Upgrader's Block and How to Overcome It, Volume 1: When to Use Your Miles

March 2018

Author Charles Bukowski said that writing about writer's block is better than not writing at all. We think the same can be said of upgrader's block, so that's exactly what we're going to do: write about it with an insight series that will get you to be an Upgrade Maestro.

We've often said that the art of upgrading is largely a mental thing–something we call "The Upgrade Mindset." Upgrader's block, therefore, just may be the lack of it. But happily, that can be fixed with a little focus.

It came to light in a recent chat with an FCF member. He said he couldn't understand why people hadn't come around to this way of thinking about booking premium flights.

So we thought to provide some of our upgrade mentality and related information and motivation. In this first installment, we look at **When to Use Your Miles—***which you already have.* (Also, in this March FCF issue is a companion piece: Volume 2: When to Buy Miles Instead of Buying a Published Fare—*if you don't have any or enough miles or points to begin with.*)

WHEN TO USE YOUR MILES?

Let's say you're looking at booking a trip to London, and wondering, "mmm, should I buy the ticket with cash or use my miles?" That's a very good question, and the answer could **save you a lot of money—and upgrader's remorse**. Many travelers answer with, "Well, I have enough points, so I'll just use them." WAIT! You need to use your miles when they're good value, because their value changes relative to the cash fare at hand. So how do you work out the value? It's really easy.

The value of a mile varies, but the method of calculating it doesn't. And once you know it, you'll know exactly what to do.

CALCULATING THE VALUE OF A MILE WHEN USING A FREE AWARD

Money Saved (cost of ticket or cash paid, minus award taxes) ÷ Award Miles Used = Value of a Mile

Just divide the amount of money you saved by the number of miles used to claim the award ticket. "Money saved" is simply the cost of your flight if you had paid for the ticket with cash, minus award ticket taxes.

For example, let's say the lowest premium fare—cash paid—is $2,200, and it takes 100,000 miles to get that ticket, plus $200 in award ticket taxes, thus on this flight the value of a mile is 2¢: $2,000 ÷ 100,000 miles = 2¢ per mile.

CALCULATING THE VALUE OF A MILE WHEN USING AN UPGRADE AWARD

When you're upgrading from a paid ticket, you calculate a little differently.

Savings ÷ Miles Required = Value of a Mile

Assume an economy ticket with American Airlines costs $500, plus it has a $700 co-pay. That's a total of $1,200. Say your Business Class ticket costs $3,000. It takes 50,000 miles round-trip to upgrade the paid economy ticket to Business Class.

To calculate the money saved, simply deduct the cost of the paid ticket from the value of the upgraded award ticket:

Business Class Fare – Upgradeable Economy Fare (including co-pay, if any) = Savings: $3,000 – $1,200 = $1,800.

So, the Savings ÷ Miles Required = Value of a Mile: $1,800 ÷ 50,000 miles = 3.6¢ per mile.

WHAT REPRESENTS GOOD MILE VALUE?

Everyone you talk to will give you a different answer. My answer: At least 3¢.

Why do we recommend at least 3¢? Because you have to consider other aspects, such as credit cards that earn cash back at 2%: Some credit cards, for example PayPal's MasterCard, earns 2% cash back. *So,* for every dollar spent, you get 2¢ back. So why play mileage games if your return on the effort spent is no more than an effortless cash-back card that allows you to do whatever you want whenever you want with the perks?

In other words, if you're only getting around 2¢ value for your miles, get a cash-back card and never think about miles again.

Don't you love the decisiveness of math?

OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER AND KEEP IN MIND

You have a lot of miles: Be wary of that one. You most likely have a lot of miles because, thanks to terrible award space availability with your airline-specific program, you can't use them. Our advice is to have an Amex Rewards or Starwood card because they give you a lot of flexibility; these credit card's points accured can be transferred to many different airlines. For more details see FCF's The Lazy Upgrader's Guide to Lucrative Credit Card Opportunities.

Earning elite and award miles: When using award miles for tickets, you don't earn award miles OR elite status (EQMs or EQDs), so you want a good return.

EXAMPLES OF USING MILES WHEN VALUE IS HIGH

Cathy Pacific First Class: New York-Hong Kong costs $31,155. It takes 220,000 miles (or FEWER with partners, see link below) to get that award. So, the chalkboard, please: $31,022 ÷ 220,000 miles = about 14¢ per mile. Great return! And whaddyaknow, here is a recent FCF Sweet Redeem find to that effect: New Sale Saves Up to 83% with Cash OR 65% Off with Miles on First Class to Asia.

Singapore Airlines First Class: Los Angeles to Tokyo costs $10,178. It takes 190,000 miles (or FEWER with partners, see link below) to get that award. The math: $10,093 ÷ 190,000 miles = about 5.3¢ per mile. Not bad! And again, here is a recent FCF Sweet Redeem find to that effect: Good Two-Seat Singapore First Class Mileage Availability Found to/from Tokyo—For Less Than Business.

The High Business Class Fare: San Francisco to Hong Kong on Cathay Pacific is $6,190 in Business Class. It takes 120,000 miles (or FEWER with partners, see link below) to get that award, so for this flight, the value of a mile is: $6,057 ÷ 120,000 miles = about 5¢ per mile. Kaching. Here's a recent FCF Sweet Redeem

to illuminate further: Special Cathay Pacific Business Class Availability Found to/from Hong Kong—For the Price of Coach.

The Short Notice Business Class fare: So, you're booking on shorter notice. Tch tch. Fares can be sky-high if you do not have a three- or four-month advance, so using miles can save you a small fortune. A two-week advance purchase fare in Business Class on American Airlines from New York to Paris is $7,885. It takes 115,000 miles (or less with partners) to get that award, so on this flight, the value of a mile is: $7,800 ÷ 115,000 miles = about 6.8¢ per mile. Very good return.

Upgrading to Business Class on a Major International Airline: New York to Hong Kong on Cathay Pacific in Business Class costs $7,985, while the upgradeable fare costs $2,477 (Premium Economy; R). It takes 45,000 miles to get an upgrade, so on this flight the value of a mile is: $5,508 (money saved) ÷ 45,000 miles = 12.24¢ per mile. See how Cathay Pacific Business Class Upgrades to Asia Saves Up to $4,123, 54% for more details.

Upgrading to Business Class on a Major U.S. Airline: Dallas to Buenos Aires on American costs $5,023 in Business Class, while the upgradeable fare costs $2,371 (economy ticket + co-pay cost). It takes 50,000 miles to get an upgrade, so on this flight the value of a mile is: $2,652 (money saved; $5,023 – $2,371) ÷ 50,000 miles = about 5.3¢ per mile. See how The Power of American Upgrades to Southern South America + Surprising Availability for more details.

ENOUGH MILE-MANIA. HERE'S WHEN NOT TO USE MILES:

Of course, it's when the calculator tells you so. That's liable to be the case when fares are low. If you're booking further in advance or you're flexible with dates or destinations, you can get great low fares for cash. **So, save your miles for when they're worth more—or get a cash-back card and forget about all this miles shhtuff!**

For example, the lowest fare we found for New York to Frankfurt on Delta in Business Class is $2,369. It takes 140,000 miles to get that award, so on this flight the value of a mile is: $2,269 ÷ 140,000 miles = about 1.6¢ per mile. Mmm, that doesn't pass our 3-cent test. Scratch Delta credit cards?!

Or take Washington, DC to London in First Class on United. The lowest fare is $4,050. It takes 160,000 miles to get that award, so the value of a mile is: $3,950 ÷ 160,000 miles = about 2.5¢ per mile.

UPGRADER'S BLOCK SUMMARY

If your return on miles is less than 3¢, consider buying the ticket and saving your miles for another higher-value flight. Of course, sometimes you make decisions that go beyond the simple math, but it's good to have a ballpark method handy, ready for your smart phone calculator. Why? So you **don't get stymied or give up** or avoid playing upgrade games when the opportunities are indeed often lucrative. That's all.

When to Buy Miles Instead of Purchasing a Normal Published Fare

March 2018

(This special report is exclusively for No Miles Nancy. We respectfully ask other FCF members not to read it.)

Dear FCF,

You talk about miles a lot. I mean, look at this March Issue – it's full of miles deals, miles strategies, even how to calculate the value of a mile! MILES, MILES, MILES! Well, let me tell you straight: Stop it! Because I don't have any miles. Hear me? I DON'T HAVE ANY MILES!

You're killin' me here!

Yours truly,
No Miles Nancy

Dear No Miles Nancy,

We hear you. And we've written this special report just for you. Let those mile-meisters go count their miles or points. This is for you—someone whose mileage numbers are as low as the membership of the Tahiti Snowboarders Club.

NANCY, YOU CAN BUY MILES – AND IT'S A REALLY SMART IDEA – ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU BUY THEM AT THE RIGHT TIME

Nancy, buying miles can save you thousands of dollars—in some cases on one trip—if not tens of thousands of dollars. Most people pay cash or transfer their points for a ticket. Buying miles (and even points) for a trip is the overlooked option.

The Simple Key: Do it when it's cheaper than paying a published fare and the airline has mileage award space. That's all.

