

How To Select Seats On Southwest Airlines

Direct answer: Southwest now assigns seats like every other airline. Since **27 January 2026**, when fifty years of open seating ended, you choose your seat **at the time of booking** on Choice, Choice Preferred and Choice Extra fares. On the cheapest **Basic** fare you do not get complimentary seat selection — you either pay to choose one or receive an assignment before departure.

If you last flew Southwest during the open seating era, essentially everything you knew has changed. There is no A-B-C boarding group with a number, no queuing at stanchions, and no dash for an aisle seat. There are now **three seat types, four fare bundles and eight boarding groups**.

The system rewards knowing which bundle buys what. **1-888-374-4490 [US] (OTA)** can compare the bundles on your route so you are not paying for a seat you would have received anyway.

What changed, and when

Southwest announced the end of open seating in July 2024, began selling assigned seats on **29 July 2025**, and flew the first assigned-seating flights on **27 January 2026**.

The airline's stated reason was customer research: it reported that around **80% of its existing customers and 86% of people who do not fly Southwest** preferred assigned seating, and that the lack of it was a primary reason travellers chose competitors.

This sits alongside the other major changes of the same period — the end of Bags Fly Free in May 2025 and the introduction of a Basic fare — as part of a broad shift toward a more conventional airline model.

The three seat types

Southwest divided the cabin into three categories.

Extra Legroom. The first five rows of the aircraft plus the exit rows, offering roughly **five additional inches of pitch** compared with standard seats. These are Southwest's first-ever premium seats. Exit rows continue to offer expanded legroom as they always have.

Preferred. Standard-size seats positioned toward the **front of the aircraft**. No extra space — the benefit is faster disembarking and earlier boarding.

Standard. Everything behind the exit rows.

About a third of seats onboard offer extra legroom. Worth knowing: Southwest also indicated that **standard economy pitch would decrease by about an inch on some aircraft** to make room, while maintaining what it describes as among the better standard pitch in the industry.

The four fare bundles

Fare	Seat selection	Boarding	Checked bags
Basic	None free — standard seat assigned at boarding; can be purchased	Last (Groups 6–8)	Paid
Choice	Standard seat chosen at booking	General (Groups 6–8)	Paid
Choice Preferred	Preferred seat, or any standard seat	Early general, no later than Group 5	Paid
Choice Extra	Extra Legroom seat, or any seat onboard	Early, Groups 1–2	2 free

The jump worth examining is **Choice Extra**, because it bundles an extra legroom seat, early boarding and two free checked bags. If you were going to pay \$45 and \$55 for two bags anyway, and wanted a better seat, the bundle frequently costs less than buying those items separately. Price it before defaulting to Choice.

Basic is the fare to approach carefully. No free seat selection, last boarding group, paid bags. What it does still include — and this is genuinely better than United's equivalent — is a **free full-size carry-on and personal item**.

Status and credit card benefits

Southwest's loyalty benefits cut across the fare bundles, which softens the system considerably.

A-List Preferred members can select **any seat, including Extra Legroom, at booking**, at no cost, regardless of fare purchased.

A-List members can select a standard or Preferred seat at booking, and an **Extra Legroom seat within 48 hours of departure** if available, at no cost.

Rapid Rewards credit cardholders can select a seat within **48 hours of departure even on a Basic fare**, and certain cards allow an upgrade to Extra Legroom within that window when available.

That cardholder provision is the one most worth knowing. It effectively removes the worst part of the Basic fare for anyone holding a Southwest card — you still get to choose a seat, just later than everyone else.

The eight boarding groups

Southwest replaced the A/B/C letter-and-number system with numbered groups **1 through 8**, ordered broadly by seat location, fare and status.

- **Groups 1–2:** Extra Legroom seats, Choice Extra fares, and A-List Preferred members

- **Groups 3–5:** Choice Preferred fares, A-List members, and Rapid Rewards cardholders — cardholders board no later than Group 5
- **Groups 6–8:** Choice and Basic fares, with **Basic boarding last**

Priority Boarding can be purchased separately, becoming available 24 hours before scheduled departure regardless of the fare you bought. If overhead space or early access matters on a particular flight, that is the late-stage option.

