



How to Get Free EQM Upgrades

December 2011

A look at the best premium routes for your December mileage run (or a vacation)—and a bonus you may not know about, free EQM upgrades

The mileage-run season is upon us— your last chance to retain or up your elite status position. But you can't wait much longer to book because many discounted premium fares require an advance purchase (and it's already late for many of the best deals), and your mileage run will soon be a

Buying a discounted economy ticket is not always a good idea when trying to earn EQMs (elite qualifying miles) because on many airlines they yield only 50% mileage credit on miles flown (and on some airlines, no

EQMs at all). To get full credit on miles flown, you often have to pay a higher economy fare. The most economical choice, in terms of time and money spent for miles obtained, is a First or Business Class ticket because they can yield up to 150% EQM credit on the miles flown.

WHAT IS A “FREE EQM CLASS UPGRADE”?

FCF defines an upgrade as “any way of getting a better result than you would by paying the straight fare or by following ordinary practices.” In this case, the “better” is the class of service or comfort that can be had, at no extra cost per EQM, if not less, by following the approach *FCF* outlines here. In many of the examples shown, “cheaper than free” means that the cost to earn a given number of EQMs is cheaper or almost the same in a premium class than it is in coach. Thus, the upgrade has no cost—it’s free! Most people I read and hear about take mileage runs in economy class. The question is, why? When you can fly in a premium class and “get more for less.” That’s what *FCF* calls cheaper than a free upgrade.

THE SAVVY (PREMIUM CABIN) MILEAGE RUNNER

Don’t just buy any Business Class ticket. The trick is finding a Business Class fare that nets EQMs at a cost-per-EQM that’s almost equal to or less than economy (see table on page 4 for a selection).

Let’s take American Airlines’ New York-Guayaquil (Ecuador) route for example. The lowest economy fare, \$672, nets 3,025 EQMs. Divide the EQMs earned by the fare to get the cost per EQM, in this case 22¢.

The best Business Class fare is \$1,055, which yields 9,075 EQMs and amounts to 12¢ per EQM. If you need about 6,000 EQMs, it would take two trips to Guayaquil in economy (or \$1,400) to get them, but only one trip in Business Class, and at half the cost per EQM (12¢ vs. 22¢ in economy). It’s actually *cheaper* than a free upgrade, when you think about it.

SOME EXAMPLES OF FREE OR LOW COST EQM UPGRADE ROUTES IN DECEMBER FOR EACH MAJOR U.S. AIRLINE:

American: Central America is one of the lowest-cost EQM regions, with Ecuador (Quito or Guayaquil) having the lowest EQM cost (10¢ to 12¢) on a per-mile basis for short notice Business Class tickets. Another good opportunity to earn EQMs on AA is British Airways to London in Premium Economy, which earns 150% of EQM flown, the same as First and Business Class, at a cost of just 5¢ per EQM! BA only requires a seven-day advance purchase. (Keep in mind that it only takes 20,000 to 25,000 miles for a round-trip upgrade to Business.) Also, check out holiday Business Class fares to Europe on both airlines.

Delta: San Jose, Cost Rica, has the lowest EQM cost (about 9¢) for travel in Business Class, with only a seven-day advance-purchase requirement. Other good low-cost EQM destinations include Europe, taking advantage of holiday Business Class fares. Look especially at Delta’s SkyTeam partner Air France in Premium Economy, which earns 150% EQMs, the same as Business Class on Delta. Air France’s Premium Economy Class also offers the lowest-cost EQMs (5¢ to 6¢) on routes to Asia and India. Also, for a limited time only (through Dec. 15) you can buy up to 10,000 EQMs; the cost ranges from 9¢ to 12¢. (Link: [Buy Delta](#)

EQMs) Don't forget that Delta rolls over EQMs in excess of the amount needed to retain or upgrade elite status into the next calendar year, so you may even get a head start for 2012.

United/Continental: Check out the carriers' European routes, taking advantage of holiday Business Class fares. Promotional fares to Asia usually yield an EQM cost of 8¢. United and Continental Star Alliance partners All Nippon and Thai Airways both offer low-cost EQMs on their Asia routes in Premium Economy class. (Continental elite members, keep in mind that you can purchase OnePass Elite Maximizer to get even more EQMs.)

US Airways: US Airways is the odd ball, the only U.S. airline that sells EQMs year-round. The cost ranges from about 12¢ (1,999 EQMs for \$249) to 3¢ (99,999 EQMs for \$2,999); the more you buy the better the rate. So forget about doing an EQM run, unless you have to travel anyways.