Before we get into this, we want you to keep this one fact in mind, Nancy: The retail price for most airline miles is 3¢ to 3.8¢ per mile (including taxes). That's your benchmark.

Buying miles when on sale can give you even bigger savings.

SO, WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO BUY MILES INSTEAD OF A NORMAL AIRFARE? FCF'S RULE OF THUMB: WHEN PREMIUM FARES ARE $4K / $6K

If the Business Class fare is over $4,000 or the First Class fare over $6,000, consider buying miles to redeem for your ticket. Let's break that down a little more.

WHEN FARES ARE HIGH FOR A SPECIFIC TRIP

The airline is great, the flight schedule is great, but the fare is *sky high:* What do I do? You have two options.

OPTION 1: BUY MILES WHEN THEY'RE ON SALE

For example, New York to Hong Kong, non-stop in First Class on Cathay Pacific starts at $31,155 round-trip. Cathay Pacific is a partner of American, so you can book Cathay Pacific flights using American miles. Back in December, American put miles on sale for as low as 1.8¢. So, if you bought 220,000 miles with American the cost to get the miles for that Hong Kong ticket would have been about $4,027 (including approx. award tax)**—a savings of $27,128 (87%).** Sound good, Nancy?

Examples of When to Buy Miles Instead of a Published First Class Fare

Route	Operating Airline	Lowest Normal First Class Fare	Buy Miles From When on Sale	Mileage Cost	Cost per Mile When on Sale as Low as*	Cost**	Savings
Los Angeles - Melbourne	Qantas	$11,798	American	220,000	1.8¢	$4,085	**$7,713 / 65%**
Chicago - Tokyo	All Nippon	$19,834	United	220,000	1.9¢	$4,226	**$15,608 / 79%**
			LifeMiles	180,000	1.5¢	$2,778	**$17,056 / 86%**
Houston - Dubai	Emirates	$18,833	Amex Rewards	247,500	2.5¢	$7,067	**$11,766 / 62%**
NYC - Hong Kong	Cathay Pacific	$31,155	American	220,000	1.8¢	$4,027	**$27,128 / 87%**
Los Angeles - Tokyo	Singapore	$10,178	United	220,000	1.9¢	$4,265	**$5,913 / 58%**
			LifeMiles	180,000	1.5¢	$2,785	**$7,393 / 73%**
New York - Munich	Lufthansa	$10,383	United	220,000	1.9¢	$4,300	**$6,083 / 59%**
			LifeMiles	174,000	1.5¢	$2,730	**$7,653 / 74%**

*Including 7.5% sales tax. **Including approx. award taxes.

When to Buy Miles Instead of a Published Business Class Fare

Route	Operating Airline	Lowest Normal Business Class Fare	Buy Miles From When on Sale	Mileage Cost	Cost per Mile When on Sale as Low as*	Cost**	Savings
New York - Hong Kong	Cathay Pacific	$7,810	American	140,000	1.8¢	$2,587	**$5,223 / 67%**
Houston - Manchester	Singapore	$3,701	LifeMiles	126,000	1.5¢	$1,970	**$1,731 / 47%**

Route	Operating Airline	Lowest Normal Business Class Fare	Buy Miles From When on Sale	Mileage Cost	Cost per Mile When on Sale as Low as*	Cost**	Savings
New York - Seoul	Asiana	$4,072	United	160,000	1.9¢	$2,744	**$1,328 / 33%**
			LifeMiles	150,000	1.5¢	$2,334	**$1,738 / 43%**
New York - Sao Paulo	American	$4,878	American	115,000	1.8¢	$2,130	**$2,748 / 56%**

*Including 7.5% sales tax. **Including approx. award taxes.

When miles are not on sale with American the cost to buy them is 3.2¢, so the savings on the New York to Hong Kong ticket would be less.

GETTING AROUND THE AIRLINE'S MAXIMUM BUY LIMITS

Now, the airlines aren't stupid, so they don't let you buy as many miles as you want, kind of. But getting around that barrier is easy – and legal. (We don't want to get you into trouble, Nancy.) We wrote a piece on it right here.

OPTION 2: BUY POINTS WITH A CREDIT CARD AND TRANSFERING THEM TO AN AIRLINE

With Amex Rewards for example, you can buy up to 500,000 points at a cost of 2.5¢ if you don't have enough points for a reward. (With some airlines the transfer time is almost instant from points to miles, but it can take up to 3 days).

Using this approach, buying 220,000 Amex Rewards points and then transferring them to Cathay Pacific brings the ticket cost down to $5,500—**a savings of $25,655 (82%).**

NANCY, BEFORE YOU BUY MILES OR POINTS...

Make sure there's availability: American and United are among the airlines that are less risky because you can hold award space while the miles-purchase transaction transpires, for more details go here.

But we find award availability every day! Just keep an eye on your inbox for our Daily Alerts.

WHEN TO FORGET ABOUT BUYING MILES OR POINTS

When fares are low: Of course, we specialize in finding low premium fares, so if they're out there, Nancy, you'll know. Like these.

Now of course, these deals aren't always available. But if you're a little flexible, you can get great published fares without the Buy Loyalty Strategy.

For example, Washington, D.C. to London on United non-stop in First Class starts at $4,052 round-trip. If you buy 160,000 miles with United at the normal everyday cost of 3.8¢, the ticket would cost $6,080. No savings, no point.

Or Houston to Beijing in Business Class on United. The fare starts at $2,627 round-trip. Nice. If you buy 120,000 miles with United the ticket would cost $4,560, so again, no point.

One more thing. Free award tickets don't earn miles or elite credit, so the savings must be good to make this strategy worth your while. So…

Remember the Aforementioned Rule of Thumb: Think about buying miles or points when you're Business Class fare is otherwise $4,000+ or your First Class fare is over $6,000.

Simple.

P.S.

Thanks for reading Nancy. From now on nobody will ever call you "No Miles Nancy." Just so you know, this is the strategy Mr. Upgrade uses more than any other, because he likes First Class (particularly on airlines whose First Class cabins go for $20,000+). Which is why he buys miles left and right in all kinds of mileage and points accounts.

Oh, all you other readers can come back now.

For more about mileage sales, check out our regular "Sweet Redeems" alerts—and use that information directly with the operating airline, or through a partner program.

Check Our Mileage Deals

We Spot Mistake Fares (such as the Air France First Class Round-trip Ticket for $1,500), But We Don’t Print Them. Here’s Why.

March 2018

Recently an Air France fare came up from Los Angeles or San Francisco to London in First Class for $1,500 round-trip. Normally, such a fare would begin at $6,000 and rise to $15,000. The fare was a mistake. Maybe they left off a zero. Who knows?

We spotted it. Others spotted it.

But when a fare is too good to be true, and our Spidey sense tingle, we knew the fare was illegitimate.

Others reported it. We didn’t.

One reason is because there's no guarantee the airline will honor that fare, and that creates a big pain in the derrière for FCF readers.

In October, Virgin Australia mistakenly published a fare between the U.S. and Australia for around $174 round-trip. Nice fare, but VA didn't honor it, and to its honor, refunded the money. However, it took a week for those who had booked the fare to find out. In that time, customers could have been carrying on their search. Very inconvenient.

So, let's be clear: FCF doesn't publish mistake fares, and we never will. Every fare we find for you is legitimate, a fare you can trust. (And some are just as good as mistake fares.)

As for the Air France fare, from what I hear, it appears that most of the tickets have been canceled—probably along with the job of the guy who made this mistake.

How to Get Free In-Class Upgrades to Hawaii on United

March 2018

It’s easy, especially now that the carrier has more routes with aircraft fitted with international Business Class seats.

United now has more routes to Hawaii on aircraft furnished with an international Business Class seat than ever before. Which means **if you know** which flights have the seat, you get MUCH more for your money.

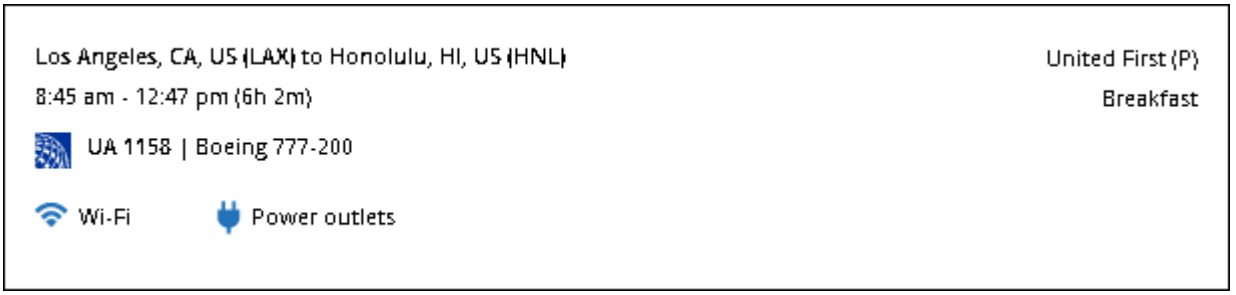
Let’s compare Seat 2A on two different United flights from Los Angeles to Honolulu, a route that now has four to six non-stop flights daily, depending on date of travel: seat 2A on UA1158 and seat 2A on UA1431.

