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Award Search Strategies

When it comes to cashing in miles, knowing the secrets of how, when and where to search can mean the difference between a decent award and an amazing one.

When it comes to playing the game of miles, knowing how to redeem them and when to search for awards is as important as staying on top of all the promotions that will help you rack up the miles. If you're lucky, a quick search using the airline's online booking tool will bring up the award flight you're looking for, but in many cases, you will need to do some legwork and find the awards you want on your own and then call to book. You'll likely be charged a booking fee for calling, but it will be well worth it if you get the award you want.

According to our WebFlyer.com poll on award booking, 88.1 percent of those answering the survey said that they have not been able to redeem miles for the award flight they wanted on the dates they wanted to fly. It may be true that there simply is zero availability for your desired flight routes and dates. If you are looking to fly your family of four on a very popular route during a peak travel period, such as from New York to Paris in July, you may spend hours searching and still come up empty-handed. So you need to be realistic about the availability of mileage awards and either travel during less desirable times or to other, less popular cities.

But if you know how to search, there may be more award flights available so don't give up on your dream trip too early. We'll look at a few of the ways you can search for awards to circumvent some of the problems inherent to the airlines' own booking engines, such as not including award inventory on partner flights and failing to search all possible routings.

Unless you are searching for a fairly simple award itinerary and aren't looking to redeem miles for a multi-city award or an award using partner airlines, booking online via the airline's website may be adequate. But if you have a complicated itinerary or are booking an international award and your airline's website does not include partners, you will need to broaden your search and check out some of the other tools available. We will look at some of these tools that can help you find awards on partner airlines when redeeming miles for international flights.

Do Your Research

If you ask any United Mileage Plus frequent flyer where United's hubs are located, they are likely to tell you: Chicago, San Francisco, Washington Dulles, Denver, Los Angeles and Tokyo. But if you are redeeming Mileage Plus miles, you should also get familiar with the hubs of the Star Alliance carriers. Knowing airline hubs and flight routes is basic information that will help you plot your award flight.

It's also helpful to consider different connecting cities and figure out possible itineraries that will get you where you want to go. For example, if you want to use US Airways Dividend Miles and fly from Cleveland to Delhi, you'll need to break down the flight into segments and figure out which Star Alliance airlines can get you to which cities and how. If you simply search for award seats from Cleveland to Delhi and nothing comes up as available, you won't know where the problem segments are. Maybe there aren't any seats only from Cleveland to New York, which may result in seats unavailable for your entire itinerary. But you could find alternatives, such as connecting through Detroit, Chicago or Toronto. The online booking tools and customer service agents will search for awards, but they won't search for every possible routing on every single partner airline. By investing some time and effort in searching for award seats yourself and looking segment by segment, a response of "sorry, no seats available" can turn into a successful award trip with some creative connections and routings.

Go Long

When breaking down an award trip, it's a good idea to search for the longest segment first and then try to secure seats on the shorter flights. In the example listed above, instead of searching for flights from Cleveland, we would start by looking for transcontinental flights from Star Alliance gateway cities, such as New York, Toronto or Chicago. For example, Continental Airlines flies direct from New York to Delhi, but if there aren't any seats available on the direct flight, you can search for alternate routings that connect in Europe. Continental Airlines flies from New York to Frankfurt and then Lufthansa flies from Frankfurt to Delhi. Or you could fly on Turkish Airlines from Frankfurt to Delhi with a connection in Istanbul. Another possible option is to consider Air Canada, which also flies from Toronto to Frankfurt. The list of options, while not endless, is certainly long, but once you know who flies where and how, you can explore possible connections and put together an itinerary based on availability.

The airlines' award booking tools will generally look at how to get you from point A to point B with the fewest connections and the most direct routing, which most people prefer. But if award seats are sold out, you can consider alternate airports that a customer service agent or award search engine may not search. A frequent flyer we talked to was booking a flight from Dallas to Buenos Aires and was told by the AAdvantage customer service agent that there were no award flights available on that route on the days he wanted to fly. But he'd already researched the flight and had found availability from Dallas to New York JFK and from JFK to Buenos Aires. He requested the agent check flights connecting in JFK and "After a few minutes of holding time, she came back and said, 'Sir, you were absolutely right, you can fly DFW-JFK-EZE on that day.'" The award booking tools available to members and even those available to customer service agents aren't perfect. Searching segment by segment can turn up award flights that simply won't show up any other way.

