

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Alex Payne, Jess Field, and Pam Lorg

[Points Talk®](#)

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Alex: We all know searching for award flights is one of the trickier things to master in points and miles. Today's special guests share tips and tricks for booking award flights.

Welcome to *Points Talk*®. We are three moms who've discovered how to leverage credit card welcome offers to get hundreds of thousands of dollars of travel expenses for nearly free. We've used credit card points and miles to take vacations to places like Hawaii, Paris, Greece, Maldives, Japan, and so much more. And the best part? We each still have 800 plus credit scores. Imagine being able to take the vacation of your dreams for nearly free. It's totally possible, and we're here to show you how.

Alex: Hey, I'm Alex.

Jess: And I'm Jess. Let's talk points. Today, we are joined by two members of the Thrifty Traveler team, Gunnar Olson and Kyle Potter. We are so excited for you both to be here. You know that we are huge Thrifty Traveler fans. I think we've created a bunch of Thrifty Traveler fans in our audience. So, thank you for joining us today.

Gunnar: Of course. Thank you so much for having us. You certainly have created a lot of Thrifty Traveler fans in your audience, so it's a pleasure to get to speak to them directly today.

Jess: We're going to get into a little bit more details about Thrifty Traveler and Thrifty Traveler Premium a little bit later in the episode, but just to kick it off, why don't you just give a quick overview of like how you got started in points and miles, how you got started working for Thrifty Traveler, and all those good things.

Kyle: Oh, man. How far back do we need to go? No, you know what? I think I think everybody gets started in points and miles in some version of the same way, which is you go on a trip, and it's... You catch the bug, and you see also, see how much better you can do it.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

So for me, that was when my wife and I took our first really big international trip through Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan in 2017. And I mean, it's just like life over at that point. You have to do it more, and when you decide that this is a part of your life, you realize that if this is going to be a part of your life, you have to figure out how to afford it. And so that just kind of sends you down the rabbit hole of learning how to do this. And I've been here at Thrifty Traveler since late 2018, writing about points and miles and airlines, now talking about it on our podcast and talking about it with you guys on your podcast. So yeah, it's just been like life-changingly cool.

Gunnar: Yeah, I think points and miles, my kind of gateway drug to points and miles, was just cheap flights to start out with. I used to jump into a car with my friends and drive 20 hours overnight to the mountains to go skiing from Minneapolis, and a few years went by of doing that, and I realized, "Hey, you know, people fly to these towns. I could also try and do that." And then, you know, just hunting down the cheapest airfares is how I found Thrifty Traveler, and then a few years later, I end up working here at Thrifty Traveler. And then, of course, you know, all these crazy points people open my mind to everything that was possible, and that's how I got into it as well.

So, but yeah, and then obviously planning a honeymoon on points and miles to go on a safari in Africa with my wife was when it all clicked for me, and I realized just the outsized value I could get and that I could travel like someone who makes a lot more money than I do.

Jess: That's always the goal, right? Is just like, make people think you have a lot of money when in fact you're just redeeming points and miles. So.

Gunnar: Right.

Jess: All right, that's awesome. All right, well, Alex is going to kick it off, I think, with our first question that we have for y'all.

Alex: Yeah, so as you guys know, we, you know, work with a lot of families, teaching them how to travel on points, and, you know, sometimes it can be a challenge to find award seats, especially business class for four or more people.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

And you guys are the experts, Thrifty Traveler's experts, at finding those hard-to-find premium cabin space. Which programs and routes are currently the most likely to release these that you guys tend to see?

Kyle: I mean, there's good and bad news. The good news is that there's a lot to pick from. The bad news is that this changes constantly. So just as an example, we wrote a story on our site about, you know, airline programs and routes where you can find four or more seats in business class. And that was like less than a year ago, and that list looks completely different now than it did, you know, just in early 2025. So with the important caveat that if you're listening to this in like January of 2026, this is great. If it's a little bit later than that, you might need to do some additional homework to see what's changed.

But the two of the big three US airline programs are probably top of the list. The best being American because they do pretty regularly slash business class rates to Europe, Asia, and even Australia to pretty reasonable levels. I'm talking like 60-ish thousand AAdvantage Miles® each way with four to nine seats on, you know, some big European routes. We've seen Australia to both Sydney and Brisbane as low as 75,000 AAdvantage Miles each way for four or more passengers.

Delta surprisingly has been on like a really great run of at least during off-peak times to Europe for as low as what, 170,000 SkyMiles® round-trip with nine seats. So, you know, is that a lot of miles? Yeah, of course it is, but it's the difference between being able to book your round-trip flights to Europe in business class for your entire family versus not being able to do it at all.

Alex: And it's Delta. Like, we know Delta is going to charge a little bit more.

Kyle: Right, exactly. Like you just, you take what you can get with Delta, but you know.

Alex: Exactly.

Kyle: We've been talking a lot, and we've been finding a lot of deals on our team recently that aren't just like good for Delta. They're just good, period. You know,

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

the some of the most recent being to Japan for as low as 85,000 SkyMiles each way in Delta One® Suites and Brisbane in Australia for just over 100,000 SkyMiles each way, which again, is not the deal of the century, but that's about as good as it gets for a lie flat seat in 15 hours where you really need that lie flat seat.

Gunnar: Yeah, SkyMiles have been a punching bag in the space for a long time, and for good reason. Sometimes you'll look up and see they're, you know, they want 600,000 SkyMiles for one person to go round-trip in business class to Europe, and like that kind of pricing is really offensive. But Delta is getting serious about this, and they're making their rates, like Kyle said, in the kind of off-season or off-peak times much more affordable. But you do have to stack up a lot of miles still to make some of these trips worth it. And so all the points earning strategies that you all talk about that we see you guys talking about all the time, those are as important as ever, especially if you're stacking Amex points or SkyMiles for sure.

Alex: Yeah, I like that you bring up the American Airlines® one because it historically, it's been kind of hard to earn a lot of American Airlines miles, but now with Citi being a transfer partner of American Airlines, it just opens it up, you know, for families to really be able to take advantage of that.