Same airline. Same route. Same price. Same 2A.

BUT A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

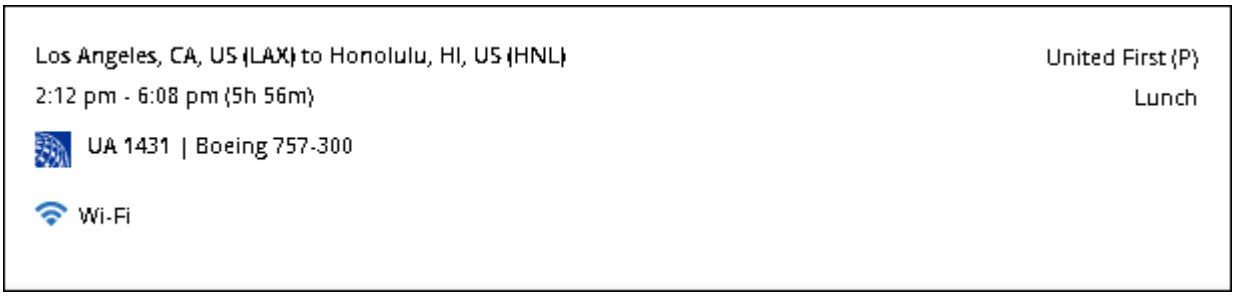
Flight UA1158 offers an international aircraft—a B777-200—with international Business Class seats.

United.com



Flight UA1431 uses a domestic aircraft, a B757-300, with domestic First Class seats.

United.com



On international flights, Business Class is really *Business Class*. On domestic flights, however, Business Class is puffed up, it's called First Class, but it's a big come down in comfort and overall experience on United (Transcons being the exception). You're getting a smart phone instead of as flip-phone.

United International Business Class Seat

If you know the Hawaii flights on which United offers an international Business Class seat, you'll have a simple way to get a **free in-class seat upgrade.**

IT STARTS WITH THE RIGHT AIRCRAFT

United's B777-200s: The airline has four versions, but to Hawaii they all have a Business Class flat-bed seat: 180-degree recline, 76 inches long, 19 inches wide, and arranged 2x4x2.

United's B767-400s: One version, all with flat-bed seats in Business. A little shorter than the B777 version (75 inches), but a bit wider (20.6 inches), and arranged 2x1x2.

United's B757-200s: United has two versions, but to Hawaii they all have a Business Class flat-bed seat: 180-degree recline, 76 inches long, 20.6 inches wide, and arranged 2×2.

NETWORKING, CONNECTIONS, AND FREE UPGRADES

Mainland Connections: If you live in Washington, DC, you must make a connection to Maui, so why not book United via Chicago instead of via Los Angeles? If you do, you get the international Business Class seat, **the "free in-class upgrade."**

HOW DO I EASILY BOOK MY ITINERARY AROUND THE BEST SEATS?

Just know where to find United's international Business Class seat on routes to Hawaii…

Route	Departure Flight Number	Days of Operation	Return Flight Number	Days of Operation	Aircraft
Chicago - Honolulu	219	Daily	218	Daily	B777-200
Chicago - Maui	202	Mon., Thrs. to Sun.	348	Mon., Thrs. to Sun.	B777-200
Denver - Honolulu	328	Daily	383	Daily	B777-200
Denver - Kona	1758	Daily	1731	Daily	B757-200
Denver - Maui	1736	Daily	1430	Daily	B757-200
Houston - Honolulu	253	Daily	252	Daily	B777-200
Los Angeles - Honolulu	1158	Daily	534	Daily	B777-200
	1232	Sun. to Fri.	1229	Daily	B757-200
Los Angeles - Kauai	1295, 1227	Daily	466, 1292	Daily	B757-200
New York - Honolulu	363	Daily	362	Daily	B764-400
San Francisco - Honolulu	300, 1175	Daily	372, 724	Daily	B777-200
San Francisco - Kauai	1111	Daily	1152	Daily	B757-200
Washington, DC - Honolulu	345	Sat.	344	Sat.	B764-400

*Always recheck aircraft type at the time of booking as aircraft can change by the day or week. For example, on the San Francisco-Kauai route, United flies the B757-200 (international seat) on May 3, but then on May 4 the aircraft changes to a B737 (domestic seat), while keeping the same flight number.

Leg Stretch Update: You'd Better Sit Down

March 2018

We've been talking about our beloved Leg Stretch Strategy (LSS) since last May and have heard some incredibly positive feedback on the savings that members' have netted. (Conrad in Chicago used it twice already, for example.) But some good things sometimes must end, so we thought we'd better mention it, lest you're in the middle of booking a LSS.

After the May report, we did two updates, the most recent one in February, when fares dropped even more for the LSS Delta & SkyTeam Partners to Europe and South America where you could get four long-haul segments for just $2,358 in Business Class. FCF regretfully must report **all the lower fares have expired.**

LESSONS LEARNED?

Fares and deals change—so grab the great ones when you see them. And this is a great one. Our latest LSS—**using miles this time** / **not cash**—is in this very issue.

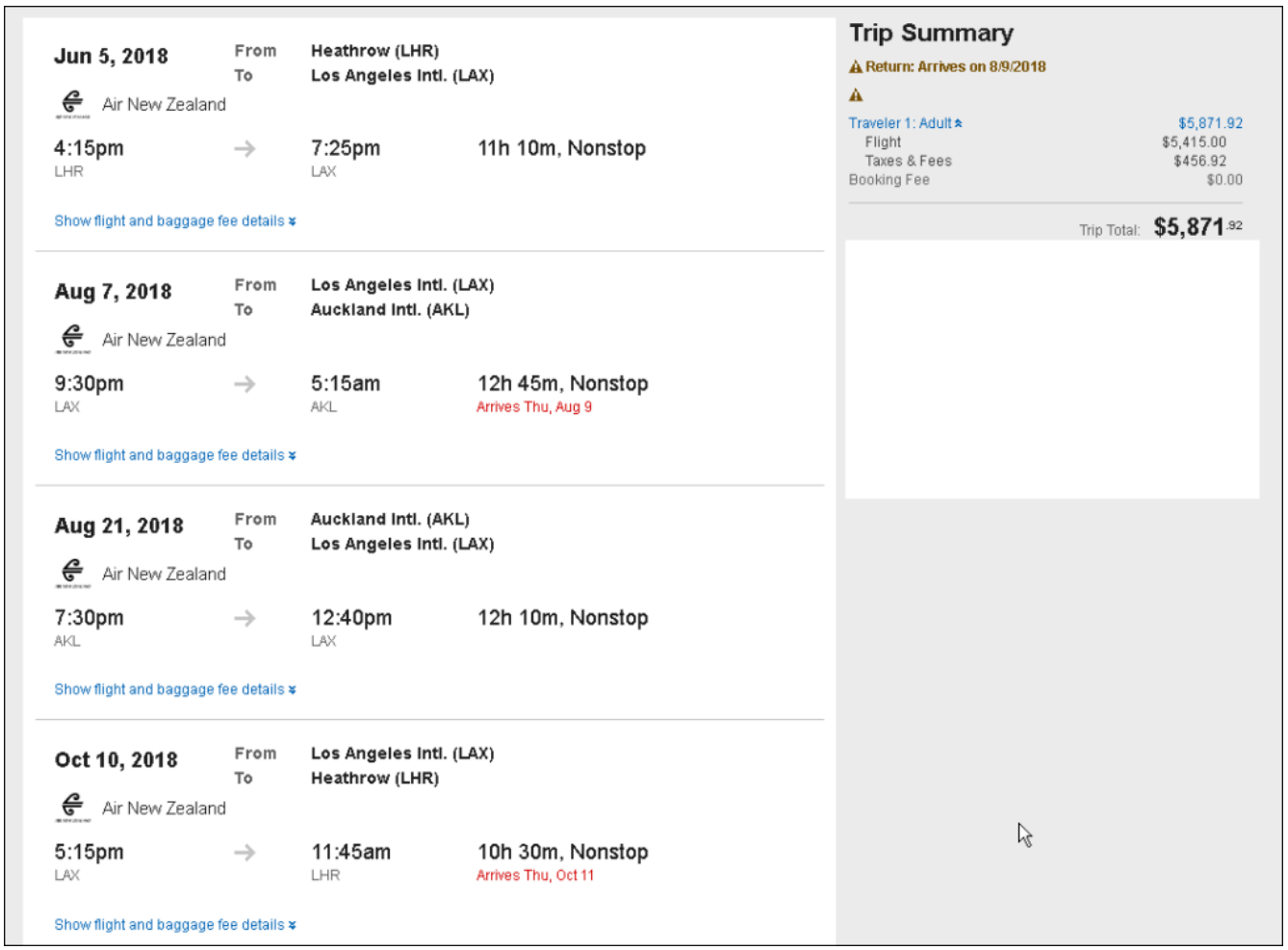
Every day there are more than one million fare changes lodged with ATPCO, the primary aggregator of airfares. It's a very dynamic industry. So, take heed of what we said in our February Leg Stretch report:

"If you haven't done so, we urge you to take another look at the Leg Stretch Strategy, because it is an astonishing way to save on airfares. The airlines could put a stop to this with a simple change in the fare rules, but they haven't yet. That could change by the end of this paragraph. Don't wait. Get out that bucket list and make it work for you."