EQM Class Cost Comparison

Alliance	Airline	Route	Fare			EQMs Earned		Cost per EQM	
Business	Premium Economy	Economy	Business or Premium Economy	Economy	Business	Economy			
oneworld	American	Dallas - Frankfurt	\$1,700 (I) ¹	N/A	\$492 (N)	15,390	5,130	11¢	10¢
	American	Miami - Quito	\$541 (I)		\$288 (N)	5,388	1,796	10¢	16¢
	British Airways	Chicago - London	N/A	\$551 (T)	\$412 (N) ²	11,859	3,953	5¢	10¢
SkyTeam	Air France	New York - Hong Kong		\$1,500 (A) ³	\$1,338 (K) ⁴	28,773	16,666	5¢	8¢
		Atlanta - Mumbai		\$1,569 (A) ⁵	\$1,976 (L) ⁴	26,193	17,310	6¢	11¢
	Delta	Los Angeles - San Jose CR	\$928 (I)	N/A	\$538 (Q)	10,734	7,156	9¢	8¢
		New York - Frankfurt	\$1,300 (S) ¹		\$577 (L)	11,553	7,702	11¢	8¢
Star Alliance	All Nippon	Chicago - Tokyo	N/A	\$1,950 (E) ⁶	\$1,331 (S) ⁷	18,849	12,566	10¢	10¢
	Continental / United	Houston - Lisbon	\$1,500 (Z) ¹	N/A	\$617 (S)	19,185	12,790	8¢	5¢
		Miami - Shanghai	\$2,162 (Z)		\$1,102 (S)	25,398	16,932	8¢	7¢

Alliance	Airline	Route	Fare			EQMs Earned		Cost per EQM	
	Thai Airways	Los Angeles - Bangkok	N/A	\$1,368 (U) ⁸	\$1,121 (L) ⁸	16,512	16,654	8¢	7¢
	US Airways	New York (JFK) - Phoenix	\$764 (A) ⁹	N/A	\$424 (G) ⁹	6,423	4,282	12¢	10¢
		Philadelphia - Las Vegas	\$874 (A) ⁹		\$464 (L) ⁹	6,516	4,344	13¢	11¢

Taxes and fees not included. ¹Holiday fares valid for departure: Dec. 19 through Jan. 10, 2012; 14-day advance purchase required. ²For travel on American. ³For departures before Dec. 16 or after Dec. 25. ⁴For travel on Delta. ⁵For travel Dec. 24 through Jan. 7, 2012. ⁶For travel before Dec. 13 or after Dec. 25. ⁷For travel on United. ⁸For departure before Dec. 14 or after Dec. 27. ⁹Seven day advance required.

How to Save Up to 45% on a New SkyTeam A380 Route to Europe

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New routes are a chance to save money and score award seats because the carrier often offers promotional fares to generate business, and it takes time for customers to find out about the new service. And this one—Air France's A380 from Los Angeles to Paris, which commences on May 28, 2012—should be on your radar. The aircraft will offer nine First Class seats on the main deck and 80 Business Class and 38 Premium Economy seats on the upper deck. (Premium Economy is not offered on every Air France A380, so this is a big plus, given the flight time, about 13 hours.)

THE PREMIUM SEATS

In First Class, the 21-inch-wide (82 inches of pitch) seat turns into a 78-inch-long bed, fitted with a mattress and duvet comforter. Business Class seats (21 inches wide, 61 inches of pitch) become a flat bed 77 inches long. Premium Economy seats recline 123 degrees, are 19 inches wide, and have 38 inches of pitch.

THE LOWEST AIRFARES

For First Class: Air France is not known for offering discounted First Class fares to

Europe. The cheapest First Class ticket is an around-the-world fare (RTW), \$13,984, while the LAX to Paris round-trip will set you back about \$17,000.

For Business Class: This route debuts on the verge of summer, when Business Class fares drop dramatically. Last summer, Business Class fares from LAX started at \$2,450 plus taxes, 45% lower than the current lowest fares of \$4,430. Summer Business Class fares usually go on sale in late January



or early February, and are typically valid from mid-June through the first week of September, so waiting here can save you substantially.

For Premium Economy Class: It's the opposite of Business Class—summer is high season and winter is low. Fares currently range from \$1,100 to \$1,475 (plus taxes) and probably will go up (see table to the right).