Using Online Award Booking Tools

According to an informal poll we conducted, the majority of frequent flyers prefer to book award flights online, if possible, and one of their biggest frustrations when booking award tickets is award booking websites that don't work or don't allow you to book partner award flights. The airlines' websites vary widely in their degree of usefulness. They can be a good place to start your search, but if your flight itinerary will include partner airlines, in many cases they won't be very helpful and you will need to either search for awards using another website or by calling the airline and hoping a knowledgeable and helpful customer service agent picks up the phone. Instead of leaving your award trip in the hands of someone who may not care as much as you do about your itinerary, there are resources available to help you find award seats on your own before you make that call. We look at some of those resources and give advice on the best tools for members who participate in one of the three global alliances: oneworld, SkyTeam and Star Alliance.

Oneworld

When redeeming American AAdvantage miles at AA.com, the online booking calendar will only search for flights on American Airlines. To find flights on oneworld and other partner airlines, you will need to search somewhere else. American AAdvantage members can search for awards using the Qantas website, which will search for some oneworld partners, including British Airways, Cathay Pacific, Iberia and American. But the tool won't search for all partner flights on all routes and awards on Japan Airlines are not included. British Airways has a website oneworld members can turn to that will search for awards on some partner airlines, including American, Cathay Pacific, Iberia and Qantas. Sign up for a Cathay Pacific Asia Miles account and you can search for awards on Cathay Pacific and Dragonair at www.asiamiles.com.

Star Alliance

When searching for award flights on Star Alliance carriers, including Continental Airlines, United Airlines and US Airways, a number of different websites will be

helpful. We take a look at the options below.

All Nippon Airways

The best airline site for Star Alliance awards is the ANA website, which has an award search tool that includes inventory on most Star Alliance airlines. The tool was tweaked a bit last year so that it will only search for Star Alliance inventory after doing an initial search for an ANA flight if you don't have any miles in your account, but it's easy to work around this change. To search for flights, join the ANA Mileage Club and log on. Search for an international flight award on ANA (typing in ICN and NRT for your "from" and "to" cities will work). From the results page, scroll down to "Use Star Alliance Member Airlines" and then type in your actual origin and destination cities and travel dates. The tool will display a chart with available flights and class of service. There are blue arrow buttons above the departure and return flights that will search for dates before and after the dates you entered, but you can only search for award seats one day at a time. The ANA tool won't display all possible connecting flights, so you can try out different possible routings or search segment by segment if your search is at first unsuccessful.

The ANA tool can be invaluable in your search for awards and by finding availability before you call the airline, your chances of securing a seat are much higher, although still not 100 percent. Just because a seat is available with the ANA tool doesn't mean you'll actually be able to book it when you call the airline, but it's accurate much of the time. A frequent traveler who calls himself MileageAddict says, "I love using the ANA tool, calling UA, giving specific dates and times and listening to the shocked response: 'Oh wow, this never happens. Mr. MileageAddict, the exact dates and flights you have chosen are available.'"

Continental Airlines

Continental Airlines has a decent award search tool that includes award inventory on a growing list of partner airlines, including Copa Airlines (including Aero Republica), United Airlines, US Airways, Air Canada, SAS Scandinavian Airlines, bmi British Midland, TAP Portugal, LOT Polish Airlines, EgyptAir, Air China, Blue1, plus inter-island add-ons operated by Hawaiian Airlines and Island Air. The award chart will show available flights for two months at a time, so the OnePass award booking tool is good if you are looking to redeem miles on those participating airlines.

United Airlines

United.com includes award inventory for Star Alliance flight awards on Continental Airlines and US Airways only. United recently made some changes to the award search capability, like adding the ability to search by multi-city, but the improvements did not include adding more partner award searches.

US Airways

Dividend Miles members can only search for US Airways flights at usairways.com.

SkyTeam

According to a recent poll on milepoint.com, 76.5 percent of survey respondents said that SkyMiles are the most difficult miles to use for awards. Milepoint member The Points Guy, who started the "The Definitive Guide to Booking a SkyMiles Award" discussion on milepoint.com at www.insideflyer.com/link/?4176, books several SkyMiles awards a day and has some suggestions for redeeming SkyMiles and SkyTeam awards. He says you can begin your search at Delta.com, but the award calendar and booking engine isn't entirely accurate. Sometimes the calendar will display awards at the low level that don't actually exist when you go to book them or fail to show awards that are available. The award booking website includes awards on some SkyTeam member airlines, including Air France and KLM, but not every flight will show up on the award calendar.

