

May I Enjoy Your Seat?

Written by L.A. Plume

Tuesday, 01 September 2009 06:27

I actually took my camera out and photographed her, she didn't blink.



LaGuardia airport – rush hour – crowded – mildly chaotic due to weather delays in connecting Northeast cities. There she sat in the middle of three seats, her carry on bag on the seat to her left and her meal-in-a-bag fully occupying the seat to her right. People everywhere, tired people, old people, weary people, people with small children tugging at them, all stood around her. She defiantly held her gaze defending her possessions' right to those seats. She wasn't disabled, she didn't have a cane, she wasn't elderly, she seemed to think she was entitled; she was inconsiderate, if not rude.

I witnessed the same behavior on the subway in New York the day before: woman in seat, lunch in bag on seat beside her. Again, people were standing while her lunch sat. I'm sure if you've ridden enough subways you've seen a amplitude of behavior and you get to the point where you don't even notice it anymore. However, taking an extra seat and impinging on someone else's space is a different matter.

Dear L.A.Plume,

What can be done about the “person of size” who squeezes in next to you on an airplane and

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oozes into your space? Their thighs occupy the space under your arm rest, their shoulders are on your seat back and their arm is on your side of the armrest. I have well defined spatial boundaries and people who are not invited into my space annoy me and often make me physically uncomfortable. This has happened to me more than once on a flight, and chances are they have brought food, or when they are served a meal, that elbow between us becomes a heat-seeking missile for some part of my anatomy. Once a flight attendant invited me back to the aft galley and served me a few free cocktails, he said it was to make up for the inconvenience because there was nothing else he could do. Are there airline policies regarding this? Can I ask to be reseated? There is not much point in asking the person to get out of my space because they can't. What can/should I do? Is there any etiquette regarding this problem?

Camille

Dear Camille,

Actually some airlines do have policies regarding "customers of size," and they require that they purchase two seats. However, in my research, I only found that Southwest Airlines and Continental have this policy in writing. I asked a flight attendant for United about this and he said there was no policy in place there but he subscribed to the 'take you back to the aft galley' idea, or 'provide you with some amenity such as free cocktails in an attempt to make your experience less unpleasant.' If the flight is not full, you can certainly ask to be reseated. If the flight is full there is not much you can do except write to the airline afterward and ask if they would like to compensate you in some way to insure that you continue to fly with them. Or check the airline's policy before you book your flight; this information can usually be found in a section called travel tools or policies. It is a sticky situation, as very few of us have enough room in our own seat much less room for one more.

L.A.P.

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When I received the above question I thought about all the things that happen with someone sitting right next to you on any mode of public transportation. If you are in coach class on an airline your seat measures in the close vicinity of 18 inches wide. Consider that a twin bed is 39 inches wide: this means that you are sitting next to someone just as if you were both sitting lengthwise on a twin bed, minus 3 inches. Remember how narrow those are? Smelly food, loud music on your headphones (please, please don't sing to the music that we can't, and don't want to, hear!), "interesting" photos on your open laptop, and cell phone conversations are all annoyances to your fellow passenger. I once was on a train trip and for the entire two hour trip the girl in the seat behind me carried on a conversation with her boyfriend; it sounded like they were having phone sex on the train. Yuck.

Again, I say to you: be alert, be aware, and be considerate of your fellow passenger; one day s/he could be you.