Seasonal Savings in Premium Economy From Los Angeles to Paris on the A380

Fare	Travel Season
\$1,472	May 16 to June 24
\$1,820	June 25 to Aug. 31
\$1,327	Sept. 1 to Oct. 28
\$1,097	Oct. 29 to Dec. 13

BEST MILEAGE AWARD REDEMPTIONS

For First Class: Skypass, from Korean Airlines (a Diners Club transfer partner), offers the best First Class redemption rate by far: 100,000 miles round-trip, the amount many airlines charge for a free Business Class award. (That's in effect a free upgrade to First Class.) Otherwise, Air France is your only option, but it restricts First Class redemption to elite members and charges double mileage (250,000 miles) to boot.

HOW ANYONE CAN GET THE MILES

Credit card points can be transferred from Amex Membership Rewards and Starwood to Air France's Flying Blue program and also to Delta and Alitalia. If you lack the points or miles you can buy them from Amex Membership Rewards at 2.5¢ each for up to 500,000 points, and from Starwood for 3.5¢ each for up to 20,000. (The 5,000-point transfer bonus brings the cost down to about 2.8¢ each.) Buying them directly from the airlines is more expensive: Air France charges 3.5¢ each for up to 40,000 miles, Alitalia 25 Euros (about \$35) for each 1,000 miles (40,000-mile limit), and Delta 3.5¢ each for up to 60,000 miles.

For Business Class: SkyTeam member Alitalia offers the lowest redemption at 80,000 miles, 20,000 fewer than Air France and Delta.

For Premium Economy Class: Only possible using Air France's mileage program, Flying Blue, at 63,000 miles, but that is only 3,000 miles more than United charges for an economy ticket.

There are favorable odds for free award travel in Premium Economy for two passengers in June and August; and 50-50 odds for travel in September. Business Class on the other hand, is a long-shot for travel in the month of July.


MILEAGE UPGRADE AWARDS

This is not a savvy option because most upgradable Air France fares are high. It's smarter to gamble on a free ticket.

For First Class: Upgrades (150,000 miles round-trip, elite status not required) are permitted on full Business Class fares (booking codes D, C, and J), which usually start at \$6,000 to \$7,000 to Paris. Get a better deal by going via Madrid, where fares drop to about \$4,500!

For Business Class: The best upgrade value is on a paid round-trip Premium Economy ticket (booking codes W and S, 33,000 miles required r/t), which usually starts at about \$1,472 (plus taxes) at the end of May. Later in the year, for example the end of October, fares drop down to \$1,097.

For Premium Economy Class: Upgradeable coach fares, including booking codes M, U, and K, start at \$1,097, and cost 33,000 miles round-trip. Currently the lowest economy fare (booking code K) for the end of May starts at \$1,472. Translation: It's smarter to just buy the ticket.



How to Get “Free Seat Quality Upgrades” Domestically

December 2011

Take Advantage of the UA/CO Merger to Get Much Better Domestic Seats

Continental and United are still rolling out their new international premium seats (Business Class for Continental; First and Business Class for United), all of which means that there's an opportunity to score a better seat on some domestic routes. But whether it's an old or new premium seat, they offer a much better experience than a standard domestic First Class seat.

CONTINENTAL'S INTERNATIONAL SEATS ON DOMESTIC ROUTES

You can nab Continental's new flat-bed international Business Class seat on some 757 domestic routes, notably from Newark (see chart on page 9). Configured 2x2, the seat is 23 inches wide and has 58 inches of pitch. On other domestic routes, look for Continental's B767s, which have a Business Class seat that reclines 156 degrees, is 21 inches wide, and has 55 inches of pitch. Continental's domestic First Class seat reclines 110 to 115 degrees and has 37 to 38 inches of pitch (53% less).



UNITED'S INTERNATIONAL SEATS ON DOMESTIC ROUTES

This flat-bed seat (76 inches long when reclined, 23.5 inches wide, 77 inches of pitch) turns up on some domestic routes (see chart on page 9) using the B767, which also offers United's new First Class Suite. There are six First Class Suites (78-inch-long beds, 31-inch-wide seats, 78 inches of pitch). Other domestic routes using United's international B777 also offer flat-beds in First Class (21.5 inches wide, 78 inches of pitch), and a seat that reclines 147 degrees in Business Class (20.5 inches wide, 55 inches of pitch).



Old international First and Business Class seats are still a much better experience than standard domestic First Class seats.

