



FREQUENT FLYER **MASTER**

Free Travel Anywhere
Featuring the 'One-Free-Plane-Ticket' Guarantee

BY CHRIS GUILLEBEAU

Frequent Flyer Master
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Introduction

Dear Fellow Traveler,

Awesome—you've made it to the *Frequent Flyer Master* report.

I'm really excited about this project. I've been earning more than 50,000 Frequent Flyer miles a year for more than 10 years. Over the past three years, I've taken it up a level and earned at least 150,000 per year through creative travel hacking, not counting the miles I earn through my actual travel.

Depending on where you live and your own preferences, you might not want to or be able to earn as many miles as I do, but even with a small investment of your time, you should be able to earn enough miles for at least one free trip a year.

I believe that the right kind of travel can be a force for good in the world. As Mark Twain put it:

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”

I'm interested in living a big, full life, and travel is one of the ways I do it. Since you've purchased this guide, I'm assuming you feel the same way. The next step is to familiarize yourself with the strategies and tactics required to skyrocket your way to an overflowing mileage account.

Let's get started.

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2 Strategy



A VERY SHORT HISTORY OF FREQUENT FLYER MILES

The purpose of this report is to focus on the practical aspects of maxing out your mileage account and facilitating easy redemptions for the kind of travel that is most important to you. For that reason, we won't take long discussing the history of Frequent Flyer Miles. If you'd like more of the backstory, check out [Mileage Pro](#), one of the few published books about the subject.

Because this guide will focus on practical information, here are just a few highlights before we get to the good stuff. The first airline loyalty program was created way back in May 1981. American was the first carrier to kick off the party, and required 50,000 miles for a basic coach redemption—a lot less than is usually required now. The concept was hot, and United soon followed with their own “Mileage Plus” program.

In 1983, both Marriott and Holiday Inn began the first hotel loyalty programs, rewarding frequent guests with points that could be exchanged for free stays on future visits. Both programs have been modified over the years to better balance the program's benefits to serve the companies' most loyal members while ensuring that rewards remain valuable enough to motivate leisure travelers. These days, virtually every airline has a frequent flyer program. Even regional carriers and discount airlines like Southwest and Jet Blue have their own programs.

The justification for frequent flyer programs is to reward loyal travelers, but in fact, the programs are incredible assets to the airlines. The psychological benefit of earning and spending miles is so great that many people will take extra connections or even spend more money to fly their preferred airline. Others go to great lengths to earn miles on the ground, sometimes spending far more than the miles or points are worth.

The airlines understand this psychological benefit very well, and they go to great lengths of their own to exploit it with heavy advertising. Don't believe the hype that millions of unused miles are a liability to an airline — the frequent flyer programs strongly favor airlines to begin with.

Most travelers are fairly naïve about how mileage programs work, and the airlines use this to their advantage by attempting to limit awards to low-value trips. Savvy travelers can turn the tables on the airlines by a) earning many more miles than the average traveler, and b) redeeming those miles for high-value trips that would otherwise be very expensive.

Because Frequent Flyer programs favor the airlines from the beginning, it's only fair to do everything you can to earn as much mileage as you can, and also be able to easily redeem your mileage for great travel rewards. That's where this guide comes in, and it all starts with goal-setting.

Set a Goal and Focus on What Works for You

This report, the accompanying online resources, and the ongoing updates all contain a lot of information. The most important thing with Frequent Flyer Mile strategies is to take what is most applicable to you, engage with that information to make it work for your situation, and ignore everything else.

I'm a big fan of goal-setting, and as you begin to supersize your travel life, it's helpful to set goals related to the miles you'll earn and what you'll ultimately use them for. Depending on your time and commitment, you should be able to earn anywhere from 25,000-100,000 miles each year without a great deal of effort. If you're up for spending more time on it, then you can likely earn even more.

WHY I DON'T MIND TAKING ON THE AIRLINES

In the battle between airlines and consumers, airlines usually win. With mileage plans in general, the airlines give out far more miles than are actually redeemed for travel. In many cases, airlines impose quotas and restrictions that put people off from using their hard-earned miles for the free travel they were promised.

Most people who aren't savvy to the mileage game don't realize that the majority of miles are not accumulated through flying but rather than credit card spending and promotional giveaways. In fact, mileage programs are a cash cow for the airlines. In some cases, airlines have actually protected themselves from bankruptcy due to the

large infusions of cash they have received in exchange for miles that are then awarded to consumers. Because the airlines treat mileage programs as a profit center instead of a reward for loyalty, I don't mind sharing black-hat or provocative information about how to get more miles and successfully redeem them for miles. It's the least I can do to narrow their competitive advantage over the average traveler.

(By the way, I'm not actually *against* the airlines. I give them a great deal of money each year and don't necessarily think they are evil. But I do believe their loyalty programs are structured in a way that is misleading to people who don't know better, so that's why I have no problem with taking them on and helping to share the wealth.)

THE BASICS

Let's start with a elements of basic Frequent Flyer strategy:

You can't combine miles between accounts.

You can, however, use miles in one account for awards on other airlines. I include this info in the beginning because it is the most frequently asked question I heard in the research for this guide. With only a couple of exceptions (the Starwood American Express program is the big one), what you earn in one program stays in one program. If you have 15,000 miles with Delta and 10,000 miles with Continental, you can't combine them for a 25,000 mile award. You'll need to earn a total of 25,000 miles in either program first.

On the bright side, it's not usually that difficult to get to the 25,000, and once you start racking up the miles, you

can use a bunch of points in one carrier to redeem for a flight on another carrier. In fact, some of the best arbitrage opportunities that we'll explore involve using the strategy of earning miles in one carrier's program and redeeming them for another carrier's flight.

Look for Big Opportunities.

When pursuing miles, you can do it the easy way or the slow way. Most people choose the slow way of earning a few hundred miles at a time, and the airlines are happy to support that approach.

The better (and in fact, easier) way is to take advantage of the "small" points bonuses whenever they present themselves, but not waste a lot of time with them. Spend your time instead on big opportunities that require a small amount of legwork but yield large rewards. For the same amount of time, you can often earn 10,000 miles as easily as you can 1,000. Because dealing with airlines can be annoying, you'll want to minimize the number of issues you need to call in about or track in your mileage account.

What are big opportunities? Here's an example: for several months in 2007, Delta had an incredible offer of 50,000 SkyMiles just for getting a new American Express Delta credit card. Even though it was a business card, they allowed individuals to sign up for it simply by listing their own name as a business ("Jane Doe, Inc.").

The first 25,000 Miles were credited with the first charge on the card, and the other 25,000 were credited after the cardholder reached a spending threshold. Even better,

10,000 of these miles counted as Elite Qualifying Miles (EQMs), allowing the cardholder to more quickly reach Medallion status. The fee for the card was \$79—not a bad price for up to 50,000 bonus miles and 10,000 EQMs. (Some people even had the \$79 fee waived upon request, showing how desperate Delta was to get people to sign up for this incredible deal.)

About once a month, and at least once a quarter, another big opportunity usually presents itself. I'll keep you posted about them with the free updates, and you can also check with some other web sites listed in the resources section. Big opportunities often mean the difference between average travelers and those who choose to really max out their mileage account.

Earn all the miles you can, but don't overpay.

Some of the best mileage bonuses are free, but others require some kind of spending. We're going to focus on adding a lot of *free* mileage to your account. The goal is to radically increase your mileage, but anything you purchase in pursuit of that goal must be cost-efficient.

VALUATION

The second most common question I hear about Frequent Flyer Miles is: "What are they actually worth?" This is a very good question, and important to consider as you get more serious about the mileage game. The short answer is that mileage valuation is entirely personal and **should be related to the awards you will redeem the miles for.**

Because different people have different travel needs, no one valuation can be standard.

However, it's true that a general "rule of thumb" can be helpful in determining valuation. The estimate used to be about \$0.02—that's two cents per mile. Because of the huge influx of miles and an accompanying devaluation of the past few years, some experts now advocate for a lower valuation of approximately \$0.01, or one cent per mile.

Because I've been doing this for a while and am fairly skilled at the process, and also because I use the miles to go all over the world instead of just close to home, I use a higher valuation of about \$0.03-0.04 per mile. Since I am frequently able to redeem miles for trips that would cost \$5,000 or more if I had to purchase them with cash, I'm comfortable with a higher valuation.

Even though I'm mileage crazy (and I know that some people who read this guide will be too), it's important to consider the time-and-money factor when pursuing miles from many different sources. I recently published a travel hacking article on my site where I outlined the strategy for getting an almost-free trip on Expedia.com that included a round-trip flight and three hotel nights to numerous cities in North America. A reader from Quebec posted this comment in response:

I totally agree that there are a million ways to make a million - at least - and each time somebody shares brilliant ideas about how to get one step closer through doing non-

conformist tricks there is one important factor that seems to be missing:

Monetary end result (US dollars) divided by your precious time (hours)

If you make more than your hourly net income and on top of that feel great about it you are a clear winner. If not—it was probably not worth telling about it either.

