



MY DREAM FLIGHT IS WHERE NOBODY GETS A BAD SEAT

News / Airlines



If you search online for information about commercial aviation, it won't be long before you come across promotional pictures from the 1960s and 1970s showing the glamorous interiors of the then-new Boeing 737 and 747 aircraft.

Even in the economy section, the airlines seem to have allocated much more personal space per passenger than today's planes. And there's a good reason for that perception: they did. The big American airliners of the day carried fewer passengers than similarly sized planes today.

Fifty years ago, flying was far less common. While the aircraft may have been noisier and offered far less in the way of in-flight entertainment, they weren't cramming passengers in like sardines.

In the 1970s, PanAm actually removed seats to improve the passenger experience. Now, the mantra at many airlines – especially discount carriers – is to get as many people in as possible and to charge for every possible service.

Airbus recently received approval from the European Aviation Safety Agency to increase the

maximum number of seats on its A320neo from 180 to 195. And British budget carrier Ryan-air has reportedly convinced Boeing to increase the capacity of its upcoming 737 MAX 200 aircraft from 189 to 200 passengers.

This is despite the fact that humans are, on average, bigger now.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the standard configuration of a Boeing 777 was nine seats per row when the aircraft was new in the mid-1990s, but leading US carriers now have 10 seats across. Some airlines have also placed the rows closer together to add even more seats at the cost of leg room.

The bottom line for airlines may be positively affected by all this, but it doesn't do much for passenger comfort.

The discount airlines will, no doubt, respond by saying that flying is a lot cheaper than it used to be. True enough – but that's not entirely because they are squeezing more people on to each flight. It's also due to better aircraft design, increased fuel efficiency, cheaper fuel (for the moment, at least), reduced maintenance costs, and improved ticketing and check-in systems (including internet booking, where the customer does the work once performed by airline employees or commission-earning agents).

If, like me, you are a larger-than-average person, the loss of a few centimetres of seat width and leg room is a big issue. And my annoyance about that has been exacerbated by commentary in the British tabloids suggesting that fat people pay more to fly. This makes sense only if I get a discount for using far less than my allocated baggage allowance and if very slim people can fly for half price.

Besides, by my own choice, I am already paying more. Wherever possible, I fly in premium economy or business class. As a single person on a relatively good wage, I can afford to pay that price, but it's not an option for everyone.

And on some airlines, the premium, business and first-class seats are disproportionately more expensive than economy class.

Some airlines do offer economy seats with extra leg room and more comfortable head rests – for a price – but that doesn't address the seat-width issue.

So, I have a solution – an entirely new class of flying for those of us who prefer a little more space. How about reducing the number of seats, making them wider, and adjusting the fare to suit? Allow, say, 15 per cent more space across the board and charge 15 or 20 per cent more per ticket. I think that's a price many people would pay.

The airline's costs would be about the same – or even less given that they could probably do away with the special meals and vanity kits they give to people with premium seats, and would have to handle and carry less baggage. With fewer passengers, they may even be able to reduce cabin crew numbers – within safety limits, of course.

I don't know if this idea has been canvassed before, but surely it's worth a trial. If successful, it could lead to a new airline category positioned between the likes of Ryan-air and the full service, five-star carriers such as Etihad airways and Emirates.

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