



A view out of the cockpit window from my seat in the last row of the aircraft. (Photo: AirlineGeeks | Joey Gerardi)

**[ TRIP REPORTS ]** February 24, 2021 7:00 am ET

By Joey Gerardi

## Trip Report: Chicago to St. Louis on the Cessna 208 – Part 1

It is once again time for another Essential Air Service (EAS) trip report. While it is true that the EAS program connects small communities in the United States to larger cities, a select few are connected to two large cities instead of just one.

What this means is that passengers in a large city can fly nonstop between their destinations, or opt for a truly unique connection in small community that isn't normally used as a stopover city.

In this trip report I opted for what is probably the most unique way of getting between Chicago's O'Hare International Airport and St. Louis. A 679-mile trip that takes nearly five hours on a single engine propeller driven Cessna 208B Grand Caravan, even though the nonstop flight between the cities is only 258 miles and takes less than an hour on a jet.

What makes this route special is not only that you fly on an 8-seat propeller aircraft out of one of the busiest airports in the world, but also that the service stops in not one but two small cities between Chicago and St. Louis.

Another interesting aspect of this route is that it will be ending in less than a week, so if you plan on flying the route yourself you are practically out of time to do so. A United Airlines service operated by SkyWest will be taking over the EAS contracts for both Mason City and Fort Dodge, which are the featured stops on the route, on March 1, 2021. Both cities will have a twice-daily nonstop flight to Chicago O'Hare on a 50-seat CRJ-200.

## Booking

Air Choice One is the airline that flies this truly unique routing between O'Hare and St. Louis. The carrier's website is rather self-explanatory and works just like every other airline's website – you type in your origin and destination and it spits out flight options.

The stops I wanted between Chicago and St. Louis are the cities of Mason City and Fort Dodge, Iowa. Despite the long route and time you'd spend on the plane, one-way flights begin at only \$98 and can sometimes be cheaper than a last-minute booking for a nonstop flight on a different airline.

The carrier also offers a one-stop option to St. Louis through Burlington, Iowa, but I wanted to stretch my trip out as much as I could.

During booking, I noticed something: Air Choice One charges for carry-on bags. It gave off the vibe of the basic economy rules on the larger carriers, and especially since Air Choice One offered different bag rules depending on what fare you decided to book.

### Flights from Chicago to St Louis

**Business Fare:** 2 Checked Bags, 1 Carry On and 1 Personal item

**Everyday Fare:** 1 Checked Bags, 1 Carry On and 1 Personal item

**Go Your Way Fare:** 0 Checked Bags, 0 Carry On and 1 Personal item

For more baggage information [click here](#).

To view the Fare Rules Information [click here](#).

The baggage rules for booking classes (Photo: Air Choice One)

As I'd be bringing only a backpack, I opted to go for the cheapest option, which they called the "Go Your Way" fare. The booking process went on, and they proceeded to ask what seat I wanted and even had a seat selection page.

3E2107 ORD-MCW    3E2998 MCW-FOD    3E2206 FOD-STL

Selected    Unavailable    Occupied    Standard    Plus    Premium/Emergency

### 3E2107 ORD-MCW

Passenger	Upgrade Price	Seat
Gerard [REDACTED]	\$0	

To travel in an emergency exit row seat a passenger must:

- Be 16 years of age or older.
- Be able to understand the operating instructions.
- Be able to operate the emergency exit without causing themselves bodily harm.
- Be able to visually determine if the exit is safe to open.
- Not require special handling or the use of a mobility aid or medical device.
- Not be traveling with an animal in the cabin.
- Not be solely responsible for another person.
- Not require a seatbelt extender as this presents a tripping hazard.

No Thanks    Select Seat(s)

Go Back

The seat selection page of the booking process (Photo: Air Choice One)

The seat selection option was rather odd, considering airlines that operate small aircraft like this usually assign your seats based on weight-and-balance calculations.

I then noticed something that was really surprising: what looked like two bathroom icons located near the rear of the aircraft. I have never seen a Cessna 208 with a restroom before and highly doubted they had one on this aircraft, but I looked forward to seeing if they actually had any.