Lets take your example about the \$200 (+ \$50 tax) trip discount including flight and hotel as being "almost for free". If you earn \$30 US per hour I see this picture:

- One hour of surfing to find the deal (\$30)
- 2 days on the road at 8 "work hours" per day (16 x \$30 = \$480)
- Food + transportation ball park figure of \$50 per day (\$100)

\$610 – \$200 rebate + \$50 taxes = \$460 expense

If you were going to Cleveland anyway this sounds like a great deal. If you weren't why would you go there for \$460 somebody may ask.

In this case, the math I would use for the example is somewhat different. I work from anywhere and don't really calculate an hourly wage for myself. My other defense is

that I actually enjoy the odd hobby of travel hacking—if I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't do it. However, Martin (the commentor) is completely right in principle: once you start going after miles and deals, better make sure it's in your best interest to do so.

Therefore, as a general rule, it's helpful to think of the one-cent rule. Each mile is conservatively worth \$0.01. For 10,000 miles, you might happily spend \$100 (remember, a 90,000 mile ticket would then cost only \$900), but you probably shouldn't spend much more than that unless you know exactly what you're doing and have a definite redemption plan in mind. Set your own exceptions, but be careful.

Consider the value of your miles based on the rewards you want.

This is a follow-up to the \$0.01 Rule. Think about your travel goals. If you don't have any, set them. Go ahead—its fun. Some examples are:

- » Nomadic Exploration of South Asia
- » Family Vacation to Hawaii
- » Caribbean Retreat with Spouse
- » Personal Trip to Mexico
- » Sky trip to Colorado
- » Scandinavian Tour

Those are just some ideas: think of your own, and then figure out how many miles you'll need to turn the idea into reality. The value of your rewards will help you discover what you'll need to do to rack up the miles. If your travel dream requires a very large number of miles, you may need to save for a while, or if your dream involves two people,

consider paying for one person's flight while using miles for the other.

It doesn't really matter what your goals are—as long as *you* know what they are. Setting travel goals will also help you figure out the value of the miles you already have, as well as the value of future mileage. If you know you want to go to Hong Kong (HKG) in Economy Class on Cathay Pacific (a great airline where Economy is actually comfortable most of the time), then you know you need 45,000 or 50,000 miles depending on how you book. Your objective is then to get to that level, and the value of your miles will be based on whatever the best-available price for the ticket would be if you purchased it with cash.

Likewise, if you wanted to go to HKG in Business Class, you'd need at least 80,000 miles depending on how you booked it. For First Class, you'd need 120,000. Obviously, for two people, the required mileage will double, so the idea is to adjust your goals accordingly.

If You Can, Charge Everything.*

Remember, more miles are earned on the ground than in the air these days. If you really want to rack up crazy miles, you can either be a dedicated road warrior who travels for business every week, or you can take it easy at home and use an airline or associated credit card to earn serious

miles. Which cards are the best? Stay tuned—we'll have more on that in a moment, and the online resources also include several important links to learn more.

**Of course, you also need to pay off your balance every month. It doesn't make economic sense to charge for miles and then pay high interest rates. So be smart, use the card for miles, but pay the bill on time and in full.*

Save miles, but don't hoard.

Yes, you should save up as long as you need for the rewards you want. BUT, you shouldn't hoard your miles forever. It's simply not the smartest decision. Airlines go bankrupt all the time, and while Frequent Flyers are sometimes rescued when another airline picks up their miles, it doesn't always happen.

Also, mileage charts are frequently “adjusted” by airlines, which is code language for “devalued.” Sometimes a few months of advance notice is given, and sometimes not. The point is if you won't be doing much travel for more than two years, then it might be better to consider booking free rewards for friends or family, or donating your miles to charity.

In short, save all you can, but save for a specific reason.

Keep in mind what you want to do, and go for it! If you have lots of general miles that you know you won't use for a while, put them to a better use through donation.

Tip: *You can learn more about how to donate excess miles to charity by reading [this online article](#).*

When flying, earn mileage on cheap flights and redeem on expensive rewards.

This is critical! Don't waste your hard-earned miles on flights that you could purchase cheaply. Always research the current price of a ticket before booking it with miles. Then, after you've earned mileage on cheap flights, redeem those miles for expensive flights. The best rewards in terms of dollar value are long-haul First Class (or Business Class) tickets. An upgraded ticket to Europe can easily cost \$3,000—at the low end. Better airlines like British Airways and Virgin Atlantic will charge up to \$9,000 on short notice.

However, you can use as little as 80,000 miles to book the same flight for free. When you consider that an Economy redemption requires 40,000-50,000 miles (and the ticket would usually cost less than \$1,000), using mileage for Business and First Class overseas tickets is truly a great deal.

Other good redemptions are cross-country flights, flights to Canada or Mexico from the U.S., flights to Hawaii, flights on routes that don't have much discount airline competition, and flights to lesser-known or “difficult” travel destinations. These fares tend to be higher, and are thus better suited for ideal mileage rewards. I went to Mongolia for just 20,000 SkyMiles, for example, by using Delta to book the trip on Korean Air Lines during a stop in Tokyo.

When it comes to earning miles, the rich get richer.

What this means is that once you spend a couple of years learning the ropes and working towards elite status, you'll likely start earning even more miles. I've earned double

EQMs (Elite Qualification Miles) with Delta and American for the past few years for example. If you're just getting started with mileage, it will get better. Start now and scale up over time.

THE UNITED STATES: BAD AIRLINES, GOOD MILEAGE PROGRAMS

The headline pretty much says it all—in the U.S., airlines are not known for their service or comfort. Give me an Asian airline any day over a U.S. airline. Flying Economy on Singapore Airlines is about like domestic First Class on United, Delta, Continental, or American.

The bright side is that while our airlines suck, the mileage programs are usually the best in the world. Many active travelers who live elsewhere, especially Europe or Australia, have adopted a strategy of earning most of their mileage activity with U.S. airlines. (This can be a good deal even for those based elsewhere who rarely come to the U.S.)

Air Canada usually falls in the same category as U.S. airlines—not the greatest in terms of service, but the mileage program is especially good for certain redemptions. After two years of flying mostly OneWorld carriers, I'll be taking more flights on Star Alliance again next year, and I took a hard look at Air Canada's Horizons program before deciding to focus my earning on Continental. For their part, European airlines used to be considered superior to the North American ones, but they have also fallen on hard times recently and dropped in service.

All things considered, you can think of the airline service hierarchy like this:

*U.S. / Canada < European Carriers < Most Asian Carriers
(+Air New Zealand & Virgin Atlantic)*

When it comes to mileage programs, though, it's more like:

U.S. Carriers > Everyone else

What if you need an address to sign up?

By the way, if you need a mailing address to register for a program, you often need to use a U.S. address. Canadians, you're (usually) in luck. Most U.S. airlines have an office in Canada and actively compete with Air Canada, so most of the time a Canadian address will be accepted.

For everyone else, here's a U.S. address you can use (this is an unadvertised bonus; please don't get me in trouble with anyone):

Your Name
Unconventional Guides
4110 SE Hawthorne Blvd.
Portland, OR 97214

(Note that I won't be working as a mailman and forwarding anything to you—this is just an address you can use if you need one when you sign up online.)

BUYING & SELLING FREQUENT FLYER MILES

A significant “gray market” governs the unofficial buying and selling of frequent flyer miles. Technically speaking, most of the transactions are in actual awards bookings, since direct mile transfers between accounts usually require substantial fees and are limited to a relatively low number of miles per year. Therefore, it’s only natural that a market would develop between people who travel often for business and have tons of extra miles, and adventurous travelers who like to enjoy the benefits of high-mileage redemptions but simply don’t have enough miles for the awards they want.

Before the internet, most of the market existed with companies who acted as brokers for miles and awards, buying from overloaded mileage holders at one price and reselling to would-be travelers at a higher price. A few of those companies still exist, and you can find them by searching on Google for “buy and sell Frequent Flyer Miles.”

Because there are several companies doing this, the market is fairly efficient, meaning that you won’t make a fortune selling off your piles of miles, and you also won’t often find an amazing deal on that big First Class award trip to Australia you’ve been waiting for. The awards can best be categorized as generally good values with no mega-savings.

For example, you can typically purchase a Business Class awards redemption to Europe using one of these services for around \$2,400. While this isn’t nearly as good as getting

it for free, published fares are often a lot higher. Bear in mind that just like when you’re using your own awards, you won’t earn any additional miles when flying on a free ticket booked by someone else.

What do the airlines think about this practice? Opinions vary, but because they have an interest in keeping hard-to-get redemptions at a low level, they generally don’t like people buying and selling awards. Technically, they even reserve the right to cancel someone’s frequent flyer account (and awards itinerary) who has been found “guilty” of trading dollars for miles.

