

Escape: Report

Economy seats may all look the same, but there's a big difference between them. Here's how to bag the best (and avoid the worst)

Are you sitting comfortably?



Picture: GETTY

by TOM
CHESSHYRE

PICKING the perfect seat in economy class is a minefield. But a little research can go a long way — and make your flight much more agreeable.

The big problem is that many airlines — including British Airways, Virgin Atlantic and all budget airlines — now charge passengers who book 'basic' hand baggage-only versions of economy-class tickets to select a seat.

This means that, depending on which type of economy ticket you have bought, there will be different charges and rules for when you can select your seat (if you can at all).

For example, if travelling with hand baggage-only 'economy basic' on BA from Heathrow to Geneva on April 17, the current price of £92 does not let you select a seat.

Instead, your seat will be allocated. You will also be required to board the plane last (just to rub your nose in it).

So if your instinct is to fly as cheaply as possible, it's a lottery — although for £19 extra you may be tempted to upgrade to 'economy plus'. This allows you to select your own seat, but you can only do so 48 hours before departure.

That's just with BA. Each airline seems to have its own set of rules, which can vary depending on whether you are travelling short-haul or long-haul.

Virgin Atlantic has no fewer than three types of economy seat on some planes.

Its Heathrow to Orlando service offers 'economy light', 'economy classic' and 'economy delight'. With the first, you may select a seat at check-in; with the second, you are allowed to choose your seat at any time after booking; and when it comes to the final — poshest — economy seat you can opt for one with extra legroom.

For a Virgin flight from Heathrow to Orlando this summer the price could be as much as £357 in 'light', £457 in 'classic' and £557 in 'delight'. These figures might well differ 'depending on when you fly', a Virgin spokeswoman said.

EVER since budget airlines burst onto the scene in the mid-Nineties, the variations and prices of economy seats have been like shifting sands. The simple old days of economy, business and first-class are well and truly over.

So what can you do? Well, first of all it pays to bone up on the basic rules before you even book your flight. Go online and check out what each class offers.

BA has a page entitled 'Reserving your seat in advance', while you can find Virgin's seat comparison section via its 'Fly with us' page. Most airlines, including BA and Virgin, also provide seat maps.

Knowing what's what ahead of time helps, as the impulse is to hurry when you are mid-booking, which can lead to mistakes.

Then there is the website *seatguru.com*. It's so trustworthy a BA spokeswoman said that she relies on it. The best and worst seats are clearly marked — simply enter your flight number or the route you intend

THE HOT SEATS AND THE NOT SEATS ON SIX AIRLINES

BRITISH AIRWAYS

Heathrow to New York
Boeing 747-400

- ✓ **Seats 29A and 29K:** Extra legroom
- ✗ **Row 37:** Limited recline and close to toilets and galley
- ✓ **Rows 51 and 52:** Seats B-C and H-J, good for couples
- ✗ **Row 55:** Limited recline and near toilets

VITAL STATS
Seat pitch 31in,
width 17.5in;
seats recline

virgin atlantic

Heathrow to Orlando
Boeing 747-400

- ✗ **Row 38:** Extra legroom but near toilets
- ✗ **Row 46:** Seats D-G, limited recline and near galley
- ✓ **Row 53:** Seats D-G, extra legroom and bassinet for infants
- ✓ **Rows 61-63:** Seats A-C and H-K, good for couples

VITAL STATS
Seat pitch 31in,
width 17.5in;
seats recline

RYANAIR

Stansted to Dublin
Boeing 737-800

- ✗ **Seat 11A:** Missing a window
- ✗ **Seat 12F:** Also missing a window
- ✓ **Rows 16-17:** More legroom but extra charge (£15)
- ✗ **Row 33:** Close to toilets and overhead bins are used by crew

VITAL STATS
Seat pitch 30in,
width 17in;
no recline

easyJet

Glasgow to Paris
Airbus A319

- ✗ **Row 1:** Extra legroom but the charge is £18.49 and it's close to the toilets
- ✓ **Rows 10 and 11:** More legroom and an extra charge of £14.99; table is in seat ahead not in armrest, so it is more convenient than Row 1
- ✗ **Row 26:** Missing windows and close to toilets

VITAL STATS
Seat pitch 29in,
width 18in;
no recline

W!ZZ

Luton to Warsaw
Airbus A321

- ✗ **Row 1:** Extra legroom, with a £22 charge, but close to a galley and the toilets
- ✓ **Row 12:** Seats A and F, extra legroom with a £16 charge
- ✓ **Row 25:** Good for couples, but a £16 charge
- ✗ **Row 39:** seats 38C and 38D close to toilets and galley

VITAL STATS
Seat pitch 30-32in,
width 18in;
no recline

Emirates

Manchester to Dubai
Airbus A380-800

- ✓ **Row 54:** Seats D-G, extra legroom and bassinets for infants
- ✗ **Row 67:** Extra legroom, but close proximity to the toilets
- ✓ **Row 81:** Seats A and K, extra legroom

VITAL STATS
Seat pitch 32-34in,
width 18in;
seats recline

* Source: Seatguru.com

to take (see examples above). Tips include paying to pick economy seats near the back on long-haul flights, as airlines tend to allocate seats from the front. 'You might end up with three seats to yourself on less packed flights,' says Tom Otley, editor of Business Traveller magazine.

On a Boeing 777, he advises checking if the economy cabin is configured with nine seats or ten seats abreast — obviously there is more room with nine. BA is converting cabins from nine to ten on some routes.

And the bigger the seat pitch, the better

— it's the distance from one part of a seat to the same part on the seat in front.

Know when checking-in opens — set an alarm on your phone to warn you — and pounce to secure the seat you prefer, ahead of everyone else, as soon as it is allowed.

When doing so, consider whether you intend to travel with small hand luggage that will fit beneath your feet, or a bigger bag. Booking an aisle seat for a short-haul flight in Europe might make sense if you have a small bag that can be tucked beneath the seat in front, as you can board later than

others to avoid all the kerfuffle of finding spaces in overhead bins.

Finally, the perennial question: 'Window or aisle?' Mr Otley says many passengers think being by a window means you are stuck, and all you get is a pretty view.

'In fact, they mean you are never disturbed,' he says. 'If you want to get up, it only takes a moment for others to move.'

■ **TOM CHESSHYRE** is the author of *How Low Can You Go? Round Europe For 1p. Each Way (Plus Tax)*.