

What you need to know: COVID-19: Airline seat capacity policy

March 19, 2021

As part of their efforts to keep travelers safe, some airlines are social distancing passengers by keeping a number of seats free on flights; typically, the middle seat is kept free. This report details what airlines are doing and includes information on those that have not announced the adoption of such measures.

Africa

Airline	Seating adjustment
Kenya Airways	<p>Passengers booking the airline's Economy Max product can increase their personal space by booking the adjacent seat or row of seats.¹</p> <p>Economy Max seats may only be purchased online during check-in, between 48 hours and 3 hours before departure.</p> <p>The cost of the extra seat ranges from US\$15 on domestic flights through to \$80 to Europe and \$120 to the Americas. A small per-seat discount applies if purchasing two spare seats.</p>

Asia Pacific

Major airlines

Airline	Seating adjustment
Air New Zealand	<p>For a short period, initially from August 13 until August 16, seating was allocated to allow an empty seat between customers traveling alone.</p> <p>The airline now allocates seating to allow additional space around customers where possible.² Air New Zealand will try to keep families and some traveling companions together.</p>
ANA	No announcement
Cathay Pacific	As part of its Cathay Care wellbeing commitment, the airline will block off seats "wherever possible." ³
Garuda Indonesia ⁴	To maintain social distancing on board, a seat is left empty between each passenger.
Japan Airlines (JAL)	Until June 30, JAL introduced a temporary restriction on seat assignments to allow more personal space onboard. As a result, certain seats were unavailable for reservation. The restriction did not apply to some aircraft and routes nor to First and Business class on international flights.

¹ [Kenya Airways](#), Economy Max

² [Air New Zealand](#), COVID-19 Hub

³ [Cathay Care](#)

⁴ [Garuda Indonesia](#), Preventive Action

Asia Pacific

Major airlines (continued)

Airline	Seating adjustment
Philippine Airlines ⁵	When flights are not full, seats are allocated in a way that maximizes personal distance between passengers.
Qantas	From April, Qantas and Jetstar kept the middle seat free. ⁶ This policy ended in June with the introduction of the Fly Well program, which states “the aircraft configuration, including the seats and galley, act as a natural barrier, and people are not seated face to face.” ⁷
Singapore Airlines	While there is nothing indicating the airline is keeping seats free, it has introduced dedicated seating zones onboard to separate transit passengers from non-transit passengers. Passengers must remain in their designated zone. ⁸
Virgin Australia	Wherever possible, Virgin Australia will try to keep a seat empty between passengers traveling alone.

Other Asia Pacific airlines

Airline	Seating adjustment
Bangkok Airways	This Thai regional airline pre-allocates seats onboard to ensure safe distances between passengers. ⁹
FlyPelican	Seat allocation procedures at this Australian regional airline ensure social distancing within the aircraft. Where possible there will be a free seat between passengers not travelling together.
Regional Express	While authorities do not consider social distancing to be necessary on board, this Australian regional airline will try to allocate alternating occupied and unoccupied seats (unless passengers are traveling together) ¹⁰
Royal Brunei Airlines ¹¹	Seats are allocated to maximize available cabin space. Middle seats will only be allocated where necessary.
Vistara	Indian full-service airline allows passengers to book an adjoining seat at an equivalent fare. ¹²

⁵ [Philippine Airlines](#), PAL redefines the normal flying experience

⁶ [News.com.au](#), June 4, 2020

⁷ [Qantas](#), Fly Well, On board the plane

⁸ [Singapore Airlines](#), Precautionary measures

⁹ [Bangkok Airways](#), Practices to ensure safe travel

¹⁰ [Regional Express](#), Coronavirus Safety Information

¹¹ [Royal Brunei Airlines](#), Flying with us

¹² [Conde Nast Traveller India](#), July 17, 2020

Asia Pacific low-cost carriers

Airline	Seating adjustment
GoAir	Through its GoMore fare option, this Indian carrier allows passengers to buy two seats per person in order to keep the adjacent seat free. Keeping the middle seat free is only available for passengers seated in the first two rows.
IndiGo	From July 24, 2020, under its “double seat bookings” promotion, IndiGo passengers can pay to ensure the adjacent seat is kept free. The second seat will cost up to 25% of the normal price. ¹³
Jetstar	No announcement from Australian low-cost carrier
Jetstar Asia	From April 21, all flights operate with a reduced number of passengers to allow for safe distancing on board. It is not clear if this policy remains in place today.
Lion Air ¹⁴	Where possible, Lion Air seats passengers, who are not part of a family or group traveling together, at a distance from other passengers. To support this, the airline has reduced maximum capacity on some aircraft.

