

Here's when you should shell out more money for a premium economy flight



CAMILLA CORNELL | November 23, 2015 10:42 AM ET
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Lufthansa's premium economy cabin of a Boeing 747-8 passenger aircraft. Lufthansa introduced premium economy seats this fall in response to demand from customers.

Martin Leissel/Bloomberg

Flying business class isn't in the budget for entrepreneur Saeid Babaei. "When you're running an early-stage company every dollar counts," said the president and CEO of Mississauga, Ont.-based biotech AbCelex Technologies Inc. "Being frugal and productive takes precedence over comfort."

But Babaei has found a new tool in his quest to get cozy in the air: namely premium economy class (a.k.a. comfort or plus class). Babaei estimates he flies premium economy 15 to 20 per cent of the time. "It depends on the length of the flight, the intensity of the meetings and how long I will be there," he said. "I usually fly premium economy on flights that last more than four hours."

“This is like the last generation of business class

Premium economy often provides in-flight wireless connections, and better meals and amenities. But more importantly, the seats are often wider and have more leg room, particularly on international flights. And the ticket price is usually a fraction of the cost for a business class seat.

"This is like the last generation of business class," said Jason Rabinowitz, data research manager for routehappy.com, a website that claims to help you "find the comfiest seat on the plane." You won't find lie-flat seats in premium economy, he said. But you may well get a recliner or cradle sleeper, making it possible to get a little shut-eye.

That's a major selling point for Babaei. "We did a cost-benefit analysis," he said. "When you fly economy, you're more tired and when you reach your destination you have to rest. Given the additional accommodation and the time spent, it's better to upgrade to premium economy."

For airlines, however, premium economy sections offer a chance to wring more profit from the back of the plane by "hitting the sweet spot between bare bones economy and super-premium business class," Rabinowitz said.

Increasingly, airlines are also seeing it as a way to remain competitive. Lufthansa introduced premium economy seats this fall in response to demand, Hans DeHaan, director of Lufthansa's Canadian operations, said. "We haven't introduced a new class in 35 years. But premium economy caters to a certain sector of the market that we probably were losing because other carriers had it."

Many businesses' travel policies prohibit flying business class, Rabinowitz said, noting that isn't the case with premium economy, which is available on many company travel policies. With economy seats narrowing and seat pitch receding, "the upgrade to premium economy isn't that expensive and it is a vast comfort bump for passengers," he said.

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Rabinowitz said premium economy has been around for several decades, with British Airways being the first to offer it. But, "it is really just starting now to become critically accepted. We're getting to the point where major airlines are starting to roll it out across their fleets," he said.

Air Canada has made it a priority. Its newest fleet of Boeing 787 Dreamliners, for example, have 21 premium economy seats measuring 19.5 inches wide

(compared to 17.3 inches in economy), with 38 inches of leg room (vs. 31 inches) and seven inches of recline (economy has five). Premium economy also offers a better inflight entertainment system and the business class meal.

In September, WestJet enhanced its plus service by eliminating two middle seats in the first three rows of its Boeing 737 aircraft. "We designed a console that straps in to the middle seats in plus," WestJet spokesperson Robert Palmer said. "If you drive a truck or SUV with a big wide console in the middle, complete with cup holders and a flat spot for your cell phone, that's exactly what it looks like."

Plus also offers priority boarding and screening (in airports where there are separate lines), first access to overhead bins, flexible change and cancellation, free checked bags, extra legroom and free food and beverages.

Cathay-Pacific, Singapore Airlines, Delta Airlines, Air France, Air New Zealand, Qantas, Virgin Atlantic and IcelandAir are among others that offer premium economy. But it can be difficult to suss out exactly what you're getting for the premium price. "In the U.S., all premium economy means is a seat with slightly extra leg room and maybe a slightly upgraded meal. We're not talking a bump to a wider seat, or a different seat type," Rabinowitz said.

In contrast, Lufthansa's seats offer up to 50 per cent more room than economy class for prices closer to those for economy class. "The reviews have been beyond our expectations," DeHaan said. "A lot of the flights are sold out in premium economy."

RouteHappy lets you display only premium economy flights when booking, and offers a numerical score of the service, as well as a list of amenities included. For a Toronto-to-Hong Kong flight in January, the site listed premium economy fares from \$1,372 (Air France) to \$1,899 (Cathay-Pacific). But, Air France scored a measly 3.8 on the 'Happy' scale compared with Cathay-Pacific's 8.4 (and took an extra 20 hours). A direct flight in coach would have cost \$942, while business class rang in at \$3,936 to \$10,000-plus.

"Premium economy is really helping fill that void between economy seats, which may not be the most comfortable option, and super-premium business class, which may be up to \$10,000 per flight," Rabinowitz said.