Delta.com allows you to search for roundtrip, one-way and multi-city itineraries.

When piecing together a trip, search for individual segments using the one-way option so you can find awards at the lowest levels. After you find the segments you want, you can use the multi-city search and enter your destinations and dates. Write down the specific flight numbers of the award flights available at the low level so you know which flights to select when using the multi-city tool. You can also call Delta and have an agent book the award for you.

Another website that is useful for searching for SkyTeam flights is Airfrance.us, where you can sign up for a Flying Blue account to search for flights on Air France, KLM, Alitalia, Kenya Airways, Air Europa and TAROM.

Using Subscription Web Tools

There are four subscription-based tools that will look for flight awards on multiple airlines: KVS Tool, ExpertFlyer, Award Nexus and UsingMiles. If you only book one or two awards a year and your itineraries tend to be straightforward point A to point B and back again, you probably won't need any of these tools. But if you like to create more complex itineraries that include stopovers, open jaws and flights on multiple airlines, you may want to consider signing up for one or more of these services.

Most of the information that you will find using these tools can be found for free by searching the websites listed above, but the information will appear in a different format. The advantage to using one of these tools is that you can perform one search on one website instead of going to each individual airline's website. They each are slightly different in the services they provide and in the number of airlines they will search. The KVS Tool pulls data from many airlines' websites whereas ExpertFlyer has "contracted directly with two GDS services to access airline information," according to their website. Some of the information on ExpertFlyer.com can be found other places but some of it cannot.

KVS Tool

Gary Leff of the View from the Wing blog says that KVS is his main tool when searching for awards. "It's the convenience and speed of the tool that I pay for, much better than searching each site individually." All of the information you will find on KVS can be found for free elsewhere, but the site can definitely save you some time if you search frequently for awards. You can open multiple screens at one time so you can conduct several searches concurrently.

The KVS Tool shows availability of awards on all oneworld and Star Alliance carriers and most SkyTeam carriers. You will need to sign up for several frequent flyer accounts (if you don't already have them) to search for award inventory. The KVS Tool will search by accessing award inventory on the websites of ANA, Qantas, Flying Blue, Delta, Asia Miles, Miles & More and KrisFlyer. KVS will allow users to search availability by global alliance, whereas ExpertFlyer users can only search award inventory on one airline at a time.

KVS Tool has three levels of membership at \$20 for Gold for six months, \$35 for six months at Platinum and \$45 for six months at Diamond. Annual and shorter two-month subscriptions are also available. To conduct searches for award flights, you will need to subscribe to a Platinum or Diamond level, which you can test out for two months for \$15 for Platinum or \$20 for Diamond.

ExpertFlyer

With expertflyer.com, subscribers can search for awards on 40 airlines, but US Airways and Continental Airlines are not included in the list. At the higher membership level, you can use the ExpertFlyer tool to search for awards and upgrades plus or minus three days, which is useful if you can be flexible on your flight dates. And it has an automated search feature where you can set up an alert so that if seats open up on that particular flight, you will be alerted via email. The tool will also show you how many award seats are available. If there are a few seats available, you can safely wait a few days to decide whether to book a ticket but if the tool only brings up one available seat, you'll know to book as soon as possible.

When searching for a flight award, you can only search for award inventory on one airline at a time, unlike the KVS Tool and Award Nexus that will allow you to search for awards on multiple airlines at once.

ExpertFlyer is not as comprehensive as the KVS Tool in terms of the number of airlines it supports, but it does have some content that is not available via KVS. Ben Schlappig of One Mile at a Time blog points out that "ExpertFlyer is the only place to find American Airlines upgrade award availability online. Another huge benefit of ExpertFlyer is their automated monitoring service, which can serve a few purposes. First of all, if you need to get onto a flight that's sold out entirely or sold out in your preferred fare class, it will monitor for space to open up. If it does, they will send you an email alert. The same applies to upgrade space and award space on select airlines, including Alaska, American, United and more. That alone can more than justify the membership fee."

ExpertFlyer is a paid subscription service that offers a basic plan for \$4.99 per month and a premium plan for \$9.99 per month. An annual premium subscription of \$99 is slightly cheaper than paying the monthly \$9.99 fee. You can also sign up for a five-day free trial and test out the service to see if you like it.

