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How Much for Your Airplane Seat?

Getting bumped from a flight used to be a good deal. What happened?

■ Volunteering to give up your seat on an overbooked flight was once an easy victory. The airline put you on the next available plane, delaying your trip maybe as little as an hour or two, and you walked away with a free round-trip ticket for travel anywhere in the United States. The rewards are still attractive, but these days they are generally less predictable and more restricted. So before you race to the gate to hand in your boarding pass, consider the following.

Free and easy? Of 10 airlines investigated, five—Delta, TWA, USAir, Tower, and Kiwi—continue to reward volunteers with free domestic round-trip tickets, which are good for one year. Some of these airlines impose restrictions similar to those placed on frequent-flier tickets, with blackout dates and limited availability on certain routes (don't expect the free trip to take you to the Super Bowl, for example). Tower does not put restrictions on its reward tickets. However, you might have a longer wait when you are bumped, because its flights are less frequent. And if Tower places you on another airline's flight, you'll probably have to pay the new airline an additional fee.

Know the offer. American, United, Northwest, and Continental have replaced free tickets with transportation credit vouchers worth a certain dollar amount, to be used for future travel on that airline within one year. (America West has always used a voucher system.) Voucher reward values are based on objective criteria. First and foremost is the route you're flying. In other cases, the almighty gate agent decides what you'll get—call it the misery index. Are these passengers business travelers with meetings to attend or vacationers with time to kill? What is the availability and frequency of upcoming flights? Other factors include time of day (usually the later the hour, the better the reward) and time of year (holiday woes make for higher incentives).

Continental, for one, uses a set formula for its rewards: voucher amounts are based on the *lowest* round-trip fare available for the overbooked flight. If a 21-day APEX fare on that flight is \$210, Continental will round your voucher re-

ward up to \$225. Note that—contrary to many fears—how much you actually *paid* for the original ticket (full or discounted fare) will not affect the compensation you receive.

All passengers are created equal—almost. If not enough people on an overbooked flight forfeit their seats, the agent may simply keep raising the offer until passengers just can't refuse. (If that doesn't work, passengers will be bumped involuntarily, based on two factors: how much they paid for their ticket and when they arrived at the gate.) Don't panic if you already accepted the initial reward offer and it just rose by \$200. Passengers who signed up to be bumped three hours before the flight will get the same reward as those who volunteered at the last minute. First-class passengers will get the same-value ticket or voucher as those in coach.

Can you increase your odds of being bumped? Although you won't be able to find out in advance if your flight is overbooked, keep in mind that the odds of a flight being overbooked are higher on Friday evenings and holidays.

And no, you cannot call the gate agent *before* getting to the airport to volunteer your seat: you'll need to do so in person, first come, first served. —CAREN OSTEN GERSZBERG

In the Sky, with Diamonds

Forget to pick up a Barbour jacket for Mum on your jaunt to London? Starting in June, British Airways passengers can test an innovative seat-back entertainment system that includes an in-flight video shopping channel. Browse for duty-free jewelry, clothing, toys, and leather goods from Harrods, Liberty, Aquascutum, Steiff, and the Disney Store. Oxfam will be peddling ethnic crafts such as Zapotec hall rugs, African warrior statues, and Peruvian bowls. At first only one 747 will offer the service; by December, it will be available on all BA transatlantic flights. Goods can be delivered anywhere in the world: they'll even gift wrap.

—SHANE MITCHELL

Last year 793,747 air travelers volunteered to give up their seats; 48,665 were bumped involuntarily.