Continental and United's International Seat Specifications

Airline	Aircraft	Seat Type	Class	Recline In Degrees	Width	Pitch (Legroom)
Continental	B757	New	Business	180	23"	58"
	B767	Old		156	21"	55"
United	B767	New	First	180	31"	78"
		New	Business	180	23.5"	77"
	B777	Old	First	180	21.5"	78"
		Old	Business	147	20.5"	55"

CHEAPEST WAY TO GET THE SEATS

On mid-to-long range flights, such as the transcon, use miles for an upgrade or an award ticket. Both airlines charge 50,000 miles (80,000 to Hawaii) for Business Class and 70,000 miles for First Class. The upgrade will cost 40,000 miles on the lowest economy fare plus a co-pay of \$150 round-trip. (Hawaii is 60,000 miles on the lowest economy fare plus a \$1,000 co-pay round-trip.) Upgrade to one of these seats and the value you'll receive will be significantly more—perhaps double the value for your miles!

GETTING THE MILES

Continental allows you to buy up to 60,000 miles per year and United up to 100,000 miles, at 3.5 ¢ per mile. On the Washington-Los Angeles route the First Class fare is about \$5,000 (plus taxes), whereas buying the 70,000 miles required for a seat comes to \$2,633 (including taxes), a savings of about 47%.

CHICAGO CONNECTIONS

You'll get the best First and Business Class seats when flying Denver-Frankfurt and San Francisco-Paris by connecting in Chicago on UA910 on the former route and UA972 on the latter.

Where to Find Continental's International Business Class Seat on Domestic Routes

Route	Flight Numbers	Aircraft
Departure	Return	

Route	Flight Numbers		Aircraft
Houston - Honolulu	CO1	CO2	B767
Newark - Honolulu	CO15	CO14	B767
Newark - Houston	CO1491 ¹ , CO107, CO1241 ² ,	CO106, CO152 ³ , CO1075 ⁴ , CO1177 ²	B767
	CO63	CO62 ⁵ , CO1546 ¹ , CO1205 ²	B757
Newark - Miami	CO1236	CO1073 ¹ , CO1235 ²	B757
Newark - Orlando	CO1010 ³ , CO37 ⁴ , CO1634 ⁴ , CO1141 ²	CO1242, CO76 ⁴	B757
Newark - Tampa	CO1618		B757
San Francisco - Honolulu	CO73	CO72	B767

¹Till Jan. 2, 2012. ²Starts Jan. 3, 2012. ³Till Dec. 14. ⁴Starts Dec. 15. and ends Jan. 2, 2012. ⁵Every day except Dec. 15.
Recheck aircraft type at time of ticketing.

Where to Find United's International First and Business Class Seat on Domestic Routes

Route	Flight Numbers		Aircraft
Departure	Return		
Washington, DC - Los Angeles	UA951 ¹ , UA967 ²	UA 950, UA653	B777
Washington, DC - Chicago	UA671 ³ , UA284 ⁴ , UA291 ⁴ , UA883 ⁴	UA 964	B777
	UA965 ⁵ , UA395 ⁶		B763
Washington, DC - San Francisco	UA 846		B777
San Francisco - Los Angeles	UA595 ⁷		B777
San Francisco - Los Angeles	UA949	UA910 ⁵	B777
	UA675 ⁵		B763
Chicago - San Francisco	UA907	UA972	B763

¹Till Jan. 2, 2012. ²Starts Jan. 3, 2012. ³Starts Dec. 15. ⁴Starts in Jan. 2012. ⁵Starts between Jan. 3 and Jan. 5, 2012; Dec. flight numbers vary too much to list. ⁶Starts Mar. 1, 2012. ⁷Starts Jan. 2, 2012 and flies every day except Saturday (UA639); Dec. flight numbers vary too much to list. **Recheck aircraft type at time of ticketing.**

Say Adios to Avios?

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Ten or more reasons why it's a bad idea to fall for the hype, even if you're mad at BA over the recent changes

FCF has never recommended betting all of your chips on one frequent flyer program, and the recent—and abrupt—changes to British Airway's Avios program shows why. When you get burned, it can be first degree.

We gave an early notice of some of the changes in the October issue of *FCF*, although BA did not release the full details until Nov.16, when the program—and the new moniker, Avios— went into effect. By now, you will have heard the roar from the blogosphere.