Selecting a seat step by step

- 1 **Choose your route and dates** on southwest.com or in the Southwest app.
- 2 **Compare the four bundles.** This is the decision that determines everything else — read what each includes rather than sorting by price alone.
- 3 **Reach the seat map.** On Choice and above you select immediately; on Basic you will be offered seats for purchase.
- 4 **Read the map's categories** — Extra Legroom, Preferred and Standard are distinguished, with charges shown where they apply.
- 5 **Check the aircraft layout.** Southwest operates a Boeing 737 fleet, but cabin retrofits to add extra legroom rows have been rolling out progressively, so configurations vary.
- 6 **Confirm and pay.**
- 7 **Check again 24 hours before departure**, when Priority Boarding goes on sale, A-List extra legroom selections open, and aircraft swaps may have moved your seat.

Choosing a good seat

Now that you can actually choose, it is worth choosing well.

Exit rows offer expanded legroom and fall within Extra Legroom. Trade-offs: seats may not recline, and you must meet the safety requirements to sit there.

The first five rows are the other Extra Legroom zone and get you off the aircraft fastest — useful on a tight connection.

Preferred seats buy position, not space. Worth it if disembarking speed matters to you; not worth it if legroom is the goal. For legroom, go to an exit row instead.

Over the wing is the smoothest position in turbulence and among the quietest — a good pick for nervous flyers.

The last row typically has limited recline, lavatory and galley proximity, and is last off.

Not the bulkhead or exit row if you are travelling with a pet. Southwest prohibits pet carriers in both, because there is no under-seat stowage.

Sitting together as a family

Assigned seating actually makes this easier than open seating did, provided you act at booking.

- **Book Choice or above**, not Basic, and select seats immediately
- **Book everyone on one reservation** so the system treats you as a group
- **Choose early** — availability only shrinks
- **Check again 24 hours out** when seats shift
- **Ask at the gate as a last resort**, politely and early

Under open seating, families relied on family boarding to sit together. Under the new system, the reliable route is simply selecting adjacent seats when you book.

What was lost, and what was gained

Worth being even-handed, because opinions on this run strong.

Lost: the ability to secure a good seat purely by checking in early, which rewarded attentiveness rather than spending. The famous flexibility of grabbing an empty row on a light flight. A boarding process many frequent flyers considered genuinely faster.

Gained: certainty about where you will sit, the ability to choose a specific seat in advance, extra legroom seating that Southwest never previously offered, and the ability to book adjacent seats for a family without relying on family boarding.

Southwest's own research suggested most travellers wanted the trade. Whether it suits you depends heavily on whether you were a check-in-exactly-24-hours-early type.

Common mistakes

Assuming open seating still applies. Anyone who has not flown Southwest since January 2026 is likely to be surprised.

Booking Basic and expecting to choose a seat. You cannot, unless you pay or hold a Southwest credit card.

Paying for Preferred when you wanted legroom. Preferred is position only. Extra Legroom is the space.

Overlooking Choice Extra when you need two bags. Bundled, it frequently costs less than buying bags and a seat separately.

Forgetting Priority Boarding exists. It goes on sale 24 hours out for any fare.

Not re-checking after a schedule change. Aircraft swaps reassign seats.

Preboarding and family boarding under the new system

Two provisions survived the transition, and they matter to a lot of travellers.

Preboarding remains available for passengers with a disability who need specific seating to accommodate it, need assistance boarding, or need to stow an assistive device. Request it at the gate. Under assigned seating, preboarding is less about securing a good seat — you already have one — and more about having time to settle without the pressure of a queue behind you.

Family boarding for adults travelling with young children continues, though its function has changed. Under open seating it was how families secured seats together, which made it genuinely essential. Now that seats are assigned at booking, its purpose is practical rather than territorial: time to get children, bags and car seats stowed without holding up the aircraft.