Kyle: Yeah, exactly. And you know, I know there are a lot of families out there, mine included, who just stacked up as many AAdvantage Miles as possible when you could still earn advantage miles from both Citi and Barclay's cards. So if you combine that with, you know, the option now to transfer Citi ThankYou® Points, it's it's it looks a lot easier to stitch together a big family trip in business class to Europe or even Australia than it did just like a year ago.

Alex: Yeah, for sure.

Kyle: A couple other business class like quick hits, Aer Lingus, um, flying to or through Dublin, I mean, they always have four seats available. You need to look at least, you know, probably three to five months out, but they have so many US and even Canadian departure cities, and when there is space, there is always four seats. And you can book that.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

I mean, one of our favorite tricks that we've been talking about in the office is you can book those with Alaska Miles and even though Alaska typically charges 55,000 miles each way from like the Midwest and some of the further east coast cities, if you add a connection in economy, so let's say you fly from like Chicago to Dublin and then onward to Paris or Amsterdam in Air Lingus economy, it drops to 45,000 miles each way per person. So like four people.

Jess: Hold on, I need to write I need to write this down. Hold on. I'll refer back to the transcript, but that is I had no idea that trick existed. And so.

Alex: Yeah, that is good. That's really good.

Jess: That's amazing.

Kyle: I mean it's two destinations for the not just the price of one, but for the price of less than one ticket would normally cost you. It's great. And you can even work in a free stopover through Alaska on all award tickets, too.

Jess: I was just going to ask that. Okay, so you could have a stopover in Dublin on your way to another European city.

Kyle: Yeah, exactly. It's great.

Alex: Which is kind of like what you did when you went to Iceland.

Jess: Yeah, it's kind of what I did when I went to Iceland, but.

Alex: But you were just on a different airline. But you booked through Alaska.

Jess: Yeah, so I need to go, you know, check out what Alaska has after this podcast recording's over with.

Alex: Can I just say, though, that I think our audience's minds were blown when you said book three to five months out? Because you've got like Jess, who books like the day flights are released. So they're like, "Wait, what? We don't have to book a year out?" Like, you just made a lot of people probably pretty happy.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Kyle: Yeah, I mean, there's always a Goldilocks zone with this stuff, right? It's it can be right when that schedule opens at 331 days in advance, but there's also kind of a sweet spot in the middle for some of these airlines, which is great.

Jess: Yeah, I've become the person that Alex texts, and she's like, "What time Mountain Time do I need to log into this airline and search the flight calendar?" And I'm like, "Alex, let me do the math for you."

Alex: Well, I'm like, "She's already done it." She booked Qsuite for February, and I booked it for March. And so I was like, "Hey, what's the time again that I need to go do this? I need to get those two seats."

Gunnar: Yeah, if you want Qsuites, you better be on top of it.

Alex: Or hope you get an alert from Thrifty Traveler.

Kyle: That's right. Or both.

Alex: Or both. Yep. Um was there any other ones before I move on?

Kyle: Yeah, two more quick ones. Uh, Swiss Airlines is pretty good about having four seats and sometimes more. Definitely from a lot of departure cities in the US to Zurich, but especially their flight from New York City to Geneva. It's the only nonstop to Geneva that they operate from the US, and there is always a ton of award space on that route. So you can book that with, I think, as few as 60,000 Aeroplan points, so transfer from all the banks to Aeroplan, and you can pretty easily put together a family trip.

And then the last one, not Europe, LATAM is really great about having award space for the whole family, as many as nine seats in some cases. So not just, you know, you and the spouse and the kids, but grandparents and aunts and uncles. And you know, if you time that right with a transfer bonus booking through one of the Avios programs, I think you can get to Peru for as low as 33,000 miles each way.

Jess: Wow. That's amazing.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Alex: That's so good.

Jess: I will also say, Gunnar, I know you need to hear this because you've got a six-month-old daughter, I think. My mom and I just went to Switzerland in October. We did the, well, we flew from Boston to Zurich, but we, you know, for 60,000 Aeroplan miles, and Switzerland is incredibly family-friendly, incredibly. So you've got to add it to your list, you know, your next, one of your next family trips. You got to. There's playgrounds everywhere. There's like so much to do outside. I was like, "Man, I got to come back here with my whole family."

Kyle: It's going to be significantly less family-friendly for Gunnar's family because as soon as he gets there, he's going to be like, "All right, I'm going skiing. Have a good day, guys."

Gunnar: Yeah, I won't see my family while I'm there. No. Switzerland is always on the list, one of my favorite places in the world, and I wish it weren't so darn expensive on the ground sometimes there, but it is, it's such a special place, and I, yeah, I can't wait to go back. Easy tip. Thank you. All right.

Jess: So next up, what are a few of your current favorite sweet spots that still offer outsized value? I know that I feel like, especially this year, I feel like 2025 was a doozy when it comes to changes all around in the points and miles space, but you know, I know that there are still some sweet spots out there. So what are some of your current favorites?

Alex: Which hopefully these still exist...

Kyle: By the time this episode airs.

Alex:When people are listening. Yeah.

Gunnar: Yeah, unless this show is live, I don't know if these are, exist by the time I'm done speaking.

Alex: We've literally had times where we record an episode, and then the next day it all gets changed. We're like, are you kidding me right now?

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Gunnar: Yeah, takes sour fast in our line of work here. Here's one that I was just writing about this for our website recently, but flying Iberia in both in economy, premium economy, or business class to Madrid and onward to Europe, I still think is one of the great sweet spots out there.

Lately, we've been digging more into these economy awards because that flight to Madrid is pretty short. And so some people are thinking to themselves, "I might as well just sit in the back." I mean, you can get to Madrid nonstop from the East Coast for 13,000 Iberia Avios round-trip when they're running a sale. And they do run these sales pretty frequently. We've been digging in. They just had one for Black Friday, but you know, they put out a sale a couple times a year. And if you can keep an eye on it or sign up for our alerts, we'll let you know when it happens. But you know, 13,000 round-trip, especially if you're taking the family. That's such a good deal.

