

Biz.Travel Q&A with Stephen Forbes



By [Brian Berkman](#): contributing editor, travel

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Stephen Forbes of Meropa Communications speaks for British Airways and represents a number of top travel/hospitality industry clients such as The Taj Cape Town.



Biz.Travel: As a travel industry insider, what should passengers know about the check-in and upgrading process to get the best possible seat on a plane?

S F: One of the biggest misconceptions that people have is that there's a flexible policy on upgrades and that these can be made at the discretion of a check-in agent or crew member. In reality upgrades are generally only provided in exceptional circumstances, for example if someone has been seriously inconvenienced. Any upgrade has to be approved by a senior manager and many airlines now have a one-cabin upgrade policy i.e. you won't be upgraded from economy to First.

The reason for airline's implementing rigorous policies is that very few people would pay a premium for a business or first-class seat if they thought there was a decent chance of being upgraded anyway. This is particularly true at a time when airline revenues are under huge pressure.

The best way to secure a good seat is check in early. These days you can generally do this online 24 hours before the flight departs. Some airlines will also allow you to pay a little extra to secure a favourite seat.

Biz.Travel: There are always stories about people who are "bumped off" flights that are overbooked. In your experience, how often does this really happen and what's the best way to ensure that it doesn't?

S F: Full-service carriers overbook certain flights to try and maximize revenue and hedge against no-shows. The airlines claim if they didn't, average ticket prices would be much higher, but it's an argument that's hard to sell to anyone who's been left behind. Fortunately, in many countries passengers are now protected by regulation which stipulates

compensation.

This and the fact that airlines' revenue management systems have also become a lot more sophisticated means that offloads don't happen very often. Revenue management experts are now able to work out overbooking profiles for particular flights on particular days pretty accurately. Most of the time they get it right, but occasionally, usually as a result of something unexpected, it goes wrong and customers are offloaded.

When there are more people than seats, an airline will generally ask for voluntary offloads. These passengers will usually be given some sort of incentive to stay behind and be rebooked on a later flight. It's when there aren't enough voluntary offloads that people get bumped.

There are no cast-iron rules to avoid being bumped other than check in early and keep a frequent flyer card handy as airlines are less likely to offload loyal customers. It's also always a good idea to ensure you have sufficient travel insurance if you're travelling overseas.

Biz.Travel: Everyone knows about remaining hydrated while in the air, but, as a regular traveller, what do you do to ensure you arrive looking and feeling your best?

S F: Most airlines have pretty good advice on wellbeing during your flight. I don't follow these obsessively, but try to reasonably sensible. Before a long-haul trip I'll go for a quick run or have a relaxing bath, I'll dress in comfortable clothes for the flight and try to get some sleep onboard.

For me the two key things are being organized and packing light - neither of which come naturally.

It's difficult and stressful to negotiate busy airports lugging heavy bags. You'll also end up with a stiff neck or worse from carrying heavy laptop or sling bags. A small wheeled suitcase that fits into the overhead lockers is best.

I also like to check in online as early as possible and be sure of how I'm getting to and from the airport. It's hard to concentrate on your meeting or presentation if you're worried about catching the flight home.

Biz.Travel: Everyone wants to fly Club or First. Under some circumstances people are upgraded at the boarding gate. Who are these lucky people and how do we become one of them?

S F: In most cases these would be people who have flexible tickets and are entitled to Club or First, but there were no seats available. Once the flight is closed and a seat becomes available because of a no-show, they're allocated the seat. As I've explained airlines such as British Airways have strict upgrade policies.

Biz.Travel: AA Gill once wrote that unless a passenger had serious gastro, it shouldn't take more than six minutes to use the toilet during a flight. Seems that some budget airlines are even charging extra for using the toilet! What's your toilet survival strategy for passengers flying Economy?

S F: Avoid the rush. Typically rush times are after takeoff when the seatbelt lights are switched off, after the meal service and the 20 minutes or so before the seatbelt lights go on for landing. I try to go before boarding and then before going to sleep, when the toilets usually aren't too crowded. I also try to get up about an hour before landing to freshen up.

Biz.Travel: BA's new Heathrow Terminal Five lounges are fabulous. Is there any way to gain access without a Club or First ticket in your hand?

S F: Yes, if you have a Silver or Gold Executive Club card.

Biz.Travel: What's the best way to secure seats at the over wing exit with the extra leg room? Can these be booked on-line?

S F: Yes. Some carriers allow you to secure your preferred seat by paying a little more. Alternatively check in online 24 hours before hand.

Biz.Travel: Any suggestions for helping passenger next to screaming babies or someone with halitosis?

S F: I used to be very intolerant of screaming babies until I had a child of my own. Now I'm intolerant of mothers who make no effort to consider the child's needs onboard. I'm probably guilty of generalizing, but most mothers with small babies think about bottles, dummies and soft toys. It's when the kids get a little older that the problem often starts. Even a two-hour flight with a toddler can be nightmare if the child has nothing to do. Soft toys or even paper and crayons can be enough to occupy them. I've even know a really well-organized mother who wraps toys in Christmas paper to keep the child interested.

Halitosis is a bit more tricky. If the aircraft's not too full ask if you can move to a window/aisle seat. Failing that it could be a long flight.

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