That said, my guess is that the fares will be back.

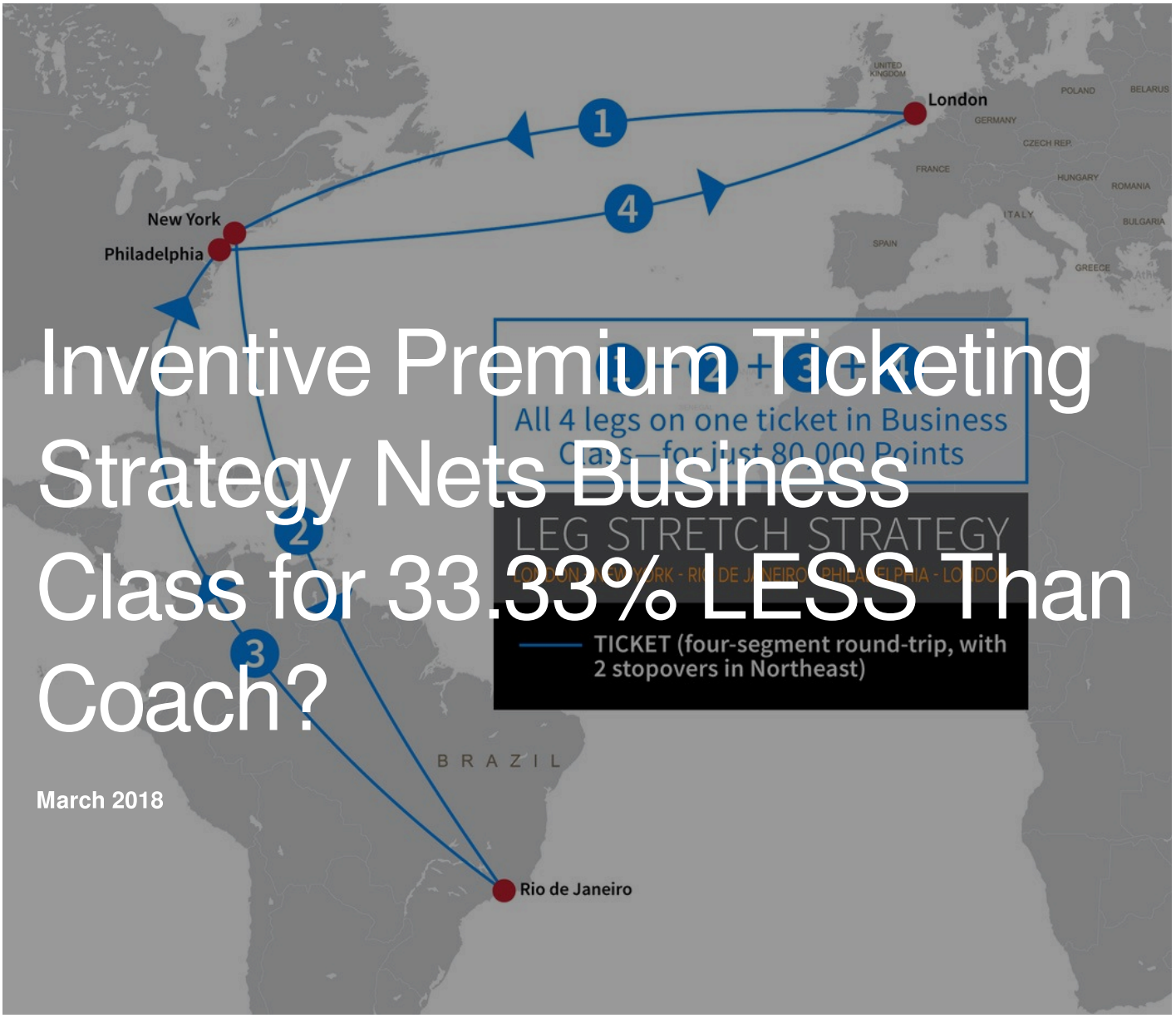
ON THE UPSIDE

THE MAY LSS: STILL FLYING: The LSS fare outlined in May for a US—Europe—South Pacific itinerary in Business Class is still valid on Air New Zealand. Fares currently start at £4,215 (at today's exchange rate, about $5,871). With the novel ticketing strategy you likely won't find elsewhere, you essentially get a free round-trip to Europe for booking one to the South Pacific. Not bad. For details, see FCF's May report.



THE JULY LSS: STILL FLYING ON SOME ROUTES, BUT AT HIGHER RATES: For example, New York, Zurich, Rio de Janeiro was $2,460. It's now $2,715, an increase of $255. Or Miami, Frankfurt, São Paulo was $2,883. It's now $3,311, an increase of $428.

Still a deal—just less of one.



Inventive Premium Ticketing Strategy Nets Business Class for 33.33% LESS Than Coach?

March 2018

FCF's Leg Stretch Strategy using miles (which you can now buy cheaply) nets four long-haul segments in Business Class for 100,000 miles—or 80,000 Starpoints—or $455 international one-way tickets in cash if you don't know what Starpoints are.

We've been Leg-Stretching so much lately here at FCF that we're considering ice-dancing at the next Winter Olympics. This particular Leg Stretch Strategy takes advantage of a round-trip ticket using miles that offers two free stopovers in the U.S. between Europe and South America.

It's not for everyone, but if you are planning on, say, going to Europe twice this year and South America once in Business Class, or vice versa, this is pure gold, because you can time it so that the "free (home) stopover" lasts as long as you like. But the clock is ticking: The itinerary has to be completed within 12 months.

LET'S BREAK IT DOWN — OPTION 1: POSSIBLY THE WORLD'S BEST MILES/POINTS TICKETING STRATEGY

This gets you 4 long-haul segments in Business Class for 80,000 points. That's 20,000 fewer than many pay in coach! You book the flights through Japan Airlines (JAL)—a Starwood Preferred Guest (SPG) points-to-miles transfer partner—but take the flights on JAL's mileage partner, American Airlines.

So, let's say you live in the New York area and want to go (or would want to go if the price was dirt cheap) to Europe for business or leisure a couple of times over a 12-month period, and you are also flirting with a trip to South America. Normally you'd treat them as completely separate tickets—right? Not with the Leg Stretch Miles Strategy. It lets you combine multiple trips into one ticket.

HOW OPTION #1 WORKS

The Leg Stretch Strategy (LSS) starts in Europe so you need to get yourself there one-way, as low-priced as you can. Hey, FCF is just the place to find those one-way deals.

After you've done business or pleasure in Europe, the Leg Stretch begins.

A sample itinerary, but one that works for many other itineraries.

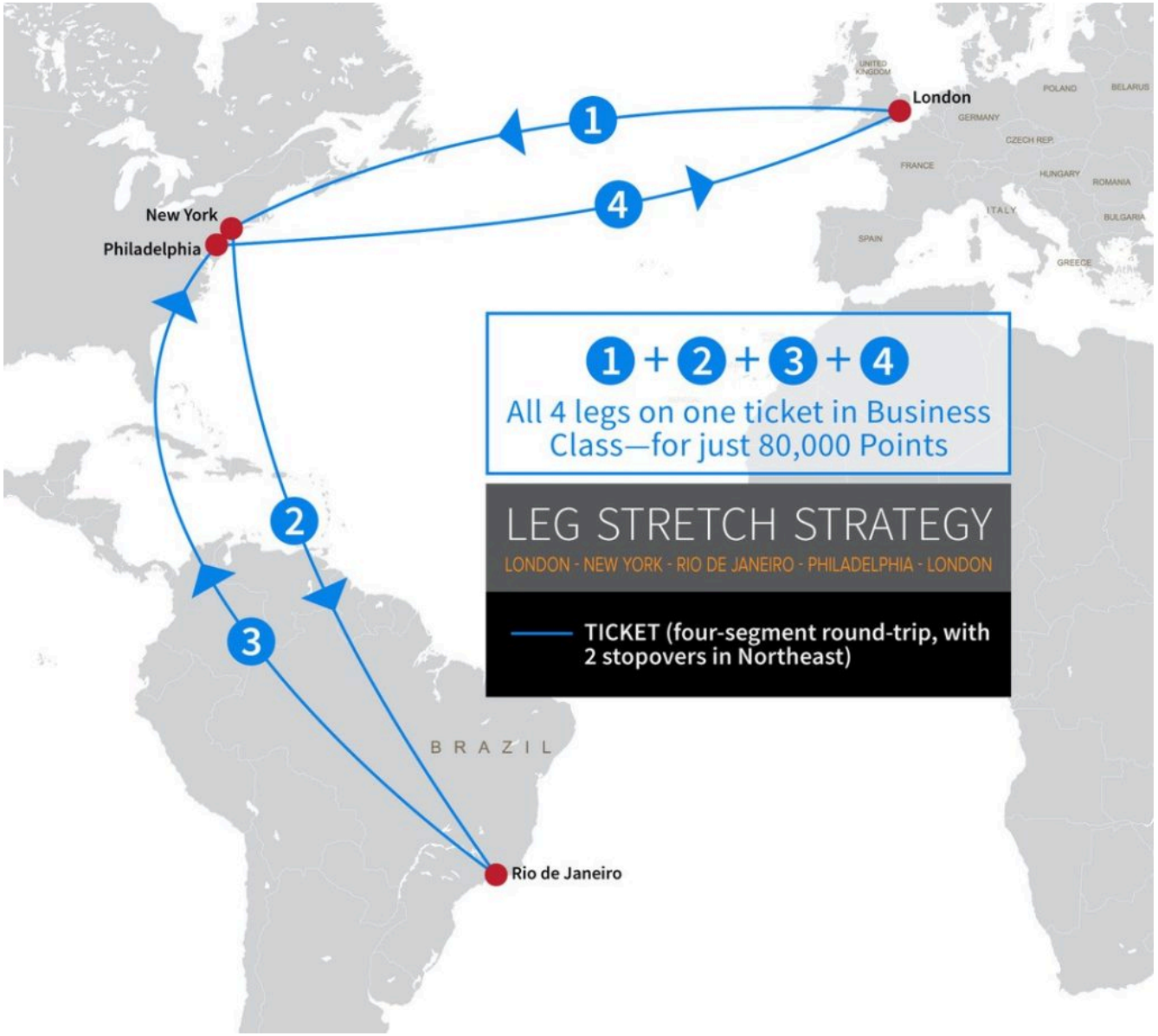
Leg 1: London to New York – first U.S. stop (End of first vacation / business trip.)