And you have to pay it's about \$250 in taxes and fees. So it's not nothing in taxes and fees, but man, if that's all you're paying to and just those few points in economy is really good. In premium economy, it's closer to like 40,000 to 50,000 obvious round trip, which is still a fantastic deal. And of course, up front with Iberia is about 40,000 each way on their off-peak pricing.

And that new seat that A321 XLR airplane seat that they have for Iberia is one of my favorite business classes I've flown lately. I really, really enjoyed that experience. There's only 14 seats in that small cabin in the front, so the service is really good. And you just don't need, you know, you don't need to have like years and years worth of points stacked up to fly Iberia. So I still think that's one of the best values in the sky. And who wouldn't want to go to Madrid? But Iberia's network from Madrid is also really strong everywhere else. So that's one big sweet spot that comes to mind for me.

And then another one I have that's a little more general, I guess, is just anything to Brisbane, Australia, just because there's so much capacity flying into Brisbane. The government there in Queensland put out a lot of incentives to bring over some US carriers, and the US carriers delivered, and people aren't flying there in droves yet. So there's just a lot of empty seats on those routes.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

And they're offering up award space, you know, whether it's Delta SkyMiles for 130,000 SkyMiles each way up in Delta One, 60,000 round-trip in economy for SkyMiles. And then American Airlines is flying their brand new suites there as well. You can get those as low as 83,000 AA miles each way. So Brisbane is just a good place to target. I always tell people, if you want to go to Australia and you're not finding the space, just search, look for Brisbane, and then figure it out from there. So those are two of my favorite sweet spots right now.

Alex: Yeah, that's a good tip to check Brisbane. I also feel like we've seen a lot, like earlier in December, a lot of alerts from Thrifty Traveler Premium for Brisbane. And I was like, "Oh, I really want to do these," but I don't have the time to go and do this. My schedule is already booked. And I'm learning I need to like not book so much, so I can wait for the deals to show up, you know, wait till I get the email alert, and then plan my trip. But yeah, that's a good tip for Australia because we do have a ton of people that are, you know, wanting to go there, a lot of families wanting to make that happen.

Gunnar: Yeah, we get a lot of FOMO working here. When you get these deals, these deals coming across my desk, you know, five or six times a day, and every single deal is good, right? They're all deals that are bookable and that we would book ourselves. And so for that reason, I can talk myself into any one of these. So it's hard to not have my calendar full.

Alex: Well, you guys give uh my mom a lot of FOMO. She was literally texting us, what was it, like during the Thanksgiving break, and was like, "Oh my goodness, you guys, I just got another alert. I really want to book this." And we said, "You cannot do it." We told her she has to run her trips by the two of us now because she was, she way overbooked herself last year and was kind of losing her mind, like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so tired. I just want to be home." So we're like, "You need to run it by Jess and I, and we will give you the okay if you if you can do it." So I'm like, "Maybe don't check your email for a little bit, Pam." So you don't get the FOMO from the alerts.

Kyle: Pam, don't let Alex and Jess keep you down. Just keep going.

Gunnar: Yeah, don't listen to him, Pam.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Alex: What about you, Kyle? What's uh what's a one of one of those uh what even was the question you guys, I don't even remember.

Kyle: We're just having fun. It's fine.

Alex: Yeah, we're just, we're just spitballing it here.

Gunnar: Your sweet spots.

Alex: Oh, yes. Sweet spots.

Kyle: You know, we've touched on it a lot, but I think just in general, Delta SkyMiles flash sales have been better than ever in 2025 and have only gotten better in like the second half. So like those Brisbane deals, we found round-trip fares nationwide for 22,000 SkyMiles round-trip to Europe. I mean, that's normally, you normally when you search Delta it's 80,000, 100,000. So, you know, that 22,000, you can book the entire family of four for the price of one normal ticket. That's incredible. And from like the East Coast, it got as low as under 19,000 SkyMiles round-trip.

The other one that we've been obsessing a lot about in the office is since, um, Bilt and then Capital One added Japan Airlines as a transfer partner. All of a sudden, it's like, "Oh, we have to care about this airline program now." And one of the coolest things that we found is that, just as an example, most one-way business class flights, whether you're flying Iberia or American Airlines, will be 60,000 Japan Airlines miles each way. Round-trip, it's not 120,000, it's 85,000 Japan Airlines miles round-trip because of the way that their distance-based calculations work with their award chart. They just add the sum of both legs together, which is incredible.

So you can, you know, fly round-trip from most cities on the East Coast and some in the Midwest to Europe for 85,000. And that includes Emirates business class from JFK to Milan and Newark to Athens at 85,000 miles, and just like I think \$200 in taxes and fees when Emirates now charges close to 110,000 miles and \$1,000 in taxes and fees per person.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Alex: Yeah, well, and you can't even transfer one to one to Emirates too. So that's a great that's a great one.

Jess: My eyes just got really wide when you said that. I'm like, "Okay, now..."

Kyle: Jess is about to leave this call, and just like go start booking things like, "Alex, you got this."

Jess: I was about to just sign out. I'm like, "Alex, you can handle the rest of this. I need to go do some googling real quick."

Gunnar: Yeah, let's pause for a booking break if we need one.

Alex: Right? Book in real time.

Kyle: Yeah, most people pause for sponsors. We pause to book flights and then come back.

Alex: Yeah. Okay, a common question we get asked a ton, and I'm sure it very much depends on the airline, but as best answers you could give, when is the best time to book award flights?

Gunnar: Yeah, so like you said, it depends, which is the worst podcast answer there is, but I would say there are three kind of main waves of award space. Uh, of course, you know, depending on where you are flying around the world, this will change. But right when the calendar opens, like you know, Jess, if you're hunting out Qsuites, you better be ready to go. You have to be right when that calendar opens, I would have your points ready and be ready to book those because those seats go very fast. When the calendar opens, a lot of programs will just have those seats pop up right away.