Practically speaking, however, most of the time the airlines will look the other way as long as you are not a million-miler who’s offloading huge numbers of miles all at once or a buyer looking to finance a First Class Round-the-World trip with someone else’s miles.

eBay Auctions

With the widespread adoption of eBay, individuals can now discreetly buy and sell their miles and awards to people they don’t even know. eBay is frequently used as a trading house for these kinds of awards, although from time to time the airlines do step in and ask for certain auctions to be cancelled.

Of special interest on eBay these days is the sale of Delta awards (which can be booked on any SkyTeam airline, including Air France and KLM) and U.S. Airways awards (which can be booked on any Star Alliance airline,

including United). To search for Delta awards, [use this link](#). To search for U.S. Airways, or any others, just change the search term.

It's also possible to pick up United "anytime" upgrade awards on eBay. These are given to 1K Premier members several times during the year, and can be a great value for long-haul flights. The current link for United upgrades for sale on eBay [is here](#).

Finally, you can often find other interesting Frequent Flyer items for sale on eBay, including passes to airline lounges (usually a \$25-50 value for \$10-20). Try searching around yourself and see what you come up with.

Tip: *availability for eBay mileage awards varies greatly from week to week and season to season. If you don't see anything you like right away, keep checking back. You can also use a free eBay tool to set up an alert that will automatically email you whenever awards auctions are available.*

3



Tactics: Earning Miles

Generally speaking, there are three major areas for earning frequent flyer miles: actual flying, credit card spending, and non-travel activity. To rack up massive amounts of miles (let's say 200,000+ a year), it helps to combine use from all three categories.

However, if you don't fly much or don't wish to use credit cards, you can still accumulate up to 100,000 miles a year through an active strategy, or at least 25,000 through a passive strategy. The main difference between the two is a) how much time you're willing to spend, and b) whether you're willing to spend any money to get miles.

THE PASSIVE STRATEGY

If you're able and willing, you sign up for one or two mileage cards that provide a good mileage bonus (at least 25,000 on registration) and one mile per dollar spent. Whenever you travel, you use your Frequent Flyer number. It's not a priority, but when a promotion comes along that doesn't take much time or effort, you follow-up and get the miles.

Again, with a passive strategy you should still earn at least 25,000 miles a year, and if you spend an hour or two with this guide and the related web sites, you can probably pick up twice as many without much difficulty. That's enough for two domestic tickets a year, or one international ticket to most destinations.

THE ACTIVE STRATEGY

To take it to the next level, you'll need to spend a bit more time—but the rewards will be adjusted upwards as well. With an active strategy, you're willing to regularly surf the internet to find new opportunities. If you're able and willing, you'll sign up for several mileage cards (if you've never done this before and sign up for four, you can have 100,000 new miles within a month). You actively pursue bonuses and use a spreadsheet to record your growing stash of free travel opportunities.

Naturally, which strategy you pursue is up to you. It's also possible to start with one or the other and then fall back or scale up as your mileage account grows or other parts of your life get busier.

ONGOING OPPORTUNITIES

Mileage Mall Shopping

Mileage Mall Shopping is a greatly underused strategy for earning miles. Most Frequent Flyers shop online a lot for both travel and non-travel items, but less than 5% of Frequent Flyer members also participate in a mileage mall rebate program.

At first glance, you may think that a Mileage Mall program is a hard sell because they often feature promotions for advertising partners you may not be interested in—and in fact it isn't worth it, *if* you end up buying stuff you wouldn't ordinarily buy. However, the attractive thing about Mileage Mall shopping is when vendors *that you already buy from*

offer additional rewards or mileage rebates when shopping through a mileage portal.

If you regularly shop at Barnes & Noble, Best Buy, Toys-R-Us, Safeway, or a number of other big-box merchants, you can earn extra miles for your purchases without changing any of your shopping habits. Here are the links to a few of the bigger mileage malls, and if you don't see your preferred airline, use Google to search for it:

- » [United Mall](#)
- » [AAdvantage Mall](#)
- » [Choice Privileges Mall](#)
- » [SkyMiles \(Delta\) Mall](#)
- » [Air Miles \(Canada\) Mall](#)

TIP: *Some of the mileage malls are better than others, and you should beware of the expensive gift catalog offers that airlines tend to feature in their online shopping sites. Yes, they'll give extra miles for those purchases, but you'll usually pay far too much in the first place. It's better to focus on partnerships with national merchants that you already shop with or could easily switch to.*

I'm not a big shopper, but whenever I need to buy something for more than \$200 or so, I try to do so through a mileage mall in order to receive the double points. It's also possible to buy something from one of the mileage malls

for local pick-up. This can really come in handy for big electronics purchases from outlets like Best Buy, Staples, or the Apple Store.

Finance Bonuses

Ameritrade

Ameritrade is a leading investment and trading firm that offers large blocks of bonus miles for opening a bank account with their company. The more you deposit, the more miles you receive, and you can choose which program you want your miles to go towards.

Here are a few of the links:

- » [Ameritrade Delta Bonus](#)
- » [Ameritrade United Bonus](#)
- » [Ameritrade Continental Bonus](#)
- » [Ameritrade American Bonus](#)

The good thing about this bonus is you don't have to actively trade with Ameritrade to receive the miles. (In other words, you don't have to risk anything.) For U.S. customers, your money is guaranteed by the FDIC the same way that it is in any physical bank or credit union. After you receive the miles (it usually comes in two blocks, half in the beginning and half at the end of the initial three or six month period), you can cancel the account and transfer your money out if you don't want to stay with Ameritrade.

Lending Tree

If you're in the market for a loan or a real estate service of any kind, you can also earn a ton of miles if you're not picky about who your agent is. Visit LendingTree.com for their latest offers. The deals usually include big mileage bonuses for buying and selling real estate, but you can earn lesser amounts by merely requesting a service or connecting with a local agent.

There are some other online financial services firms offering mileage bonuses, but Ameritrade and Lending Tree are the most reputable.

Here are a few of the links:

- » [Lending Tree Delta Bonus](#)
- » [Lending Tree United Bonus](#)
- » [Lending Tree Continental Bonus](#)
- » [Lending Tree American Bonus](#)

CREDIT CARD SPENDING AND BIG BONUSES

Credit card spending, managed responsibly, is simply the best way to max out your miles. If you're not already earning miles for every dollar you spend, this is the easiest way to make a big improvement in your mileage balance. Which card is best for you? It all depends on your needs and location. The first one we'll look at is the Starwood American Express card.

Starwood American Express

Widely recognized as the #1 card for mileage earning for both hotels and airfare, this card accrues points on a 1/\$1 basis that can be converted to virtually every major airline program. One of the great things about the Starwood AmEx card is that it offers a 20% bonus when transferring at least 20,000 points to an airline program. Whenever you transfer 20,000, they give you a 5,000 point bonus.

The bonus continues even when you transfer more points. Transfer 40,000 and you get 10,000 bonus points. A transfer of 60,000 points gets an additional 15,000 bonus, and so on. This is a fantastic deal, because with most U.S. & Canada Economy redemptions requiring 25,000 miles, **in effect you can get the flight for only 20,000 each.**

You can also use the Starwood points bonus to dramatically offset the cost of international First or Business class tickets. In fact, by earning on Starwood and transferring to Cathay Pacific, you can then fly British Airways Business Class to Europe for the same miles that a Delta Economy ticket requires. Check out the math below:

**Delta Economy (US/Canada - Europe):
50,000 Miles**

**British Airways Business Class (US/Canada
- Europe, when booked through
Cathay Pacific): 60,000 Miles**

How to do it:

**Transfer Starwood Points to Cathay Pacific:
50,000 + 10,000 Bonus = 60,000 Miles**

Note that you'll have to join Cathay Pacific's Asia Miles program and book the BA flight with them (a partner airline). You'll then enjoy the superior BA service in Business Class instead of being crammed in the back of the plane on a no-frills, low-service Delta flight.

Why isn't everyone doing this? For two reasons:

- 1) *It's hard to accrue mileage with British Airways.* BA is one of the few airlines that doesn't accept 1/1 transfers with Starwood, thus making it difficult to earn substantial miles without flying.
- 2) *Most people don't understand the strategy of earning with Starwood, then transferring to Cathay Pacific, then booking the flight on British Airways.* It's really not that complicated, but most people don't realize that this is even possible.