Leg 2: New York to Rio de Janeiro – vacation time on Ipanema Beach (First segment of second trip.)

Leg 3: Rio de Janeiro to Philadelphia – second U.S. stop connecting via Miami. Japan Airlines fine print requires you to stop at a different U.S. airport than the first one, and connect via a different airport too. (End of second trip.)

Leg 4: Philadelphia to London (Start of vacation / business trip #3.)

The **Leg Stretch ticket** ends in Europe, so you need a one-way ticket home (or the start of another Leg Stretch journey).



I said to my analysts, “Only 100,000 miles!? Is it April Fool’s Day already? This can’t be right. Go back and check those numbers!”

*American Airlines four-segment itinerary (equivalent to two round-trips)—**all on one ticket.** Screenshot from www.JAL.co:*

JAPAN AIRLINES

Flight information

London → New York — Mon 19 Mar

AA107

17:15 London (Heathrow) — 21:25 New York (John F Kennedy International)

Cabin: Business class

Total duration 8hour(s)10minute(s)

New York → Rio de Janeiro — Fri 01 Jun

AA973

21:50 New York (John F Kennedy International) — 08:40 +1 Rio de Janeiro (Galeao A.C Jobim International)

Cabin: Business class

Total duration 9hour(s)50minute(s)

Rio de Janeiro → Philadelphia — Wed 13 Jun

AA904

20:40 Rio de Janeiro (Galeao A.C Jobim International) — 04:35 +1 Miami (Miami International)

Duration : 8hour(s)55minute(s)

Cabin: Business class

Connecting time: 2hour(s)35minute(s)

AA1414

07:10 Miami (Miami International) — 09:59 +1 Philadelphia (Philadelphia International)

Duration : 2hour(s)49minute(s)

Cabin: Economy class

Total duration 14hour(s)19minute(s)

Philadelphia → London — Thu 02 Aug

AA728

20:40 Philadelphia (Philadelphia International) — 09:00 +1 London (Heathrow)

Cabin: Business class

Total duration 7hour(s)20minute(s)

SAMPLE MILES SAVINGS USING OPTION #1

U.S. to Europe one-way in economy is 30,000 miles using American's program; and U.S. to South America in economy is 30,000 miles each way with AA. That's 120,000 miles at a minimum to fly economy for these four segments—and 230,000 miles in Business Class using AA miles.

Compare that with this Leg Stretch Strategy using miles with Japan Airlines, and you net those same destinations in Business Class for 100,000 miles—80,000 SPG points—**40,000 fewer than coach.** In effect, that's a couple of free tickets and more. No wonder I thought it was April Fool's.

100,000 JAL miles for the four segments—which cost me 80,000 SPG points. (AA credit card users pay 50% more for coach travel!) Screenshot from www.JAL.com:

JAPAN AIRLINES

JAL MILEAGE BANK

MR MATTHEW BENNETT Mileage Statement for MR MATTHEW BENNETT

・Thank you for flying with Japan Airlines.

Date	Description	miles ①	Bonus miles ②	Total miles ①+②
	Up to November 30 2017			
24Feb 2018	STARWOOD SPG POINT	25,000	0	25,000
03Mar 2018	MILES FOR PARTNER AIRLINES AWARD TICKETS	-100,000	0	-100,000

Cash cost for taxes: total of just $86.96 each leg. Screenshot from www.JAL.com:

Web receipt

Passenger : BENNETT MATTHEWMR

Display web receipt

Receipt

This is to certify that JAL has received the following.

Japan Airlines Co., Ltd.

JAPAN AIRLINES

RECEIVED FROM

TOTAL	$ 347.82 (USD)	IN PAYMENT OF	FARE, TAX, FEE, HANDLING CHARGE
PAYMENT METHOD	CREDIT CARD (AX): $ 347.82 (USD)		
TICKET ISSUED DATE	03/03/2018	WEB RECEIPT DISPLAYED DATE	02/03/2018

This is an electronic display of receipt data.

Itinerary

AA107	Mon 19 Mar	From LONDON/HEATHROW to NEW YORK/JOHN F KENNEDY INTERNATIONAL
AA973	Fri 1 Jun	From NEW YORK/JOHN F KENNEDY INTERNATIONAL to RIO DE JANEIRO/GALEAO A.C JOBIM INTERNATIONAL
AA904	Wed 13 Jun	From RIO DE JANEIRO/GALEAO A.C JOBIM INTERNATIONAL to MIAMI
AA1414	Thu 14 Jun	From MIAMI to PHILADELPHIA
AA728	Thu 2 Aug	From PHILADELPHIA to LONDON/HEATHROW

Taxes

Passenger Service Charge (UB)	$ 62.17 (USD)
APHIS User Fee (XA)	$ 7.92 (USD)
Embarkation Tax (BR)	$ 33.59 (USD)
Air Passenger Duty (APD) (GB)	$ 207.64 (USD)
Immigration User Fee (XY)	$ 14.00 (USD)
Passenger Civil Aviation Security Service Fee (AY)	$ 11.20 (USD)
Customs User Fee (YC)	$ 11.30 (USD)
TOTAL	$ 347.82 (USD)

OPTION #2:

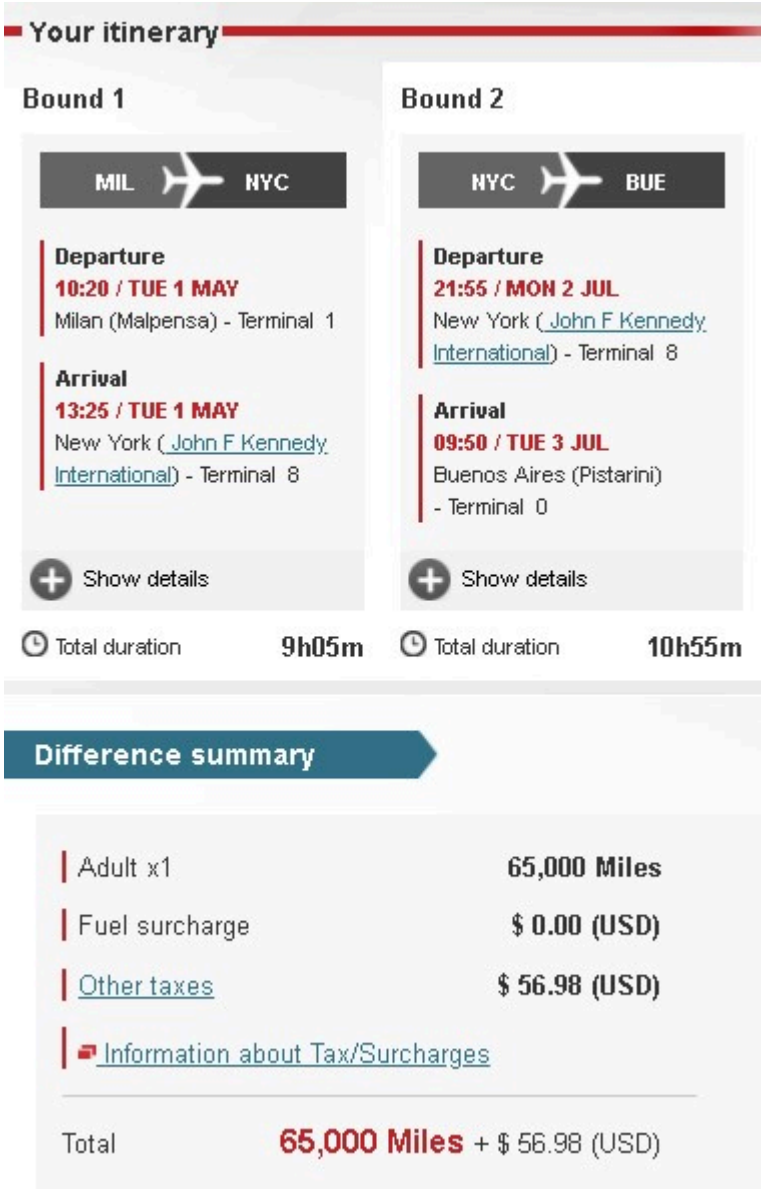
Avoid Japan Airlines Fine Print / Restrictions

To get around that rule that forbids stopping in the same city twice will cost you 130,000 miles round-trip, but it means you can use the same city as your U.S. stopover. It is, in effect, **two one-way tickets that each allow you a stopover.**

Savings: For Option 2, each one-way Leg Stretch ticket costs 65,000 miles (15,000 more than half a round-trip ticket), so 130,000 in total for a round-trip in Business Class—or 105,000 SPG points. **15,000 fewer miles than coach**, and you get to stopover in the same U.S. city (home) twice.