I just did this, or not just did this, I did this almost a year ago now with Finnair for a flight I'm about to take, and in a few days here, but to get up in front right away at the beginning of the calendar, I would be ready.

Then I think another sweet spot is right at the last minute, uh, within kind of three weeks or a month of travel. Sometimes, the airlines, when they see a lot of softness, they'll release some extra seats. I know at least in the past, the Star

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Alliance, in general, like Swiss and United, have been pretty good about this. United has clawed back a lot of their availability, especially with partners lately, but at the last minute, things pop up. Some of the, my favorite redemptions ever I've booked at the last minute to replace other flights. Uh, and that's a good way to do it.

And then, you know, we talked about with Aer Lingus, there was that kind of sweet spot for Aer Lingus. Aer Lingus is a little closer to, you know, your travel date than most airlines. I think Aer Lingus releases a lot of really good space like, you know, two to four months ahead of time.

But I would, I'd stretch it out and say like two to five or six months out, sometimes the airlines will take a look at their schedule and say, "Hmm, this, these seats aren't filling up quite as much as I'd like." And then they make a good release of award space there.

So you'll see those kind of three trends in our Thrifty Traveler Premium deals. When we're sending out deals, it's either right at the end of the calendar. We don't always send last-minute space unless it's like really, really great stuff. But then there's that kind of middle uh, trench where the airlines are taking a look at things and hoping to fill some seats. So I, you know, that's, it's not exactly, I wish I could tell you, like 55 days before you fly is your perfect window. I can't tell you that, but those are kind of what the trends that we've seen.

Jess: All right, that's really helpful. And good to know that I'm, you know, I'm tackling one of the waves when I book right when the calendar opens. So I'm doing all right. Can you each share one or two of your favorite redemptions ever? I'm sure that's difficult because you've been doing this a long time. You do it for a living, and so you're doing this a lot. But yeah, I'm sure our listeners would love to hear, you know, one or two of your, you know, from the experts, your favorite redemptions ever.

Gunnar: Hands down, my favorite redemption ever was actually one of those last-minute bookings. I booked ANA's The Room business class from Chicago to Tokyo Haneda about 10 days before travel. I booked it through Virgin for 47,000 points each for my wife and I to fly nonstop to Tokyo from Chicago. It

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

was the best flight of my life, and I just couldn't believe how cheap it was using Virgin Atlantic miles.

And that was one where I had seen months out that they were releasing space at the last minute, and so I was just watching it every day and looking, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, it's there again, it's there again." And then when my date finally came up, we jumped on it as fast as we could and replaced what would have been an economy flight too. So my wife was extremely pleased. It was the best flight of my life. I've never been treated like that on an airplane before, and that seat is just amazing too. So I mean, just like bang for your buck and also just turning what would have been an economy journey into that was just so, so special. That was definitely my favorite redemption ever.

Kyle: You guys should see the photo of Gunnar and Megan. The photo of Gunnar and his wife, Megan, in that cabin. You have never in your lives seen two happier human beings. It's like the birth of their daughter and flying The Room. It's just slightly above that, I think.

Gunnar: The flight attendant saw our smiling faces and probably assumed we were honeymooning and demanded that we take a photo together. So she took our phone and was snapping photos of us, deliriously happy in the front of the plane.

Alex: That is awesome.

Kyle: I've got, I've got two. One, I'll preface with you can no longer do this. So, as we've talked about, as good as SkyMiles seem they can be lately, they can also be terrible. And so, typically, you'll see a flight from between LA and Sydney for like 400,000 SkyMiles each way in Delta One Suites.

But a couple of years ago, leading into my wife and I's first trip to New Zealand and Australia, there was a trick where if you departed from or returned to Mexico or any really anywhere in Central America or the Caribbean, you could book those flights for just 95,000 SkyMiles each way.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

So that's how we got home from our trip to Australia, was flying Delta One Suites for 95,000 SkyMiles, which we both just had either through credit cards or, you know, my wife travels a lot for work. So that felt like stealing from Delta, I guess. Uh, there's a reason why they got that loophole because a lot of people were doing things like that.

But my other favorite one was just like a really short economy flight, in the UK. So this past summer, my wife and I finally went to the UK. It was my first time there, and we traveled to the Scottish Highlands and drove through Edinburgh. And we were like, we were forced into this box of we're going to try to drive down the East coast of the UK, but then we would need to drive back up to Edinburgh to take a flight down to London or to get on a train and that train is going to take 10 hours and it's like, what do we do?

Well, we could drive down to Newcastle and fly from Newcastle to London, but the flights that we needed for that day were like \$600 a piece. So it was like, I, we just couldn't make it work. And so against my better judgment of just assuming there would be no award space, I searched British Airways, and lo and behold, that \$600 flight was available for less than 10,000 Avios and \$1 in taxes and fees, which is, it was not a special flight, but it made the entire trip work in a much better way. That day would have been so much more painful had we not been able to do that.

Alex: I love it. I love that you've got like this really bougie flight and then you've got this really practical one too, because that's equally as important sometimes, is just getting where you need to be when you want to be there in an easy way.

Kyle: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the best, the most fun use of points is always that business class trip or, you know, a really fancy luxury hotel or all-inclusive resort on points. But also, points can get you somewhere across the country in a family emergency without paying \$1,000 at the last minute, or, you know, get to a family reunion or just like a quick friends getaway. It doesn't have to be quote-unquote "special" for it to be like an important and worthwhile use of points.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Gunnar: Yeah, I know you all have the motto of “you do you.” And I just think, you know, there's no there's no one way to do points and miles, and just as long as it's you're doing something you otherwise wouldn't have been able to do, that I mean that's exactly the reason to use points and miles. And we don't have a perfectly pithy mantra like you guys have. You really you really nailed it. We're just kind of searching for what our version of that is. But we have the exact same thought and idea on your points and miles are yours, and you know, however you're going to use them, it's going to be special.

