




CONTRIBUTORS

Opinion | Musings from a Zone 2 frequent flyer from the back row of the plane

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Airline boarding zones were first implemented in Canada by Air Canada in 2014 to make boarding an aircraft more efficient. They prioritize premium and high-status customers — the Zone 1 and Zone 2 passengers.

Jennifer Bain photo

By Jennifer Bain Contributor

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“This Hour Has 22 Minutes” has a comedy sketch floating around YouTube called “[Thanks for flying Air Canada, unless you’re Zone 5](#)” that makes me giggle.

It satirizes the “liars who’d like to fake a limp” to pre-board, the Zone 1 folks “who will stare at you with pity as you walk back to coach” (technically economy), the Zone 5 “filth” who deserve to be spit on and the Zone 4 passengers “who also suck.” Hey — I don’t write the jokes.

Before supposedly inventing Zone 6 to torture the lone Zone 5 traveller, the gate agent inexplicably goes easy on Zone 2 flyers — like myself — saying “now we’ll board the very attractive folks in Zone 2 and 3.”

If you haven’t been paying attention, Air Canada launched a five-zone boarding system in 2014 for a smoother process that also prioritizes business class and frequent flyers. It later added Zone 6.

I enjoyed my Zone 5 years, but I'm glad that they're behind me for now. These days I take a ridiculous number of flights each year and buy everything on a credit card linked to my Aeroplan. This gives me Aeroplan Elite Status and priority boarding in Zone 2. I don't need the complimentary checked bag perk but do appreciate the odd free preferred seat.

In real life, Zone 2 has nothing to do with looks but virtually guarantees I'll score luggage space in an overhead bin and not be forced to gate-check my bag. I save anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour per flight not waiting at baggage carousels.

Have you heard of the "gate lice" who crowd boarding gates and try to board before their designated zones? They try to hone in on the Zone 2 perk of boarding after business class, ahead of people with small children and way before general boarding.

Sometimes it's an honest mistake since infrequent flyers don't always know what zone numbers are or how to find them on their boarding passes. Other times it's a harmless act of anarchy, like the time I heard a gaggle of Newfoundlanders scoff at the existence of zones. Once, a frazzled gate agent skipped Zone 2 when I was coming home from abroad. It still rankles.

But enough about boarding. Here are some serious tips about actually being on a plane from a business traveller who spent 12 days and 15 hours in the air last year. An app called [Flighty](#) calculated that number after I punched in my 81 flights on 15 airlines to 48 airports.

- Zones typically have nothing to do with where you choose to sit. Look for me in the back row aisle seat on the left. Nobody kicks my seat, it's easier as a lefty to work on my laptop and I can go to the bathroom without inconveniencing strangers. Nearby rows are often blocked off for crew breaks so that's fewer wild card passengers to contend with.
- I don't recline my seat because it feels too intrusive. I abide by the unwritten rules that the middle seat gets two armrests and the person by the window controls the shade.
- I do use earbuds. It's huge news that United Airlines recently said it will [boot people off flights](#) — or even ban them — for refusing to use headphones while listening to their devices. Crying babies, unruly toddlers, meowing cats and barking dogs don't bother me because I've usually got white noise going in my earbuds to drown everybody out.
- If you're travelling with folks you absolutely must sit with, please shell out for reserved seats instead of asking people to change with you. That's just good manners especially since you can't tell who has paid for their seats. If you don't spring for advance seat selection, set an alarm and check-in exactly 24 hours before your flight — like I do — and you'll likely get the seat you want for free.

The jump seat (the folding seat for the flight crew) was broken on my first flight this year, forcing a flight attendant to sit beside me in the back row for takeoff and landing, which is highly unusual. We bonded over shop talk

and then she surreptitiously treated me to my favourite — but increasingly rare — airplane cookie.

That would be Lotus Biscoff, crunchy cinnamon-spiced cookies from Belgium that you can find in stores but taste best at a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet.

Air Canada used to dole out Biscoff before switching to chocolate-topped Célébration butter cookies from Québec and horrific garlic-herb pretzels. I don't know how many of my beloved Biscoff are still squirreled away in aircraft galleys, just that getting one now is possibly more wonderful than boarding with Zone 2.

Hmm. Sounds like fodder for a comedy sketch.

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