

# Ep #174: Making Your African Safari More Affordable with Points and Miles



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

**Alex Payne, Jess Field, and Pam Lorg**

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Jess: An African safari is one of those bucket list trips that feels completely out of reach for most families. But what if you could fly there using points, stay at safari lodges with points, and even offset some of the cost with the right credit cards? Today, we're breaking down the best ways to use points and miles to make a safari way more affordable.

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.

Pam: Hey, I'm Pam.

Jess: And I'm Jess. Let's talk points.

Pam: So Megan and Jess both recently returned from safaris in Tanzania with their families. And we talked about this last week in Part One. We discussed their itineraries in detail, but now we want to help you learn how you can make a safari more affordable with points. In Part Two, we'll be breaking down both flight and hotel options on points.

Jess: Alright, so we are going to start it out with flight options for getting to Africa. We're going to focus on Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa. I feel like those are probably a few of the more popular safari options. This is not, I'm going to say it from the beginning, this is not an exhaustive list of flights or hotels. Because every week we have people listen and they message us and they're like, "But what about this? Well, you didn't talk about this." I'm saying it right now. This is not an exhaustive list. There are other options. These are just a few of our favorites, and that we think could make sense for you.

So Pam is going to start us off because she's actually going to Kenya this summer. She's been before, but previously was not able to actually do her safari. We have, we have a podcast episode about that. I don't remember which

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number it is, but it's, I think the title is something like, "Pam's African Safari That Didn't Happen." So if you want to hear, if you want to hear about that, you can listen to that episode. But so tell us this, so you're going in June, is that right, Pam?

Pam: Yeah, yes. We're going the start of June. Now, we started, so we've been on, this is our third safari that we've planned. So technically, we went twice. The first time my husband got kidney stones. The second time, the day before, we were in the island of Mauritius ready to go the next day into Kenya to the JW Marriott, Masai Mara. And I got a text, I can't remember if it's a text or an email, saying that it had all been canceled. I mean, that's just like a blow to the heart. You're leaving the next day.

But I mean, it was massive flooding, more flooding they'd had. I mean, there were, um, livestock, there were animals lost, there were some lives lost. It was a mess over there. I was just very grateful that we found out before and felt very bad for all those that got caught up in that. So we have rebooked.

Now my deal for Masai Mara for the JW Marriott was a kind of an introductory offer. It was super cheap. And I thought, "Oh, shoot, now, not only am I not going to get to go, now I'm going to have to pay a higher price." Well, they were with a lot of stick-to-itiveness on my part.

Jess: Persistence.

Pam: Persistence, yes. And saying, you know, that this was not my, out of my control, would they possibly think of honoring this old price? They have agreed to do so, which is really, really kind of them. They did not have to do it. And I would have, you know, I was even hoping they could even just get kind of the discounted price. So anyway, we are going to recreate what we didn't do.

I've been to Kenya before. Kenya, Nairobi was very interesting because we did fly in there before we went to Mauritius, flew back, stayed at the JW Marriott in Kenya, which was a beautiful hotel, one of my favorites.

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So getting to Kenya this summer, I found flights from New York City on booked through VA, but we're flying in Kenya Air business class. And so that's how we're getting there. I know that it was under 100,000. I think it was around 80,000 points business class, which I feel is a great deal.

Coming back from Nairobi, we are flying my beloved Qsuites. So I'm excited about that, from Nairobi to Doha. I mean, I'm sorry, to Dallas. And so it's, uh, you know, pretty, it's wasn't very expensive either. So those are the two ways. I will tell you the way that we got over to Tanzania beforehand was we booked on United and flew Ethiopian Airlines. I'd never heard of Ethiopian Airlines. I remember coming back from Zanzibar, I saw the Qatar airplanes. I was going, shoot, wish I was flying that. Because, you know, Ethiopian Airlines was okay. It definitely was one of the least luxury business classes that I've flown.

Now, if that's my only choice, lay-flat seat or a nicer airline, you know, in economy or economy plus, I'm going to take Ethiopian business class. And it could have been just our flights. You know, it could have been the planes that we were on. So, you know, I would never say that it's not ever good. I just didn't particularly like mine. So that's how we're doing it. So, Jess is going to go on with some other ways of some other flight options to get you on your safari.

Jess: Yeah. So I think if business class is your goal, then Qatar is 100% Qsuite is going to be your best option. There are two business saver awards released per flight, and you can snag those for 85,000 miles each way, you know, all the way from the US to Kenya or Tanzania or South Africa. That's what we flew. We flew from Houston with a layover in Doha. And so if there's only two of you, I think that is going to be the best way to fly there in style if you want to do business class. I will say those get snatched up quickly. And so you're going to want to book those two Qsuite saver award flights as soon as the Qatar award calendar opens up, which is exactly what I did.

If you're okay with economy, they also have really good deals in economy. So from Washington, D. C. to Kilimanjaro or Nairobi, Megan and her family flew, y'all flew D. C. to Kilimanjaro. Yep. Right? With a layover in Doha. It was 42,500 miles per person. That's a great deal if you're okay with economy. And then

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47,500 to South Africa. So, again, I think either of those is a great option. Megan, I think, I know you didn't love the food in economy, but I feel like, you know, for a long flight in economy, Qatar offers a good hard product.