Alex: Yeah, love that.

Jess: Can't agree more. Love it.

Alex: Okay. Switching gears just a little bit. Let's get into Thrifty Traveler Premium. Can you guys give our listeners just a little brief overview of what it is? And then I've got some more questions about it once you kind of give them the info on all about it.

Gunnar: Sure. Um, I'm on the Thrifty Traveler Premium team. I help search for flight deals with the team. Basically, we are constantly searching for flight deal alerts, whether it's using your points and miles or cash flight deals. It could be anything from a, you know, \$57 round trip domestic fare to Florida, like we found last week, or you know, these big kind of splashy Emirates first class, you know, spend all your points and book this once-in-a-lifetime trip kind of thing.

But we cover more than 200, I think it's closer to 250 now, uh, US and Canadian airports. And we're constantly searching for the cheapest flights and award availability. We have a team of 10 full-time flight deal analysts, and we're, you know, we're searching in every cabin of service. So we're doing, you know, premium economy, business, first class, economy, basic economy.

We're looking to just basically take that three or four hours that people would need to search for flights every day after work in order to actually find the cheapest stuff. We just want to take it off their hands and do it for them and find the best stuff that, you know, we'd only book ourselves.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

It's an incredibly manual process. You'd think with in like the advent of AI and all of these tools that we could automate this somehow. You really can't. We believe me, we've tried. It's humans who have to do this stuff because there's a lot of phantom award space out there and there's a lot of, you know, cash deals that look like they might be bookable, but then it's through a sketchy OTA and we do a lot of just vetting, making sure that flight deals are bookable and that we'd actually take them ourselves.

So we run this service. It's, you know, \$99 a year for Thrifty Traveler Premium. And then if you want to add Premium Plus Hotels, we do also points and miles hotels bookings or searches for people. And we alert them to award space through Hyatt and Hilton and Marriott and IHG. That's \$149 a year if you do Premium Plus Hotels.

So it's uh, I think it's a great service. It definitely fueled my travels for a really long time, and it's just really fun to be a part of, too. And getting to see the replies we get from people who are telling us all the time about these amazing trips they've booked that to a destination maybe they've never thought of or, you know, on the exact date they wanted it for their dream trip, and it's so much fun just helping people fuel their travels like this. What did I miss, Kyle?

Alex: Can I say one thing real quick? I was on, Jess and I were at the Miraval Arizona back in August, which great time to go to Arizona, but we uh, we were doing a water aerobics class and we got talking to this girl in the class and she was saying how she does a bit of the points of miles stuff too and she's like, "Yeah, I've done this and I've done that." And I was like, "Wow, that's really impressive." Because she kind of made it sound like she was just dabbling and she'd like taken some amazing flights. And she's like, "Oh yeah. Well, I like have this alert service. It's called Thrifty Traveler Premium." I'm like, "Oh, okay, that makes sense."

And I think the really cool thing about the service is you don't have to know everything about points and miles. I think the redemption part of all of this is the trickiest part. And you don't need to be an expert to be able to take advantage of a flight alert that is sent to you from Thrifty Traveler Premium. The work is done

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

for you, the instructions on how to book, the points you need. And so that's what I love about it is I don't have to spend the time like knowing all the airline alliances. I mean, I do because it's my job, but if I didn't, then it'd be really, really great. So that's what I love about is you don't have to know a lot to be able to take advantage of these really great deals.

Kyle: Yeah, we have our two award travel experts are Katie Rollins and Peter Thornton, and they're two of the coolest people you know, and they're better travelers than all of us. And I'm in awe of them every day. But they make a real point of making everything educational.

The how to book section of every single flight deal alert email that you get lists out exactly what you need to do. Where you search for the available dates, and then once you find the available dates, how do you get to the website? How do you sign up for the right account? What points am I going to transfer over? It's so clear and easy, and I use our own instructions all the time, just going back through deals. It is like the most educational tool.

And the part of it that I really love the most is, say you get a deal that you hadn't been thinking about, and you don't have the points. Then it becomes kind of inspirational, where you say now I know exactly how many Amex Membership Rewards® that I need to earn with a credit card bonus or just my spend, so that the next time this deal comes around, I have the points in place to book it. So I think they're just they're so savvy and they write so well, and Katie and Peter are just actual whizzes at this. It's it's pretty amazing to see them work.

Kyle: We hear it all the time of like, "Oh, I took this trip and this trip and another trip on points thanks to you." And you know, you walked me through the whole process, which is great. But honestly, what we hear more is, "I love the deals, but what I love more is the education." Because you're not going to take advantage of every single deal that we send you.

You know, and on some days we send as many as five alerts, and maybe only Pam is booking five flights a day, but the rest of the rest of us mere mortals are not. But in those other four deals or five deals, there's always something to learn that's going to make you smarter or to prepare or give you a road map for the

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

next big trip that you're going to take so that you know what you need to earn or the best way to book a flight when that next deal comes that does actually work for you.

Jess: And it's impossible to know. Like you heard on this episode, they've already listed two sweet spots that blew my mind. Even though Alex and I do this every day in and out, it is impossible to keep all this straight in your head. It's impossible to know every single sweet spot, how many miles are required, what airports you need to leave from. With this, you have it all right in front of you, you know, in writing for you to reference back to. So I find that ridiculously helpful for myself selfishly. Okay.

Alex: Couple questions about the service. What is about the volume of deals per week or month? I know it probably fluctuates based off what deals are coming to you because, like you said, you're only going to share the ones y'all would actually book.

Gunnar: Yeah, so usually we send on average about 100 flight deals a month. If that sounds like a crazy amount of emails to get into your inbox, you don't need to be getting all the... So you can filter out for your departure airport, your, you know, your home airport, and then you can also choose as many other departure airports as you want. So if you're in a smaller regional airport and you want to tick the boxes for a few more airports around you to make sure that you have like the nearest hub covered or if you're really looking for award space to some place in particular, like you know that you want to go to Australia using points and miles next year, I'd probably go ahead and select LA and San Francisco and Dallas as well. So we give some recommendations on, you know, what airports you should select as well.

