

Joel Widzer's favorite strategies for getting upgrades.

PLANES

1. **Remain steadfastly loyal to one airline.** I've flown almost exclusively with Delta for the last ten years. When agents see my long-term record, I always get free upgrades. That means I fly first-class round trip from New York to Los Angeles for about \$300, and first class/business class from Los Angeles to Europe for under \$1,000.

The more business you give them, the more preferential treatment you get. In my case, there were many times when another airline offered a more direct flight or charged \$75 less for the same route. But I was always faithful and have been more than compensated for the occasional inconvenience or extra expense.

- Research who has the best upgrades for the routes you take the most. For example, I never fly Southwest because they don't even offer first-class service. Both American and United have good frequent-flier programs, but lots of restrictions on upgrades. U.S. Air and Continental are struggling so they are more flexible with upgrades. Most generous: Alaska Airlines.
- Choose an airline that's part of an alliance program. That way if your carrier doesn't fly to a given destination, you can take another and still maintain loyalty. Most useful domestic alliances: American--Alaska Airlines, Delta-Northwest-Continental. Most useful international alliances: Star Alliance, One World Alliance, Sky Team.

2. **Achieve minimum elite status as quickly as you can.** Elite-level frequent fliers have the greatest leverage for upgrades since they represent only 3% of the flying public. They also get special considerations such as bonus miles on every flight leg; no black-out dates for free tickets, and the ability to make ticket changes without penalty—even on discounted coach fares.

- While the minimum number of base miles to achieve elite membership is usually 20,000-25,000, you can qualify in as few as three flights. For example, American Airlines has a little-known program that lets you attain "Gold" status by earning only 8,000 points in a 90-day period, or "Platinum" status by earning 16,000 points in a 90-day period.

Favorite trick of mine: If you're an elite member on one carrier and decide to switch allegiances, write to the manager of the competing airline's frequent-flier program. You'll get instant elite status in that program too.

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