

# How to get an airline upgrade?

Tips for travelling in style without paying through your nose



Everyone who frequently travels by plane has wished to escape the man in the next seat smelling of cheap aftershave, the bawling babies, and the queue in front of the lavatory without having to fork out a fortune. But even if you do usually fly business, you may wish for a little bit more privacy and comfort. While the "good old days" of free upgrades for acting your smarmiest are long gone, there are still ways to increase your chances for an affordable seat with somewhat more legroom.



If you haven't done so, join a frequent flyer programme as soon as possible and begin clocking up miles. This is undoubtedly the most relaxed and straightforward way to get an upgrade. When you have earned a certain number of miles—for instance, book an economy seat and then use miles to upgrade to business class, or book business and use miles to upgrade to first, respectively. Some carriers will even offer unlimited complimentary upgrades to top-tier members, so if you happen to be a very frequent flyer you may not even need to give miles.

**Tip No. 1** If you often pay by credit card, consider switching to a card with which you can earn miles. Similarly, check out the airline's mileage partners such as other airlines, hotels, or car rental companies and opt for an airline with which you are most likely to run up miles fast. This has become more relevant recently as many airlines changed their policy in 2007 to make frequent flyer miles expire more quickly. You cannot count on redeeming miles if you only fly with the airline once in a blue moon.

**Tip No. 2** If you aren't a member of a frequent flyer program, travel with your spouse or "domestic companion" who is, and you may enjoy complimentary membership for the flight with the opportunity for a miles upgrade, or, if your companion is a top-tier member, even for a complimentary upgrade. Some airlines even extend complimentary membership to any kind of travel companion, so traveling with your business partner who is a top-tier member may also win you a "free" upgrade.

**Tip No. 3** If you don't have the patience to earn flyer miles or if you use different airlines and are up for a bargain, hunt for a "Y-Up" or "Q-Up" economy fare, for which some airlines also use other letters like M and Z. This is either an economy seat with an automatic upgrade or a strongly discounted first class. Ask the airline booking agent on the phone specifically for a Y-Up or Q-Up, or, if you book online, search for a first-class seat. If a Y-Up is available, the fare will automatically show up as the lowest rate.

**Tip No. 4** Alternatively, buy a cheap upgrade at the airport. For instance, many low-cost US domestic airlines such as AirTran and Spirit will release unsold first class seats at the airport on the day of departure. So instead of paying \$2000 for a business class flight coast to coast, you may get into first class with an economy class ticket that cost you \$300 and just \$150 each way for an upgrade.

**Tip No. 5** Speaking of airports, avoid flying from large ones. There will be masses of other frequent flyers competing for upgrades. Also, arrive early: If you are on an airport standby list and if there are a few mileage upgrades available but dozens of mileage programme members requesting them, those who check in first get them. The same applies for last-minute first class upgrades sold at the airport and flights with an oversold economy or business class, on which top-tier members may be so lucky to get be moved for "free".

**Tip No. 6** If you are an infrequent flyer and feel lucky, ask for a seat towards the front of the plane when checking in. Passengers at the front seem to be most likely to get moved to the next higher class at the last minute. Again, it helps if you are a top-tier member, as, for example, Hon. Circle with Lufthansa. If you are aspiring to a business class seat, try to fly on a wide-body aircraft like Boeing 777 with masses of business class seats.

**Tip No. 7** Although rarely, ticket agents may upgrade you if you are on a flight for a special occasion, for example your honeymoon or your wedding anniversary. So if this is the case, try mentioning it. Similarly, there is no harm in dropping your title, which may not get you an upgrade "automatically", but if all other things of other applicants are close to equal, your chances of being upgraded are certainly better than average.

**Tip No. 8** There is hardly any harm, either, in showing yourself to the check-in staff as the nice person you are. While you can't expect any concrete rewards, this may just tip the scales when you're competing with other passengers, and you'll certainly enjoy the noble feeling that you're one of the few civilized people in the frenetic world of flying.

Having said all that, consider that striving for an upgrade is probably not worth the effort on a one-hour domestic flight. If you aspire to an upgrade, then do it on a long-haul flight where you'll get 5-star-cuisine, seats that convert into beds and where you can forget about class consciousness over a bottle of premium wine.