Here's an example of how option #2 might work:

Ticket #1: Europe > U.S. (stopover) > South America



Ticket #2: South America > U.S. (stopover) > Europe

Your itinerary

Bound 1	Bound 2
BUE → NYC	NYC → MIL
Departure 21:40 / TUE 17 JUL Buenos Aires (Pistarini) - Terminal A	**Departure** 18:15 / THU 4 OCT New York (John F Kennedy International) - Terminal 8
Arrival 07:31 / WED 18 JUL New York (John F Kennedy International) - Terminal 8	**Arrival** 08:20 / FRI 5 OCT Milan (Malpensa) - Terminal 1
Show details	Show details
Total duration 10h51m	Total duration 8h05m

Difference summary

Adult x1	65,000 Miles
Fuel surcharge	$ 0.00 (USD)
Other taxes	$ 91.21 (USD)
Information about Tax/Surcharges	
Total	65,000 Miles + $ 91.21 (USD)

KEY FACTS ABOUT THE JAPAN AIRLINES MILEAGE PROGRAM

- **You must book partner travel by phone:** (800) 525-3663. Two one-way (option 2) awards can be booked online after you login into your JAL mileage account. We recommend first checking the AA website for availability, then calling JAL to make the reservation, as award space is usually the same.
- Holding award space is not permitted, so you must have the miles in the account in order to book.
- LSS works only with American flights for Europe and South America; code-share flights are not eligible.
- There's a maximum of six flight segments permitted on round-trip tickets, so the LSS can also be used for connecting flights to the gateways.
- **Maximum of three stopovers**: this is based on South America being one stop, and the U.S. home base having two stops, one in each direction.
- **Getting Japan Airlines miles:** These can be transferred from Starwood, based on FCF's research, transfer time can be three to five days.
- **Be flexible:** Look for a "cluster of award space," meaning days on both sides of your preferred dates. That gives you better odds of booking the space using Japan Airlines miles once the transfer is completed. See below for FCF Sweet Redeem research on American to Europe and South America.

- JAL has a flight-distance program, meaning miles charged are based on flight distance. The Leg Stretch Strategy for 100,000 miles for four long-haul segments works for trips for up 20,000 flight miles; for trips up to 25,000 flight miles (say for Californians) the cost increases to 125,000 JAL miles.

FCF CHEAT SHEETS GET YOU THERE FAST AND EASY

We've prepared a few "Sweet Redeem" alerts to show you when and where free mileage award space for American Airlines flights is available to/from the U.S. and Europe, and to/from the U.S. and South America, including:

U.S. to/from Brazil & Chile—For 4 Travelers

New York to/from Europe

Miami and Philadelphia to/from Europe

Charlotte, Chicago, Dallas or New York to/from Europe

NO DATES? NO PROBLEM.

JAL allows you to make date changes for just $20. You can't change the cities on your ticket once travel has commenced, but changing dates only requires American Airlines to have availability.

So if you're flexible (or s t r e t c h a b l e), it's no problem. As you can see above, FCF publishes availability opportunities regularly with American. Just get your cities right and you should be fine by providing "placeholder dates" when you make your booking.

MORE HELPFUL LINKS

Figure out how many flight miles your trip will be.

Japan Airlines flight distance pricing chart.

The Power of American Upgrades on Domestic Transcons, Plus Surprising Availability

March 2018

Elite, non-elite, business, and leisure travelers can now save big on Transcon routes—up to 81% off.

In the past three months, FCF has written three special reports for oneworld members (American) looking to deploy miles in order to achieve or maintain their elite status. In December, we focused on Europe, in January on Asia, and in February on South America.

By the way, **the tactics also work for anyone** who can't find a low Business Class fare, and they also work for those who don't even have any American miles.

This month FCF takes the same approach to the Transcon routes. The premium non-stop service offered from Los Angeles and San Francisco to New York/JFK, is America's glamour route.

Our Pitch: The same as Asia, Europe, and South America: Forget about free mileage awards because they don't earn elite credit, and it can be difficult at times to find award availability. Instead, use miles to upgrade, as **availability is much greater** and you earn miles and elite credit.

AMERICAN'S UPGRADE PROGRAM

On the Transcon, American requires 15,000 miles plus a $75 co-pay each way on the lowest upgradeable economy fares (H, K, M, L, V, G, Q, N, O, S classes) to Business Class. Upgrades to First Class also require 15,000 miles plus a $175 co-pay each way. When fares are high, this upgrade offers a great return—**for anyone.**

SAVE 64% ON TRANSCON BUSINESS CLASS FARES

One example: Business Class on Los Angeles-JFK is often expensive, $1,300+, even when booked way in advance. The lowest AA economy fare is currently $322, while Business Class is $1,317, so even with the $150 co-pay, you can save 64% ($845) off the published fare by using miles. (See chart below for an upgrade award availability survey.)

WHAT TO DO WHEN AN UPGRADE IS ONLY AVAILABLE ONE WAY?

American lets you combine coach and Business Class fares (and also Business and First Class fares), so you can upgrade the segment that has space and pay for the other leg in either First, Business, or coach. On Los Angeles-JFK, the combined coach-Business Class fare is $902 while round-trip Business Class is $1,317—so even with the $75 one-way co-pay, you can still save 32% ($145) by using miles one-way.

CONNECTIONS CAN SAVE UP TO 81%

Smart travelers use the long-haul Business Class flight as a "bridge." All they have to do is get to and from the bridge gateway.

That means you might even buy an economy through-fare ticket, meaning the fare gets you to and from the Transcon gateway on one ticket rather than requiring two separate tickets. Upgrade all the flight segments if the space is available.

Example: JFK-Portland: The through-fare ticket gets you there via Los Angeles in coach for $279 instead of $2,264, the cost of a Business Class ticket on American. Even with the $150 co-pay, you can save $1,835 (81%) off the published fare by using miles.

Use our cheat sheet, below, to know when you can easily upgrade the long-haul segments; fly the short connecting flight/s in coach if you must.

TRANSCON UPGRADE FROM BUSINESS TO FIRST CLASS

In short, there's often no value. Because published First Class fares are often only a bit more than Business Class fares, and once you add in the $350 co-pay for the First Class upgrade, the upgrade has no value. With one exception: You're faced with a high First Class fare. Then, go for an upgrade using miles.

HOW TO BOOK MILEAGE UPGRADES WITH AMERICAN

Before buying your economy ticket, call American (upgrades cannot be done online) at 1-800-433-7300 to find out if the flights/dates you want are available for a mileage upgrade. Book the economy ticket online—keep American on the phone—then have the AA reservationist book the upgrade, or pay the by-phone booking fee and book both the economy ticket and upgrade at the same time directly with the AA reservationist.

If the upgrade on the flights/dates you want are not available, have the agent check dates/flights on the days before and after.

Use our survey below to get an idea of months with great upgrade space to get off to a fast start.

HOW ANYONE CAN PLAY THIS UPGRADE GAME

Don't have any or enough American miles? No problem. Just buy American miles when they go on sale (recent opportunity here), or transfer Starwood points (takes about two days), and you, too, can save.

Sweet Redeem Survey: American Upgrade Availability on Transcon

Routes	Class of Service	Departure			Return		
		4 to 8 Days Per Month	9 to 12 Days Per Month	13+ Days Per Month	4 to 8 Days Per Month	9 to 12 Days Per Month	13+ Days Per Month
New York - Los Angeles	First	Nov.	May	March through Nov.	March		March through Nov.
San Francisco - New York				March through Nov.			March through Nov.
New York - Los Angeles	Business				March, April, Sept. through Nov.	July, Sept.	July, Aug.
San Francisco -		May through	March, April, June, Aug.	March, April, May, June, July,	April, May, July through	March, May, June through	March, April, June through

Routes	Class of Service	Departure			Return		
		4 to 8 Days Per Month	9 to 12 Days Per Month	13+ Days Per Month	4 to 8 Days Per Month	9 to 12 Days Per Month	13+ Days Per Month
New York		Aug., Nov.	through Oct.	Aug. through Oct.	Sept., Oct.	Aug., Sept.	Aug.

*Months in black at least one seat available; in blue at least two seats; in green at least four seats.

