

Guide: How to BUY and FLY

United Airlines



Scott Stewart – Community Flights

Tips for Traveling on United Airlines

This is a step-by-step guide to flying United Airlines, I'll go over how to buy and at the best rate for the features and services you want *and* what to expect boarding and onboard a [United Airlines](#) flight.

What to Know Before You Buy with United Airlines

- Member of the [STAR ALLIANCE](#) – Largest Airline Alliance
- **Caution:** Know the operating carrier to determine air ticket policies and rules
- **A Legacy Carrier** – United has good re-routing and more robust schedules should your flight be cancelled or delayed.
- **More Restrictive Carryon policies in Basic Economy** – On United you only get a Personal Item vs. Full-size carryon + Personal Item on both American and Delta

United is a member of the largest global airline alliance. The Star Alliance has as some of its main airline partners [Air Canada](#), [Air New Zealand](#), [ANA](#), [Avianca](#), [Lufthansa](#), and [Swiss](#). Many international flights may be sold by United but operated by codeshare partners so make sure to read the flight details to know which airline is actually

operating your flight. Certain policies and flight rules will be controlled by the operating airline.

United is able to re-route passengers more efficiently than ultra-low-cost carriers because of its interline airline agreements and more frequent flight schedules. If prices are similar, it may be worthwhile to book a United flight over an ultra-low-cost carrier for this reason.

United's Basic Economy fare is more restrictive than American and Delta because on United Basic Economy only includes one small personal item. If you need or desire to travel with a full-size carryon on a route operated by all of these airlines, you may want to book American or Delta if you need to travel with that full-size carryon bag. If you need to bring a full-size bag on United you cannot even purchase a full-size carry-on but will have to purchase a checked bag to bring it along, which for many flyers is not as convenient.

Basic Economy vs Regular Economy on United Airlines

- United offers Basic Economy—US/Canada—Mexico—Central America—Caribbean—Europe.
- You can pre-reserve preferred seats (*standard seat-preferred location*) or standard seats for a \$Fee (*Varies*) with Basic Economy Fare.
- You must book on initial purchase the Regular Economy “Economy” fare to have access to purchasing larger Economy Plus seats or to upgrade.
- United Basic Economy—\$Fee for pre-reserved seats/Last to Board Aircraft/Personal Item Only for Carryon Bags except for Trans-Atlantic flights which allow full-size carryon/Check bag fees apply to both Basic and Regular Fares except for Transatlantic Regular Economy “Economy” Fares that include 1 checked bag for \$0/No flight changes allowed with Basic Economy Fare and no Upgrades from Basic Economy.
- Premier members, Star Alliance Gold members, and certain qualifying MileagePlus credit card holders retain priority boarding & full-size carryon in Basic Economy.

- Premier members retain complimentary checked baggage allowance but mileage earning will not be the same for Basic Economy tickets.
- MileagePlus members earn award miles based on fare and status, Basic Economy tickets only earn 50% of premier qualifying miles and segments.
- **Basic Economy is a good fare for you if** you are able to travel extremely light, won't upgrade, don't care about pre-reserved seats and will only bring a small bag onboard.

WHO UNITED'S BASIC ECONOMY FARE WORKS BEST FOR...

United's [Basic Economy](#) fare may be best for flyers looking for the absolute lowest price flights who are willing to adhere to all the restrictions. If you prefer an experience that allows for a full-size carryon and other features like pre-reserved seats and don't mind paying a little more, it may be best to buy a standard United Economy fare on your initial purchase (*Remember...you can't upgrade*).

In the US the upgrade from Basic Economy to Regular Economy "Economy" typically costs +\$60 round-trip. (*Although we've seen this vary at times*).

United sells Basic Economy fares on routes within the US/Canada and on routes from the US/Canada to Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and Europe. If you purchase a Basic Economy ticket on any of these routes, you will not be able to pre-select a specific seat for free, you'll be last to board the aircraft, and you will not be allowed to make any changes/upgrades or cancel your ticket after the 24-hour risk-free cancellation period. Advanced seat assignments can be purchased for a fee or assigned at random for free upon check-in. United's Regular Economy fare includes pre-reserved seat assignments and allows ticket changes/upgrades for a fee.

The baggage policy differs for Basic Economy fares depending on the route. On transatlantic routes, Basic Economy fares include the same carry-on allowance of one full-size carryon bag plus a personal item as a Regular Economy fare. However, transatlantic Basic Economy

tickets on United do not include any checked bags and there is a \$60 fee (*Each-Way*) for the first checked bag on flights across the Atlantic. Regular Economy fares still include one free checked bag on transatlantic flights for Free \$0.