The Starwood card also offers a lot of other benefits, like the ability to combine points with cash for lower-cost hotel stays, 50% off the rack rate deals, "Fly & Stay" deals to popular resort locations, and guaranteed rooms when using points to book Sheraton and other Starwood rooms around the world. It's a great program, and [here's the link to apply.](#)

The Great Citibank AA Cards

You can get 30,000 AAdvantage miles for every Citi card you sign up for, including Visa, Mastercard, *and* AmEx options. The annual fee is waived for the first year, and you can cycle (or “churn” as some mileage junkies call it) card applications every 60-90 days. Some people have literally used this method to earn more than two million miles in just a few years. If you have a willing spouse or partner, you can use the Citi AA card cycle to get double the points. A typical calendar of cycling looks like this:

January – x2 cards = 60,000 miles

March – x2 new cards = 120,000 miles

May – x2 new cards = 180,000 miles

July – x2 new cards = 240,000 miles

September – x2 new cards = 300,000 miles

November – x2 new cards = 360,000 miles

In other words, you can earn **up to 360,000 miles in one year** without paying any fees for the cards. The cards typically have a minimum spending requirement of \$750 each, for which you’ll also receive miles, so that’s an additional 9,000 miles if you applied for all the cards.

If that’s not enough, you can also apply for Citi AA Business cards, which also provide the bonus and also waive the fee. The allowable application calendar is slightly different for those cards, and may have been shifting recently. (It’s hard to know for sure, since presumably Citi doesn’t want most of its customers earning hundreds of thousands of miles each year—but it appears you can get one business card

every 90 days if you so choose.) The Business card app can usually be found on the same page as the app for the personal cards.

Of course, you may wish to be less active in your card applications, but even if you apply for only one card per cycle, that’s **180,000 miles in a year**. Not bad, right? That’s seven domestic, round-trip tickets, or two Business Class tickets to most overseas destinations.

Note that there are several different application links for these cards, and the one to the best offer (which includes the full bonus but waives the fee for the first year) changes periodically. It’s currently [here](#), but if you follow it and don’t see the offer, it may have changed. You can follow [this FlyerTalk thread](#) (just read the most recent posts) to see where the new link is. By the way, the mileage bonus used to be 25,000, but was raised in 2009. Depending on when you investigate, it may be back down to 25k, but that’s still a great value.

AMERICAN EXPRESS MEMBERSHIP REWARDS (OR “WHY AMEX IS A GREAT PROGRAM”)

If you’re an entrepreneur or have a small business, then you can probably earn miles quicker than a lot of other people. Signing up for an American Express Business card can be the best decision you’ll ever make for ensuring that your business supports your personal travel dreams (in addition to the other goals you’ve set for your business, of course).

You can apply for an AmEx business card [here](#).

If you use a business credit card for any reason, even a home business or sole proprietorship, you should definitely consider using American Express as a big part of your spending-and-miles strategy. The Membership Rewards program is simply the best multiple-partner redemption program out there.

How It Works

Each dollar you charge on an AmEx card will automatically accrue one point in their branded loyalty program called Membership Rewards. You'll pay an annual fee for both your AmEx card and the Membership Rewards program (fees vary depending on what kind of card you get, but are usually around \$70), so be sure you can earn at least 10,000 miles or so to justify the fee.

You then have access to a large catalog of travel awards through an online catalog. The catalog includes specific rewards and also allows direct transfers to a number of airline and hotel loyalty programs. The second option, direct transfers, is normally what you want to focus on earning and redeeming for. Members of American Express can access the catalog [here](#).

The eleven airline programs that AmEx currently allows for direct transfer are:

Air France / KLM, Airtran, Alitalia, AeroMexico, ANA, Continental, Delta, El Al, JetBlue, Mexicana, Singapore Airlines, Southwest, US Airways, and Virgin Atlantic

The four hotel programs that AmEx allows for direct transfer are:

Best Western, Hilton, Priority Club, and Starwood Preferred Guest

In addition, there are a number of other programs which don't allow direct transfer but do allow transfer for specific awards. Your mileage may vary, but generally speaking, these awards aren't as optimal as the direct transfer of points.

A vast array of rewards is available using all of these programs. Some of the airline partners are better than others, and some (El Al & Mexicana in particular) should really be avoided unless you need a specific reservation or travel frequently on that airline anyway.

Specific Tips about Membership Rewards

Double mile promotions

At least once a year, cardmembers typically receive a promotion through the mail (or email) advertising double points during a specific time period, usually a month. This is a fantastic opportunity, especially for high-spenders. To take advantage of the offer, you need to have your account

activated for it. This is free, and usually you just need to click a link in an email or phone a toll-free number to get your account activated.

Once that's done, you'll be able to earn 2x the regular points for all your purchases. While you should never buy something just to receive points, you should consider if there are any major purchases coming up in the next month or two that could be shifted to the current spending period.

The bonus points usually show up after your regular points do. Sometimes it only takes a week or two, but other times it takes up to six weeks. Also, make sure to read the fine print—sometimes there is a limit on the number of bonus points you'll earn. Other times, there is no limit, and I've heard of people who have bought \$30,000 cars or other high-ticket items specifically during the 2x points promotion time.

20% bonus promotions

Throughout the year, AmEx and several of the participating airlines run 20% bonus promotions. The way these work is simple: when you transfer a minimum number of points (usually pretty low) into miles with one of the airline partners, AmEx will add a 20% bonus to the transfer.

In other words, for every 10,000 points you transfer, AmEx will kick in an extra 2,000. This bonus is very helpful when working towards international tickets or Caribbean vacation packages, and over the past year the bonus has been available for at least Virgin Atlantic, Continental, and

Delta. The Delta bonus has been available quite frequently, perhaps due to Delta auctioning off large amounts of its miles to AmEx.

You can monitor the forums on FlyerTalk to pick up on any 20% bonuses you haven't noticed, or just look at the Membership Rewards site whenever you log in to pay your bill. You don't have to check in all the time—usually once or twice a month is sufficient to stay current. To access the AmEx Membership Rewards program forum, use [this direct link](#).

Is AmEx perfect?

The short answer is no, because there are still a lot of good airlines not included in the Membership Rewards program. If you're dependent on one airline that doesn't participate with Membership Rewards, you may choose not to accumulate a lot of your points with AmEx.

But even if your preferred airline isn't part of Membership Rewards, you still may be able to redeem free flights through an airline that is part of the program. Look carefully at the airline's partner awards options (included on their web sites) and see if there's a way you can rack up AmEx points and then redeem them through a partner.

For example, United isn't a member of the AmEx program, and neither are the other great Star Alliance carriers like Singapore Airlines and Thai Airlines. BUT, Air Canada and ANA Airlines are, and you can book Star Alliance partner flights through them. To take advantage of this, just transfer

your Membership Rewards points to Air Canada or ANA, then book the partner award with them. (You might want to phone in before transferring to check availability.)

TIP: *Webflyer.com has a neat tool that lets you quickly see different options for transferring points or miles from one program to another. [Check it out here](#). However, there is a downside: many of the transfers shown involve steep losses in value, and the tool doesn't show any "creative" transfer options like redeeming on partner airlines through Membership Rewards participating airlines.*

American Express is usually the best option for business awards points, but Visa and Mastercard have begun competing with AmEx for business customers. Most co-branded airline cards now have a business version that they offer along with the personal one. Keep in mind that in most cases, you don't really need a business to apply for the business card. Just use "Your Name, Inc." as the business name. (Assuming you plan to pay your bills, this isn't dishonest and the banks don't seem to mind.)

The Delta Card

From time to time, Delta will offer a 100% SkyMiles bonus for all purchases with their AmEx branded card. This is a great opportunity to move all your spending to that card for a month to really add to your mileage account.

Even better, AmEx will also sometimes offer a 20% bonus on transferring Rewards Points to SkyMiles. If you take

advantage of one of the 100% bonus months and then transfer your points to SkyMiles, you can get both of these bonuses—a whopping 120% bonus! For a U.S. or Canada round-trip ticket, you'll only need to earn slightly less than 11,000 points (that are then transferred to SkyMiles) to redeem for the 25,000 SkyMiles needed for the ticket. Amazing! [Here's the link you need](#).

4 —————

Tactics: Redeeming Miles for Award Travel

OVERVIEW

Note: *We're going to shift to redemptions now—the other half of any good Frequent Flyer strategy—but if you'd like more opportunities for earning miles, skip ahead to the “Miscellaneous Tips” section.*

If you're used to accumulating and using frequent flyer miles, you may also be accustomed to being frustrated when it comes to using them. It can be difficult to redeem miles for the awards you want, and the airlines aren't really interested in making it easier. Because of the difficulty factor, a lot of people give up and book their flights elsewhere, leaving their hard-earned miles sitting in mileage limbo for another year. The airlines are happy to help you earn miles, but when it comes to using them, they often treat their most loyal fliers as second-class citizens.

Sometimes, it's enough to make you think that getting a big bunch of miles is the easy part, and actually cashing them in is where the challenge lies. Here are a few strategies to help make it easier.

HELPFUL HINTS

First, start with trying to book your award online.

There's probably a 50% chance that this won't work, but just in case it does, you'll sometimes get an additional bonus reward of 1-3,000 miles per booking. You also won't have to pay the typical fee of \$10-25 the airlines charge when you use the phone.

