

How to find frequent flyer seats

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Whether you have the minimum 25,000 frequent flyer miles or millions, you'd like to find free airline seats. Unless you are very flexible, persistent, lucky or have elite status on an airline, your chances are not very good even if you are willing to spend extra miles. Unfortunately, I don't see the situation getting any better. Before you use your miles to buy magazine subscriptions, there are still a few tips and tricks that may help.

- Spend the money to talk with an airline reservation agent. Most airlines charge \$10 to \$25 per ticket if you make reservations on the phone. Travelers are reluctant to spend the money so they search the airline's web site to no avail. The truth is that many of the airline's web sites do not show all of the possible routes, connections or partnerships that are available for redemption of frequent flyer seats. This is especially true for travel to Europe or the Far East where the airlines have multiple and complex relationships with other carriers. The airlines reservation agents can access the frequent flyer seat inventory of their partner airlines even when it's not available to the public on their web site. Spend the time and money to work with an airline reservation agent, especially if your trip is overseas.
- Some destinations have no seat availability but you can find frequent flyer seats to a near-by low-fare hub/city. Throughout Europe and the United Kingdom, a large number of low-fare airlines have sprouted over the past few years. Some of the best known are easyJet and Ryanair but there are dozens more. Many of them are brand new, have minimal leg-room, charge extra for everything and sell tickets only on their own web sites. However, their fares are rock-bottom! When looking to redeem frequent flyer miles, if you can not find seats to your primary destination, perhaps seats are available to a near-by city that has connections on a low-fare airline serving your destination. Often the low-fare airlines are in different airports than your other airline so you must leave lots of time to connect. A listing of which low-cost airlines serve various cities is available at www.WhichBudget.com.
- The legacy airlines are scrambling to find new routes that can be flown profitably while defending their turf when it's encroached upon by another airline. They are no longer flying only to and from their "fortress hubs" but are now flying point-to-point as the low-fare airlines do. These new routes often go unnoticed even though the airline may offer incentives (double frequent flyer miles) to draw passengers. An example is Flint, Michigan. While Flint is only 56 miles from Detroit's Metro airport (a Northwest Airlines fortress-hub), air fares from Flint are much lower to many cities than from Detroit. When Northwest Airlines started non-stop service from Flint to Las Vegas, Orlando, Tampa and Ft. Myers, frequent flyer seats were readily available. Even seats from Flint on Northwest via their Detroit hub were more easily found than directly from Detroit. When

hunting for frequent flyer seats, keep an eye open for new routes to or from your departure or destination cities as well as near-by airports.

I wish that I could offer more guidance but I'm sure that you've already heard the advice of others; be persistent, call at midnight, check 330 days before you want to travel, call the week before you want to travel, say three Hail Mary's, kiss the Blarney Stone, and many more. The sad truth is that almost all of the legacy airlines are losing millions of dollars every month yet their planes are more crowded with paying passengers today than ever before. When buying airline tickets, if you are willing to pay more or take an inconveniently timed flight so that you can earn frequent flyer miles, I have a bridge in Brooklyn that may interest you.

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