Megan: I totally agree.

Pam: I didn't love the food in business class on Ethiopian either. So I would rather pay less.

Megan: You can't win them all. And honestly, I just looked at these prices this morning, and on Qatar especially, there is a lot of economy availability. So if you have a bigger family, that is a really, really a great option to with that's very reasonable to spend about 40 to 50,000 points each way to get on a what total 20-hour trip. Like you're flying 14 hours to Doha and then 6 hours to Tanzania or even further to South Africa. So that's a really good price.

Jess: Yeah. No, you can't really, you can't really beat that. And like she was saying, you do not have to book right at award opening for economy. You have a little more time to wait for that one.

Another option that I looked into when I was booking flights was Flying Blue. So Air France and KLM both fly to Nairobi and Tanzania. You just have to have, you'll have a layover in either Paris if you fly Air France or Amsterdam if you fly KLM. And they offer a 25% award discount for those award flights for kids under 12. And so you can find some really great deals.

I feel like their pricing isn't as predictable as Qatar's is because or at least not business class. I know economy is probably a little bit more predictable. But some example prices that Megan pulled up was like Washington, D. C. to Nairobi, Kenya for 40,000 miles a person. That's pretty amazing. And then you would get 25% off of that price for kids under 12.

Chicago to Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, again, 40,000 miles per person, premium economy 88,000 miles per person. That's, that's pretty decent for, I mean, it's hard to pay 88,000 for that when you could pay 85,000 for Qatar, but I'm assuming maybe availability is a little bit better on Flying Blue. So 88,000 miles

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in premium economy, 128,500 in business class. Again, those business-class flights are going to be harder to find.

Flying Blue isn't even one where you can book at opening. I feel like they are constantly changing their premium economy and business class prices, and it's kind of just dynamic all over the place. So a little harder to find. And then Flying Blue, New York City to Cape Town or Johannesburg, South Africa, the same 40,000 miles per person in economy. Megan found some for 65,000 per person in premium economy, which I think is really good. There aren't as many good options in business class on that route. She found some for 182,500 points per person. So a little trickier for that one.

I will say for both of these options, another reason we wanted to talk about them is for Qatar, so you can transfer one-to-one directly to Qatar if you have Amex Membership Rewards®, Capital One Venture Miles, Citi ThankYou® Points, or Bilt points. So all four of those transfer directly to Qatar. And Qatar uses Avios, which is the loyalty program of British Airways, Aer Lingus, Finnair. And so, like, you can't transfer from Chase to Qatar, but you can transfer from Chase to British Airways and then from British Airways to Qatar.

And then with Flying Blue, we already know that all of the major programs transfer one-to-one to Flying Blue. And so these are also really good programs because while these sound like a lot of points and miles required, it's also a lot easier to rack those up versus something like United, where really Chase and Bilt are your only options for United miles. So we love the flexibility of these two programs.

And then lastly, the other option I looked at was Turkish Airlines. This one is a little bit trickier because I think only Citi, Capital One, and Bilt transfer to Turkish. And so, a little bit trickier to build up your Turkish Airlines miles, but you can fly economy from the US to Kenya or Tanzania for 65,000 miles in economy, 75,000 miles in economy to South Africa.

The other trick is, this is where something like Thrifty Traveler Premium comes in handy, you can sometimes find flights from the US to Istanbul in business

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class for 65,000 miles. That's the longer flight of the two. So like, if you're only going to have one portion in business class, that's the one you want to have.

So you could fly, like I could fly from Houston to Istanbul for 65,000 miles in business class, and then I could fly from on a separate ticket, Istanbul to Kenya or Tanzania or South Africa. And I wouldn't mind flying economy for that one because it's it's a shorter flight. And so Istanbul to Nairobi, I found 25,000 miles in economy. I think it was, it was more, it was 55,000 to Tanzania and I think 75,000 to South Africa. But if you're going to Kenya, this could be a really great option if you find business class to Istanbul for 65,000 and then flew from Istanbul to Nairobi for 25,000. I think that would be a pretty great deal.

Like I said, also several options with US airlines like United, Delta, AA, just a little bit harder to rack up hundreds of thousands of those kind of points. I'm going to, I was looking at it, and like Atlanta has a direct flight on Delta from Atlanta to Cape Town or Atlanta to Johannesburg.

I don't want to know how many Delta SkyMiles that's going to cost you because they tend to charge out the wazoo. I mean, maybe you could look at booking through Virgin Atlantic, and that might get you a better deal. But yeah, it's just a little bit harder to rack up United miles and AA miles, especially when you're trying to accumulate like 500,000 of them for your entire family to fly round-trip to and from Africa.

We love Flight Connections. It's a website where you can put in where you're starting and where you're going to and it kind of breaks down all the possible routes. That's what I When I first started planning my trip to Tanzania, I went to Flight Connections. I put in IAH Houston to Kilimanjaro, and I saw, okay, which options for flights? Like, I only want one stop. What are my options for carriers? Okay, let me go check their award calendars and see. So we love the Flight Connections website for this if you're planning your trip.

