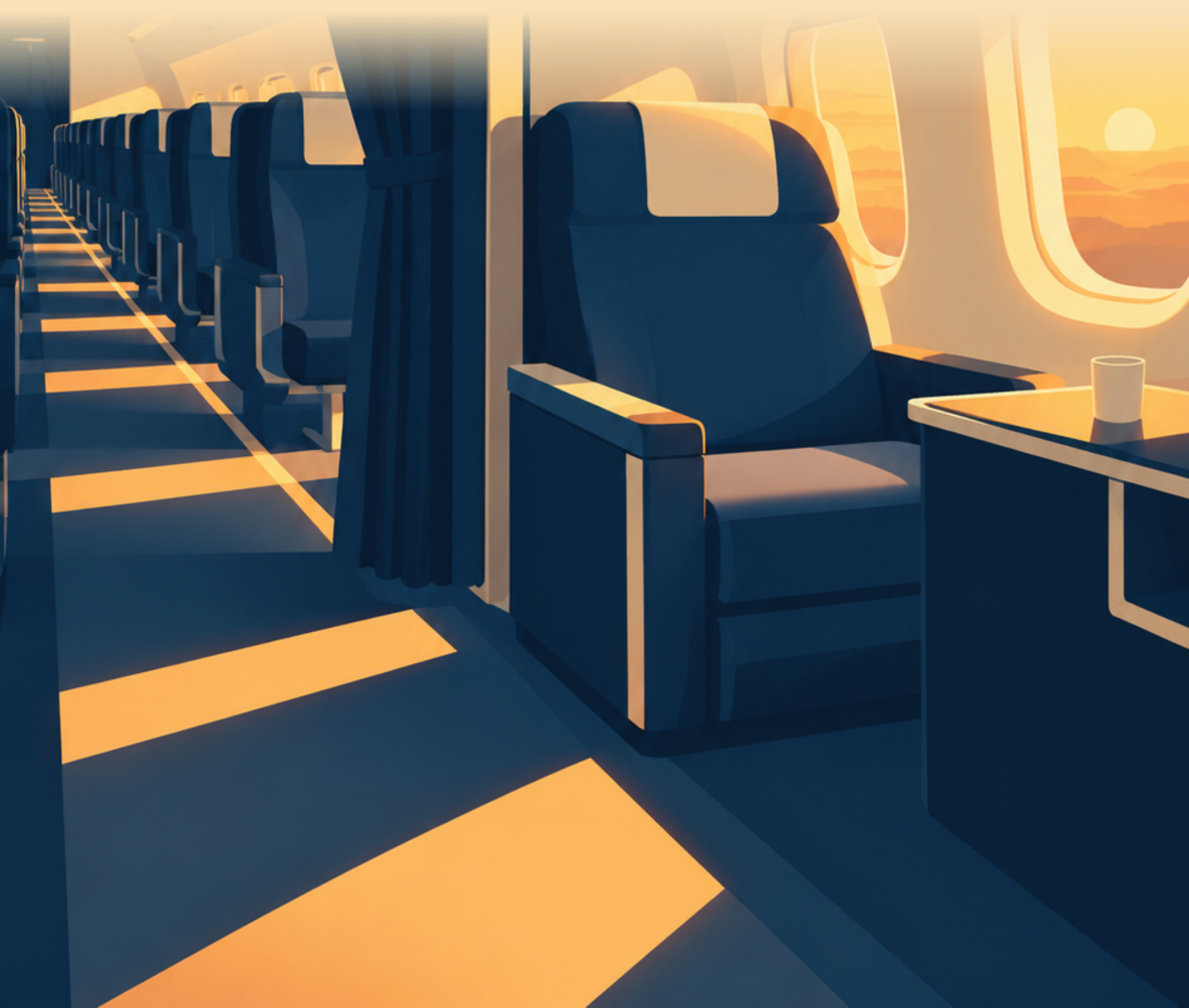


PRIME TRAVELER

Upgrades Are a List, Not a Lottery

*How airline upgrades are really decided, and the moves that
actually change your odds.*

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS • CHECKED OCTOBER 2026



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The List Decides

The popular story about upgrades goes like this: dress well, smile at the gate agent, ask at the right moment, and the seat is yours. It makes a good story. It is not how the large airlines work.

At the major US carriers, upgrades are processed by a computer-ordered list. When a premium seat is available, it goes to the person at the top of that list who is eligible for it. The gate agent's main job is to run the list, not to rewrite it.

HOW THE LIST IS USUALLY ORDERED

Each airline publishes or describes its own order, but most follow the same broad logic:

1. Elite status tier. Higher tiers come first.
2. Type of upgrade. Paid upgrades, upgrade certificates, and upgrades with miles generally rank ahead of free complimentary upgrades.
3. Fare paid. Within the same tier, a more expensive fare class usually ranks higher than a deep discount.
4. Tie-breakers. These vary: some airlines give priority to holders of their premium co-branded card, some use annual spending or loyalty points, some use the time you requested the upgrade.

HOW AN UPGRADE LIST IS USUALLY ORDERED

1. Elite status tier

Higher tiers are processed first

2. Type of upgrade

Paid, certificate and miles before free

3. Fare paid

Higher fare classes rank higher

4. Tie-breakers

Co-branded card, spend, or request time

Each layer only breaks ties within the layer above it. Exact order varies by airline.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Every useful upgrade move does one of four things: puts you on the list, moves you up it, lets you pay to skip it, or makes a seat open up. Everything in this guide falls into one of those four.

THE MYTH, CORRECTED

Courtesy matters, and Chapter 07 covers how to avoid being passed over. But on the large US airlines, charm does not move you up a list that a system has already ordered. Plan around the list, not around the agent.

The agent at the gate is reading a list. Your job is to be higher on it.

CHECK YOUR PLACE

Several US airlines show the upgrade and standby list in their app on the day of travel. Look before you walk up to the desk.