For all other Basic Economy tickets on United that are flown within the western hemisphere, the checked baggage policy is the same for both Basic Economy and Regular Economy. There is usually a fee for checked bags starting at \$30 each way regardless of which fare you've purchased.

However, the carry-on policy differs between the two types of fares on domestic and short-haul international routes and it's the biggest reason you may want to avoid Basic Economy on United. While Regular Economy fares include a full-size carry-on bag plus a personal item, a Basic Economy fare will restrict you to only a small personal item up to 9 x 10 x 17 inches onboard that must fit under the seat in front of you. Any larger bags must be checked for a fee (*Including what may normally be a full-size carryon bag*) and if you bring a larger bag to the boarding gate, there is an additional \$25 fee tacked on to any applicable checked bag fee.

BASIC ECONOMY FARES FOR PREMIER AND SOME FREQUENT FLYERS...

Premier members, Star Alliance Gold members, and certain qualifying MileagePlus credit card holders will maintain boarding priority and still be allowed a full-size carry-on bag when traveling on Basic Economy tickets. Premier members will also retain complimentary checked baggage allowance based on their Premier status, but keep in mind that mileage earning will not be the same for Basic Economy tickets.

MileagePlus members will earn award miles based on the fare and status, but Basic Economy tickets will only earn 50% of premier qualifying miles and segments. These are only used to achieve status so if you're a frequent flyer looking to get to the next status level, this could be a big hit towards reaching the requirements.

SHOULD I BUY BASIC OR REGULAR ECONOMY “ECONOMY”?

For domestic and short-haul international flights, Basic Economy can be a great deal on United if you are able to travel extremely light or plan on checking a bag and only bringing a small bag onboard. For transatlantic flights, it may be worthwhile to choose Regular Economy if you need to check a bag, but if you're able to travel with just a personal item as carry-on and don't mind where you sit, the Basic Economy fare can be a bargain.

How to Buy a Ticket with United Airlines

- You can buy on 3rd party sites and Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) like Expedia & Orbitz
- We recommend also considering metasearch sites like [Momondo](#) which show multiple and more obscure 3rd Party web fares.
- Obscure 3rd Party web fares can sometimes be hundreds of dollars less than what you find on United (*Usually International Travel*)
- **Caution** – Obscure 3rd Party Sites – Often charge extra change fees and are not as transparent with fare rules and change conditions in addition to adding a middle-man into your air travel purchase.
- If the price difference is minimal you want to go with a well-established online travel agency or book directly with [United](#).
- When booking on United's site, utilize the handy calendar shop for a monthly calendar showing the lowest fares for travelers with flexible dates.
- The United search display gives the option to choose between Basic Economy, Economy, Economy (*flexible*), and the Premium Business or First Class, cabins.
- For Premium Economy you need to book via the Standard Economy Fare and then add bundles and the bundles you need for a complete Premium Economy fare may NOT be available on all flights as the bundles to build a premium economy experience are NOT always available for purchase.

United sells its tickets on all major third-party booking sites and OTAs such as Expedia or Orbitz. Many of these Online Travel Agency OTA websites do a decent job of pointing out United's Basic Economy restrictions (*Hotwire for one*). Using these sites is often a way to receive deep discounts on United flights by booking with lesser-known online travel agencies.

For international flights, you'll often see United and other Star Alliance partner flights available for lower fares on some obscure third-party websites such as Cheapfaremart, Faredepot, JustFly (*Via the [Momondo metasearch site](#)*), among many others. These can sometimes be hundreds of dollars less than what you'll find on United.com or other sites so it's always best to shop around and [compare multiple sites](#) via a metasearch website before booking.

Don't forget to "Join", "Like" and "Follow" the Premium Facebook Page for your origination to see all the air deals we send out so you can find out when prices drop. Email us here at scott@communityflights.com and let us know your origination if you are not yet a premium member for the Facebook page access. We'll share how you can become a premium member having access to ALL your origination cities flight deals.

Some of the obscure third-party sites may not do a very good job of indicating when a fare is Basic Economy and there may also be higher than normal change fees associated with these sites. Since Basic Economy doesn't allow changes anyway, this shouldn't be much of a factor when booking the lowest fare.

Keep in mind that many of the inventory on these smaller sites is lagging and prices may not be updated as quickly as they are on the larger sites. This means the low front of search posted price may sometimes not be available when you cycle through to the purchase page. It also may take longer to receive confirmation of your flight, so if the price difference is minimal and you want to make sure you get a super low fare ticketed, its best to go with a well-established online travel agency or book directly with United.