Award Nexus

Award Nexus is a service that will search for flights on all Star Alliance and oneworld airlines, but not SkyTeam. The service is only offered to registered active members of FlyerTalk.com or milepoint.com. You will need to enter your FlyerTalk handle to create an account and if you are only registered at milepoint.com, you can send a message with your milepoint handle and email address to the site founder at peter@awardnexus.com and request a membership.

The founder of AwardNexus.com has put together an award tip chart that includes some helpful notes on the "quirks" of each mileage program website. We have published the chart below to inform you of some of the idiosyncrasies of each website.

Award Nexus offers free and premium memberships, so you can try the free version first and test it out. There is no monthly fee, but each award search requires you to "pay" a set number of points. With a free membership, you can request 100 points every 90 days and for additional points, you will need to upgrade to a premium service, starting at \$50 for 500 points.

The Award Nexus tool is similar to the KVS Tool in that it searches the award inventory found on airline websites. You could find the same information by going to each of those sites individually, but Award Nexus provides a shortcut that will search for awards on "all 28+ Star Alliance airlines and all 10+ oneworld airlines" by gathering information from Air Canada, Continental Airlines, All Nippon Airways, British Airways, Qantas and Japan Airlines websites. Award Nexus is a useful tool if you want to search for an award flight on a number of different airlines for a wide range of dates. You can search for awards by alliance and you can search for seat availability up to a week at a time. With one search, you can find availability for a particular route on all Star Alliance and oneworld carriers.

You can schedule a daily search for award seats on a particular route and sign up to receive updates on seat availability. Members of the site can save up to four searches and receive daily notifications of results via email.

AwardNexus.com also has a Route Explorer tool that can help you find alternate routings for your itinerary. Type in your origin and destination cities, such as Los Angeles (LAX) and Paris (CDG), and either Star Alliance or oneworld and the tool will display possible connecting cities, such as Chicago, Toronto, Newark, Zurich, Philadelphia, Frankfurt, Montreal and Houston. Even if you know hub cities like the back of your hand, this tool may still pull up connections that you hadn't considered.

Award Tips

Site	Coverage	Date Range	Web Accuracy	Notes
Air Canada	All Star Alliance airlines	Min: 0 Max: 355	Inconsistent	*Sometimes Air Canada has been observed to not display an available award seat on a Star Alliance flight, even if that flight is nonstop and no other Air Canada flight is available. Such hidden flights are available by calling. *Air Canada has a bias toward routing you on Air Canada and connecting in Canada, even if the routing would be far away.
Continental Airlines	Many Star Alliance airlines Omission examples: Turkish Airlines, Singapore Airlines	Min: 0 Max: 328	Reliable	*Continental has a fast site with sensible connection choices. *Continental makes no distinction when searching business or first. If you specify one, results for the other cabin will also be returned. *Continental results do not specify actual cabin. For premium awards, some segments may be booked in an alternate cabin (e.g. in economy for a business award), and there is no way to tell from the search results alone. *On a few routes, Continental has been observed to show Virgin Atlantic Airlines award availability.
All Nippon Airways	All Star Alliance airlines	Min: 7 Max: 330	Reliable	*All Nippon Airways will only show nonstop or 1-stop flights. You need to search segment-by-segment for 2+ stops. *All Nippon Airways will sometimes show flights as on request (REQ), meaning you need to attempt to reserve for All Nippon Airways to actually check availability for you. This usually happens for Asiana or All Nippon Airways flights.
British Airways	All oneworld airlines, OpenSkies	Min: 0 Max: 355	Inconsistent	*Sometimes an award seat that could be available is not shown on BritishAirways.com. You will need to call to get access to those unseen seats (tip: ask them to waive the phone booking fee since the site is not showing them as available). *British Airways is not reliable for partner