Europe

Major airlines

Airline	Seating adjustment
Air France	On practically all flights, low load factors mean Air France is able to observe physical distancing. ¹⁵
British Airways	No announcement
Iberia	Where occupancy levels permit, passengers are seated to ensure maximum distance between them. Iberia notes that EASA has determined that it is not necessary to leave an empty seat between passengers.
KLM	Whenever possible, KLM creates as much space as possible around passengers by keeping seats empty.
Lufthansa	In the #WeCare section of its website, Lufthansa makes no mention of leaving any seats free on its flights.

¹³ [Times of India](#), July 17, 2020

¹⁴ [Lion Air](#), August 5, 2020

¹⁵ [Air France](#), By your side at all times

European low-cost carriers

Airline	Seating adjustment
EasyJet	While mask wearing is mandatory, easyJet has decided not to block off the middle seats on its aircraft. ¹⁶
Eurowings	Passengers can pay extra to keep the middle seat empty, throughout the entire cabin, on all flights within Europe. Subject to availability, passengers can block seats for a fee starting at €18 (US\$21) per flight. Otherwise, every effort is made to allocate seats to create as much space as possible when occupancy is low.
Norwegian	No announcement
Wizz Air	Seat allocation takes social distancing guidelines into consideration wherever possible. ¹⁷ Passengers may be directed to seats by cabin crew to support social distancing onboard.

Other European airlines

Airline	Seating adjustment
Aer Lingus	No announcement
Alitalia	As recently as mid-June, all flights were operated at half seat capacity to comply with Italian regulations on social distancing. This measure is no longer mentioned in Alitalia's Flying Safely details. ¹⁸
Austrian Airlines	Passengers are required to social distance in the cabin where possible. The airline will not leave seats free on full flights.
Brussels Airlines	No announcement
CSA Czech Airlines	Seating capacity permits gaps to be maintained between passengers in Economy Class. The middle seat is always left empty in Business Class. On aircraft with a two-seat configuration, there will always be only one person seated per pair of seats
Finnair	Staff review seating at the gate and will socially distance passengers where possible. Families can continue to sit together.
SAS	While onboard, SAS will do its best to seat passengers across the cabin, to create as much space as possible between them. ¹⁹
Swiss	Depending on the booking situation, Swiss allows passengers to reserve a neighboring seat from CHF 40. ²⁰
TAP Air Portugal	No announcement

¹⁶ [Skift](#), May 21, 2020

¹⁷ [Wizz Air](#), Information & Services

¹⁸ [Alitalia](#), Flying Safely

¹⁹ [SAS](#), SAS Safe Travel

²⁰ [SWISS](#), More comfort with a vacant neighbouring seat

Latin America

Airline	Seating adjustment
Copa Airlines	Where possible aisle seats in the last three rows are left unoccupied for the comfort and safety of passengers queuing for the toilets and passengers seated near the queue.
GOL	As part of its standard offering, passengers flying on the Brazilian low-cost carrier can already purchase an extra seat.
Sky Airline	Chilean low-cost carrier Sky Airline blocked center seats to ensure physical separation until August 1.

Middle East

Airline	Seating adjustment
Emirates	Airline president Tim Clark had described leaving middle seats vacant as “neither economically viable nor sustainable.” ²¹ From March 1, 2021, Economy Class passengers with a confirmed booking may buy up to three adjoining empty seats. ²² These cannot be pre-booked and must be bought at the airport for AED 200 to AED 600 (US\$55 to US\$165) per empty seat plus applicable taxes.
Etihad Airways	Etihad has made some changes to its seat maps so that, where possible, there’s more space between passengers. ²³
Gulf Air	Bahrain-based airline ties to modify seat arrangements when possible
Qatar Airways	No announcement
Saudi Arabian Airlines (Saudia)	In economy class on domestic flights, the adjacent seat will always remain unavailable to ensure social distancing.