Next—and unfortunately, much of the time you'll need to move to this step—if the online booking doesn't work out or no award seats are shown on your desired flights, don't give up. Even in this advanced age, it's still usually a lot easier to book your awards flights over the phone than through the Internet.

Pick up the phone and call the number on the back of your loyalty card or the airline website.

Go through the prompts and you'll eventually get a person. Sometimes the person will even be helpful, so it's good to be polite.

Before you call, you should have as many suitable options as possible in mind. This doesn't mean that you're willing to fly to an airport 200 miles out of the way (assuming you're not) or travel on dates that simply don't work for you. It just means that if you have any flexibility in your plans, it's good to know what will work for you before you call the frequent flyer desk.

Remember that the agents on the other line can help or harm your chances of getting the flight you want. Give them any additional information that would help. For

example, if you have hub cities in mind that you'd like them to check, or if you want to do a stopover somewhere, let them know.

If it works, great—you're on your way. All you paid was your time on the phone and probably a \$10 or \$25 booking fee. If it didn't work out and there were no awards seats at all that matched your plans, you still have a few options. In this order (roughly) they are:

Make sure that the agent checks all available options

This includes nearby airports, unlikely connections (if you're willing to fly around to get what you want), and partner airlines. Some agents will do this automatically, but others need to be prompted. Make it clear that you really need this booking and are willing to be patient to get it—but also be polite and thank the agent for their time and research.

If you're only looking in Economy, ask the agent to check for Business and First Class seating.

You might be surprised to learn that seats in an upgraded section are available, and even if they require more mileage, it will probably still be less than the "Choice" or "Standard" awards the airlines offer for double the mileage. (Incidentally, those "Choice" awards are usually hugely over-priced. Unless you absolutely have to be somewhere on a certain date and absolutely have to use miles for the trip, you should never book an award for twice the normal mileage rate.)

Ask to be booked on an alternate flight and wait-listed for the flight you want.

Often, new awards seats will become available the closer the flight gets. This can be risky, especially if you're wait-listing on a flight you really need, but often it will work.

Look for low-mileage rewards.

United often features Round-Trip awards flights for 15,000 miles. These flights are restricted, of course, and don't include cross country or international travel, but they're often a great deal on a short trip. Sign up for their free newsletter for notices of when the 15K awards become available.

Book seats as far in advance as possible—or as close to departure as possible.

In other words, the earlier the better; last-minute notice works well too, but finding trips between 1-3 months out is often difficult. That's because the 30-90 day period is the same time when most people book revenue tickets, and therefore it's also before the airline can accurately predict how many seats will be sold. Once they have a good estimate of "revenue seats," they'll then release more awards seats subject to availability.

Assuming you can't book on 11 months notice (the maximum allowable time with most airlines) and you normally don't buy a ticket for same-week travel, finding the best time to book awards flights varies by airline. Each airline has a "sweet spot" in the middle when good reservations are available.

Book a “ghost reservation” that closely resembles your desired itinerary, then phone back later to change the dates and/or destination to the trip you really wanted.

You’ll usually pay only \$25-50 to change, and having the ghost reservation is a lot better than having nothing. In the event you need to cancel your trip entirely, that’s easy too. Just phone back to the airline, tell them you want to cancel, and they’ll deposit the miles back into your account, less a processing fee of \$100 or so.

Yet another good reason to use ghost reservations is as insurance against the worst case scenario of the airline going out of business. Most of the time (but not always) when an airline shuts its doors, a partner airline or generous benefactor airline will agree to honor all existing tickets and reservations.

If you’re not sure you want to go on a trip (or use miles for a trip), make the reservation anyway but ask the airline to put it on hold.

Allowable times for this vary by airline. Some may allow only a day or two, and others will give you up to 14 days. You can also call back before the period is up to request an extension, which is normally given without any questions. My personal record for this was an extension of 23 days, which I eventually committed to turning into an award between Europe and the U.S. If you let your hold expire, you’ll lose the booking but won’t be charged miles or money.

When flying to Europe or Asia, look for alternate cities that aren’t normally as popular.

Both regions have a large number of budget airlines that connect major cities with smaller cities throughout the continent. Simply choose a different, less popular destination in the region and book your flight there with miles.

Some good cities for doing this in each region are:

Europe - *Amsterdam, Barcelona, Brussels, Copenhagen, Dublin, Frankfurt, Prague, and Venice*

Asia - *Bangkok, Honk Kong, Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Taipei*

All of these are both hub cities for major airlines and also feature several budget carriers that hop around the region for cheap prices. You can easily get from these cities to your original intended destination, usually on the same day of arrival in the region if you choose. Or even better, take a day or two and see the connecting city as well before flying on to your intended city.

Note that this strategy does not work well for traveling to Africa, the Pacific, the Mideast, or anywhere in the developing world. It can be difficult to get from one country to another in those places, and multiple visas will often be required.

TROUBLESHOOTING

If at first you don't succeed, keep phoning back.

The major airlines each have dozens, if not hundreds of agents who all work full-time at booking frequent flyer tickets. Some of them are simply better or more experienced than others, and the computer systems are updated daily with thousands of changes to availability.

Ask the agents to look at partner airlines.

In fact, depending on your airline, you may prefer to fly on a partner airline even when there is availability on your main airline. There's no penalty or extra fees for this.

TIP: *When making an international reservation, always select the "Partner Airline Desk" if given a choice through the automated system. The agents there are typically more knowledgeable than those who book exclusively for the airline you're calling.*

Watch out for outsourced customer support.

To reduce costs, many airlines are shifting low-level reservations staff positions to the Far East. Sometimes your experience will be fine, but other times you should carefully confirm dates, airline, and actual airport codes when making the booking. One awards traveler was recently booked through Portland, Maine instead of Portland, Oregon! It was a huge mistake, but happened quite innocently because the overseas agent wasn't familiar with U.S. geography.

When new routes open up, new award slots open up as well.

A while back, Delta introduced service to a number of new European cities, including Venice, Istanbul, and Budapest. For more than a month after the announcement, awards seats to those cities were widely available in both Economy and Business Elite.

You can find out about new routes on your preferred airlines by subscribing to their free newsletter. A link to the sign-up page is normally located right on the airline's home page. Alternatively, airlines often advise their frequent flyers of new routes through monthly statement mailings that contain bonus offers. (And you'll also get 500-1,000 bonus miles just for signing up for the emails.)

Show your frequent flyer card at check-in, even when you can't earn miles.

You should always identify yourself as one of the airline's best customers. Even though more and more people are low-level elite members of the common U.S. airlines, loyalty still counts for something, at least some of the time.

TIP: *Once in a while, you may actually earn frequent flyer miles when you're not technically supposed to. One reader was on a free flight to New Zealand and showed her card at check-in out of habit. The reservations agent also keyed it in without thinking twice. Much to our reader's surprise, an extra 9,000 miles was added to her account the next month!*

If you are an elite member, use that phone number when making a change or any kind of request.

And yes, you can also call the elite number even if you don't technically qualify (be aware that you may get rerouted, but it's worth a try). If you search for "elite phone number" + "[your airline name]" in Google, you'll find the secret numbers posted on forums and consumer information sites.

Generally speaking, it's not worth it to redeem your miles for cruises or vacation packages due to the high points requirements and lower pricing for cash buyers.

Sure, you can cough up 300,000 AmEx points for a free cruise—but you can also buy it through a cruise consolidator. Don't waste your hard-earned points on anything less than a valuable reward.

Use MileageManager.com

MileageManager.com can help you keep track of your miles, in addition to providing a number of other interesting services. If you're a member of multiple loyalty programs, it can be hard to keep up with your earnings and make sure that all your points are accruing properly. This service will help you do it automatically. (There are some other "mileage managing" services too; see the online resources for details.)

Points.com is heavily advertised and lightly used... for good reason.

This service claims to allow users to transfer points between a lot of different programs. The "catch" is a big one, though—you'll lose a lot of value when making most transfers. Use Points.com as a last resort, or not at all.

HAVE MILES, WILL TRAVEL - SOME GREAT AWARDS

Here are a few examples of some great trips to make with Frequent Flyer Miles. All of these trips are very expensive when purchased with cash, but don't require an especially high number of miles.

Flights to/from Africa

It costs 80K or 90K miles to fly Business Class to Europe from the U.S. or Canada, and usually about as much to fly from Africa to Europe. If you book a trip to Africa using miles, though, you can fly for 120K from North America to most major cities in Africa, and include at least one stopover in the European city of your choice. By booking your trip this way, you'll save at least 40K miles and sometimes more. Similar savings are found in Economy class, and some airlines even include First Class on these routes.

Airlines with good service to Africa include Air France, British Airways, Delta, Lufthansa, KLM, and South African Airlines. Each of these carriers is a member of one of the major world airline alliances. Emirates also flies to a number of African destinations, but it can be difficult to get awards bookings with them without some creative transferring. Some limited service (Nigeria, South Africa, etc.) is also available with Virgin Atlantic from London.