So not, you're not going to be getting 100 deals a month necessarily unless you're one of the sickos on our list who signed up for all cities. The all cities people, I mean those are my people. I love them dearly. Uh, but that's, that's a wild amount of emails to be getting every week from us. But you know, it's so it's, you know, four to six deals a day, and that's everything from an economy

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

cash deal to Phoenix to, like we said, those big bucket list overseas first class flights and things like that.

Kyle: Yeah, I, we make it a point to send at least one award deal a day, be it in economy or business class. I would say most days, we probably send two, one of each, somewhere in that neighborhood.

One of the most important filters beyond just being able to tailor which airports you want alerts from is that we also have a business class from all cities toggle. Which means, you know, for Alex for you in Salt Lake City, I'm sure you'd gladly hop on a cheap flight to Denver or Seattle in economy, but you're not looking for, you know, weird economy flights from Dallas or economy flights from Miami, but you would fly to Dallas or Miami or JFK or Boston if that was your positioning flight for a business class redemption. This toggle makes that happen. So you get all of those business and first class awards regardless of the departure city.

Alex: Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's what I have that turned on, and then other stuff based off of being in Salt Lake City. But I'm like, yes, send me all the business class deals, please. I will go wherever I need to go.

Jess: I think I'm unintentionally a sicko because I feel like I get so many emails every day.

Kyle: Jess, welcome to the team.

Jess: So I need to go look at my filters, I guess. 'Cause I was going to say like, when you said \$100 a month, I was like, "Oh, that's it? Like I feel like I get more than that."

Alex: Oh man. Okay. I want to know your proudest or wildest Thrifty Traveler Premium alert that's ever that you've ever seen be sent.

Gunnar: I think one that blew my mind when we sent it was when, man, was this last year or two years ago now? When Virgin Atlantic made its flights, when you book through Virgin Atlantic Flying Club, they made their own flights dynamic. And we knew this news was coming, and we're like, "Oh man, another program that's going to dynamic awards. Like this is going to be nasty." And we logged

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

on, and one of our co-workers, Jackson Newman, did some searches, and he's like, "Guys, guys, it's, it's way better than you think." And it was, I think, 21,000 Virgin Atlantic miles each way in business class from JFK to London. And this was back before they, you know, made their taxes and fees really nasty like they are now.

Alex: Hey, you're never, you're never going to believe who took advantage of that deal.

Kyle: Is it Pam?

Alex: Pam. You know it.

Gunnar: Right. Of course. But that one I blew my mind because, you know, seeing a one-way business class flight for that cheap was crazy. And at that point, we had been, we were in kind of a drum beat of bad news and devaluations and bad, bad points and miles news for so long. And then finally something happened that uh was for the better and we were all so excited. But that one blew my mind when it first came out.

Alex: I bet that was pretty fun in the office that day.

Kyle: Oh, it was. So here's what happened. About, at the time, about seven of us uh worked in the same office together. We now have a bigger team and a bigger office, but it was a really small office, though. And so we found this, we sent out the deal, and then literally five minutes later, all seven of us booked that flight. So these are the deals that really stand out. It's us, it's literally just us being selfish about like the deals that we actually booked.

Alex: Are you guys ever like, "Wait a second, don't send out the email alert yet. I need to book my flight first."

Gunnar: We have... Yeah.

Kyle: No comment.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Alex: Because I'm going to say, there may have been some times where we've done it with Jess will find a hotel, and I'm like, "Wait a second, I need to book it, and then you can send it put it in the Facebook group. Let me book it first."

Gunnar: We had our co-worker, Jackson, we sent a Japan Airlines deal a few months ago, and he was, he got it just he got he got to review it right before it went out, and we just check for typos and make sure that, you know, things look good. And he sent a reply back saying, "You're going to have to take January 21st off the list." And then he showed us his confirmation page, and we were like, "All right, Jackson, you're taking away..."

Alex: Hey, there's got to be some perks to the job, right?

Gunnar: That's right. That's right.

Jess: I'm a little nervous that Pam is going to listen to this episode and submit an application to work at Thrifty Traveler and just leave us because she's going to say, "Hey, I can get all this inside information." I'm also laughing because, as we're recording this, I get an alert. I get a Thrifty Traveler email pop-up in my inbox as we are recording this. So, yeah, I definitely need to go check out my filters after this.

Kyle: Yeah. Other than that one, the biggest ones that like alarm bells go off at headquarters here is just any mistake fare. The occasional points mistake fare, but you know, cheap cash fare. So over the years, we've found \$62 round trip from Atlanta to Santiago, Chile. Just, what, last year or two years ago, Minneapolis and Chicago to Dublin for \$123 round trip.

And then my personal favorite, because it's because I'm selfish, and it's one I took years ago, I think this must have been in 2018. Uh, Hong Kong Airlines round trip in business class to Vietnam, Thailand, and China for I think it was as low as \$560 round trip instead of \$5,600 round trip in business class. So those are the ones where it's like that's not just like one year of your membership paid for, that's a lifetime of a membership paid for.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Alex: 100%. Which, speaking of membership, if anybody listening wants to subscribe, check out the link in our show notes. New subscribers will get \$20 off their first year. You're going to want it every year, though. Like this, people ask us all the time, if there was one service you guys were going to pay for of all the services out there, which would you do, which would you do? And we always say Thrifty Traveler Premium. That's what we would pay for. So check out that link.

Gunnar: Yeah, thank you. That's really nice of you. And I mean, you all are people, and your listeners are our people. I mean, we're all travel sickos, whether or not you have all cities turned on or not. And I mean, this is what it's all about. And it's just it's really fun to hear you guys uh talk about the service as well because obviously we're we're extremely proud of it and um it's clear you see the value in it too. So thank you for the kind words.

