

Itineraries

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ON THE ROAD

Southwest Adds Complexity To Its Frequent-Flier Plan

By JOE SHARKEY

THE day before New Year's, I was having lunch in Tucson with Tom Miller, who writes books about travel and the Southwest. Like many business travelers at the end of the year, Mr. Miller was a little distressed.

"I only need 2,000 miles to make it to the next elite level on American," he said of his airline frequent-flier status for 2011. "Any suggestions?"

I looked at my watch. "Simple," I said. "Hustle over to the airport right now, get on a plane and fly 2,000 miles somewhere by midnight, pal."

For many business travelers who carefully tend to their frequent-flier programs, the new year is often a time of high anxiety. Especially for those who fly often, frequent-flier programs are complicated and sometimes perplexing, and never more so than when it comes to ensuring that you have racked up enough actual flying miles by the end of one year to qualify for a specific level of elite status the next.

Southwest Airlines, alone among the major carriers, has always made simplicity a selling point. Easy to book, easy to change itineraries without a penalty fee, no charge to check a bag. Likewise, its Rapid Rewards frequent-flier program, introduced in 1987, has been as simple to use as a pizza parlor coupon book. Take 16 flights, get one free.

So why has Southwest spent \$100 million to redesign Rapid Rewards, introducing better benefits, for sure — but also adding a lot more complexity?

Quite simple, said Gary C. Kelly, the chief executive. Southwest Airlines established itself as a popular short-haul, point-to-point carrier, but its strategy in recent years has been to add longer haul routes in an aggressive push to lure business travelers from the network carriers. In talking to business fliers who use other airlines to determine how they might be persuaded to become loyal Southwest customers, Mr. Kelly said, "Consistently, they told us the No. 1 thing that we could do is to enhance our frequent-flier program."

Southwest has always carefully tended its reputation for excellent customer service and low fares, though competitors often match the fares, if not always the service. Southwest has a fleet of 541 Boeing 737s, in models that seat up to 137 people. Recently, Southwest announced that it was buying 20 new 737-800 models that can seat up to 189, for delivery in 2012, as part of its expansion.

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sion of longer-haul routes out of major business travel markets.

Essentially, the program is built around awarding points based not on trips flown, but on money spent. Customers who buy the more expensive "business select" fares, for example, receive more points than those who opt for cheaper fares.

One new feature that Southwest is strongly emphasizing is that there are "absolutely no blackout dates" for award redemptions as there are on other airlines. Points can be redeemed for award seats on any date, any flight. (Details of the new Rapid Rewards program changes can be found at a Southwest Web site, www.newrapidrewards.com.)

Southwest's planes, which have been flying less full in recent years as competitors' flights have become jammed, are now flying close to the high occupancy rates of the other domestic carriers. In December, for example, Southwest's planes were 80.4 percent full on average, up 4.2 percentage points from December 2009. Southwest carried 7.1 percent more passengers in December 2010, with only a 5.6 percent increase in available seats. This suggests that to keep its pledge, assuming demand grows, Southwest may need to give away a certain number of seats that it could sell.

In my opinion, frequent business travelers will find many things to like about the new Southwest frequent-flier program, which takes effect March 1. Competitors acknowledge that Southwest is aggressively moving to take a share of their lucrative business travel markets and that they are impressed. But of course, they do have some skepticism. They note, for example (ahem), that Southwest does not have premium-class cabins to provide those upgrades that motivate elite-status customers.

Nor does Southwest have international destinations, though its planned acquisition of AirTran will add some Caribbean routes. The new frequent-flier program does enable holders of a Rapid Rewards credit card to redeem points for international flights on other carriers, but these will basically be booked by third-party travel agents.

"Delta SkyMiles offers program amenities frequent fliers want most, like a first-class cabin, unlimited complimentary upgrades and a robust international network," said Chris Kelly Singley, the general manager for corporate communications at Delta Air Lines.

As for my friend, Tom Miller, he briefly toyed with the idea of a quick trip but decided that we should have dessert instead. "It isn't worth the tsoris," he said.



KIM STALLKNECHT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

In hypoallergenic rooms at the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver, draperies are steam-cleaned and beds are featherless.

Sneeze-Free Zone

Superclean Rooms for Travelers With Asthma and Allergies

By TANYA MOHN

Even die-hard road warriors need a comfortable place to recharge after a long day. But for business travelers with allergies, asthma and other sensitivities, hotel rooms can be rife with dust mites, mold, animal dander and other allergens that set off sneezing, itchy eyes, headaches and sleepless nights.

Individual hotels have long accommodated guests by cleaning rooms with special products and processes and washing linens in hot water with no or fragrance-free detergent. They have also offered mattress and pillow protectors, rugless rooms and windows that open.

But now, two hotel chains, Hyatt Hotels and Resorts and Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, are taking the service even further by designating permanent allergy-friendly rooms, with things like medical-grade air purifiers and chemical- and fragrance-free bath products.

