

Make the most of your miles with a 'reward trip specialist'

Posted 7h 47m ago

By **David Grossman**, special for USA TODAY

Traveler loyalty programs have grown increasingly complex in recent years. Most frequent travelers belong to multiple airline and hotel loyalty programs and now most large banks and credit card providers are offering their own points reward systems redeemable for travel and other prizes.

Tracking and managing your points and miles in this constantly evolving world is challenging, and redeeming those points and miles can be a time-consuming and frustrating experience. Perhaps that's why many frequent travelers seek help in managing their portfolios of points and mileage accounts.

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Using a mileage/points tracking program

Mileage tracking and management services have been around since frequent traveler programs began, but more players continue to enter this arena. USATODAY.com's [Miletracker](#), GoMiles, MileageManager, mileBlaster, Points.com, Traxo and Triplt are some of the many websites offering mileage/points tracking/management capabilities.

Mileage tracking programs can consolidate all your frequent traveler awards programs into a single place for better tracking and visibility to be certain the correct number of points have been deposited in or debited from your account. Many of these systems can claim missing points or miles on your behalf. Some programs will tell you when travel suppliers are running special offers that might substantially boost your miles or decrease the cost of award redemption. Most programs can also alert

you when you've reached a new award level and warn you when your mileage expiration dates are approaching.

Some mileage/points tracking programs are free to use, others exact a modest annual fee. You generally need to provide these programs with the passwords to your mileage/points accounts in order to utilize their services.

Hiring a mileage manager

Another way to manage and maximize your points and miles is to hire a "Rewards Trip Specialist" like Pam Keystone. Keystone's company, [The Art of Vacationing.com](#), specializes in rewards trip planning. "My business is to help people maximize the value of their points," she says. Keystone is just like a travel agent though she only arranges award travel using miles or points.

Keystone came up with this idea when she worked for the Marriott Vacation Club, where timeshare property owners earn millions of points in the Marriott Rewards program. Keystone says those mileage millionaires often struggled with the redemption process.

Travel loyalty programs can be quite complex, particularly those offered by hotel chains and credit card vendors that partner with many travel suppliers. For example, Marriott Rewards points may be redeemed on 30 different airlines.

To further complicate award redemption, once

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you've converted your hotel or credit card points into miles on one airline, you can often use those miles on that airline's partner airlines. For example, if you convert Marriott Rewards points to [United Airlines](#) Mileage Plus miles, you can use those miles on 27 additional Star Alliance carriers. This may help you find award seats when those seats are not available on United flights, but it also greatly increases the time, effort and knowledge required to find and book that award travel.

Keystone says many travelers give up when the airline tells them no award seats are available, but she keeps calling until she finds an airline with open seats. Keystone says she enjoys the challenge of trying to help her clients get the greatest possible value from their reward program points.

Keystone charges a flat rate for her services based on the number of flights, the length of hotel stay and the number of travelers. Her fee for a typical one-week trip for two is \$295. She has been in business for a year and a half and currently has about 200 regular customers. Though many of her initial clients were Marriott timeshare owners, she now handles customers with points in many awards programs, like Starwood Preferred Guest or [American Express](#) Membership Rewards.

About 85% of the trips Keystone books are international, with many in first or business class. London, Paris and Prague are currently the hottest international destinations. Hawaii, Phoenix and Palm Springs make up most of the other 15% of her award travel requests.

Keystone always explores options with partner airlines, multiple travel dates, different routings and alternate gateways to locate the best deal. Most airline telephone agents don't know or won't check these options when a customer calls to redeem miles, says Keystone. "Even when I am on the phone with the agent, I have to tell them the routes to check."

Most airlines now offer a multi-tiered award redemption schedule. This often eliminates blackout dates and allows travelers to book award travel on any flight though they may pay double miles for that flight. Keystone says the airline agents often don't tell a customer they could pay half that amount of miles if they flew a day earlier or later. Keystone's goal is to book all award travel at the lowest tier.

You may also get a different story from every agent, according to Keystone. "You can call three times and two will tell you there are no seats and the third will tell you there is a seat." Sometimes Keystone will hang up and call back again to get a different person. "I'll call many, many times until I find that one agent who will really look and try to find the seats."

For most people, the time spent on hold waiting to reach an airline agent can be very discouraging. John Drewes, a Keystone customer who runs a financial planning firm in St. Petersburg, Florida, says it's too time-consuming to run his business and spend many hours on the phone booking a trip. Drewes says he would often be up till 3 a.m. talking to airlines to get the right seats before he hired Keystone. Now he just makes one call.

"Pam does all the legwork," says Merrill Cohen, an attorney in the Washington, D.C. area. "It's much easier to rely on an expert to book your award travel and it is well worth the fee."

Readers: Do you use a mileage tracking system? Would you consider hiring a mileage manager or rewards trip specialist to redeem your awards points and miles? What is your favorite travel awards program?

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Send David your feedback: [David Grossman](#) is a veteran business traveler and former airline industry executive. He writes a column every other week on

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