Jess: Yeah, I mean, you know, we're moms, we have a lot of parents in our audience who don't have, I think most people don't have time to be spending hours and hours searching these deals, but especially if you've got kids and extracurriculars and recitals and concerts and I don't have time to be searching these things for my family

So just knowing that I have y'all, y'all have my back, and I'm going to just follow the deal that you've sent in my email is, yeah, gives me some peace of mind there. All right, we are going to do some rapid fire questions to end the episode. I always like this. So, number one, best loyalty program right now?

Gunnar: I would say Air Canada Aeroplan continues to impress me all the time. Great partner availability, pretty easy to use website, not bad taxes and fees. I like Aeroplan a lot right now.

Kyle: I would go with any of the Avios airlines, British Airways, especially Finnair, especially Qatar Airways if you want to fly Qsuites, mostly because you have that flexibility to turn BA Avios into Finnair, into Qatar, into Iberia, into Aer Lingus. So it's like a five-for-one.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

I will note that Gunnar and I did an episode of the, of our podcast, drafting our favorite loyalty programs, and he chose Aeroplan first, and I chose Avios first, and Gunnar won. So I do think the people have spoken as to which one is truly the best.

Jess: All right, most underhyped airline for business class.

Gunnar: Mine would be Swiss. I mean, first of all, the availability is usually pretty good, so uh, the best availability, or the best ability is availability. Um, but I think it was really comfy. I flew it with my wife. It was really comfy for a couple. We were in kind of the seats side by side. The service was outstanding. We had the best flight attendant we've ever had on that flight. The lounges in Zurich are great. And, you know, who wouldn't want to go to Switzerland? They also have great connectivity onward to the rest of Europe and the rest of the world, too. But I really loved my time flying Swiss.

Kyle: Mine is uh EVA Air in Taiwan. My wife and I have flown it twice, including once in one of the special Hello Kitty flights, which was by accident, but was hilarious.

Alex: Oh, Jess is so jealous. She's so jealous right now.

Jess: I'm jealous.

Kyle: Jess, when we're done, I'll send you the story I wrote after I flew it off ranking every single amenity and item on the flight based on its respective hello kittiness out of five kitties. It was so over the top. But for real, though, EVA is to me the quintessential best business class flight. It's also, most of these flights are 14, 15 hours or more, so it needs to be extra special, but it absolutely is from the seat to the service and everything. I've done it twice. I would do it again in a heartbeat.

Unfortunately, it's gotten a lot harder to book in the last two years, unless if you actually transfer, I think both Capital One and Citi points transfer to EVA, and they're giving their members all of that availability now, not to Star Alliance Airlines.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Jess: All right, now on the flip side, most overhyped business class.

Gunnar: I would say Delta One is probably the most overhyped just because the difference, the disparity in Delta One products, you know, you have the Delta One suites on the A350 or the A330 900 Neo, and those are like, you know, cream of the crop, some of the best business classes in the world. And then you get some of the some of the 767s and some of the A330s flying around with just ancient, decrepit business class seats, and they're charging the same thing because they know most people don't know or care. So they're just, you know, they just they'll they're going to fly those planes until they can't fly anymore. So I would say just because of that disparity, Delta One.

Kyle: I would say this is a little bit of a zag, almost anything with a door. I think enclosed suites are overhyped with exceptions, I think. Gunnar talked about flying ANA's the room. It's incredible. It's so spacious. The Qsuite with a door is incredible because it's spacious. But all of these other airlines that have added doors to their business class suites, most of them just become more narrow. So yes, it's private, but it comes at the expense of space. And if I had to pick one over the other, I would say just give me a little bit more space, and I'm okay with looking at another human being on this plane. Like, I'm going to be fine, guys.

Jess: I've actually told I told Alex and Pam, the best sleep I ever got on a business class flight was in Turkish Airlines ancient business class that's three, two, three or three, two, three because it's so, oh I mean it's terrible if you're flying solo, you have to climb over someone in business class to go to the bathroom. But it's so open and spacious. Like, I slept so well, whereas I agree with you with the doors, I feel claustrophobic. Like, I can't move, and I'm not a particularly large person, and so I can only imagine if you're like six feet or more, how difficult it is to get comfortable in that seat.

Kyle: Yeah, I think doors have just become a crutch for airlines. It's like they have to do it, and so they throw in a door no matter what, no matter what the cost is. And I think for probably a vast majority of the business class cabins in the sky, they just don't really need it. It's just they do it because they feel like they have to, and that's unfortunate, I think.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Jess: All right, points currency you would hoard if you could only pick one.

Gunnar: Well, by virtue of the fact that I live in Minneapolis at a Delta Fortress, I probably have to choose Flying Blue. It gives you some flexibility, but also the ability to book Delta flights if I need to. And they do offer some really good rates on those short Delta flights, which I end up taking all the time. I use Flying Blue to book Delta probably more than I use SkyMiles to book Delta. Um, so I'd guess I'd hoard Flying Blue.

Kyle: That would be mine, too. You know, not just for the Delta-operated flights where you can, you know, book Delta One for as low as 60,000 Flying Blue miles instead of, you know, the norm of 300,000 SkyMiles or more. But also, there are a lot of different good partners that you can book for much lower rates, like China Airlines to Southeast Asia and a handful of others. At my honorable, very, very honorable mention would be World of Hyatt. I think that just gets you so, so far.

Jess: We are big Hyatt girlies over here, so I agree with you on that one. All right, first program you would recommend to a beginner.

Gunnar: Okay, so maybe this is cheating to pick a flexible program, but I would say always start earning Chase Ultimate Rewards®, Chase points. We just talked about Hyatt. We're also big Hyatt girlies here, and uh, I love booking hot. I mean, it's you can't do better with hotel programs and Chase transfers to Hyatt. And Chase also just has a really good list of transfer partners. And you know, because of that 5/24 rule, signing up for Chase cards usually should be a priority for most travelers. So I would say jump into Chase, and you'll see how good it is, and Chase is a good gateway drug for travelers.