What Grandma Taught Me About Loyalty Programs and 99+ Ways Anyone Can Score by Buying SPG Points

March 2018

With My Favorite Loyalty Redemption Catalog: Now domestic Transcon First Class for just $1,365; Europe First Class for $1,820, Emirates First Class (otherwise $22k) for just $2,844; Asia First Class for $2,844, you name it...

My experience with loyalty programs started when I was nine.

It was when I discovered "Green Stamps" as I was rummaging through Grandma Lockhart's closets. It was one of the many fun things to do at her house. Who cares where the Green Stamps came from, the economics

behind their existence, or even how to spell their name!?

Grandma L was awesome in every way. What was hers was mine. And lo and behold she had a loyalty currency—which I knew nothing about and still don't—that could be redeemed for all kinds of cool stuff in the "**catalog of goodies,**" including a trick bow-and-arrow set, which my brother and I would fight over for years.

WHAT GRANDMA'S LOYALTY PROGRAM EXPERIENCE TAUGHT ME

I talk about buying loyalty perks (miles/points) a lot. But if I didn't, you could call me out for not practicing what I preach. Yeah, this is how I travel. What follows is **the latest "sale" on buying points**—with the rarest, highest-value currency in the world—**for 35% off through March 16.**

SPG POINTS ON SALE NOW

The basics: Starwood Preferred Guest (SPG) points can be purchased anytime—up to 30,000 a year—at 3.5¢ each. Through March 16 you can buy them for 2.275¢. They do go on sale periodically, the last time in December.

SPG hotels' points transferred to airlines miles: Given the 25% bonus when you transfer 25,000 SPG points at a time, during this sale you're looking at the equivalent of **1.82¢ per airline mile**.

THE STARWOOD'S RICH REDEMPTION OPPORTUNITIES

Let me count the reasons (the top 11 anyway) and start out by just pointing out the sixth Leg Stretch Strategy—another one of FCF's countless upgrade innovations, and one you can likely only find here. In short, with just 100,000 Japan Airlines miles—net-able for just 80,000 SPG points—you can get two round-trip Business Class tickets.

Know how much you can buy those points for right now, through March 16. Just $1,820! Two international Business Class tickets for $1,820! And that's the tip of the SPG iceberg!

11 AWESOME STARPOINT SCORES
PLUS LINKS BELOW TO A BEVY MORE:

SPG Points Transfer Partner Airline	Redeem Miles With	Fly Between	Class	Cost With Points on Sale*	Normal Fares	Strategy Savings	FCF Sweet Redeems Alert Link Examples**
Japan Airlines	**Emirates**	**U.S. and the Middle East**	**First**	**$2,844**	**$22,568**	**$19,724 / 87%**	**Dubai**
Japan Airlines	Cathay Pacific	U.S. and Asia	First	$2,844	$31,155	$28,311 / 91%	Hong Kong

SPG Points Transfer Partner Airline	Redeem Miles With	Fly Between	Class	Cost With Points on Sale*	Normal Fares	Strategy Savings	FCF Sweet Redeems Alert Link Examples**
Japan Airlines	**Emirates**	**U.S. and the Middle East**	**First**	**$2,844**	**$22,568**	**$19,724 / 87%**	**Dubai**
Japan Airlines	British Airways	U.S. and Europe	First	$1,820	$6,300	$4,480 / 71%	London
All Nippon	All Nippon	U.S. and Asia	First	$2,730	$19,834	$17,104 / 86%	Tokyo
Asiana	Asiana	U.S. and Asia	First	$2,958	$8,469	$5,511 / 65%	Seoul
Japan Airlines	American	U.S. and South America	Business	$1,251	$5,898	$4,647 / 79%	Rio de Janeiro
Japan Airlines	Cathay Pacific	U.S. and Asia	Business	$1,820	$6,368	$4,548 / 71%	Hong Kong
Japan Airlines	Qantas	U.S. and South Pacific	First	$2,844	$11,797	$8,953 / 76%	Melbourne
Asiana	Etihad	U.S. and the Middle East	First	$2,958	$24,341	$21,383 / 88%	Abu Dhabi
All Nippon	Singapore	U.S. and Asia	Business	$1,820	$5,858	$4,038 / 69%	Hong Kong
American	Cathay Pacific	Transcon; LAX-JFK	First	$1,365	$2,817	$1,452 / 52%	Transcon

*Not including award taxes. **Availability may have changed, since original post.

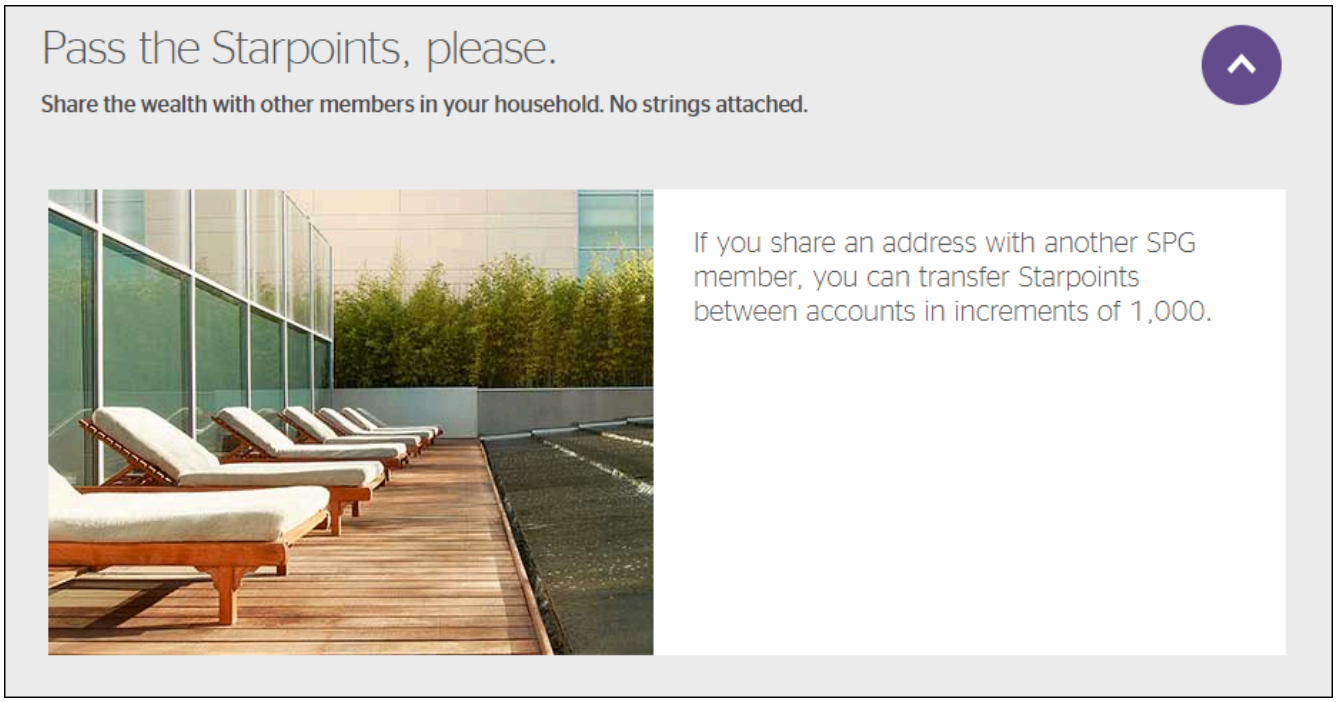
17 LINKS TO MORE IDEAS ON THE VALUE OF SPG POINTS *IF YOU STILL NEED CONVINCING*

- 16 Ways American AAdvantage loyalists can upgrade to First Class to Europe for less than free
- Save up to 54% in First Class to Asia with All Nippon
- Save up to 46% in Business Class on Delta
- Save up to 33% in First Class on All Nippon
- Save up to 23% to Asia on Singapore Airlines Business Class
- Up to a 54% savings in First Class on Lufthansa
- 26 ways American AAdvantage loyalists can upgrade to Business Class to Europe for less than free
- First Class to Hong Kong on Cathay Pacific 24% off
- Europe upgrade buffet nets Business Class for less than coach

- First Class on British Airways for only 95,000 Starpoints
- 13 ways United MileagePlus loyalists can upgrade to Europe for free
- Cathay Pacific First Class for 125,000 Starpoints
- Nine ways to upgrade to Europe for less than free on SkyTeam airlines
- All Nippon's ultimate mileage award ticket
- Part two: The ultimate Business Class mileage award with Japan Airlines
- Pay just 58,000 points on Iberia New York-Madrid
- Get First Class for less than Business to Europe

FOR ADVANCED SPG POWER PLAYERS
BREAKING THROUGH THE ANNUAL BUY-LIMIT BARRIER

As we covered last month, there are ways around annual purchase limits. Here's how SPG works:



See All Terms & Conditions

Transferring Starpoints.

- SPG Members Who Reside at Same Address. In Starwood's sole discretion, an SPG Member may be permitted to transfer Starpoints in 1000 point increments only from one SPG Member account to another SPG Member account under specific conditions. Generally, Starpoints may transfer if both SPG Members are active, consent to the transfer, and share the same residential mailing address that is not a P.O. Box, APO or SPO address for a minimum of 30 days prior to requesting the transfer. SPG Members may be required to provide proof of residency prior to Starwood transferring the Starpoints between the two accounts. Elite Preferred Guest Membership Status and the related benefits will not transfer to the recipient of the Starpoints.

