

AIRPORT GATE READING

What You Need to Know About “Gate Lice” at the Airport

While you may dream about traveling more, the actual “traveling” part is not always what it’s cracked up to be. In fact, navigating your way through an airport can be downright annoying—especially if you encounter gate lice. Before you start getting itchy, know that these aren’t actual lice. This term refers to passengers who crowd the gate like swarming insects long before their group is called to board the plane. And while they might not make you itchy, they certainly will make you angry.

As a professional travel writer who has probably flown at least twice a month for the past decade, I can attest to that. Flight attendants and gate agents despise this behavior too, and apparently, so does American Airlines. In fact, it’s rolling out a new program that aims to stop gate lice and ensure the boarding process goes according to plan.

Why are “gate lice” a problem?

Flight crews and gate agents try to make the boarding process go as smoothly as possible, prioritizing efficiency, safety and accessibility. Gate lice get in the way of that—and can delay your flight. For starters, they can affect preflight prep, as crew members and cleaning staff sometimes struggle to get through the crowd. Jackie S., a longtime flight attendant, notes that the crew usually arrives an hour before a flight, and even then, she’s seen people starting to bunch in groups and crowd the area.

Beyond annoying flight attendants and other airport personnel, gate lice can block pathways needed by those with actual priority needs, like families with young children or passengers with wheelchairs. “When passengers are crowding the boarding area, it makes it difficult for those with legitimate needs for preboarding to get to the boarding door,” explains Jackie. “Other boarding cannot begin until those people have boarded.”

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I want to add that this rude behavior can also put the safety of passengers with mobility issues at risk. I have experienced this when flying with my mom, who sometimes needs a wheelchair if the gate is far from security or simply needs more time when boarding due to her slower pace. When people don't clear out of the way, it makes me nervous that someone will knock into her and cause her to fall.

Why do passengers crowd the gate?

The kind way to look at this rude behavior is that people have anxiety when traveling. The not-so-kind way that's also true? They are prioritizing their needs and comforts above everyone else's. Either way, many travelers feel the pressure to line up early so they can secure space in the overhead bins since there's not enough room for every carry-on bag on most flights.

The irony? "Some gate lice are frequent fliers and passengers who have high enough status to board early, so there's rarely a problem finding space for their luggage," says Heather Poole, a longtime flight attendant and the author of *Cruising Attitude: Tales of Crashpads, Crew Drama and Crazy Passengers at 35,000 Feet*. In those cases (as well as many others), it boils down to wanting to get settled early and not having to wait—especially if there aren't enough seats in the terminal to relax in, which Poole says can be exacerbated by people spreading out on multiple seats with their various items.

Problems also arise with passengers who may want to swap seats on the flight itself. "Occasionally, people will board earlier than they are supposed to because they are traveling with someone else and are not seated together," Jackie says. "They figure that if they get on first and sit in the wrong seat to be next to their traveling companion, the person who is supposed to be in that seat will just switch with them. That actually happens quite a bit and is very unfair to the person who is assigned to that seat, which is almost always a window or an aisle."

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We also can't discount human nature. After all, once you see a few people standing around the gate, ready to hop in front of you, you may start to feel like you should be doing the same thing. That Lord of the Flies-style competition just might get the best of us sometimes. (But please restrain yourself!)

What is American Airlines doing to stop gate lice?

American Airlines is testing out a new system that will not just prevent people from cutting the line but also (hopefully) shame them into not doing it again. The new technology gives gate agents an "audible signal" when a passenger tries to board early—at which point, the passenger will need to step aside and wait until their zone has been called. (Like they should have in the first place!)

While it's still in the early phases of testing, this technology is already being used at Albuquerque International Sunport in New Mexico and Tucson International Airport in Arizona, and it will soon roll out at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Virginia.

American Airlines reports that it's "pleased" with the early results of the program.

AIRPORT GATE READING VOCABULARY

Gate lice vocabulary

"Not all it's cracked up to be" is an informal idiom that means something is not as good as it is said to be.

Downright: Used to emphasize something as very negative = similar to the word extremely

encounter: experience something, especially something unpleasant or difficult, while you are trying to do something else

crowd somebody: to stand very close to somebody so that they feel uncomfortable or nervous

swarm: a large group, especially bees, moving together in the same direction

Despise: to dislike and have no respect for somebody/something

Roll out: to officially make a new product available

Ensure: to make sure that something happens or is definite

prioritize: put tasks, problems, etc. in order of importance, so that you can deal with the most important first

To bunch: collect or fasten into a compact group.

Legitimate: for which there is a fair and acceptable reason

Mobility issues: Having difficulty walking

anxiety: the state of feeling nervous or worried that something bad is going to happen

"Not so kind" means someone or something is not very kind, implying a lack of consideration or gentleness, potentially bordering on being rude or insensitive, but not necessarily outright cruel

Irony: the funny or strange aspect of a situation that is very different from what you expect.

Boil down to: to have something as a main or basic part

Settle in: to make yourself or somebody else comfortable in a new position

exacerbate: to make something worse, especially a disease or problem

Spread out: to stretch your body or arrange your things over a large area

Swap: to give something to somebody and receive something in exchange

Discount: to think or say that something is not important or not true

Restrain: to stop yourself from feeling an emotion or doing something that you would like to do

QUESTIONS

1. What does the term "Airport Lice" Mean?

2. Why are gate lice a problem for crew members and cleaning staff?

3. What is the 'irony' of the gate lice?

4. Why does the writer worry about her mother?

5. What new technology is American Airlines using to stop passengers who try to board early?

ANSWERS

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This term refers to passengers who crowd the gate like swarming insects long before their group is called to board the plane.

2. Why are gate lice a problem for crew members and cleaning staff’?

crew members and cleaning staff sometimes struggle to get through the crowd which can delay the flight

3. What is the ‘irony’ of the gate lice?

Some gate lice are frequent fliers and passengers who have high enough status to board early, so there’s rarely a problem finding space for their luggage

4. Why does the writer worry about her mother?

When people don’t clear out of the way, it makes her nervous that someone will knock into her mother and cause her to fall.

5. what new technology is American Airlines using to stop passengers who try to board early?

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