When booking on United's site, utilize the [handy calendar shop](#) (*Click on Calendar shop option to highlight on right hand side*) for a monthly

calendar showing the lowest fares for travelers with flexible dates. You can choose a trip length up to 180 days making this one of the best flexible date search tools of any airline. This calendar will let you search by multiple day length options.

Booking is very straight forward on United.com. After choosing dates, you'll be given the option to choose between Basic Economy, Economy, Economy (*flexible*), and Premium cabins. If you choose Basic Economy, a pop-up will appear, and you'll have to click a checkbox noting you agree to the restrictions of this ticket before you can continue booking or you can decide to choose the upgrade option presented and purchase a Regular Economy Ticket "Economy" at this point.

On the seat map page, if you're purchasing Basic Economy and don't want to pay extra to choose a seat, simply click the "continue to payment" button and seats will be assigned at random upon check-in for free. Only standard or preferred location seats are available to Basic Economy fares. You can't purchase the bigger Economy Plus seats on a Basic Economy Fare ticket.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

Once on the payment screen, you'll be offered insurance, which you may want to consider depending on your travel situation but we do also recommend comparing travel insurance plans via [Squaremouth](#) to see whether purchasing via the airline website or [Squaremouth](#) is better. You'll then proceed to enter your payment information.

One unique option that United offers on its site is the option to choose "Hold this Fare". This option comes up after the flight selections. Another unique option that United offers is "Other Payment" then noting "Pay in Person". These options can allow two things. 1. You can hold your ticket for 24 hours then 2. Pay in person at the airport. Obviously, this isn't a preferred method of payment, but if you'd like to hold your fare for 24 hours absolutely free, you can choose "other forms of payment" and then "pay in person" from the drop-down. This will give you a confirmation number and hold your reservation until midnight the following day. You can still purchase the ticket online and then have an additional 24 hours after purchasing to cancel your ticket

for free if it falls under the 24-hour risk-free cancellation policy.

Premium Economy & Bundles Bundles Can Help You SAVE on Extra's

- BOOKING a Regular "Economy" fare with the addition of Economy Plus, Premier Access and Standard check bag bundles, can create a "Premium Economy" type ticket.
- Bundles are NOT available with Basic Economy Fares so you have to buy "Economy" fare to add the bundles.
- Bundles are NOT always available on all flights and with all features to build the total Premium Economy type ticket...but we do recommend looking for bundle options if you want to enhance your experience but don't want to buy business or first class.
- The full complement of bundle options from "Economy" fares include: Economy Plus, Premier Access, Standard Check Bag, United Club Access and Earn Extra Award Miles

Economy Plus

Economy Plus seats feature up to 6 inches (15 cm) of extra legroom (*Varies by aircraft type*) and are located near the popular front of the United Economy cabin.

MileagePlus, Premier and Platinum members and higher enjoy advance complimentary access for themselves to larger Economy Plus Seats and up to eight companions, and Premier Gold members enjoy advance complimentary access for themselves and one companion. Premier Silver members continue to enjoy complimentary space-available access to Economy Plus for themselves and one companion upon check-in.

Please note that Economy Plus seating is not available to customers who are traveling on a Basic Economy ticket.

Also consider [Economy Plus](#) subscriptions if you fly United frequently to SAVE even more on the extra seat space!

When you subscribe, you can select Economy Plus seating {SEE [Footnote](#)²} for an entire year, with access to all the subscription benefits. You can customize your plan with the options that best suit your travel needs.

United Club Access

If you don't purchase [United Club Access](#) via a bundle there is an initiation fee of \$50 or 7,000 miles for all new United Club memberships and for renewals for memberships that are more than 30 days past expiration. A single initiation fee will be charged for a membership with spouse.

There are also annual subscriptions starting from \$550 for general members.

Premier Access

[Premier Access](#)® lets you enjoy the convenience of dedicated airport check-in lines, exclusive security lanes at select airports and priority boarding, so you can get to the gate and your seat sooner.

Prices, starting at \$15, are segment-based and subject to change. Premier Access is subject to availability. Premier Access purchases do not include priority baggage handling.

Standard Checked Bag

Checking a bag comes at a reduced rate when purchased as part of a bundle

Extra Award Miles

While you always have the option to buy award miles, you're able to purchase extra award miles at a reduced price each time you fly United. [See Award Accelerator Information](#)

Check-In and Boarding a United Airlines Flight

- Online Check-in 24 hours prior to departure
- Domestic check-in at least 30min w/o bags/45min w/ck bags
- International check-in at least 60 min prior to departure.
- NO Online Check-in for Basic Economy passengers not checking in bags.
- Basic Economy Passengers board last.

