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Airlines Are Making It Harder to Book Frequent Flier Seats

By Ryan Craggs

This article is based upon a report issued by IdeaWorksCompany.

Reward seat availability went down for the first time since 2010.

For the last six years, you were in luck if you were looking to cash in your frequent flier miles: Every year since 2010, the number of available reward seats had gone up. The good times were bound to slow, though, and finally did this year, when the number of award seats saw a decrease.

In its eighth annual Reward Seat Availability Survey, Ideaworks found that "76.6 percent of reward queries provided access to a saver-style reward seat; this dropped to 72.4 percent for 2017." In simpler terms, it was slightly easier to find a flight using frequent flier miles last year than it is this year. The survey looked at both domestic and international frequent flier programs, and found the top airline, in terms of reward seat availability, was Southwest, with reward seats available 100 percent of the time. JetBlue came in second, at 94.3 percent of the time, and Air Berlin rounded out the top three, with reward seats available 90.7 percent of the time, dropping from 100 percent availability in 2016.

On the low end, don't try to book a reward seat on Avianca—you'd be successful only 38.6 percent of the time. As for the other Big Four airlines, Delta came in 10th, at 74.3 percent; United in 13th, at 65 percent; and American in 18th place, at 54.3 percent. The biggest downgrades, in terms of reward availability, came from airlines Ideaworks said face "financial challenges," including Air Berlin, Cathay Pacific, Emirates, and Turkish Airlines. Additionally, long-haul reward availability decreased overall, with only seven airlines having availability scores above 70 percent in 2017, compared to eight in 2016. On the positive side, however, average reward prices for U.S. domestic travel dropped by nearly 11 percent for 2017, with the exception of United. If you're just traveling domestically, things are looking up—but if you've been stocking up on points to go abroad, it's not quite as rosy.

"The airlines outside of the U.S. are not as healthy as those here in the U.S., and a lot of those foreign carriers would rather sell a seat for cash than offer it to a frequent flyer," Jay Sorensen, president of IdeaWorks, told CNBC.

Just in case you're wondering about the methodology behind these rankings, Ideaworks tried to book two tickets at a time on 25 frequent flier program websites during March 2017, using 280 specific dates, and only reward seat availability for travel on the date specified was recorded. Reward travel had to be available for the outbound and inbound dates queried, but any departure times were acceptable, and any connections were as well.

Keep in mind, this study doesn't suggest Southwest has the best frequent flier program altogether—that designation recently went to Delta, based on factors beyond just reward seat availability, like the fact miles never expire, and number of routes serviced. Still, it's just another feather in Southwest's cap, and likely a reason it gets the fewest complaints of any airline in America.