The upshot is that families no longer need to rely on boarding position to sit together. Select adjacent seats when you book, on a Choice fare or above, and the problem is solved before you reach the airport. That is a real improvement over the old system, where a late-checking-in family could end up scattered.

Passengers of size should review Southwest's longstanding policy on this, which has historically been among the more accommodating in the industry and continues under assigned seating.

What happens if your seat changes

Assigned seating introduces a category of problem Southwest passengers never previously had.

Aircraft swaps reassign seats. If Southwest changes the aircraft type or configuration, the seat map changes and your assignment may move. You will usually be reassigned automatically to something comparable, but comparable may not mean what you chose — an Extra Legroom seat can become a standard one.

Check after any schedule change notification. This is the single habit worth adopting. A schedule change email is also a seat change email more often than people expect.

If you paid for a seat and lost it, ask. A paid Extra Legroom seat that becomes a standard seat through no fault of yours should be addressed, but it is not always corrected automatically.

If Southwest cancels the flight, seat charges should be refunded or reaccommodated along with the fare. Again, ask rather than assuming.

Because Southwest's fleet is all Boeing 737s, swaps are less disruptive than at airlines flying many types — but the ongoing cabin retrofits adding Extra Legroom rows mean configurations genuinely do differ between aircraft.

Where to get help

Contact	Number	Best for
Travel reservations and fare comparison	1-888-374-4490 [US] (OTA)	Comparing the four Southwest bundles on total cost, arranging seats together for a family, checking whether Choice Extra beats buying bags separately

Contact	Number	Best for
Southwest Airlines Reservations	Published on southwest.com	Seat changes, Priority Boarding, fare bundle questions
Rapid Rewards service	Published on southwest.com	A-List and cardholder seat benefits
Southwest accessibility desk	Published on southwest.com	Accessible seating and preboarding

Frequently asked questions

Does Southwest still have open seating? No. Open seating ended on 27 January 2026 after more than fifty years. All flights now have assigned seats.

When did Southwest start assigned seating? Seats went on sale 29 July 2025, and the first assigned-seating flights departed 27 January 2026.

Is seat selection free on Southwest? On Choice, Choice Preferred and Choice Extra fares, yes. On Basic fares there is no free seat selection — you pay or receive an assignment.

What are Southwest's Extra Legroom seats? The first five rows and the exit rows, with roughly five additional inches of pitch. About a third of seats onboard.

What is the difference between Preferred and Extra Legroom? Preferred is a standard-size seat nearer the front — position only. Extra Legroom has the additional space.

How do Southwest's boarding groups work now? Eight numbered groups. Groups 1–2 for Extra Legroom, Choice Extra and A-List Preferred; Groups 3–5 for Choice Preferred, A-List and cardholders; Groups 6–8 for Choice and Basic, with Basic last.

Can I pick a seat on a Basic fare? Not free. You can purchase one, and Rapid Rewards cardholders can select a seat within 48 hours of departure even on Basic.

Do A-List members get free extra legroom seats? A-List Preferred members can select any seat including Extra Legroom at booking. A-List members can select Extra Legroom within 48 hours of departure when available.

Can I still buy priority boarding? Yes. Priority Boarding goes on sale 24 hours before scheduled departure, regardless of fare.

The takeaway

Southwest seat selection is now conventional: choose at booking on Choice fares and above, pay or wait on Basic. The decision that matters is **which of the four bundles you buy**, because it sets your seat type, your boarding group and whether your bags are free.

Two things are worth checking every time. **Choice Extra** bundles two free checked bags with an Extra Legroom seat and Group 1–2 boarding — if you were paying for bags anyway, the bundle often wins on total cost. And if you hold a **Rapid Rewards credit card**, you can select a seat within 48 hours of departure even on a Basic fare, which quietly removes the fare's biggest drawback.

For legroom specifically, look at the **exit rows** before paying for Preferred seats, which buy position rather than space.

To compare the bundles on total cost for your route, or to get several seats together on a busy flight, **1-888-374-4490 [US] (OTA)** can work through it in one call.