North America

Canada

Airline	Seating adjustment
Air Canada	A policy to block adjacent seats in Economy Class expired after June 30, 2020. ²⁴ Air Canada now notifies Economy Class passengers if a flight is nearing capacity. This is by email before the flight, or an announcement at the gate before boarding. ²⁵ Passengers can explore other options if preferring more space onboard, including selecting another flight at no charge.
WestJet	WestJet’s safety program includes a limit on seats onboard its aircraft, although families travelling together can still sit together. ²⁶ The airline ended a policy of blocking the middle seats at the end of June 2020.

²¹ [Gulf Business](#), June 1, 2020

²² [Emirates](#), March 1, 2021

²³ [Etihad Airways](#)

²⁴ [Business Travel News](#), June 29, 2020

²⁵ [Air Canada](#), Service offering changes, June 30, 2020

²⁶ [WestJet](#), Safety on board

U.S. airlines

Airline	Seating adjustment
Alaska Airlines	<p>From January 6, 2021, Alaska Air Lines started to phase out blocking middle seats on all flights,²⁷ starting with short-haul flights and services to Hawaii, where pre-flights COVID-19 testing should reinforce traveler confidence.</p> <p>Until the end of May 2021, Alaska Airlines will keep middle seats free in Premium Class.²⁸ On certain occasions, however, the airline advises this may not be possible, e.g. when reaccommodating passengers from a canceled flight.</p>
Allegiant Air	<p>Passengers are asked not to book the middle seat, unless it is to keep family members together. Once on board, crew members may move passengers to provide additional distancing where possible.</p> <p>Customers concerned that a flight may be too full to accommodate social distancing can ask to be notified if a booked flight exceeds 65% capacity.²⁹</p>
American Airlines	<p>Since July 2020, American has allowed flights to be completely sold, but travelers are advised of full flights and allowed to move to less crowded flights without charge when available.³⁰</p>
Delta Air Lines	<p>Delta is blocking middle seats and limiting capacity on all flights until the end of April 2021.³¹ Unless three people are traveling together, middle seats are blocked in Delta Premium Select, Delta Comfort+ and Main Cabin.³² Selected aisle seats are blocked on smaller aircraft. Adjacent seats in First Class are blocked, but not in Delta Once cabins with two aisles.</p> <p>Where customer demand is high, Delta will try to up-gauge aircraft or add extra flights to promote space on board.</p>
Frontier Airlines	No announcement
Hawaiian Airlines	<p>The airline had prevented the booking of middle seats to provide more space onboard, but this practice was discontinued in mid-December 2020.³³</p>
JetBlue	<p>From January 8, 2021, JetBlue has been selling all available seats.</p> <p>Passengers looking for extra space may book extra seats, which are marked as “empty seat” during the booking process.³⁴ All unsold seats are available for purchase as extra seats, including adjacent seats and those in the row in front or behind. Normal fares are charged for empty seats.</p>
Southwest Airlines	<p>Southwest ended capacity controls from December 1, 2020, but it increased flexibility for passengers who prefer not to be on full flights.³⁵ It also communicates with passengers booked on flights more than 60% full, trying to re-accommodate them if they wish.</p>

²⁷ [Business Travel News](#), October 23, 2020

²⁸ [Alaska Airlines](#), Premium Class

²⁹ [Allegiant Air](#), Going the distance for health and safety

³⁰ [Business Travel News](#), June 26, 2020

³¹ [Delta Air Lines](#), Feb. 8, 2021

³² [Delta Air Lines](#), Blocking seats for more space on board, Feb. 8, 2021

³³ [AFAR](#), Dec. 15, 2020

³⁴ [JetBlue](#), Booking extra seats

³⁵ [Business Travel News](#), October 22, 2020

U.S. airlines (continued)

Airline	Seating adjustment
United Airlines	United had adjusted its seat selection systems to avoid seating customers next to each other, except when travelling together. ³⁶ Where a flight was expected to be full, United aimed to let passengers know 24 hours before departure, allowing them to change the flight with no change fee or receive a travel credit. ³⁷ These services no longer appear to be available.

Note

The COVID-19 situation is rapidly evolving, and the situation is changing on almost an hourly basis. The information presented in this report represents the latest view as at March 19, 2021. We have carefully researched and checked the information contained. However, we do not guarantee or warrant the correctness, completeness or topicality of this article and do not accept any liability for any damage or loss as a result of the use of the information contained within this article.

Do you have questions or comments regarding this report? Please email mike.eggleson@bcdtravel.co.uk to share your thoughts.

³⁶ [United Airlines](#)

³⁷ [United Airlines](#), Should I expect my plane to be full?