Flights to the Pacific Islands

It's usually fairly expensive to get to some of the most beautiful (but also most remote) islands in the world. Use Air New Zealand or Hawaiian Airlines, however, and you can hop around Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, the Cook Islands, Tahiti,

and more for relatively low mileage requirements. When traveling with Air New Zealand, you can often get a free stopover in Auckland.

Out-of-the-way U.S. & Canadian cities

Going somewhere out of the way like Wyoming or Prince Edward Island? Book the trip with miles, because awards availability is usually no problem but cash tickets are expensive.

Out-of-the-way Europe

Already been to London, Paris, and Rome? Great! Now go to Hungary, Moldova, Cyprus, Gibraltar, or similar off-the-grid stops. They require the same miles as the normal tourist cities and often have better awards availability. If you want to hop around from there, that's easy too—it's not normally a problem to book an open-jaw awards flight into one airport and out of another.

Air New Zealand to London via Los Angeles

Fly from Los Angeles (LAX) to London non-stop on an incoming Air New Zealand flight, and you'll only pay 75K miles to fly business-class in great lie-flat seats with stellar service. This is a nice ride! The same flight on Delta with lower-quality seats costs at least 90K miles.

Singapore Airlines to Frankfurt via NYC

On the other coast, fly to Frankfurt on Singapore Airlines, often voted the best airline in the world. It's a codeshare flight with Lufthansa and United, but offers far superior service and much better seating in all classes for the same mileage.

[If you're really stuck with getting the perfect redemption, Gary Leff from [View from the Wing](#) can help you out for a fee. More on that in the Q&A section.]

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17 Miscellaneous Notes and Tips



Note: *These tips were current at the time of publication. Some of them may have expired, some are evergreen, and other new ones will come along that we'll let you know about through the free updates. Remember to focus on what works for you and ignore anything you don't need.*

20% Discount on United flights in North America

Every fall, United puts awards flights on sale for the following spring. The 2009 sale lasted for three weeks in October and was valid for 20% off all domestic (U.S. + Canada) bookings through April 30, 2010. If you know you'll be traveling in the spring, pay attention to United.com the previous October. A 25,000 redemption costs only 20,000 with this promo.

Earn up to 15,000 Bonus Aeroplan Miles (ends January 31, 2010)

Fly within Canada and between Canada and the US from **October 15, 2009 to January 31, 2010** on eligible scheduled flights operated by Air Canada and Jazz and earn up to **15,000 Bonus Aeroplan Miles**. [Here's the link.](#)

Unlimited \$50 Credits from Expedia

Expedia has a “best rate guarantee” that can result in \$50 vouchers whenever you find a price discrepancy that meets the requirements. Sounds like a lot of work, right? Well, fear not: [the Best Rate Guarantee blog](#) finds them for you. Then you call Expedia and get \$50.

There's a limit of three credits per month, so sadly you're limited to only \$1,800 per year in free hotel credit. Try not to spend it all in one place.

Free “War Zone” Cancellation for Awards Travel

When you cancel an awards ticket before departure, you can usually get the miles back—but you'll pay at least a \$100 fee for the change. You can avoid the fee if the country you were planning to travel to is involved in almost any kind of war or civil conflict. This will work for travelers from the U.S., Canada, and anyone traveling on a U.S. airline.

[Check here with the State Department](#) for a list of current warnings. Even if you're not the type who heads off to the Congo or Afghanistan, be aware that the State Department is quite conservative with these notices. If your destination is on the list, mention that to the agent when canceling (“I can't go there now, because the U.S. government advises against it”) and the fee will likely be waived.

Note that this may work in other cases too—like with Qantas for Australian citizens, Lufthansa for Germans, and so on. Check with your appropriate government travel site before calling to cancel, and you may save \$100.

Free Sixt Rental Car Platinum Status

Sixt claims to be “The most prestigious rental car company in Europe.” You can take that or leave it, but if you’d like Platinum status with them, you can get a status match from any airline or hotel program simply by filling out an online form. Note that the status you present is not verified, so anyone can do it. Free upgrade the next time you rent a car? [Here’s the link.](#)

(And one more thing: if rental car prices are sky-high in the U.S. or Canada, check out a few European booking sites. Sometimes the prices are lower for the same vendor and same car.)

Graduation Bonus

Can you believe you can earn 10,000 miles just for graduating from college? No kidding! And yes, graduate school counts too.

Send these items to the address below, and you’ll get 10,000 free United miles, no strings attached:

- 1) A copy of your final transcript showing that you did indeed graduate as a fulltime student from a U.S. college or university.
- 2) Your United College Plus/Mileage Plus account number.
- 3) Your e-mail address.

Mileage Plus, Inc.
Attn: College Plus Graduation
P.O. Box 40
Rapid City, SD 57709

More details are at [this web site.](#)

British Airways 30,000 Mile Credit Card

For years, BA was a holdout on the credit card mileage wars. When I conducted my infamous [Frequent Flyer Challenge](#), I skipped BA because the best card I could find offered only a 10,000 mile bonus. Well, BA finally joined the party with a new card that offers 30,000 miles *and* a \$50 discount on every flight you book. (Yes, if you get this card you’ll get 30,000 miles and pay for the cost of this report on the first flight.)

20,000 miles are awarded right away, with the remaining 10,000 coming after \$750 in spending. You can also receive complimentary Companion Airfare passes with the card, but the value isn’t always great for that option. The card is currently U.S.-only (yes, that’s odd for British Airways), but I’m hoping they’ll make it more international soon. [Here’s the link to apply.](#)

The Glitch in the AmEx Matrix

AmEx will give you miles for complaining about the fact that the first bill they send with a new card does not offer the option of online payment due to a technical glitch. Understand, I'm not suggesting you complain for no reason, but this is a known issue that AmEx acknowledges is a problem. It looks like for now they're happy to pay people off rather than fix it, so I'll take it.

Readers have reported a range of points, from 3,000 at the low end on up to 6,000. Not bad for filling out an online form and asking "Hey, how can I pay online?" More details and user experiences are [here](#), courtesy of a popular travel hacking blog.

To Save Taxes, Avoid fights into or out of Heathrow Airport

Among major airports, LHR has some of the highest airport taxes in the world. I generally prefer to fly into a European airport and then travel to the U.K., but you can also fly direct to other London airports (Gatwick, Stansted) or other cities in the U.K. such as Manchester or Edinburgh. Pleasantly, the flights will be less crowded and the airports less stressful anyway.

Interesting Debit Card from Delta and Suntrust

Most of the time, credit cards are a better source for mileage accumulation than debit cards. This new card from Delta and Suntrust [may be the exception](#). This card is interesting for a couple different reasons.

- 1) It offers a 15,000 Bonus (potentially x2 if you get the Business one as well)
- 2) It offers a \$1/mile on debit card purchases (normally available only for credit cards)

Potentially you could buy \$1,000 in money orders, deposit the money order, and repeat. A few people are busy trying to replicate this strategy on a grand scale, so stay tuned for an update if it turns out to work well. Note that this card is offered by Suntrust, a small regional bank. If there's no Suntrust in your area, you can also apply by phone for the personal card. (For the business card, you have to be in an area where they have a branch.)

Bose Headphones AA Promo

Every six months or so, Bose headphones offers a quick award of 150 AA miles for watching a 2-minute video or 350 miles for walking into a Bose store. [Check this link](#) to see if the promo is currently active—if not, it will be sooner or later.

Remember the 330-Day Rule

Airlines open up their awards seats right around 330 days in advance. If you can plan ahead and call in 330 days before a once-in-a-lifetime trip, you're almost guaranteed to get the seats you want. (It is not always *exactly* 330 days, so you don't need to be on the phone at 12:01 a.m. ready to call. Sometimes it's 331, sometimes 335, but it's always around that week.)

5,000 Points for One Stay at Priority Club Hotel

Priority Club, home of Holiday Inn, Crowne Plaza, Intercontinental, and other properties, will bribe you with 5000 PC points after your first stay. They'll also give 5,000 to the member who referred you, so if you'd like to use my member ID, it's 317104508. (You don't have to use mine, but you need to put someone's there.)

After you [sign up here](#), you can use your own member ID to refer others. Oh, and [here's another 500 points](#) just for answering four easy questions.

Add Starwood Members for 1,000 Points Bonuses

Once you have a Starwood AmEx card (which you probably should get if you're eligible, since it's one of the best), you can get 1,000 extra points for each additional cardmember you add. The cards will be mailed to you, so technically you never even need to give the card to anyone else if you don't want to. More details [here](#).

Southwest Airlines for Boston

If you live in Massachusetts (or if you want to pretend to), get halfway towards a free flight on Southwest Airlines thanks to a special promotion. Supposedly there are links for New York and Pennsylvania as well, but I haven't seen them yet. Here's the one for [Massachusetts](#).