Some of the changes that has everyone up-in-arms include BA's award chart moving from a "zone calculation" (used by American carriers) to a "flight-distance calculation" (used mainly by Asian carriers). The result: Many long-haul flights now cost more, the award calculator doesn't always price correctly, connecting flights cost more, free stopovers are gone, some partner award redemptions have increased, and most egregious, BA gave no grace period before the new mileage redemption rates took effect.

If you've been an *FCF* reader for more than a few issues, you'll know that none of these is a reason to lose your cool.

I would not want to have all of my miles with British Airways, unless of course I had no choice in the matter. But if that's not the case, then this tempest shows the wisdom of what I've been preaching since 1996, when *FCF* was founded: diversify. That way you're not hurt too badly when one of your assets drops in value, even though it doesn't feel good. You can use program diversity strategically, based on a variety of strengths and based on your goals of the single trip at hand.

Long-time *FCF* readers know that the advice we offer keeps you from having to be too concerned when a single program changes all that much. *FCF*'s focus isn't on what you can't do or what you have just lost, but what you *can* do and what you *can* get out of a new situation. That's our mentality and our editorial mission.

So, what I'm saying is keep your shirt on. Don't be swayed by the vitriol pouring from travel blogs and websites. If you liked BA's program before, let me tick off its strengths and remind you of all the ways you can still use it to your advantage—the ways in which it still blows away the competition—for the premium, value-minded traveler.

THE BIG REASON TO STICK

BA still offers the only First and Business Class upgrades that don't incur a "surcharge," which comes to as much as \$1,100 on some airlines. (I want BA in my portfolio now more than ever!) Instead of bailing, and selling your BA-Mileage Stock, take advantage of BA's current Amex Rewards transfer bonus of 30% to keep enough miles in your BA account for upgrades that you might need in a pinch.

TOP TEN WAYS TO USE AVIOS TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Competitive Free Award Cost

- **First Class to Europe: Fewer Miles for a Free First Class Award Ticket Equals a Free Upgrade to First Class.** From many North American gateways (Boston, Chicago, Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC), BA now charges fewer miles to London—120,000, down from 150,000. Transfer points from Starwood and you only need 100,000 miles, which is the cost of Business Class on many other airlines. In effect, it's a free upgrade to First Class. Transfer miles now from Amex Rewards and the cost plummets to 93,000 with the bonus—less than many airlines charge for Business!
- **Business Class to Europe: Fewer Miles for a Free Business Class Award Ticket Equals Almost a Free Upgrade to Business Class.** New York-London on BA is now 80,000 miles, down from 100,000. Transfer points from Starwood and you only need 65,000, almost as much as many U.S. airlines charge for an economy ticket (60,000), including BA's oneworld partner, American. Transfer

now from Amex Rewards and you're looking at less than 60,000, the amount most airlines charge for coach!

- **Business Class to the Caribbean and Mexico: *Fewer Miles for a Free Business Class Award Ticket Equals Cheaper Than a Free Upgrade to Business Class*.** American, like many U.S. airlines, charges 60,000 miles round-trip for a free Business Class award ticket from the Continental U.S. to the Caribbean and Mexico. BA charges as few as 30,000 miles from Miami to St. Thomas, or Los Angeles to San Jose del Cabo. (On the latter route, AA charges 35,000 miles for an economy ticket, which is why I call this "the cheaper than free upgrade.") Other examples of low cost BA routes from the U.S. are Dallas-Cancun, 30,000 miles; New York-Cancun, 40,000 miles; New York-San Juan, 40,000; and Chicago-San Juan, 50,000.
- **Premium Economy to Europe: *Fewer Miles for a Free International Premium Economy Class Award Ticket Equals a Free Upgrade*.** Most airlines charge 60,000 miles round-trip for a free economy ticket to Europe from the U.S. BA charges that amount from six North American cities (Boston, Chicago, Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC) to London. A few cities in Europe, Brussels and Paris among them. Los Angeles to London requires 75,000 miles. With a Starwood transfer, the cost is only 60,000 points—still giving you a free upgrade compared to the cost of an economy award. The Amex Rewards transfer drops the cost to 58,000 miles.

Competitive (Wait, the Lowest!) Upgrade Award Cost

- **First Class: *Fewer Miles for an Upgrade to First Class*.** To London, BA now charges fewer miles—40,000, down from 50,000 round-trip from the eastern U.S. cities mentioned above—while western U.S. gateways remain the same (50,000 miles to London). Plus, the upgrade is valid on any—even deeply discounted—Business Class fares.
- **Business Class: *Fewer Miles for an Upgrade to Business Class*.** To London, BA now charges 5,000 fewer miles (20,000 instead of 25,000) from Boston, Chicago, Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. From its other U.S. gateways, BA charges 25,000 to 35,000 miles round-trip, which is still much lower than the amount most U.S. airlines charge. Plus, there's no surcharge on mileage upgrades! U.S. airlines charge up to \$1,100 (Continental/ United). Factor that in when deciding which upgrade program to use.

