



April 11, 2015

Wine, weddings and Hobbits! Wacky flyer rewards revealed

By Harriet Baskas, Special to CNBC

This article is based upon a report issued by IdeaWorksCompany.

Most travelers feel lucky if they can swap their frequent flyer miles for first-class upgrades or a free flight.

But a recent study found at least 160 airline frequent-flyer programs worldwide offering redemption options that are far more interesting, innovative and, at times, a bit wacky. Among other things, the study by research company IdeaWorks and tech company Switchfly found that El Al offers an inflight marriage proposal kit for \$60 plus 120 travel points. If you let the airline know you plan to pop the question during the flight, a crew member will deliver a bottle of wine, wine glasses and chocolates when (or if) your proposal is accepted.

Meanwhile "Lord of the Rings" (LOTR) fans in New Zealand can swap frequent flyer points earned on Air New Zealand for Hobbit-themed souvenirs, such as a replica of Gandalf's Magical Silver Scarf made of 100 percent New Zealand wool. The item is woven by the same weavers who used historic looms to create the Fellowship Cloaks and other textiles for the LOTR trilogy.

Elsewhere, Japan Airlines' Mileage Bank members can turn in 2,000 miles to get a key chain made from the same leather used for the seats found in its first-class suites, while EVA Air offers a 90-minute flight simulator experience for 10,000 miles.

For a whopping 15,000 miles, Cathay Pacific has a Made in Hong Kong Tour that takes visitors to a suit tailor, a shoemaker and a wood engraver. The trip includes lunch, and a jaunt to a local market with more than 100 shopping stalls.

The range is what the report describes as "wild, weird and wonderful rewards." While unusual and dizzying, the perks are designed to appeal to a wide range of travelers.

"Some appeal to customers who may have smaller points balances about to expire and are swimming in magazine subscriptions, so they can redeem for a little keepsake or luxury," said Daniel Farrar, Switchfly's CEO.

Other perks "some appeal to the experiential traveler interested in adding to his or her itinerary, as with Avianca's Pizza Tour of Manhattan."

"Accounting rules reward airlines that encourage members to redeem miles or points," said Jay Sorensen of IdeaWorks. Because much of the revenue associated with miles can only be added to an airline's income statement after miles are redeemed, "there is a financial incentive," he said

For 10,000 miles, passengers on All Nippon Airways (ANA) can get a coupon for a stay at the pet hotel at Tokyo's Haneda Airport.

Air France's Flying Blue members can get a purse made out of a recycled life vest for 9,000 miles, or for 45,000, a tour of Paris gardens for two in a vintage Citroën—complete with mini-bottles of Champagne. Separately, on May 9, United Airlines is offering a limited number of private batting practice sessions with Los Angeles Dodgers alumni at Dodgers Stadium for 10,000 miles.

Alaska Airlines has offered special winemaker dinners in Seattle for 12,500 miles per person. Earlier this year, elite members of the airline's frequent flyer program were able to bid points for seats on a special flight taking Seahawks fans to a Super Bowl party in Phoenix.

"We host exclusive events to give our customers an opportunity to use their miles for something special in addition to travel," said Rick Rasmussen, director of Affinity Card programs for Alaska Airlines.

British Airways lets you use points for Eurostar redemptions, United offers cruise redemption options and "Delta has experiences that can be decent and unique," said Brian Kelly of The Points Guy. Still, "the weirder the experience, the less value you'll get from your redemption."

In general, says Kelly, "Airline miles are best used for flights."