always designed to be temporary, it does affect top-tier elite members the most.

Fare class is one of the big determining factors in [United's upgrade priority](#), and those ticketed in Premium Plus will be higher on the list than customers booked in economy — no matter the Premier level.

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After Aug. 1, United is selling Premium Plus cabins on all Boeing 767s. UNITED

As such, if elite members want to maximize their upgrade odds, they'll now need to purchase a Premium Plus seat, which often sells for at least a few hundred dollars more than those in coach.

United's take on premium economy, dubbed Premium Plus, first started rolling out in 2019. Since then, the carrier has installed the "purple seats," as loyalists affectionately call them, on its entire long-haul wide-body fleet, with completion now expected in August.