Netflix Signup Bonus

The Netflix DVD rental club offers a 2,000 United miles bonus for signing up for a trial membership. Already a member? Simply cancel your existing membership and sign up again with another household name. [Here's the link](#).

Various Surveys

What's your opinion worth? Well, it depends, but at some web sites, it can be worth free miles. Spend about a minutes a month answering questions and these two sites will faithfully deposit new miles in your account every 6-8 weeks.

- 1) You can earn 300 American Airlines miles every month for answering surveys at [Opinion Place](#).
- 2) [TravellerPoll.com](#) offers up to 250 miles per survey on American or United Airlines (whenever it's working—it's been down a lot recently).



The Monster Q&A

Do I have to worry about my airline going out of business?

Generally, no. But it's good to keep tabs on the airline news just in case. As mentioned earlier, I don't think it's wise to keep very large (200,000+) blocks of miles sitting in one program for a long period of time. Once I get up to that many, I definitely look for a good use for them.

How do you keep track of all your points and miles?

Personally, I just use a basic Excel spreadsheet—if you have *Travel Ninja*, you can steal or modify mine for your own use. Every few months I log-in to my various accounts and update the data.

If you want to get more serious, there are a few different services that will keep up with your miles for you. I'm most familiar with MileageManager.com, which at \$15 a year is a pretty good deal. AwardWallet.com is another service that provides some basic features for free, and lets you decide what to pay for additional services.

What do I do when the airline doesn't offer any Frequent Flyer seats for the flight I want?

You can either a) accept it and move on, or b) fight it. If you choose to fight it, you can usually win, but it will take some time to wear down the wall of airline resistance. When fighting, start by making sure that the representative you're speaking with has really looked hard enough. Most of the time, they probably haven't.

Be prepared with specific flight numbers and alternative routings. Ask them to check other airlines in the alliance and connections to other hub cities. Suggest a connection or two of your own if you have to. Ask them to check the days on either side of the dates you want. Ask to confirm on the backup day and wait-list for the day you really want. If the wait-list comes through, which it usually does eventually, you won't need to pay a fee for the change.

If all of that fails, hang up and call back—I kid you not, sometimes the information you receive will be completely different in a new agent's hands.

Note: *as mentioned previously, do yourself and other flyers a favor by not accepting the new "Standard" or "Choice" awards which are free of restrictions but require twice as many miles. These awards are a very poor use of awards miles, and this move by the airlines is worth resisting.*

I mostly fly budget carriers (Southwest, Jet Blue, Westjet, etc.). What kind of mileage earning strategy should I pursue?

I fly budget carriers too, especially in Asia and Europe. Over in North America, I usually fly legacy carriers (American, Delta, and Continental in my case) to retain my elite status and take advantage of whatever perks are still left. In the long-term I think this is a better strategy for most active travelers.

If you don't travel very often or otherwise just prefer a budget carrier, then you can still rack up miles (or credits,

as they're often called) in the budget carrier's program and use them for free flights. What I would *also* do, however, is sign up for a couple of additional programs and concentrate my credit card spending and other "bonus" point offers over that way. Then, over time you'll accumulate miles in an account that can be more widely used than those offered by the budget carrier.

Can you get miles AFTER flying, even if you forgot to provide your number when you booked or checked in?

Yes, but it can be a pain in the ass. Make sure you save the boarding pass from your trip. Make a photocopy of it and send it in to the airline with your Frequent Flyer number. If it's from the past 3-6 months (policies vary), you'll be able to get credit about half of the time. The other half of the time, the request disappears into the airline abyss, so hopefully you'll get lucky.

How do you redeem awards for one-way trips?

Some airlines allow that and others don't—as the biggest example, AA recently switched to a one-way awards system by default. If your airline doesn't offer the option, you can try setting the return date as far in advance as possible in the hopes that you might be able to use it later. (You usually get just under a year for the return, or sometimes one year exactly.)

If I have to pay, should I buy my tickets last-minute or far in advance?

The idea that last-minute tickets are much cheaper than tickets purchased far in advance is one of the longest-lasting travel industry myths. Most of the time, there's not

much reality behind the myth, so if you have a choice, buy those tickets in advance.

If you must buy last-minute, check out LastMinute.com. If you find a good fare, consider yourself lucky.

Can I give my miles to a friend or family member?

Not easily. You'll have to pay a fee to transfer miles, and most of the time it's not cost-effective. However, you can use your miles to book free flights for anyone else, so while you can't directly give them away, they can benefit from your miles if you so choose. There are two ways to do this:

- 1) You call the airline (or use their website) and set up the entire itinerary yourself, providing the name of the passenger who will actually be traveling
- 2) The passenger sets up the itinerary themselves, asks the airline to place a courtesy hold on it, then gives you the record locator for the trip. You then call up the airline and say "I'd like to use my miles to pay for my friend's flight under such-and-such record locator."

All things being equal, the second option is usually easier even though two phone calls are involved. That way, the passenger has already sorted out the actual flights and taken care of any conflicts in availability.

What's the "best" airline?

The "best" airline is the one that is best for your needs, and a lot depends on where you live and fly to most often. But for the objective rankings, check out the site AirlineQuality.com, where the current "world's best" airlines are on display. If you're curious, the top five are Asiana, Kingfisher, Cathay Pacific, Singapore, Malaysia, and Qatar—and notice that none of the top ten are based in North America or Europe.

·If I sign up for United's miles program, does it make sense to also sign up for Thai Airways' program if they're both in Star Alliance? Or is it easier to organize if I only sign up for one?

You probably just want one Star Alliance program, then you credit all Star Alliance flights to that account. It would make sense to join a OneWorld (and SkyTeam) program too, but probably not two from the same family unless you are an especially active flyer.

I like miles, but don't want to mess with this stuff.

Can I pay you to do it for me?

No, I'm not in that business. But I know a couple of guys with services that might be worth it for you:

First up, Gary Leff writes the great [View from a Wing blog](#) and contributes a wealth of information on [FlyerTalk](#). When he's not giving away valuable information for free, he also has a premium service to help travelers book premium awards with airlines.

I asked Gary for a couple of examples of what he does with the service, and this is what I heard:

A woman emailed and said she and her husband, her husband's law partner, and his wife were thinking of a cruise departing Athens and back from Rome. The two husbands each had several hundred thousand Membership Rewards points and wanted to fly in business class on the same flights together, and also stop over in Frankfurt on the way home. Since they wanted a stopover AND their itinerary had an open jaw, and considering the distance of their particular trip, I first found flights that worked (a choice of itineraries—one on Swiss and the other on Lufthansa) and transferred their points to Air Canada's Aeroplan to complete the redemption.

This week the proprietor of a chain of pubs in the Midwest emailed me for a first class trip to Thailand next month. He had some flexibility in dates, and both United miles and American Express points. I put a couple of itineraries on hold for him as a starting point for discussion—one involving flying Turkish Airlines first class (which has actual suites with doors) and one flying Lufthansa and Swiss. He then let me know what he really wanted—to try out Lufthansa's First Class Terminal and also to fly between Europe and Asia in Thai Airways First Class, so that he could enjoy Thai's famous

ground service (including their complimentary first class spa). Since United almost never permits booking Thai Airways premium flights between Europe and Bangkok, we decided to use his Amex points instead. I gave him his ideal itinerary, he's excited, and already has two trips he wants me to plan for friends and family.

For the right flight, I think this is a great deal. Obviously you wouldn't need Gary's services for a simple trip, but if you're going overseas, especially with more than one person and especially on a premium ticket, his fee of \$150 (\$100 for additional passengers) is not unreasonable.

Brett Synder, from CrankyFlier.com, has another service that is a bit more basic. Brett is a self-described "airline dork," and his "Cranky Concierge" service helps with flight planning, delays, updates, and rerouting. Here's a story from one of his satisfied customers:

My husband, baby and I needed to fly across country for a family emergency. We talked to Cranky at 2:00 pm, and were on a plane leaving Burbank by 4:15 pm. Not only was he able to quickly book flights for all of us, but he found us an awesome fare, great flight times, and we were even able to sit together in the bulkhead row. I was so busy trying to pack and prepare our baby for the trip that I'm glad I had Cranky to help. I never would've been able to book flights as quickly or as cheaply as Brett did. He's truly a miracle-worker!

You can learn more about Brett's service [over here](#).

(By the way, I don't receive any benefit from recommending Gary and Brett; I'm just happy to support their great work.)

Can I upgrade an existing award ticket?

The short answer: probably not. Most awards tickets are not upgradable by design. If the trip hasn't begun yet, you could cancel the existing Economy (or Business Class) ticket and cash out more miles for a Business (or First Class) awards. Just be sure that the airline offers availability on the higher cabin before you say goodbye to the existing ticket!

How can I complain to an airline about their awards program (or something else)?

Good question. It's usually worth speaking up when you've been wronged, and it's best to do so in writing. No matter how pissed off you are, be polite and concise. Keep in mind that someone at the airline has the job of reading all the letters, and they hear from enough lunatics that if you seem like a reasonable person who's genuinely been wronged, they'll probably help you out with some free miles (at least).