				coverage, because partner options are only offered if the initial search date does not have any British Airways flights available. For example, if there is a British Airways itinerary available on 12/12 (regardless of how out of the way British Airways metal flights may be), no partner flights will be offered for any date in the entire search.
Cathay Pacific	Cathay Pacific/Dragonair	Min: 0 Max: 360	Reliable	*Cathay Pacific has been observed to make extra awards available to its own members. If you see an award from Cathay Pacific, it is possible it is unavailable to partner airlines. Sometimes the extra awards will become available after a few hours or a few days; sometimes they never become available.
Japan Airlines	Japan Airlines only	Min: 7 Max: 330	Inconsistent	*Japan Airlines allows waitlisting for its own members, so if you have Mileage Bank miles, log on to the site for waitlist possibilities.
Qantas Airways	Many oneworld airlines, Cathay Pacific, JetStar Airways and some South West Pacific airlines Omissions: Japan Airlines, Mexicana, Royal Jordanian, Dragonair, S7	Min: 1-7 Max: 353	Reliable	*Note that while Qantas Airways shows Cathay Pacific results, Dragonair does not appear in the results. *There are reports that Qantas Airways occasionally returns phantom Cathay Pacific seats, which are not actually available.

This table is reprinted from <https://awardnexus.com/page/tips> with the permission of Award Nexus.

UsingMiles.com

A new website with an award search tool that is free to use can be found at usingmiles.com--the site will also keep track of your mileage balances. After you register and enter your frequent flyer accounts, you can search for a flight and the search engine will let you know the number of awards available on the route you enter with the programs you participate in. You can then click the link to the airline's website to book the award flight. If no flights are available, you can sign up to receive email alerts on a daily or weekly basis to notify you when award seats become available. See the 60 Seconds interview in this issue of InsideFlyer to learn more about usingmiles.com.

Calling to Book

After you've found the flights you want and made detailed notes on the exact flights that are available, the next step will be working with a customer service agent who can book the ticket for you.

Gary Leff who has booked countless awards through his award booking service has spent hours talking with airline customer service representatives and suggests that you befriend the agent on the other end of the phone. While you may be more knowledgeable about the program rules and award availability than the person you talk to, it's a good idea to pretend that you know less than you do. Leff suggests you initiate the conversation by saying, "Another agent previously found these seats and would you please check to see if they are still available?" Since you've already done the work to find the flights with available award seats, you can go segment by segment and provide the exact flight numbers and origin and destination for each leg of your itinerary. If the agent you get isn't helpful, it's better to play call center roulette and hang up and try again. You may have to call more than once, but it's better to call back until you get someone helpful and knowledgeable than to try to work with someone who doesn't know how to help or isn't willing to take the time to figure it out. Save yourself some frustration and politely thank them for their time and call back.

As a reminder, United Mileage Plus has a history of "StarNet Blocking" awards on partner carriers. If you are redeeming Mileage Plus miles for a partner award and the agent is unable to see availability for a flight you know has award space, it is possible that United is blocking availability. Fortunately, StarNet blocking has become less prevalent in the past year and Leff says he hasn't "run into any blocking at all myself since September [2010]." And now that United Mileage Plus and Continental OnePass members can transfer miles between their accounts, if you do run into StarNet blocking, you can simply transfer your Mileage Plus miles into your OnePass account and complete the award reservation using OnePass miles.

Award Booking Services

It is possible to spend less than an hour searching for and booking an award, but it can also take much longer, especially if you don't have much experience with complicated itineraries using partner airlines. If you are looking to book premium class tickets for international itineraries and don't want to invest the time searching for awards and calling customer service agents, bloggers Gary Leff, Lucky (Ben Schlappig) and The Points Guy (Brian Kelly) are all experts at award booking and will help you create your dream trip and book it for you. At bookyouraward.com, Leff asserts that "Whatever the award itinerary you want, in whatever class of service you prefer, I can book it for you. I will make things easy, listen to your preferences, and present you with your best options--and then handle everything, all you have to do is enjoy the flights." Leff charges \$250 for the first two passengers and \$100 for each additional passenger and he will only charge the fee once you are satisfied with the itinerary and he successfully books the tickets.

Ben Schlappig of PointsPros.com also offers an award booking service and charges \$150 for the first passenger on any type of award and \$100 for each additional passenger on the same trip.

Brian Kelly of thepointsguy.com has been redeeming miles and points for luxury travel and first class seats for years and offers his award booking service to help others maximize the value of their frequent flyer miles. His fee depends on the complexity of the award, but is generally \$125 per ticket for international awards and \$100 for domestic/Hawaii. Visit the award booking section at his website to fill out an award booking form and Brian will get back to you. Leff, Schlappig and Kelly have many years of experience searching for and booking awards and if you are short on time or don't find the award seats you want, their services can be invaluable.

With the information we've shared with you, you should now be able to turn an award booking "no" into a "yes"--but remember, being flexible will go a long way.