

## Frequent-flier seats hard to find this summer

Airlines have cut flights and are flying planes almost full to popular destinations this summer, making mileage-award seats hard to find

By **Jaclyn Giovis**

*McClatchy Tribune News Service*

If you're cash-strapped and banking on frequent flier miles to make a last-minute summer vacation possible, you may be disappointed.

Airlines have cut routes globally to adjust for weak travel demand, so even amid recession planes are flying almost full and routes to popular destinations are packed. Some experts say the crunch doesn't leave much room for summer passengers competing for a free ride.

Now carriers are so desperate for revenue they would rather leave a seat empty — hoping to snag a passenger who will pay an expensive last-minute fare — than give it away, said Tim Winship, publisher of [FrequentFlier.com](http://FrequentFlier.com).

"It's a bad combo of factors for people that are looking to redeem their miles for a free seat," he said.

For customers that would rather not fight hassles of booking award flights, Winship suggests using miles for hotel stays. "The hotel award availability is not a problem," he said.

**His advice:** "Work with an experienced Travel Agent, familiar with the routing system, permutations, ideas, bonus miles and code-share agreements to find an itinerary, even though talking to an airline agent can cost \$30 to \$250, depending on the airline, routes and distances involved.. Sometimes these agents even have the power to override the system and make a seat available for award travel, he said.

The ability to extend to you various different options to fly, secure a seat and take care of the paperwork and save you mammoth time is worth every red cent when it scores you a free frequent flier Airticket- except the taxes and fuel levies/fees that are compulsory to pay out anyway !"

Award club members, especially those with fewer miles, should pay attention to promotions offering savings on award bookings and jump on them.

"The airlines do nice stuff and often we don't even notice," Petersen said.

Earlier this year, Delta launched two award redemption-related promotions: one for 20 percent off the standard mileage requirement and another to upgrade to Delta's international BusinessElite cabin using only one mile.

Winship says such promotions send consumers a false message: that there must be a lot of empty award seats for the taking. Travelers who want to cash in on these offers are best to be flexible with travel dates and times, he warned.

Major legacy carriers, which have the largest and most robust frequent flier programs, have announced plans to trim back their routes even further. It's only a matter of time before airfares will ascend, he and others say.

"That's when you really want to use them," Petersen said. "Right now, I don't know why anybody would." **Get your Agent to secure the best-value paid deals now and use points later!**