

upgrade

|| TRAVEL SMARTER ||

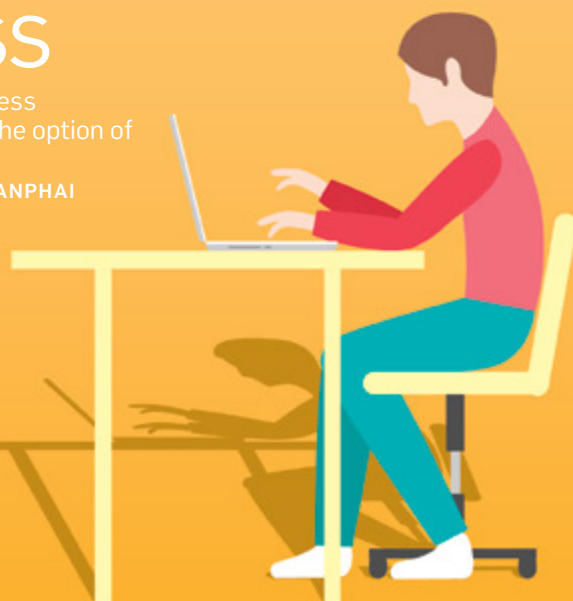


Bid for Business

Want to ditch cramped seats and tiny trays for business class? More airlines are giving passengers the option of bidding for a seat upgrade at a fraction of the cost.

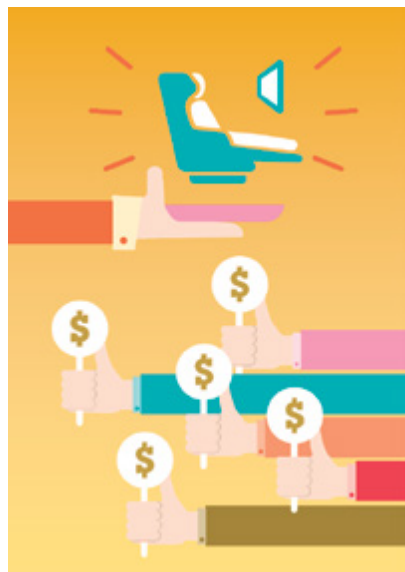
BY DIANA HUBBELL ILLUSTRATIONS BY AUTCHARA PANPHAI

SPINDLY ARMRESTS, CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT legroom, a dreaded middle seat—the aggravations of flying economy class are many. In the past, the only alternatives were to shell out for pricey first or business class, to cash in frequent-flyer miles, or to foster a relationship with a single airline with the hope that one day, your loyalty might be rewarded. Unfortunately, free upgrades >>



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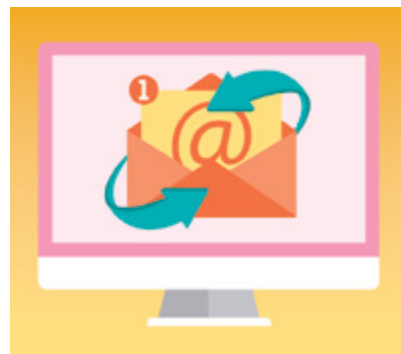
for high-flying regulars are few and farther between than ever. Airlines have begun filling empty seats by offering them to the highest bidder. Before a flight, passengers either receive an e-mail informing them that they have the option to compete for premium economy, business- or first-class seats or can check for the option on the airlines' website. If your bid is successful, you'll receive notification usually between 72 and 24 hours in advance. Minimum bids range from less than US\$10 to a few thousand dollars, and you're only charged if the bid is successful. The airlines make an extra buck and you can fly in comfort for less. Here's how to maximize your chances of an upgrade.



KNOW HOW AND WHEN TO BID

Like any auction, a number of contenders will inevitably bid the absolute minimum, meaning that going even slightly over gives you a distinct advantage. Choosing flights that are popular with leisure rather than corporate travelers increases the odds of a free seat in business class. Flying solo will also likely boost your chances. If you bid on a ticket for more than one person, the amount you put down will be multiplied by the number of people on the ticket. If there aren't enough upgrades for everyone, you'll all end up back where you started. Even if you've got company, consider entering separately and letting the best man (or woman) win. You can always buy the loser a drink once you reach your destination.

Finally, while airlines are notoriously cagey about disclosing what will help a bidder succeed, some, including Air China, have openly acknowledged that having a high status or belonging to their mileage program helps. It's hardly a guarantee, but it might be worth signing up just in case.



USE OUTSIDE HELP

Unsurprisingly, there's—well, not an app for that, but definitely a website. Canadian tech startup **Plusgrade** (plusgrade.com) works with 31 airlines around the globe, including Tigerair, Garuda Indonesia and SriLankan Airlines, to allow customers to scout out their options. Certain airlines on the site, including Virgin Australia, feature a "Strength Meter" to help you gauge the odds that a particular bid will score you that coveted, comfy seat. Although the numbers vary drastically depending on the day and the route, a few customers have reported serious savings—think premium economy to business class on a trans-Pacific long-haul from Auckland for US\$750. Not bad given that the difference between those two tickets typically sells for thousands.

An alternative is **Optiontown** (optiontown.com), which operates on a different principle, but claims to offer up to 75-percent savings on an upgrade to business or first. Instead of bidding, wannabe high-flyers sign up for their "Upgrade Travel Option" on partner airlines including AirAsia X, Air India, Cambodia Angkor Air and Vietnam Airlines. You pay a set price up front and, depending on availability, you'll either be upgraded no later than four hours before your flight or have the fee automatically refunded within five days. Loyal customers are rewarded, meaning the more often you try, the better your chances of succeeding. ☘

CHOOSE YOUR AIRLINE CAREFULLY AND READ THE FINE PRINT

Although bidding wars are an increasingly common feature, not all airlines offer them. If you're hoping for an upgrade within Asia Pacific, try booking on SriLankan Airlines, Malaysian Airlines, Lufthansa, Garuda Indonesia, Etihad, Qantas, Air New Zealand, Virgin Australia or Air China. As with any deal, policies vary widely and the whole process is not without a few caveats. For some airlines, such as Lufthansa, upgrades only go as high as premium economy, meaning passengers with visions of champagne flutes are bound to be disappointed. Others, such as Virgin Australia and Etihad, deny upgraded passengers swankier perks such as chauffeur service or extra baggage allowance that normally accompany a business-class ticket. Most airlines only allow upgrades on select routes, and bar passengers with group tickets or discounted tickets entirely.

