

The Washington Post

October 31, 2019

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Overhead bins are a battleground. Here's what airlines are doing to fix the problem they caused.

IdeaWorksCompany contributed information to this article - - see italics.

At a recent media event in Chicago, United Airlines' chief customer officer showed off a photo of a generous overhead bin packed with six carry-on bags. According to USA Today, Toby Enqvist treated it with reverence.

"This," he said, "is like my Mona Lisa."

The airline says it is adding bigger overhead bins starting next year and expects the roomier carry-on storage to be available on 80 percent of its mainline fleet by 2023. Other major U.S. carriers, including Delta, American and Alaska Airlines, have also expanded their overhead space in recent years or announced plans to do so.

That's just one way airlines are trying to cope with a problem more than a decade in the making that they helped create by introducing fees for checked bags. Often, those solutions — early boarding, for example — force passengers to shell out even more cash.

"The airlines recognize that they needed to do something," says Henry Harteveldt, a travel industry analyst at Atmosphere Research Group. "They created a monster."

He said more air travelers started to carry their bags onto planes after the Rollaboard suitcase was popularized in the 1990s. But the real catalyst came during the recession, when traditional airlines, struggling with high fuel costs, introduced fees for checked bags in 2008. American was first, charging \$15 for the first bag, followed over the next several months by competitors. Southwest remains a holdout, allowing passengers to check two bags free of charge. Last year, the largest U.S. airlines raised their checked-bag fee to \$30 from \$25.

"We've been living with the legacy of that since then," says Jay Sorensen, president of IdeaWorksCompany, which consults with airlines on fees.

Last year, according to an estimate from the consultancy, global airlines charged more than \$28 billion in baggage fees. That includes checked luggage, charges for bags that are extra-heavy or oversize and some carry-on bags. That total is up from \$13.4 billion in 2014.

Even as airlines started to charge for bags, Harteveltdt says, they added seats to their jets, cramming more people in. Planes are flying fuller. Which means passengers who don't want to hand over at least \$30 for a checked bag — and don't have an airline credit card or elite frequent-flier status — try to cram everything into a carry-on and personal item.

That has led to anxious lines to start boarding, the familiar scramble for overhead space, and occasional Jenga-like reshuffling of bags onboard — not to mention a backup of passengers waiting to gate-check their bags because room has run out. Harteveltdt says that's not great for airlines, because it can slow down the process of passengers getting on and off planes, and force planes to spend more time on the ground between flights than operators would like.

“And it creates just a very tense, very uncomfortable environment at the beginning of the flight,” he says. “Because it's like musical chairs, only it's not just one person who doesn't find a place to sit, it's a whole bunch of people who don't have a place to put their bags.”

This has prompted more options — or restrictions — from airlines.

Stripped-down “basic economy” fares that Delta, United and American sell can limit carry-on bags, either explicitly or because passengers who buy these tickets board after everyone else has had a shot to stow their bags. United is the toughest on luggage, specifying passengers who buy the cheap restricted fare can only bring an under-seat personal item onto the plane. If they try to bring a full-size carry-on, they have to check it (for a fee) and pay an additional \$25 for handling.

Some higher-end fares, like Delta's Comfort Plus or first class, come with dedicated overhead space. Most airlines sell an early boarding add-on that suggests better access to bins, such as Southwest's EarlyBird Check-In, Delta's Priority Boarding extra and JetBlue's “Even More Space” seats, which include early boarding. Earlier this month, Delta even launched a \$59 annual subscription bundle called SkyMiles Select that includes relatively early boarding.

JetBlue is running a test in Orlando offering passengers the option to check a carry-on bag before reaching security checkpoints for \$5.

“We hope customers who take advantage of this option will enjoy a more streamlined travel experience by carrying fewer bags through security and a quicker boarding process at the gate,” spokesman Philip Stewart said in an email. He said the airline had not made the call to broaden the trial or change its baggage policies permanently.

Ryanair, the European low-cost airline, has what Sorensen calls “the most perfect bag policy:” It charges between 6 and 12 euros for priority boarding, a small personal item and a wheeled bag. The airline warns that the option “will quickly sell out;” everyone else has to pay to check a bag or limit their luggage to an item that fits under the seat.

“You’re going to pay a modest fee for this, but you’re getting the benefit of getting onboard ahead of other people, and you have the ability to have assured space to put a medium-size roll-on bag with you on the flight,” Sorensen says. “And it works.”

Ultra-low-cost carriers such as Spirit, Frontier and Allegiant do what larger carriers haven’t dared: charge for both carry-on and checked bags. They allow a free personal item to go under the seat, but passengers must pay to bring anything larger on the plane.

Some experts think they have the right idea.

“I think that there’s a good amount of jealousy over Spirit’s carry-on fees,” says Sorensen. “Because it instantly fixes a multitude of problems ... The boarding process is lickety-split. There is no drama, the plane boards quickly, it’s easy to be in the aisle as the plane is boarding.”

Whether passengers can tolerate the rest of the experience on those carriers — which tend to charge for every part of the journey in exchange for offering lower base fares — is another question. Sorensen doesn’t think traditional airlines want to risk their brands by taking a cue from the lowest-cost operators.

“The optics of charging for a carry-on brings them far too close to Spirit and to Allegiant for them to consider doing that, and so they don’t,” he says. “They are struggling with finding their good solutions.”

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