Kyle: Mine would be Capital One, because I mean, I agree, I think it's important to start quickly with Chase, but I think everybody needs an easier entry point to make sure that this is something that they want to spend their time and their credit on. And Capital One just gives you the best of both worlds.

You can go down the rabbit hole of learning about transfer partners and booking, you know, \$5000, \$6,000 business class flights for 50,000 or 60,000 points if

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

you want to. But if you don't want to, there's still the option to, you know, book any travel, any travel whatsoever, pay it, pay it with your Capital One card, and then go back and erase that so that a \$500 flight is 50,000 miles. I think having both of those things to fall back on, um, just makes it really valuable and well worth sacrificing one of those 5/24 slots just to make sure that this is something that you really want to do.

Jess: I like that because a lot of our a lot of people in our audience, you know, they want to book Disney tickets with their miles or they want to, you know, use it on rental cars or things that you that it's a little trickier to use points and miles on traditionally. So it allows them to be able to do those, or vacation rentals. You know, we have a lot of families who don't want to stay in a hotel room. They need like a two or three bedroom vacation rental. So being able to put their miles or points towards those is really helpful.

All right, last question, the product you are most wanting to fly that you have not flown yet.

Gunnar: Mine, hopefully, will be checked off the list in a matter of days, but Finnair business class on the A350, that those the seat that doesn't recline. You just kind of put a little insert in, and it just becomes a lie-flat bed. And supposedly, these seats are just enormous. And I'm flying with my wife and my six-month-old to Helsinki and then on up to Lapland in just a matter of days. We're taking uh my six-month-old daughter to meet Santa Claus at Santa Claus Village, and she's flying business class to do it all for her first Christmas. So should really set expectations for what her life is like

Alex: I mean, that's what you got to do, right? She's a points and miles baby.

Gunnar: That's right. The AA flagship lounge in Dallas is your birthright, sweetheart. This is, this is your life now.

Kyle: It's probably good you're doing this before she has the ability to form memories.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Gunnar: Right. Yeah, exactly. We'll show her someday how she got there. But yeah, I'm excited to try out these seats just because they're unique and kind of unlike anything else out there. And I wonder if they'll like the not-reclining seat is going to be comfy. It looks like they throw a bunch of pillows in there and, but I don't know what it's going to be like. So I'm interested to see.

Alex: Well, I'm interested to hear about it. So, I'll be waiting for the report back.

Gunnar: I'll circle back.

Kyle: Mine is Japan Airlines' new business but especially first class on their A350, which currently I think is flying from Dallas, LA, and New York City. It just looks otherworldly, especially those first-class suites. There's only six. They're massive. Huge privacy partitions, ones that actually matter and don't come at the expense of extra space. I've flown JAL's older first class before, and it is still one of my favorite flights ever. It is probably my favorite flight ever because of the service and the food. And when you have that in like a brand new massive first-class suite, I just can't imagine it wasn't one of the best experiences in commercial aviation. Not that my expectations aren't like impossibly high or anything.

Gunnar: Wait, can we flip it on you? I would love to hear your answers, Alex and Jess.

Alex: For the flight that we're most looking wanting to take?

Gunnar: Yeah, the product. The product that you really want to fly.

Kyle: We're bringing our on-the-spot category into your podcast. This is cheating.

Alex: Yeah, you are. It's all good. Okay, Jess, are you ready? I got to think, if you, I can go, if not, but.

Jess: I want to fly Singapore Suites. I've never done that before, and it looks amazing. So I think that would probably be my number one.

Kyle: That's a really good one.

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

Alex: Um, can I copy her?

Jess: We could fly together, and we could turn our suite into like a little double bed and cuddle.

Alex: Yeah, well...

Kyle: You guys need to do that for the content. Seriously.

Alex: Right. Well, you guys will never believe it, but Pam has flown Singapore Suites. We flew, yeah, she flew that, and I was with her, but I was in lowly business class. And so I did get to come up, and I took some pictures of her in her suite. The flight attendants were super nice. They were like, "Oh, come up and visit your mom." And so it was, I mean, I got to see it. I got to sit down on her chair for a minute and then lay in her bed for a second, and then I was like, "All right, I guess I better go back to my seat in business class." But no, that would be, that'd be amazing. There's a lot that I would love to try, so that would be one of them for sure.

Kyle: It's a very good one.

Alex: Yeah. All right. Well, thank you, guys, so much for coming on the show. I know Jess, and I learned some stuff. We're super excited. We're going to hop off this and go look at some flights to book. But if our audience wants to learn more from the two of you, where can they hear from you?

Gunnar: Yeah, well, first of all, thank you so much for having us. Like, this is a really fun show. We really admire all the work you do. And you came on our show and gave us one of our best podcasts of the year just this last week.

Alex: Oh, well, you're way too nice.

Gunnar: So, if everyone wants to go ahead and listen, it was a really fun episode. We had a ton of fun recording. But yeah, you can find all of our travel coverage at thriftytraveler.com. You can find us on social media at Thrifty Traveler everywhere, on our own podcast, the Thrifty Traveler Podcast. You can

Ep #163: Booking Award Travel and Business Class Deals with Thrifty Traveler

find it on Thursday mornings on YouTube and anywhere else that you get your podcast.

And yeah, to sign up for Thrifty Traveler Premium if you're interested, use the link in your show notes here on this episode to get \$20 off your first year. And if you're on the fence, uh, we also have a free version of the service that sends out a lot of cash deals and the occasional points and miles deal, just so you can dip your toe in the water and see if you like what you see, and give it a test.

Alex: Okay, thanks, guys.

Kyle: Thank you so much for having us. This has been a blast.

Gunnar: Thank you. Thank you.

Thanks so much for listening to *Points Talk*®. Make sure to hit the subscribe or follow button from wherever you're listening so you never miss an episode. Wanna start jet setting even faster? Follow the links in the show notes to learn about everything we discussed in today's episode. And to stay connected and follow along, follow us on Instagram @PointsTalkSquad. We can't wait to see where in the world points and miles take you.