Jim Strong, co-owner of Strong Travel Services in Dallas, said a colleague who once worked at the St. Regis in New York recounted how over 100 years ago, the hotel replaced draperies with wooden shutters in some rooms for guests with dust allergies. "This type of customer service has been done for years and years and years" all over the world, he said. But there has been, he said, "a noticeable increase in requests."

Thirty-eight percent of hotels offer some kind of allergy-friendly service in guest rooms, a 14 percent increase in the last two years, according to the 2010 Lodging Survey prepared for the American Hotel and Lodging Association by STR, a hotel research company.

The trend toward improving indoor air quality is part of the larger green movement that began with nonsmoking rooms, said Ray Burger, founder of Pineapple Hospitality, which administers a "green" hotel certification program and operates freshstay.com, an online booking site for smoke-free rooms. The Web site plans to add icons soon for hypoallergenic rooms, and to show what chemicals are used in cleaning products, paints, sealants and bath products.

Hyatt recently announced plans to create hypoallergenic rooms in all of its full-service hotels in North America. The

rooms, which will soon total about 2,000 in 125 properties, cost \$20 to \$30 extra a night and are intended to eliminate up to 98 percent of allergens and irritants. A medical-grade purifier continuously circulates air, Hyatt said.

"This was a market really underserved," said Tom Smith, vice president of rooms for Hyatt.

The number of allergy sufferers is believed to have gone up substantially since the late '70s, said Dr. Darryl Zeldin, senior investigator and acting clinical director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. Roughly half

Hotels rid rooms of allergens, and find they command a premium.

of Americans are sensitive to at least one common allergen. Different testing methods may account for some of the increase, but better hygiene resulting in less exposure to bacteria is also thought to play a role, Dr. Zeldin said.

Brian Brault, chief executive of Pure Solutions, the company that installs and maintains Hyatt's hypoallergenic rooms, said more than 200 hotels nationwide, including properties at several major brands, had Pure Solutions rooms, but Hyatt was the first to offer them across its brands. Some hotel conference centers also use the technology, he said.

The Fairmont Vancouver Airport hotel has had an entire hypoallergenic floor since 1999, and other Fairmont properties have long provided services to guests with allergies. But the chain is in the final stages of a pilot program for permanent hypoallergenic rooms that it plans to introduce gradually this year.

"We're looking at the bigger picture," said Paul Kingsbury, director of housekeeping for the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver. The approach will include featherless duvets and pillows and chemical- and perfume-free bath products, as well as in-room mini bars from which all nuts

have been removed and room service meals that cater to various food allergies. All Fairmont chefs have been trained to prepare a vast array of special dietary and allergy-specific meals.

Fairmont's hypoallergenic rooms will cost about \$25 extra a night.

Mr. Kingsbury recalled a patron who had a terrible reaction because she saw, through a small rip in a duvet, some fibers that she mistook for down. The duvet contained no feathers, but "sometimes even the perception of an allergen can be harmful," he said. "Knowing things are set up properly is a big comfort for the guests."

Bjorn Hanson, divisional dean of the Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at New York University, said that because more people were being found to have allergies, it made business sense for hotels to provide a greater number of allergy-friendly rooms. But the rooms also have great general appeal.

"There are many people who request special rooms, not because they have allergies but because they believe those rooms will have a higher degree of sanitation and cleanliness," Mr. Hanson said. "It's a way for hotels to invest a little bit more for a room but get a premium for both occupancy and rate."

Mike Piazza, a partner at the law firm Greenberg Traurig in Irvine, Calif., said he did not realize he had allergies until one night on a business trip. "I woke up and I couldn't breathe." It turned out he was allergic to down. "I called the front desk to get a foam pillow," he said. "Then I was fine."

Lisa Abbott, a marketing consultant for nonprofit groups in Oakland, Calif., who suffers from multiple chemical sensitivities, has learned the benefits firsthand of good air quality in a hotel room.

At home, she rarely takes the morning rush hour train, to avoid "breathing in a soup of fumes and fragrances" from deodorant, hair products and freshly laundered clothing. Traveling, she said, has "always been dicey." But she stayed in one of Hyatt's new rooms on a recent trip to Chicago. "The air is purer," she said. "I slept great. I felt energized both days of conferences. It has just completely opened up my travel options."

FREQUENT FLIER

On Adventure's Trail, Some Endings Bring a Blush

I GUESS my first crazy experience with planes was when I was 18 years old and went sky diving without a tandem. I was instructed to hold onto the wing of the plane and use my hands to scoot to the very edge. My instructor counted to three and told me to release my grip and fall backward. He also said the parachute would self-release. It did.

But my earpiece malfunctioned and I couldn't hear the instructions on how to steer. I landed in a tree and had to be rescued. The only thing hurt was my pride.