Believe it or not, there is also a consumer agency within the U.S. Department of Transportation that reviews consumer complaints about airlines. It's called the Aviation Consumer Protection Division, and as you can imagine, they also receive a lot of mail.

You can send them a letter through snail mail at this address:

Aviation Consumer Protection Division, C-75
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Ave., SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

There is also a web form [you can access here](#).

David Rowell (AKA “The Travel Insider”) has a detailed article on how to structure a complaint letter. [Check it out here](#) the next time something goes wrong—or even better, in advance, so you’ll be prepared.

I keep hearing about Points.com. Isn’t it great?

It’s great for the owners of Points.com. It’s not great for the rest of us. The rate of exchange is so devalued that it’s almost never worth using the service. Great domain, though—I wish I had it.

How can I find out how many miles I’ll receive for a particular trip?

Check out the calculator at [Webflyer.com](#). In addition to the base miles, it can also include any bonus miles you’re entitled to.

What do I do if miles are not posted in due time?

Wait a few weeks, then call the airline to ask. (They sometimes offer an online form to report missing miles, but I’ve never had much luck with that.) Keep in mind that most problems in delayed posting have to do with partner

airlines. Be sure you retain the boarding pass stub, as that is often requested if the airline still can’t find your flight.

Also, it could be my imagination, but it seems the airlines are getting better about this. Over the past year I’ve only had to call or write twice, which is pretty good considering I have around 75 flights a year.

Someone in my family has a ton of miles and they don’t have any plan to use them. What should I tell them?

Don’t let them expire! If they have more than 25,000 miles, definitely help them find a use for them. They can give them to you, to another individual, or to a charity. They can auction them off (discreetly). If nothing else, write a short post on Twitter or Facebook about it and offer them to someone you know.

Side note: because I’m a jaded world traveler, I often give free domestic upgrades away on [Twitter](#). It’s always fun to see if we can find someone in the same airport on the same flight with only a couple of hours notice. So far my success rate is 50%, which I think is pretty good considering the size of the network.



Reader Stories

As I was outlining this report, I asked for reader stories and tips to compliment the rest of the material. Here are a few of my favorite ones.

When we decided to sell our house and move across the country, I used a referral program through United Mileage Plus to choose a realtor. We received airline miles for the selling price of our home and used them to travel to Europe for the Summer. These types of offers are available for buying, selling, or refinancing a house, and they are definitely worth checking out.

The trip was so great that I recently used your credit card strategy to do it again and we are taking a trip to South America in November. - Anonymous



I've used a combination of hotel points and frequent flyer miles to put together some great trips in the last couple years. In 2008 I received two free nights at the Hilton Nordica in Reykjavik, Iceland (a 4 star hotel with a 5 star spa). This included diamond member upgrade to executive level and free spa access.

In 2009 I received a discount to \$60 a night to the all inclusive Hilton Doubletree in Puntarenas, Costa Rica. And in 2010 I will be traveling to SE Asia (via Bangkok) for free using only 60K Delta Skymiles, as well as getting free nights at Hiltons in Bangkok, Phuket, and Hanoi. Yes, there really is a Hanoi Hilton.

-Dave Hiatt



If you have a business which requires the purchase of tangible products (like we do) charge all purchases as much as possible to the card. Suppliers love this because it means guaranteed payment for them. Then sell your inventory. If you're a reseller (like we are) ask customers to pay you via wire-transfer straight to your AMEX account. Depending on how you time transactions you can extend them either 30 or 45-day payment terms. Next, watch the miles rack up!

- Karen Talavera



Give feedback whenever asked! Many people write complaint letters when a flight is delayed or canceled, but I've been rewarded for positives as well as negatives. I am a loyal Jet Blue traveler and wrote to their customer service

department to commend them on the remodeled JFK terminal. I then wrote a separate email to inform them of a problem with in-flight entertainment for which we were promised compensation. I received an airline credit in response to both emails thanking me for my feedback.

I also agreed to an email offer to join the “Jet Views” panel and complete surveys about their product promising no compensation. After a few surveys I received notification that I had been selected to receive two free round-trip air fare tickets anywhere they fly within the next year, including authorization numbers and an email address for the representative who issued them in case of any problems.

-Anonymous New Yorker in New Zealand



I've traveled to Ireland and Scotland on Virgin Atlantic Upper class for just the cost of fees. Roundtrip cost me roughly \$500 in fees for a \$10,000 retail ticket. I took advantage of a fairly regular Virgin Atlantic offer of 15% bonus miles with a transfer of AMEX points back in January. I had originally planned on using the AMEX points for a ticket to Argentina, but I couldn't pass up this deal.

I transferred about 100K miles and booked a roundtrip Upper Class ticket from SFO to LHR. I called my dad and got him to sign up for the trip and we spent a week in Ireland touring around together on the first trip we've ever shared alone. I also booked a couple free nights at the Dublin Westin in the same trip on SPG points I've stacked up from business travel. And I took a free BMI flight from Dublin to Glasgow with transferred points too.

-Sean Wilkins



Earning Miles

In order to determine if the fare one will pay, relative to the number of frequent flyer miles earned, presents a good value, **simply divide the price of the fare by the miles you will earn.** This will give you cents per mile. For a coach fare, .03-.05 cents per mile is considered a good value. For business class fares a good value will be in the .08-.15 cents range. When making the calculation, be sure to include any bonus miles you will receive for frequent flyer program status and/or bonus miles for a particular fare class.

To find good value on domestic fares, check multiple departure cities. Example: I had to fly from Atlanta to San Diego for a conference. The price of the round trip ticket was over \$400. Instead of flying directly from Atlanta to San Diego, I bought a round trip ticket departing Miami, with a connection at JFK and then to San Diego for \$200. I connected through Atlanta (in route to MIA) on the return. I then bought a separate round trip ticket from Atlanta to Miami for \$150. I received over 9,000 frequent flyer miles for roughly \$350 vs. the 4,730 miles for \$400, had I flown directly from Atlanta to San Diego.

Redeeming Miles

This year, I needed to fly to Montreal from Atlanta; the coach tickets were between \$800 & \$1000. One airline could get me there on an award ticket but not back when I needed to get back. Another airline could get me back but not there. I booked a round trip an award ticket on airline A from Atlanta. I then booked an award ticket on airline B originating from Montreal, for when I needed to return. Obviously, I did not use the return portion of either of the tickets.

-Chris Mangiapane, PricesForTravel.com

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Want to Learn More? (also known as “Further Resources”)

I believe in learning as much as I can, as often as I can, and from as many people as possible. When it comes to travel hacking, I regularly learn from a multitude of online sources, people I meet, and experiences I have all over the world. A few of my favorite online sources are listed below.

The Great FlyerTalk

Flyertalk.com is the leading forum for discussion of miles, points, and everything related to air travel. It can be overwhelming at first, but most people there are helpful to newbies. If you haven't been before, spend a bit of time reading first, but then don't hesitate to register and join a discussion.

Blogs

Note: this is a very limited list, but most of the ones here are good about regularly mentioning other sites. If you check up on these, you'll find others.

- » [The Global Traveller](#)
- » [View from the Wing](#)
- » [Wendy Perrin at Concierge.com](#)

- » [One Mile at a Time](#)
- » [Cranky Flier](#)
- » [Frugal Travel Guy](#)
- » [Priceline](#)
- » [Best Rate Guarantee](#)

Forums

Flyertalk is the main airline forum, but these are also worth checking out:

- » [SlickDeals](#) - Not specifically related to travel, but includes travel deals, especially "glitch fares" and other mistakes that crop up from time to time
- » [FrequentFlyer.com.au](#) - Australia's main forum (focuses on Qantas, but also includes other airlines and destinations)

Other Guides

I sell a few other products, all designed to help people live unconventional lives through travel and self-employment.

- » *Working for Yourself* - How to create freedom through a very small business. [Check it out here.](#)
- » *Art and Money* - How to thrive as an artist without selling out. [Check it out here.](#)
- » *Social Web* - Get your message out to the world. [Check it out here.](#)

Of course, all of these products come with a complete "rock your world" satisfaction guarantee. Stay tuned for more guides as the store grows.

No consulting, but I'll try to help for free

In order to focus on my writing (and travel!), I don't currently offer any paid consulting services. Instead, I believe in the pay-it-forward principle, where I try to help as many people as I can without charge. If you're stuck on a particular issue, [send me a note from my web site](#) and include the details of what you've tried so far. I reply to all messages, but sometimes it takes a while.

Again, thanks for your support. I look forward to seeing you on an upcoming trip!

Keep rocking the universe,



P.S. One more thing: if you haven't set any travel goals yet, be sure and do so. I've found that the mere act of setting a measurable goal is often the most important predictor of success with any given project. The more "outsized" or outlandish the goal, the better.