As I put in my details, I noticed another feature – or rather the lack thereof. There was no place to enter my Known Traveler Number, which is how passengers get TSA PreCheck when flying. I then found out via the carrier's 'Frequently Asked Questions' page that Air Choice One is one of the few airlines that doesn't participate in the TSA PreCheck program, meaning that I would have to allow myself extra time at the airport before departure.

I proceeded to book the flight and got the confirmation email with my flight details.

Departs	Arrives	Date	Flight Detail
12:00 ORD	14:30 MCW	11/13/2020 Fri	3E2107
14:45 MCW	15:20 FOD	11/13/2020 Fri	3E2998
15:35 FOD	17:45 STL	11/13/2020 Fri	3E2206

My flight details for the flight to St. Louis (Photo: Air Choice One)

The connections in the smaller cities were both 15 minutes each, but I assumed the same aircraft would take me all the way to St. Louis. This ended up being true, which was very good for me – more on that to come.

## Day of the Flight

Due to the fact that Air Choice One does not participate in the TSA-PreCheck program, I made sure to get to the airport two hours ahead of time, as I didn't know how long security lines would be.

Upon arrival to the airport, I found the Air Choice One check-in desk, which is located in Terminal 3. The carrier shares the space with the two other airlines that operate small propeller aircraft into Chicago O'Hare: Boutique Air and Cape Air.



The check in desk for the three propeller airlines at Chicago O'Hare (Photo: AirlineGeeks | Joey Gerardi)

As I was checking in, the person at the desk recognized me from when I flew the [Cape Air inaugural into Chicago O'Hare from Manistee, Michigan](#) in Oct. 2020. Apparently, the same customer service agents work the Cape Air and Air Choice One flights; Boutique Air hires their own employees.

After checking in, I was informed that I was the only passenger for the first two segments of my trip, and that my flight would be delayed by 1.5 hours due to a late inbound aircraft. I asked if my aircraft would be flying me all the way to St. Louis; luckily this was the case so I didn't have to worry about missing that 15-minute connection.

Delays are something that you risk if you do choose to fly small airlines on multi-stop journeys. Due to the delay, I would now be waiting roughly 3.5 hours for my first flight.

After passing through security, I decided to walk around and get some food, as I would be sitting around for a bit. After some walking, I decided to head to my gate, which would be L11A, a ground boarding gate that houses the three small propeller airlines at O'Hare.





Boarding gate L11A (Photo: AirlineGeeks | Joey Gerardi)

As the gate houses three airlines and only has one monitor, not all the flights are displayed at the same time. The main flight displayed was a Cape Air flight to Manistee, Michigan, which was delayed for four hours. Along the bottom of the screen is where my first flight to Mason City was being shown, which isn't really readable unless you're directly in front of the desk.

The plane finally arrived, and the customer service agent told me it was time to board. I walked down the stairs and was led to my aircraft, registered as N1983X, a 2003 Cessna 208B Grand Caravan. I boarded the aircraft and was told to sit in the last row of the aircraft for weight and balance.



My aircraft, N1983X, a 2003 Cessna 208B Grand Caravan (Photo: AirlineGeeks | Joey Gerardi)

I ultimately knew they would seat me based on weight and balance, which is why I found it odd that they still offered a seat selection option to passengers. Also, as I expected, there was no bathroom onboard the aircraft.

The aircraft has a very nice interior, and the seats were more comfortable than first class seats on some major airlines. I'm about 5'5", and I had roughly ten inches between my knees and the seat in front of me.



The cabin of the Cessna 208B Grand Caravan (Photo: AirlineGeeks | Joey Gerardi)

The seat pitch was very nice at 38 inches, and most seats reclined anywhere between three and five inches, but the last row on the left side had an impressive 11 inches of recline since there is no seat behind it.

The single-engine whirred to life and we taxied toward the runway for takeoff. It is always so fascinating being in a smaller aircraft at an airport with larger jets surrounding you. Even from the last row of the aircraft, I could clearly see all the action out of the cockpit window.

We then rolled onto the runway and blasted off towards our cruising altitude of 5,800-feet for the 1-hour 45-minute flight to Mason City, Iowa.

Stay tuned for the next article, when I show the rest of my journey, which will be published after Air Choice One discontinues this service.