The same thing is true with business travel. Sometimes, it turns into my worst nightmare. Other times, I relish it because I get away from all the things that suck up your time during a normal business day.

I remember when flying used to be fun.

One time I was in an over-booked plane and got to join the pilots in the cockpit. This was years ago, when I was in Greece.

By Rana Florida, as told to Joan Raymond. E-mail: joan.raymond@nytimes.com.

Q. How often do you fly?

A. At a minimum, once a week.

Q. What's your least favorite airport?

A. Moscow International. The last time I was there, it seemed everyone was smoking cigarettes. It was tough to breathe, and the smell was

pretty awful.

Q. Of all the places you've visited, what's the best?

A. The Amalfi coast. It's so majestic and beautiful, and the vibe there is just so chill.

Q. What's your secret airport vice?

A. Wine. Lots of it.

The pilots offered to show me where they lived. I thought they would just point out the window. Instead, the main pilot did this low dive right over his home. Everyone on board was shocked. Me, too. But it was kind of fun.

A little more than three years ago, I took over as chief executive of Creative Class. My husband is the founder of the company. One of the first things I did was work on a huge regional economic conference. It was scheduled for February. The location? Siberia.

My husband I were married for about a year at that point, and we decided it would be fun to celebrate Valentine's Day together

there.

Right before we left, we were alerted about reports of orange snow coming down over the region. That should have been our first indication that things might get a little odd. We flew into Moscow and spent the night. It was lovely. We were then invited to fly with a Russian dignitary on his private jet from Moscow to Krasnoyarsk in Siberia.

He was five hours late. When we finally boarded the plane, there were six other men on board, all of whom took a liking to me. Their way of making friends was to offer me cigarettes, meat and Scotch. I didn't want to be rude, but I declined as politely as

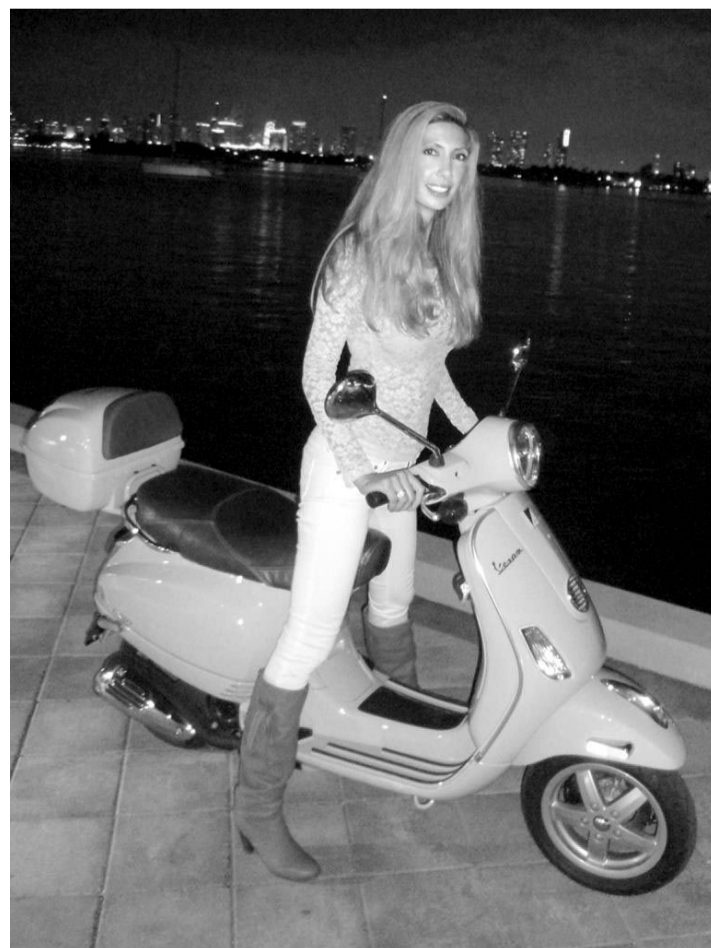
I could, since I don't smoke, I'm a vegetarian, and I don't drink Scotch.

By the time we arrived, I just wanted to shower and go to sleep. We were guaranteed an early check-in with the hotel since we had prepaid. But once we arrived, we still had to wait for two hours in the lobby. Finally, we were given a room key card. I was so excited.

We went up to the floor, found the room, and I did the honors of swiping the card. The door opened and I walked in a few feet only to find the room was already occupied by a rather large man. He was in the bed. When he heard us, he yelled and got out of bed. He was naked. I was speechless.

He then chased us out of the room and yelled at us in Russian as we tried to make our way back to the elevator. I can't say I blame him.

We went back to the lobby and tried to explain the situation to the desk clerks. No one really cared, but we did finally get an unoccupied room. I didn't see the man who yelled at us during the rest of the trip. I'm thankful for that. I already saw enough.



Rana Florida in Miami Beach. She is the chief of the Creative Class Group, which advises governments and businesses.