Good Mileage Availability

- In general, BA has good upgrade and free award availability, especially from New York, where the airline offers 10 flights daily to London. That increases the odds of an upgrade or free ticket. (Continental, by comparison, only offers five flights on this route.) And the fact that BA offers three upgrade classes: Premium Economy, Business, and First, gives you access to more seats than does an airline such as Delta, which offers only one upgrade class (Business).

Access to More Award Miles is Easy

- BA has many credit-transfer-partner options—Amex Rewards, Chase Sapphire Preferred, Diners Club and Starwood—giving you access to more miles without having to buy them—while keeping your options open with all the other credit card airline partners—at the same time!

Booking Free Award Space Far in Advance

- With BA you can confirm free award space 355 days before departure, whereas U.S. carriers can only be booked about 11 months out (330 to 337 days).

In other words, with relatively few exceptions, the more I think about it, the happier I am to have BA's Avios as a strategic investment in my Premium Upgrade Portfolio (PUP).

December 2011: When Redeeming Miles Is Relatively Easy

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Airline	Route	Class	Departure Availability		Return Availability	
Favorable Odds	50-50	Favorable Odds	50-50			
Delta	Los Angeles - Honolulu	First		April, May		April, May
	Minneapolis - Amsterdam	Business	July, Aug.	Feb., April	July, Aug.	Feb., April

Airline	Route	Class	Departure Availability		Return Availability	
	New York - London	Business	Feb.	May. Aug.	Feb.	May. July, Aug.
American	Boston - London	Business	April, Aug., Sept.	Feb., March, May to July	Sept.	Feb. to Aug.
	New York - London	Business	March, Sept.	Jan., Feb., April to Aug.	Feb. to April, Sept.	May to July
	San Francisco - Honolulu	First	April to Oct.		April to Oct.	
Continental	Los Angeles - Honolulu	First	Jan. to Oct.		Feb. to Oct.	Jan.
	New York - Paris	Business	July	May, June, Aug.	July	Feb., April, Aug.
	New York - San Jose, CR	Business	Jan., Feb., April, May, Aug., Sept.	March, June, July, Oct.	Dec., Jan., May, Sept.	April, June to Aug.
United	Denver - Kona	First	March to Sept.	Feb.	March to Sept.	Feb.
	Los Angeles - Tokyo	Business		March, April, June to Aug.		May, June
	San Francisco - Lihue	First	Feb. to Sept.	Jan.	March to Sept.	Dec. to Feb.
US Airways	Charlotte - Mexico City	First	Jan., March to May, Aug., Sept.	Feb., June, July	Jan., April, May, Sept.	March, June to Aug.
	Philadelphia - San Juan	First	Aug., Sept.	Jan. to Feb., April, May	Jan., Sept.	Feb. to May., Aug.
	Phoenix - Kona	First	April, May, Sept.	March, Aug., Oct.	Sept.	March, April, Aug.

Major Credit Cards and Their Airline Point-Transfer Partners

American Express Membership Rewards: Delta. **Starwood:** Delta, American, Continental*, United*, and US Airways. **Diners Club:** American and Delta.

*Not recommended due to 2-to-1 exchange rate.

Favorable Odds: Award space available for two passengers traveling together about 75% during time period indicated. **50-50:** Award space available for two persons about 50% during time period indicated. Worth pursuing if you're flexible.

When It's Best to Use Miles for International Upgrades

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Good Timing Can Save Up to 66%

WHEN A DAY CAN MAKE A \$1,000 DIFFERENCE...

In November we priced upgradeable fares from New York to London for travel in May 2012 on British Airways, which has one of the better mileage upgrade programs to Europe because it does not impose a cash surcharge and requires only 20,000 miles round-trip (up to 25,000 from LAX) to London.

Depart on May 21 and the upgradeable fare is \$1,093 (including \$687 in taxes) plus 20,000 miles, but leave on May 22 and the price jumps to \$2,166 (49% more). The difference, \$1,073, equals the

cost of a second ticket!