Online check-in opens 24 hours prior to departure on [United.com](https://www.united.com) or through the United app. Domestic passengers must be checked-in at least 30 minutes prior to departure without checked bags or 45 minutes prior to departure with checked bags. International passengers must be checked-in at least 60 minutes prior to departure. Certain airports may require earlier minimum check-in times so be sure to [check the list here](#).

If you are traveling domestically or on short-haul international routes with a Basic Economy ticket, you'll only be able to complete online check-in if you indicate that you are checking a bag. Basic Economy passengers planning to travel with just a personal item on these routes have to complete check-in at the airport. This is so the airline staff can verify that your personal item fits the size requirements.

This is yet another inconvenience for Basic Economy tickets that passengers should consider. You'll have to allocate more time and wait in line to check-in at the airport. There are mixed reports of how strict United agents are on the size of your personal item. Chances are you'll be ok as long as the bag doesn't look overly large, but if you are asked to fit a bag in the sizer either at the check-in desk or boarding gate, be prepared to pay up if it doesn't fit.

United has pre-boarding for unaccompanied minors, customers with disabilities, active military, families with small children, and top Premier status members. This is followed by five boarding groups with

premium cabin and elite status members boarding first and Basic Economy passengers boarding last. For a complete breakdown of United's boarding groups, [click here](#).

One of United's new policies implemented is that customers that are seated on the plane will never be required to give up their seat involuntarily unless they pose a safety or security risk.

The United Airlines Inflight Experience

- \$0 – Light snacks, non-alcoholic drinks and entertainment (*When Applicable*)
- On domestic & short-haul international flights snack boxes/light meals available for purchase.
- Comp meals available on long-haul international flights.
- Free live-tv on Boeing 737 flights with seatback entertainment.
- Average seat pitch of 30-31 inches in economy.
- Buy Economy Plus for 34-37 inches of pitch.
- Business Class offers spacious seating/premium meal service.
- Polaris Class offers lie-flat seats and exclusive service.
- [Wifi](#) is available on all mainline and 2 class cabin regional jets
- [Power](#) outlet availability varies by aircraft.

Once airborne on United, you can expect the standard legacy carrier service with free light snacks, non-alcoholic drinks, and entertainment options on most flights. For domestic and short-haul international flights, you can purchase snack boxes or light meals onboard. Complimentary meals are served on long-haul international flights.

Recently, [United introduced free live TV](#) on all of its Boeing 737s equipped with seatback entertainment.

The seat pitch varies depending on the aircraft, but you can expect an average seat pitch of 30-31 inches in economy on most of United's aircraft. If you opt to pay for an Economy Plus seat, you'll get some extra room to stretch your legs with 34-37 inches of pitch. Premium cabins range from a standard Business Class seat, which includes spacious seating and premium meal service on all flights to United's Polaris Class with lie-flat seats and exclusive service available on some of the most popular business markets in the world.

Wifi is available on all mainline and 2 cabin regional jet flights.

[Purchase now](#) and access the internet for an entire month or year on United and United Express® flights equipped with Wi-Fi. You can also purchase Wi-Fi on board. United does not allow the use of inflight internet service for voice communication or videoconferencing through a cell phone, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) or any similar device or service. Voice and video calls are expressly prohibited.

[View frequently asked questions about United Wi-Fi](#)

Your power outlet availability will vary by aircraft and cabin by location and type of outlet.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON UNITED BOOKING AND FLIGHT FEATURES SEE THE BELOW LINKS BY TOPIC

Booking Options

- [FareLock®](#)
- [Trip Insurance](#)
- [Gift Certificates](#)
- [united.com Gift Registry](#)

Airport Options

- [United Club](#)
- [Premier Access®](#)
- [Priority Boarding](#)
- [Baggage Delivery](#)

- [Baggage Subscription](#)
- [United Signature ServiceSM](#)

Onboard Options

- [Premium Cabins](#)
- [Economy Plus[®]](#)
- [United Wi-Fi](#)
- [Choice Menu](#)
- [DIRECTV[®]](#)
- [Seatback entertainment](#)

Arrival Options

- [Hotel Reservations](#)
- [Ground Transport](#)
- [Helicopter Transport](#)

Miles Options

- [Award Accelerator[®]](#)
- [Premier AcceleratorSM](#)
- [Personal Miles[®]](#)

Subscription & Bundle Options

- [United Travel Options subscriptions](#)
- [United Travel Options bundles](#)

Other United Airlines Services and Fee's

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