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Cashing in Frequent Flier Rewards Easiest on Value Airlines

By: Philip LeBeau

This article is based upon a report issued by IdeaWorksCompany.

If you're looking for the airline where you'll have the best chance of cashing in frequent flier miles or points for a seat on a future flight, your best odds are with value airlines. In fact, the fourth annual Switchfly Reward Seat Availability Survey found Southwest, its subsidiary Airtran and JetBlue among the top five airlines for customers trying to book tickets with frequent flier miles or points.

"Value oriented airlines probably are offering a lot more reward availability than your traditional, global airlines," said Jay Sorensen with the IdeaWorks Company, which conducted and analysed the reward seat survey.

The Switchfly Survey found value airlines have seats available to be booked with frequent flier miles 96% of the time. That compares to 61.5% reward seat availability with larger legacy network airlines.

Survey Rankings

Switchfly and IdeaWorks surveyed 22 of the largest frequent flier programs operated by airlines around the world. Below is a listing of where U.S. based carriers ranked in this year's study.

Rank Airline % Total Availability

#1 Southwest 100%

#3 Airtran 95%

#5 JetBlue 88.6%

#8 United 80.0%

#13 Alaska 56.4%

#17 American 48.6%

#20(tie) Delta/U.S. Airways 36.4%

Smaller Frequent Flier Programs, Greater Availability.

So why are your odds of finding seats open for frequent flier rewards greater with value airlines? It's primarily because the value frequent flier programs tend have fewer members and a lower inventory of accrued miles.

"There are a lot miles chasing each reward seat and I guess you could say the lower cost carriers don't have that baggage chasing them," said Sorensen. "They have fewer miles or points chasing rewards and they've adopted a more streamlined approach to reward redemption."

Sorensen adds that value airlines also benefit from having networks set up with a high frequency of flights on numerous routes so there are often more seats available.

Booking Reward Seats Getting Tougher

As airlines have merged the number of people in their frequent flier programs has swelled. For example, once U.S. Airways and American Airlines merge, they will have more than 100 million members in the combined airline's frequent flier program.

With so many people in these programs, booking a flight using miles or points will become tougher.

"There's a tremendous tsunami of miles or points coming on the books of airlines. That's made finding a reward seat that much more difficult, because there are a lot more miles chasing fewer reward seats," said Sorensen.

Advice For Summer Flights

The Switchfly survey was conducted by IdeaWorks making inquiries about frequent flier seat availability in the largest markets airlines will be flying to this summer.

Since airlines have cut capacity and are flying with fewer seats on fewer planes, they are being more restrictive about awarding frequent flier seats. That will make it tougher this summer for families looking to book tickets with miles.

"The era of miles is coming to a close. Really within the next five years we're going to see a change with major frequent flier programs going from earning miles to accrued points based on the fare paid," said Sorensen.