For everything there's a season—and if you know when the time is right for upgrades to Europe, you'll pay much less for one. Given that the “co-pay” required for upgrading an economy ticket can often cost more than the ticket itself, keeping a sharp eye on the calendar can keep you from paying more than you should

THE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

The time for travel is now through the end of March, with the exception of the holidays. It's hard to pinpoint a cut-off date because it varies slightly by country, but this roughly encompasses the “off-peak” or “low” season to Europe for upgradeable economy and Premium Economy fares. As we near the end of one fare season to start another, it will be important to check dates, as one day can make.

General Overview of the Upgradeable Fare Seasons for Travel to Europe

Season	Months
Low	End of Oct. to mid-Dec., and end of Dec. to the end of March
Mid	Mid-Dec. for about 7 to 10 days, beginning of April to the end of May, and end of Aug. to end of Oct.
High	End of May to end of Aug.

Varies slightly by country

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Upgradeable fares are based on the departure date.
- There are usually three seasons for upgradeable fares: low, middle, and high.
- Economy and Premium Economy fares often run counter to Business Class fares: They drop when Business Class fares rise and vice-versa.

FIVE THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN BOOKING

Know when low season is.

The best time to use miles to upgrade is low season, which usually runs from the end of October through mid-December, and the end of December through the end of March.

US Airways, for example, charges \$372 in economy for Philadelphia-Munich in March 2012 (compared to \$872 in July 2012). Add the \$600 co-pay for the upgrade and the total cost is \$972, 75% less than the carrier charges for Business Class at that time, \$3,962.

Fare Seasons Don't Follow a Monthly Schedule

They can change in the middle of the month, so when searching for the lowest upgradeable fare, check a range of departure dates. See the box to the left for an example of how big a difference a day can make.

Different European Countries Have Different Fare Season Cut Off Dates

If you're going to Europe in mid-May you might consider flying to London because mid-season lasts until May 21; and a ticket on American Airlines for example, from New York is \$919 (including taxes), instead of Paris, where high season starts on May 15, 2012, and the ticket price is \$1,658, a difference of \$739 (or 45%).

The Worst Time to Book an Upgradeable Fare is Summer

This is when an upgrade can, at times, cost more than a promotional Business Class fare. Last summer United's Business Class fare from Chicago to London was \$2,615 (including taxes), whereas its upgradeable fare, including the \$1,100 surcharge, ranged from \$2,412 to \$2,892 plus 40,000 miles— a bad deal!

Upgradeable Economy Fares Run on a Different Calendar from Business Class During the Holidays

The winter holidays are mid season for economy to Europe, but low season for Business Class. With the co-pay added to an already high economy fare, you could pay more than if you'd bought a Business Class ticket. For instance, during the December holiday stretch, Continental charges \$2,043 (including all taxes) for Business Class from New YorkShannon, Ireland. The surcharge to upgrade the \$741 economy ticket is \$1,100, bringing the fare to \$1,841, plus 40,000 miles. 40,000 miles are generally worth at least \$1,500 (at 3.5¢ per mile, the cost of buying them), which makes the economy fare upgrade cost about \$1,298. Plus you lose the 50% flight mile bonus you would get for flying on a Business Class ticket.

Upgradeable Economy Fares Compared to Business Class Fare for Travel to Europe

Route	Airline	Upgrade Surcharge	Departure Date	Upgradeable Economy Cost	Business Class Fare	Savings
Chicago - Amsterdam	United	\$1,100	Feb. 1, 2012	\$1,386	\$3,762	\$2,376
Dallas - Paris	American	\$700	28-Mar-12	\$1,008	\$4,046	\$3,038
Houston - Rome	Continental	\$1,100	Dec. 20	\$1,476	\$1,900	\$424
Los Angeles - Munich	US Airways	\$600	Jan. 30, 2012	\$975	\$3,566	\$2,591

Route	Airline	Upgrade Surcharge	Departure Date	Upgradeable Economy Cost	Business Class Fare	Savings
New York - London	Delta	n/a	Jan. 1, 2012	\$2,228	\$1,350	(- \$878)

*Fares do not include taxes and fees. *Including airline surcharge.*

Tokyo: Now Is the Time

December 2011

By Gary Walther

Japan National Tourist Agency, was off by 25% in September compared to the same month in 2010, even though the country's major tourism sites, among them Tokyo and Kyoto, were not directly affected.

In situations like this, prospective visitors may feel that visiting Japan would be morally wrong. How can I enjoy myself when so many people are suffering?



