

It Pays to Stay

Hotels make it worth your while to give them repeat business

BY LAURA DAILY

Publicist Amy Jones is an admitted addict—hooked on SPG, the Starwood Preferred Guest program. Jones, who is away from her San Diego office up to 12 days a month, amasses hotel loyalty points through travel and by using her branded credit card. By doing so, she earned a nine-day vacation in New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C., and got a free room in Palm Springs (a \$550 per night value) during the popular Coachella Music and Arts Festival, even though its Southern California locale is typically sold out far in advance of the event.

Think only big-shot business travelers or jet-setters receive hotel room upgrades or feather pillows? Think again. Hotel customer loyalty clubs can net even the most infrequent traveler some nice perks. They're also not just for high rollers. Midrange hotels—and even the extended-stay variety—are now playing the rewards game to attract repeat business.

How can you benefit? In a word: Join. All of the plans we checked out are free and have simple enrollment procedures (by phone, online, or at a hotel front desk). Then start racking up points through hotel stays, car rental and airline partners, and cobranded credit card use. Like most members, you'll probably convert those points into free room nights, though points can also be turned into airline miles, brand-name merchandise, cruises, and shopping sprees, depending on program particulars.

Most programs award points based on U.S. dollars spent. Expect to receive anywhere from two to 10 points per dollar. There are also ways to “boost” your earning power, from renting a car to ordering flowers. Best Western, for instance, gives AAA members a 10 percent points bonus. Seasonal promotions can double or triple your points. Jones always looks for opportunities to increase her awards, such as booking five stays in three months for 10,000 bonus points.

As you reach higher membership tiers, you'll receive a 10 percent to 30 percent points bonus, plus extra perks such as private lounge access or free Internet use. What's more, many clubs dish out benefits, such as free newspapers or health club privileges, just for joining. “One hotel offered a lounge that served both free breakfast and a nightly wine reception with heavy hors d'oeuvres, so I didn't have to pay for breakfast or dinner during that trip,” says Jones.

Addicted as she is to redeeming hotel loyalty points, Jones is now in “stash” mode. Her reason: a May 2010 10-night dream getaway in Tahiti or Fiji. She is well on her way to the 175,000 points she'll need. As the soon-to-be bride says, “I'm angling for Starwood and American Airlines to pay for my honeymoon.” ■

Denver-based Laura Daily writes about travel, health, food, and consumer issues.



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EARNING REWARDS

REWARDS PROGRAM	PARTICIPATING HOTELS	FOR A FREE NIGHT	COOLEST PERKS
Best Western Rewards (800) 237-8483 bestwesternrewards.com	Best Western Hotels (4,000 hotels)	8,000–36,000 points, depending on hotel category (basic points earned = 10 points per dollar)	Redeem points for restaurant and shopping gift cards, theme park tickets, or NASCAR merchandise; AAA bonus points
Hilton HHonors (800) HHONORS [446-6677] hiltonhhonors.com	Hilton, Conrad, Doubletree, Embassy Suites, Hampton Inn, Hampton Inn & Suites, Hilton Garden Inn, Hilton Grand Vacations*, Homewood Suites, Waldorf Astoria (3,300 hotels)	7,500–80,000 points (in U.S.), depending on hotel category (basic points earned = 10–15 points per dollar)	“Double dipping” of points—receive both hotel points and airline miles for each stay; redeem points for Broadway shows, film festivals, golf, and other events
Hyatt Gold Passport (800) 228-3360, (800) 51-HYATT [514-9288] (automated) goldpassport.com	Park Hyatt, Andaz, Grand Hyatt, Hyatt Regency, Hyatt Place, Hyatt Summerfield Suites (370 hotels)	5,000–18,000 points, depending on hotel category (basic points earned = 5 points per dollar)	Free use of Hyatt Fitness Centers; donate points to Make-A-Wish Foundation
Marriott Rewards (800) 249-0800, (800) 450-4442 (automated) marriottrewards.com	Marriott Hotels & Resorts, JW Marriott*, Renaissance Hotels, Courtyard By Marriott, Marriott Vacation Club*, Residence Inn, Fairfield Inn, SpringHill Suites, TownePlace Suites (3,000 hotels)	7,500–40,000 points, depending on hotel category (basic points earned = 5–10 points per dollar)	Design your own reward—tell them what you want (tickets to concerts, golf tournaments, etc.), and they’ll tell you how many points it will take to get it
Starwood Preferred Guest (877) STARWOOD [782-7966] spg.com	Sheraton, Westin, W, St. Regis, The Luxury Collection, Le Meridien, Four Points by Sheraton, Aloft, Element (890 hotels)	2,000–35,000 points, depending on hotel category (basic points earned = 2 points per dollar)	Access to once-in-a-lifetime experiences such as backstage passes to sold-out concerts or tickets to walk the red carpet at movie premieres; AAA bonus points

All hotels except (*) offer Show Your Card & Save discounts.