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How to Get a Seat Out of Your Miles

By Susan Stellin

IdeaWorksCompany contributed information to this article - - see italics.

By SUSAN STELLIN

On a slow day over the holidays, I added up how many frequent flier miles I had in various accounts — more than 250,000 — and realized I should start cashing in those miles for free trips.

Yes, I know how difficult this can be. When I called British Airways in November to see if I could use points for a Christmas trip to Ireland, the agent laughed and said, “I doubt that.”

But for all those who think it's impossible to book award flights, there are plenty who disagree. In fact, one study comparing award availability on different airlines found that it has actually gotten a little easier to find seats in recent years.

“When the economy does poorly, cash bookings go down, and that creates more opportunity for reward travelers,” said Jay Sorensen, president of the IdeaWorks Company, a travel consulting firm that compiles an annual ranking of award availability based on thousands of attempts to book seats on popular routes.

Last year's study found that Southwest had the best availability (among domestic airlines), followed by United and JetBlue, then American and US Airways toward the bottom of the list. Delta ranked last.

Your results in trying to land a trip may vary. The following tips from frequent fliers who obsess over these programs can help you beat the odds.

WAIT FOR LAST-MINUTE TICKETS

While many frequent fliers score seats by booking a year in advance, airlines don't release all award seats that early, which means you may have better luck with a last-minute trip. Mr. Sorensen said his company tried booking award tickets 5 to 15 days in advance, and generally found better availability than searching months ahead. Except for holiday travel, my experience confirms that tip: after my mother broke her arm last January, I cashed in 25,000 Delta miles for a ticket from New York to Traverse City, Mich., to visit her two weeks later. Just after my trip, my sister had a baby in Los Angeles, so my parents flew there a few days later using United miles (37,500 each) — Mom's arm still in a cast.

A drawback of last-minute awards: American, United and US Airways charge up to \$75 for booking less than 21 days in advance, which may be waived if you have elite status. Delta doesn't charge a late fee.

LOOK FOR REDUCED AWARD LEVELS

Each airline has a complicated chart outlining how many miles you need for a free ticket from point A to point B — “free” being a misnomer because you often have to pay taxes and fees. But if you use your miles to fly at off-peak times, some airlines let you book your trip using fewer miles.

Scott Grimmer, founder of Milevalue.com, which offers advice on award tickets, said American and US Airways have some of the most generous reduced awards. American lets AAdvantage members book off-peak economy tickets to Europe for 40,000 miles round trip for travel from Oct. 15 to May 15; the rest of the year, that ticket requires at least 60,000 miles. American also posts award discounts available to members who carry one of its Citi AAdvantage credit cards at aa.com/reducedmileageawards.

US Airways lets its Dividend Miles members book off-peak round-trip award tickets to Europe for 35,000 miles, compared with at least 60,000 miles, but it's a smaller travel window: Jan. 15 through Feb. 28. Sign up for Mr. Grimmer's e-mail updates at Milevalue.com to get alerts about these discounts. He also offers award booking services for \$99 a ticket.

BOOK A FREE STOPOVER

One benefit of award travel is the opportunity to book a free stopover. “Each airline has its own rules,” Mr. Grimmer said. “But you can always get at least one stopover on your round-trip international award.”

On American, that stopover has to be at a gateway city in North America, so if you're flying to South America, you could spend a few days in Miami before continuing to, say, Buenos Aires. Other airlines allow you to book a free stopover abroad, meaning you could book an award ticket on United from New York to Frankfurt, spend a few days in Germany and then fly to Venice.

ACCEPT A LESS THAN IDEAL ITINERARY

The last time I flew to Europe using award miles, the only seats I could find back from London included a connection in Frankfurt. It wasn't a stopover, it was a time-wasting detour. Fortunately, a United agent at Heathrow let me switch to a direct flight to Kennedy Airport, without charging a change fee. You can't count on that courtesy, or a seat on a direct flight opening up, but some airlines let customers change an award ticket for no cost, as long as your travel dates, departure city and destination stay the same. Otherwise, changes typically cost \$75 to \$150.

It can also be worth accepting an award ticket to a city near your destination. Rick Ingersoll, who posts frequent flier advice at FrugalTravelGuy.com, said he booked an award ticket to Dublin, then paid about \$40 for a flight on a low-cost carrier to his destination, Edinburgh. “The issue is getting across the pond,” Mr. Ingersoll said. “Take what you can get with your miles, then fly Ryanair or Air Berlin or EasyJet to your destination — or they’ve got a fantastic train system in Europe.”

CHECK PARTNER AVAILABILITY

Most frequent flier programs let you use miles earned on one airline (say, United) to book award tickets on partner carriers. Until recently, that meant calling the airline and pleading with an agent to look for seats on partners’ flights, but more carriers are updating their Web sites to let customers do these searches online. American’s search tool now shows available seats on Alaska, Hawaiian, British Airways, Qantas, Finnair and Air Berlin. United’s site shows award flights on 34 partners, including Lufthansa and Air China.

Another option is to check a third-party site, like ExpertFlyer.com, which displays award seats for about 70 airlines. It has a five-day free trial, then costs \$5 to \$10 a month; the higher price gets you e-mail alerts to find out when an award seat becomes available on the flight you want.

But Chris Lopinto, ExpertFlyer’s co-founder, said there are still times when you must call, especially if you’re using Delta miles. “Sometimes you have to call the carrier in order to get partner inventory,” he said. “It’s very frustrating.”