But in fact, staying away makes the situation worse, given how many people’s livelihoods depend upon the travel and tourism industry. If you go, you are actually contributing to the recovery.

March through September (see chart).

Fly First Class for \$3,323 round-trip (reg. up to \$20,000). One of the best ways to get to Tokyo—and to go from there to other points in Asia, if you have the time—is to nab a First Class award ticket on American from Chicago, Dallas, New York, or Los Angeles. (Other U.S. departure cities can be included for the same mileage price.) The cost is 125,000 miles, and **free First Class award seats offer unusually great mileage availability** March through September (see chart).

When First Class Award Availability for Two People on AA is Great

To Tokyo From:	Departure Availability	Return Availability
Chicago	April, May, July, Aug.	March to Sept.
Dallas	March to Aug.	March to Sept.
Los Angeles	May to Aug.	March, May to Sept.
New York (JFK)	June to Aug.	March to Sept.

Best departures, Tuesday to Thursday. Best returns, Monday to Thursday.

STARWOOD POINTS CAN BE TRANSFERRED TO AA IF YOU LACK MILES. IF YOU HAVE NEITHER STARWOOD POINTS NOR AA MILES, THEN FOLLOW THESE STEPS TO GET AA MILES EASILY.

Step one: Open an AAdvantage and an American Express Starwood account (free, and takes less than 10 minutes).

Step two: Buy the maximum miles allowed in December: 60,000 for AA (\$1,650 plus taxes, which yields 80,000 with the 20,000-mile bonus) and 20,000 for Starwood (\$560 plus taxes with the current 20% off promotion).

Step three: Repeat in January, buying 20,000 AA miles (\$550), that gives you 100,000 AA miles.

Step four: Transfer the 20,000 Starwood points to AA, which yields 25,000 miles with the 5,000-mile transfer bonus. Add them to the 100,000 miles you already acquired and you have the 125,000 miles needed for the

ticket, which otherwise costs \$11,000 to \$20,000, a savings of up to \$17,240 (86%).

Optional: Step five: If you need more tickets, you can repeat the above process, by getting AA and Starwood accounts in the name of family members or friends, because after you have the miles again in those accounts, you can redeem them for your travel or anyone else.

IN TOKYO

Visit the **Meiji Shrine**, founded in 1921 to honor the Emperor and Empress Meiji, who ushered in the country's modern period. Walk around **Harajuku**, ground zero for Tokyo's Meiji Shrine youth culture and its wild sense of style. Cruise the luxury shops in **Omotesando**, admire the Prada building for its eye-catching bubble-wrap architecture, and bring home gifts from Oriental Bazaar. Tour **Akihabara**, the section of town devoted to electronics. Lose yourself in Yodobashi-Akiba, one of the biggest stores. Visit the **Mori Art Museum** and then climb to the rooftop observation deck for a panoramic view of Tokyo. Walk the **Ginza** and visit the 10-story Chanel store, the largest in the world.



Where To Stay

The Peninsula Tokyo: It has the Pen's signature style—deep dish comfort allied with high-tech room touches such as a bedside console that opens the curtains in the morning. Ask for a room overlooking the imperial residence, Fukiage Palace, as it's the best view you'll get to it as a tourist. Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Marunouchi: With only 57 rooms, this is one of the city's most exclusive hotels. Park Hyatt Tokyo: In the Shinjuku section on the upper floors of a skyscraper. The lobby is worth a visit just for the view. Perfect-pitch understated décor and a 20-meter-long pool on the 47th floor.

Last Call for Holiday Business Class Fares to Europe

December 2011

Many airlines, among them Air France, American, Continental, Delta, Lufthansa, United, and US Airways, are offering a “last call” for discounted Holiday Business Class fares to Europe, offering savings of up to 51%. The fine print: 14- day advance; departure, Dec. 19 to Jan. 6, 2012; return, Dec. 25 to Jan. 10, 2012.

HOLIDAY BUSINESS CLASS FARES

R / T Fare	Route
\$1,000	New York - Lisbon (Delta)
\$1,500	Philadelphia - Frankfurt

R / T Fare	Route
\$1,700	Atlanta - Copenhagen
\$1,700	Dallas - Berlin
\$1,700	Houston - Brussels
\$1,750	Chicago - London
\$1,750	Washington, DC - Madrid
\$2,100	Los Angeles - Stockholm
\$2,150	San Francisco - Paris

Taxes and fees (\$600 - \$800) not included.