

How I maximized my points and miles to travel as a teacher on a limited budget

(Courtesy of Emily Thompson, The Points Guy)

There are some different approaches when it comes to traveling with points and miles.

A lot of people around TPG, for example, live for a killer redemption. They go for the [cards with the biggest bonuses](#), spend hours researching their redemption options, and use their points and miles to book lie-flat seats and suites in luxurious hotels.

This, however, is not [how I learned to use points and miles](#). A high school English teacher in my previous life, my travel goals and budget were modest and my mental bandwidth was limited. I didn't have my eye on status or first class; I just wanted to be able to [go to the beach](#) and visit my friends who lived far away.

So, my approach was a bit different from some of the pros you see around here. Below, I'm breaking it down so you can see if it might work for you too.

The challenges

Being a teacher comes with a rigid schedule and difficult work-life balance, making it tough to travel when compared with other occupations. Here are a few of the challenges I faced when planning travel.

A tight budget

When I first started using points and miles, I was a new teacher and my budget was tight. I wasn't lured into points and miles by the promise of luxury travel; I was lured in by the idea of travel being an option for me at all.

A limited schedule

A serious perk of being a teacher was the time off from school that allowed travel. However, my days off were predetermined for me. I didn't have the flexibility to, for example, decide to go to Hawaii in the off-season. The school calendar is designed for time off only in the "on" season, so getting off-peak pricing was almost never an option for me.

Limited mental energy

Teachers juggle a lot of things. When I came home at the end of the day, I was exhausted and still had piles of papers to grade. As much as I wanted to be able to travel, I did not have the time or energy to devote to learning and implementing elaborate points redemption strategies. The best I could do was to remember to use one card at the [gas station](#) and another at [restaurants](#), and even that was pushing it.

The approach

I had three major components to my strategy to keep me sane and help me work within my budget.

My points and miles balances

Instead of choosing a goal trip and using that to determine which cards I got, I focused on building and maintaining a good balance of some points and miles I knew I would be able to use when a travel opportunity arose. For flights, I kept both [Southwest points](#) and [American Airlines miles](#) available since both airlines have a significant presence in my home airport and offer plenty of good deals.

For hotels, I kept balances of [IHG](#), [Hilton](#) and [Hyatt](#) points, knowing I was likely to find availability and a good deal with a hotel in one of these groups wherever I wanted to go.

I also used [cash-back rewards cards](#) to keep a separate travel fund that I used to cover things like food and theme park tickets when I traveled.

Budget redemptions

It was really important that I stretch the points and miles I had as far as I could, so I aimed to redeem as few as possible for each trip by booking 5 a.m. flights and always keeping an eye out for [Category 1 Hyatts](#). By doing this, a card sign-up bonus could take me on multiple trips rather than be eaten up by one larger redemption.

Low annual fees

It's no secret that the [top premium cards](#) come with a lot of value, but the ones with the highest annual fees weren't worth it to me on my limited budget. I decided from the beginning that [I wouldn't get any cards with annual fees higher than \\$100](#).

I knew that I wouldn't get lounge access or significant status with my lower-fee cards, but that sacrifice was worth the savings for me. Fortunately, there are also some really valuable card options that come with no or [lower annual fees](#). I focused on cards like the [Hilton Honors American Express Card](#) and the [Chase Sapphire Preferred Card](#), which gave me excellent sign-up bonuses and cardholder value with little annual fee investment.

The travel

My strategy worked like a dream for me during my nine years as a teacher. My points and miles allowed me to book travel without hesitation when a friend moved to [Peru](#) and invited me to visit, when I found good deals on flights to visit my friends in [California](#) and when I decided to see if I could afford my dream trip to [Hawaii](#).

Your strategy

If you find yourself working with an exceptionally tight budget or limited mental energy, you can still make points and miles work for you.

Determine your travel budget

Be realistic about what you can and are willing to spend on traveling. Decide what, if any, annual fees you feel OK paying and set a rule for how you'll know when to pass on one. We, for example, make a really convincing argument that [The Platinum Card® from American Express](#) is well [worth its annual fee](#), but the \$695 (see [rates and fees](#)) out-of-pocket expense isn't right for everyone. If you aren't in a place where it makes sense right now, you have plenty of other great options.

Set some travel goals

If you have a specific trip you really want to take, use it to help you determine which card(s) to get next. But even if you don't, think about what types of trips you want to take in general terms. I, for instance, wanted to mostly travel domestically, so a [Southwest card](#) was an excellent option for me.

If, on the other hand, you have family who live abroad and want to be able to visit them more regularly, you'll want to choose a card with an [airline](#) that offers good deals to get you there.

Make your plan

If you're just starting out, start small. Whether your travel goal helped you narrow down a specific trip or if you still have just a general idea of what points and miles you want to earn, choose one or two cards that will help get you there.

And if you're on a really tight budget, look at your [cash-back rewards card](#) options to help you cover the costs that points and miles generally don't.

Great cards for a tight budget

Hilton Honors American Express Card

Bonus: Earn 80,000 Hilton Honors bonus points after you spend \$1,000 on purchases on the card within your first three months of card membership.

Annual fee: \$0 (see [rates and fees](#)).

Why it's great: This card earns 7 points per dollar on Hilton purchases; 5 points per dollar on dining, supermarkets and gas; and 3 points per dollar on all other purchases. What really makes this card budget-friendly, though, is that it comes with complimentary Hilton Honors Silver status, allowing you to take advantage of Hilton's fifth-night-free perk and stretch your points even further.

Apply here: [Hilton Honors American Express Card](#)

Southwest Rapid Rewards Plus Credit Card

Bonus: Earn 75,000 points after you spend \$3,000 on purchases in the first three months from account opening. Offer ends Dec. 5, 2022.

Annual fee: \$69.

Why it's great: This card's welcome bonus is worth \$1,125 according to [TPG's valuations](#). In addition to the excellent value of the bonus, these points count toward earning the Southwest Companion Pass, which effectively doubles the value of your Southwest points.

Apply here: [Southwest Rapid Rewards Plus Credit Card](#)

Citi® Double Cash Card

Bonus: None.

Annual fee: \$0.

Why it's great: This card allows you to earn 2% cash back on all your purchases (1% when you buy and 1% when you pay). In addition to the bonus it offers, this card is a [reliable one to keep in your wallet](#) when you're buying something that doesn't earn additional points with another card.

Apply here: [Citi Double Cash Card](#)

Bottom line

The best points and miles redemption strategy is the one that works for your budget, lifestyle and goals. By setting your travel budget and deciding what points and miles will serve you best, you can find a strategy that will take you anywhere you want to go.