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## **Fliers Can't Get Enough of the 'Upper-Middle Class' Section of the Plane**

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*IdeaWorksCompany contributed information to this article - - see italics.*

The new hot section on the plane isn't at the very front.

Not quite business class and definitely not coach, premium-economy cabins are hooking travelers willing to treat themselves to extra comfort for about double the price of a coach seat on some flights.

With offerings labeled Premium Plus, Premium Select or Premium Economy, airlines are expanding these sections, which typically come with roomy seats, early boarding, free alcohol and better meals. Airlines say they appeal to travelers with more disposable income, especially on long-haul flights where business-class seats can run thousands of dollars more.

*"I refer to it as an upper-middle cabin for the upper-middle class," says Jay Sorensen, an industry consultant and president of IdeaWorksCompany. These sections appeal to travelers on work trips with budget-conscious employers, and vacationers who want some comforts without shelling out for business class.*

Unlike with Delta Air Lines' Comfort Plus or other sections with extra legroom, major U.S. carriers don't give their loyalty members complimentary upgrades into these cabins on trans-Atlantic routes. Travelers upgrade with cash or miles, use upgrade certificates or buy the tickets outright.

*For flights to Europe from the U.S., round-trip tickets in the premium-economy cabin average about double the cost of main-cabin tickets, according to a fare analysis conducted by IdeaWorksCompany. Business-class seats on those routes are roughly double the cost of premium-economy seats, the analysis found.*

Premium-economy cabins are part of airlines' broader push toward deluxe offerings. They also play into carriers' loyalty strategies: Higher-tiered members get special upgrade points or certificates they can apply toward the seats.

Travelers who do the math on upgrades say the decision depends on the costs, which can vary depending on demand and time of purchase. Customers also factor in flight length, whom they are traveling with and how much legroom they need. (Taller travelers who spoke to The Wall Street Journal say they are more likely to pony up for the extra space.)

Scott Jameson, a 68-year-old retiree from the Houston area, takes three to four international trips a year with his wife. They recently flew in United Airlines' Premium Plus seats to Europe. Jameson says his wife managed to sleep in Premium Plus, which she typically can't do in coach.

Because upgrades are now harder to come by and depend on status, Jameson says he pays for the seats on overnight trans-Atlantic flights.

"Once you've had a taste of it, there's typically no going back," he says.

### **Premium growth**

U.S.-based airlines are equipping more planes with premium cabins to compete with international carriers' longstanding premium-economy service, analysts say.

American Airlines introduced long-haul premium-economy seating in 2016, the first domestic carrier to do so. It plans to increase the number across its fleet in the coming years, says Kimberly Cisek, the company's vice president of customer experience.

Andrew Nocella, United's chief commercial officer, said in the airline's recent earnings call that the Premium Plus cabin, which averages 21 seats on long-haul international flights, is the carrier's most profitable.

German carrier Lufthansa, which introduced premium economy nearly a decade ago, now has 52 premium-economy seats on its Airbus A380-800 wide-body airliners. Qantas Airways plans to add 40-seat premium-economy cabins to its A350s arriving in the 2026 fiscal year. The planes will fly direct to New York from Australia's east coast.

With ever more sections and options on planes, travelers say it can be hard to figure out whether upgrading is worth it. One way: dividing the cost of the upgrade by the number of hours in flight.

Hannah Norcini took this approach on a recent Delta flight from Atlanta to Tokyo. The 32-year-old, who works for the state of Florida, is a self-described "normal Joe Schmo" who spends cautiously. She considered an upgrade to treat herself on the birthday trip. After consulting forums on Reddit, she learned that \$50 an hour is considered a standard rate for an upgrade.

An upgrade from economy to Premium Select cost \$800 in the days before her flight. But when she checked in at the airport, she saw an upgrade offer for \$375—roughly \$29 for an hour of flying.

“I didn’t even think twice,” she says. “I just said to myself, ‘Sold.’”

The flight attendants served her food with dishware, but it seemed to be the same food as the main cabin. She received noise-canceling headphones, a blanket and pillow. As a bonus, the seat beside her was empty. She rates the service an eight out of 10, somewhat less than the treatment she expected for the extra money spent.

A Delta spokesman says about 70% of customers who book premium seats with the airline repurchase them on future flights. Delta plans to increase the number of Premium Select cabins on future routes.

### **Class competition**

The deals and upgrades that leisure travelers scored on first, business and premium seats during the pandemic business-travel drought are harder to get as work-related travel picks up.

United’s Premium Plus seats are similar to domestic first-class seats in terms of seat size and pitch, Nocella, the United executive, said. The distance between seats, or pitch, of Premium Plus is between 38 and 40 inches long, compared with 31 inches in the main cabin on wide-body planes.

One of the most popular markets for those seats is on routes to and from London’s Heathrow Airport, Nocella says.

Some travelers complain that airlines have no incentive to improve the main-cabin experience as long as they continue to introduce new classes of better seats.

Emre Orbay, a 29-year-old software engineer who lives in San Francisco, says he regularly pays to upgrade to premium economy on trans-Atlantic flights so he can avoid rubbing shoulders with the person next to him.

It doesn’t hurt that the food is also better, he says. To him, premium economy is the difference between feeling like part of a herd of cattle and what he considers to be a tolerable experience.

“It’s the little dignities,” he says.