



The Game of Points

New rules make it trickier to attain frequent-flier perks

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Just when you think you've mastered the system, they change the rules. Two major airlines have announced "updates" to their frequent-flier programs. As a result, that free ticket or upgrade will become more elusive, along with attaining airline elite status.

Airline mergers have resulted in fewer carriers, packed flights, and, let's face it, fees gone wild. Still, the airlines plead poverty, and their leisure travelers feel the pinch. We talked to industry experts and dug into each airline's FAQs for tips on maximizing your miles.

MONEY EQUALS MILES

Passengers on Delta Air Lines and United will see the greatest change. In 2015 (January 1 for Delta, March 1 for United), award miles earned on most tickets will be based on ticket price and your elite status, not distance traveled. That means budget-minded, nonelite travelers who get that \$99 round-trip deal **won't earn** as many miles as the Gold-level traveler who paid \$300 for the same seat.

Here's where it gets tricky. The new rules apply to miles used to redeem flights and other perks, not to miles earned toward elite status on Delta or

United. That remains based on how far you fly, the number of times you fly, and a minimum amount of money spent annually.

Take note of that minimum spending, called "qualifying dollars" in frequent-flier parlance. United and Delta will measure your annual spending on airline tickets. No matter how often you fly, you must spend a minimum (\$2,500 to \$12,500) on tickets to get special status.

American Airlines and Alaska Airlines continue to base their loyalty programs on miles, not money. American is merging its program





with that of US Airways, however, and in the combined program, scheduled for implementation this spring, all but the most elite frequent fliers must pay or use points for upgrades on flights longer than 500 miles.

Redeeming miles is also getting costlier. As Gary Leff, cofounder of frequent-flier online community Milepoint.com, notes, using miles for a domestic flight cost you nothing 14 years ago, even when booked fewer than 21 days before departure. If you try that today, American Airlines and United each charge an award processing fee (\$75 for general United MileagePlus members).

Some airlines add fuel surcharges, security fees, and more. Elite-status fliers may see fees waived, but not always. Perhaps to take the sting out of its new rules, Delta lets you pay for a flight using a combination of miles and dollars.

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

Before you wade into the frequent-flier rules and redemption charts, ask yourself: *Where do I want to go? Who flies there? Who are their partners?* This may be a good time to review your travel patterns and loyalty programs and spread the love around.

Most carriers, with the exception of Spirit, Frontier, and Southwest Airlines, belong to some sort of airline alliance (SkyTeam, Star Alliance, and OneWorld) or have partnerships that may greatly stretch your destination options. For example, through SkyTeam you can rack up miles on Delta but use them on Alitalia to fly to Rome. Even the independent JetBlue partners with Hawaiian Airlines and Emirates.

Alaska Airlines Mileage Plan gets top marks for its flexible rules, limited fees, and partners across all airline alliances, including American and Delta.

If you fly economy and most of your

flights are within the United States, the Caribbean, or Mexico, look to JetBlue True Blue or Southwest Rapid Rewards. Both peg loyalty points to ticket price but let you redeem them for any available seat on any flight.

Use your miles strategically, says Brian Kelly, founder of ThePointsGuy.com, a website devoted to travel miles. "There are sweet spots to be found. If you have a dream trip in mind, use your miles and book that ticket when seats first become available, 11 months in advance. Or, be adventurous and wait until the last minute. Sometimes airlines release award travel to great destinations in the last seven to 14 days."

DON'T JUST FLY, DIVERSIFY

While it may be harder to earn the perks, it is easier than ever to earn miles without ever stepping onto an airplane. "Only one-third of all airline loyalty miles come from flying," says Leff of Milepoint.com. Billions of miles are earned every day via dining, shopping, hotel stays, and using a credit card for everyday purchases.

One option Kelly recommends is to maximize your credit card portfolio. Instead of an airline-specific credit card, consider one that allows you to transfer points into miles on a number of carriers or use the points like cash to purchase a ticket on any airline. The Points Guy Maximizer is a free online tool that recommends credit cards based on your travel preferences.

United and American, among others, offer programs that can bulk up your points for such things as eating out or shopping at participating restaurants and retailers, buying event tickets, joining a gym, subscribing to magazines, or renting a car. **W**

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