And the fine print:

Buy points for you and your significant other, or all the people in your house, and transfer them into your account.

What no one will tell you: If you need even more points/miles, remember that most airline award tickets can be purchased as one-way flights. It's a divide-and-conquer play that means you max out all the accounts you can at your address, then ask your mom / dad / beautician / paperboy / dog catcher / whomever to buy all the points using their address. Use your miles for a one-way ticket (if not round-trip). Use all the points you net through other people for your flights. A snap. More on all that jazz here.

FOR ADVANCED SPG PLAYERS: POWER PLAY #2

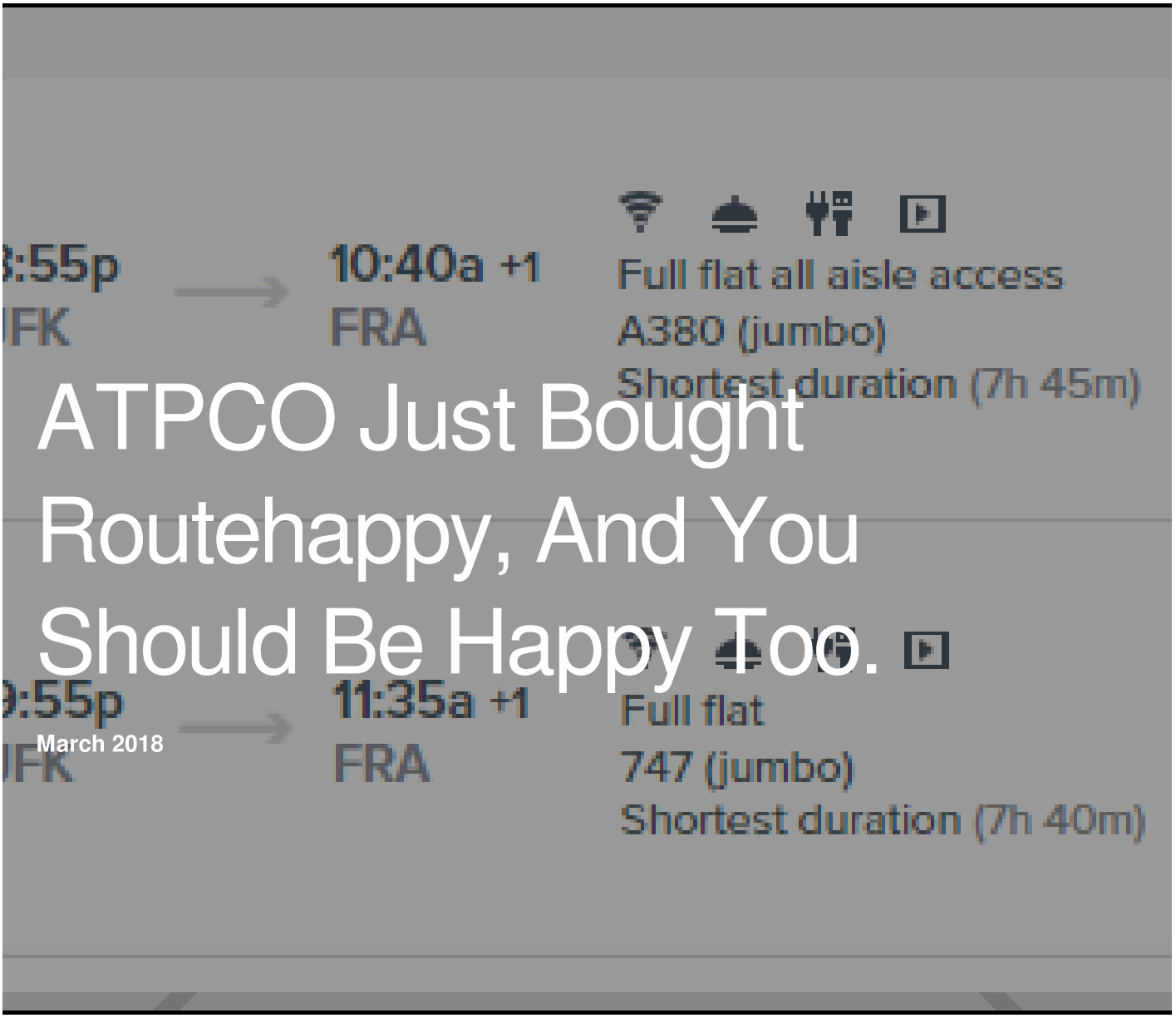
Look at the report from FCF's November 2016 issue, which outlined the opportunities now available via the Starwood-Marriott merger. There you'll find how to net—via this points sale—United miles + Ritz Carlton stays for peanuts, with Starpoints-to-Marriott Rewards points at a 1-to-3 rate. That means Marriott points can be bought for just 0.758¢ each.

More on the power that can yield savings here, including seven nights at the Ritz-Carlton Central Park FREE while getting United miles for just 3.1¢. Just use the family strategy outlined above and you can get 132,000 miles + a $5,600+ stay for just $4,095!

THANKS, GRANDMA

My dearest Grandma L passed in 2009 at 87 years young, but I hope one day to see her again, and then I'll thank her for all that she taught me about lucrative loyalty programs and The Upgrade Mindset (and how it led to $455 premium one-way tickets abroad).

P.S. If you’re reading this after the sale ends (March 16) know that this approach is still amazingly lucrative, just a bit less so.



ATPCO Just Bought Routehappy, And You Should Be Happy Too.

March 2018

Last month ATPCO, the largest distributor of fare data for the airline industry, bought Routehappy, a company that collects flight experience data. It's a game changer, and *First Class Flyer* readers are in a particularly good place to benefit.

The purchase means that data for many more decision criteria you want to know about, will be in one place. Along with schedules, fares, aircraft type, and cabin configuration, you'll be able to get information about in-flight amenities, meal service, seat width and pitch and more. This information has been available before, but never before in one place. FCF readers love the details that uncovers true value, because they realize that a seat is not a commodity. Most folks don't, and that plays right into the airline's game. This transaction will both decommoditize and democratize air travel at the same time.

TRAVEL VALUE IS OFTEN HIDDEN

Air travel is one of the last bastions of “fingers crossed purchasing.” If you’ve never flown the airline, you have no idea until you get to the airport or onboard your flight of the experience you’re about to enjoy or endure. This is unlike so many other sectors of the economy in which comparing and researching products (dishwashers, computers, cars, etc.) is now the norm.

For 21 years, First Class Flyer has gone beyond price to uncover true value. We’ve looked at the travel experience as a whole, not just at the fare. A page out of our 2007 book, “London Flight Guide.” Note the “Bennett Rating” on the right.

Now Boarding » Bennett’s Seat Comfort Ratings: Business Class

★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★	★
Worth the money	**Good**	**Average**	**Not worth it**	**No-fly zone**
Seats that lie flat or recline at least 176 degrees. Worth going out of your way to fly or paying more (up to 30%) to book.	**Seats must recline to at least 170 degrees and be 20 inches wide.** Usually on an airline that recently upgraded its cabin.	**Nothing to email home about.** Must recline to 160 degrees and be at least 19 inches wide.	**Your company had better be paying for this one.** Reclines 159 degrees or less.	**Enough said.**

AIRLINE	AIRCRAFT	SEAT WIDTH (inches)	LEGROOM (inches)	SEAT RECLINE (in degrees)	BENNETT RATING
Air India	B-747-400	19.33	47	160	★★
Air New Zealand	B-777	22	79.5	180	★★★★★
American Airlines	B-777	20	57-60	150	★★
	B-767-300	18.5	57-60	150	★
British Airways (old seats)	B-747,767,777	20	73	180	★★★★★
BA new seats being installed (currently avail. from JFK)	B-747,767,777	20	72	180	★★★★★
Continental	B-777	22	55	170	★★★★
	B-757-200	20	55	156	★★

A screenshot from Routehappy, soon to be a part of the ATPCO offering.

A HYPOTHETICAL CONVERSATION WITH A TRAVEL AGENT IN THE NEW ERA OF DATA

Charlie the Customer: Hey Tracy, I want to fly to Frankfurt in Business Class in September. What's the best price you can get me?

Tracy the Travel Agent: Hi Charlie. Now you could fly Lufthansa for $2,320, that's a pretty good price. But let's see, the Singapore flight costs $48 more and you get a much wider seat and aisle access with every seat as the cabin layout is 1x2x1. APTCO's Routehappy rating for the flight is 9.8 whereas Lufthansa is 9.1…up to you.

Charlie: Let's go with Singapore Tracy, well worth $48 to have a much wider seat. You're amazing!

LOOKING FORWARD

We think some airlines could actually go out of business in this new transparent landscape. Airlines that offer an inferior product will have a hard time parity-pricing with the better airlines because the product will be there for all to see. That should force down prices for inferior product airlines.

It's like the fruit market where you can see which apples are bruised.

Long live analysis, research and good data – it's been our bread and butter at FCF since 1996.