



How to Avoid Gate Checking your bag

by Megan Johnson from Smart Travel

If you have flown recently, chances are you have experienced airlines either asking passengers to volunteer to gate-check their carry-ons or forcing them to after a certain number of carry-on bags have made it onto the plane. I was recently on a United flight that had enough room for 47 carry-on bags and everyone else had to gate-check their bags. My later boarding group guaranteed I would have to gate-check my bag and I was right. They let my medical device stay with me (it can't go in cargo) but my backpack had to get checked.

This got me thinking: WHY is this happening? Planes know how many passengers will be on board so shouldn't they have enough room for everyone's carry-on bag? I did a little research to find out why this happens, what airlines are doing to avoid this in the future and how to avoid it happening to you.

What Causes Airlines To Require Gate-Checking Carry-on Bags? There are a few reasons why more and more airlines are asking passengers to gate-check their bags. Some are because of what a passenger does and others are because of the airline.

If your Bag is too big - If you have a ticket that only allows one personal sized item on your flight, but you bring a regular sized carry-on, the flight attendant will have you check your bag and you will have to pay to check that bag. If you have a regular ticket with a regular carry-on sized bag included, but you have a giant oversized carry-on the same rule applies. And please don't be that person who tries to get a giant bag past the flight attendants.

You have too many bags - If you have the correct size bag but you have two of them, the flight attendant likely will ask you to check one. The only people allowed to carry an extra bag on board are people with medical devices. Of course, this doesn't include bags from the airport – although I have been on flights that make you consolidate everything so you should be wary of purchasing too much at the airport if you can't fit it into your carry-on. If you are allowed a personal item and a carry-on, keep it to that, please.

The Flight is full - When I was forced to gate-check a bag, my main issue was they had a certain number of passengers that they had room for. Why would an airplane not have enough space for every passenger to have a carry-on? While in the moment I was too annoyed that I would have to check my bag to realize it is because now that most airlines require you to pay to check a bag, everyone is just taking a carry-on, and they likely are bigger than what you would take when you were checking a suitcase. So, between more people carrying on than before and bigger bags, space fills up fast. A full flight means less room in the overhead bins. Often, airlines will ask passengers to volunteer to check their bags and allow them to board earlier than their designated zone or even get a seat closer to the front. When people volunteer before boarding starts, it speeds up the boarding process and makes happier passengers. However, some flights just don't have enough room, so after a certain number of passengers have boarded everyone has to check their bag.

What are airlines doing to stop this? To me the answer is simple: make checking a bag free again. Free checked bags mean fewer carry-ons or smaller ones at least, making more room in the overhead bins. However, those fees are a bit too tempting for airlines to stop despite record revenue numbers and growing profits. Instead, major airlines are improving overhead bin space to accommodate larger bags and higher volume of bags.

Remy Milburn from United Airlines explained that “as part of United Next, United is equipping planes with larger overhead bins with enough space for one carry-on per person. Last year the A321 neo joined United fleet – this aircraft is equipped with larger overhead bins.” He went on to explain that United has already started to expand their fleet with larger overhead bins, becoming “the first airline to add new, larger overhead bins to Embraer E175 aircrafts”

While Delta isn't expanding the overhead bins, they are putting new doors on the overhead bins on their refurbished fleet. These doors will allow for larger bags to easily fit, therefore, making more room for everyone's bulging bags.

Earlier this year American announced plans to retrofit “its A319 and A320 aircraft beginning in 2025. The retrofit will refresh the interior with power at every seat, larger overhead bins and new seats with updated trim and finish.”

How to Avoid Gate-checking your bag-Upgrade your Seat: An easy yet expensive way is to upgrade your seat. It's tempting to pick a seat that doesn't come with an extra fee but that will guarantee priority boarding and all the overhead storage you need for our carry-on. If you really hate checking your bag, that extra \$100-300 for priority boarding first class or business class might be worth it.

Use Rewards and Credit Cards - Many frequent flyer programs and credit cards offer priority boarding as a perk. If you join the programs or get the credit cards, you will be able to board earlier. Keep in mind, some rewards programs offer earlier boarding once you hit a certain status or have a designed number of points.

Pack Small - Perhaps one of the most obvious answers is to just bring a personal sized bag with you when you fly. These bags must fit under the seat in front of you. You may think it is impossible to do, especially if you are heading anywhere for more than a night or two, but I promise you it is possible. I once bought a super cheap ticket to the UK and was able to pack everything I needed for four days in a tiny suitcase. I had just bought a house and the extra expense of checking a bag or bringing a larger carry-on was not in the cards. If you only have one bag and it will fit under the seat in front of you, you won't be forced to gate check it. Gate checking is only for overhead bin bags. If you are skeptical, check out recommendations online for 'how to pack just a personal sized bag'.

Prepare for your Trip - Stay informed, research the carry-on and personal size item requirements for the airline you are flying before you head to the airport. Look up what aircraft you will be flying and research the overhead bin size. Smaller aircrafts are going to have less space (this was my problem...I was flying from Washington DC to Hartford Connecticut, and it was a small plane for a short flight). Staying informed and being prepared will help you make a better decision when it comes to what luggage you decide to bring.

Fly an airline with free checked bags - One simple way to avoid having to gate check your bag is to fly Southwest, the only airline that has no baggage fees (unless you are checking more than two bags). An important thing to note is that if you do go with Southwest, you need to check in as early as possible so you will get a decent boarding group and will still have plenty of room in the overhead bin for your carry-on. Even Southwest's overhead bins can get full!

Bottom line - There are a few surefire ways to avoid having to gate check your carry-on bag: purchasing priority boarding, using a credit card or frequent flyer status, and only bringing a personalized bag. If none of these ways work for you, then you are just going to have to take the risk that your flight won't be full or that most of the passenger's won't have a carry-on bag.