Alright, Megan is going to, we're going to move on to some points options for your lodging. If you want to do a safari and you want to pay points for the whole thing. In Part One, we talked about how we used points for our flights, but then when it came to our lodging and our transportation, we kind of hired out a travel

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agent to handle all of that for us. But if you want to do the whole thing on points, it is possible. So Megan is going to go over some options for lodging on points.

Megan: Alright, and a little bit of a spoiler, this is the trip I'm trying to plan for next summer.

Jess: Already? You're already going back?

Megan: So, so you could go to Cape Town, South Africa. There is a Hyatt Regency there. It's a Category One. There have been rave reviews for this hotel in our big Facebook group. People love it. There's a club lounge. You can get multiple rooms for bigger families, and it's really not that many points because it's a Category One.

And there are some places nearby where you can do a safari trip, like you can coordinate with like a driver where they take you out. These are not places you can go and do self-driving. So this isn't something where you're going to rent a car and go drive through a park yourself. You need to have like a licensed safari guide take you. But I think if you're paying for your hotel with points, it would really be probably not that crazy to hire a driver for a couple days for a couple hours each day.

So there's the best places to visit based off of my initial research. We just got back like a week ago, so I'm...

Jess: So, this is so you want to go to Cape Town and do this exact trip.

Megan: I want to go to Cape Town, and then I want to go to Johannesburg and go to Kruger National Park. And we can just do basically South Africa.

Jess: So you want to like combo, you want to combo it.

Megan: So I don't even know, I'm probably going to pronounce this wrong. Aquila, Aquila Game Reserve, Inverdoorn, and Sanbona Wildlife Reserve are all within two to three hours of Cape Town. So if you have your hotel there and you hire your driver for the day, you could probably get your box lunches and pack your lunch and just go out for the day, and then come back to your hotel in the

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evening. Some of these reserves have lodges inside of them, and you could even just do like overnight packages or just the day trip idea, which is kind of like what I'm thinking to keep the cost down.

Jess: I will link all of these in the show notes so that people aren't having to like take notes and try and figure out what you're saying, because I agree with you, some of these are a little bit harder to pronounce. So I will link them all in the show notes.

Pam: The other thing is we do have a couple reader success stories where people have done similar things where they have gone somewhere different and then they have done the renting someone for the day. So I would encourage people to get on the website and search Africa, and you're going to find some other ideas from readers like you or members of the community like you.

Megan: Yeah. So then the next option would be to go to Johannesburg, and that's near Kruger National Park. And so you can do your own self-driving safaris here. So you could rent a car, use those travel credits on your Venture X or whatever, and just go out for the day.

I will say now, after kind of experiencing a safari, I do think having a guide is worth it if you can afford that. It's not easy. It's sometimes where our driver and guide were spotting animals, we literally were like, how did you even see that? The grass was so tall, and there's six lions sleeping under that tree. And so, like having a professional really can make a difference. But I do think just if you're going to have a day or two and you're like, let's go drive through the park and see what we can find, and you have no expectations, I think that would be a really great way to do it and keep that cost down.

Jess: Honestly never crossed my mind because there were there were a couple times where animals started kind of moving towards us, and the driver had to gun it and drive away. And I think I would pee myself if I were if I were self-driving and that happened.

Pam: I couldn't do that either, Jess. I actually asked them to please keep me as the person that was furthest away from the animals after a while. You know, as

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we're seeing the lions, you know, eating on a giraffe, and I'm right on top of it. I'm like, could we move this so I'm furthest away?

Megan: I will say I did get nervous a couple times because same thing, like we were so close and there were where two male lions and four female lions and cubs and they're all sleeping, and our driver just pulled right up next to them up at TAASA Lodge, and the male lion lifted his head, and I think my heart stopped. I was like, and our driver and tracker were like, "It's okay. They're like, it's fine. They don't see you as a threat. They don't see you as food. It's not a big deal." And I was like, I know you're saying that, but my brain is not processing that.

Pam: And they don't even have guns. They don't have nothing with them. 'Cause I just I just felt very confident that they had guns if they needed to have them. And when I found that out, I was like, please keep me far away.

Jess: No, I had a video I shared.

Pam: Let them get my husband first.

Jess: I had a video I shared in stories and it was like I'm taking a video of this lion, and it looks straight at me and just licks his lips. And I was like, okay, can we move along now? I don't think this lion wants me near him.

Megan: Alright, so another great option in Johannesburg, which is kind of, I don't know if this is new, but I feel like we've just started hearing about it, but Leopard Sands Lodge, it's bookable through Marriott points for as low as 90,000 points per night. And if you have flexible dates and you max occupancy of each room is two, I would assume they probably charge a hefty fee to add a third person if you were a family of five and you needed two rooms. But you do get the fifth night free on Marriott award booking. So that could be a really great option.

I'm going to get into the JW Marriott Masai Mara next, but that one has gone up significantly in the last couple of years. So this Leopard Sands Lodge, I would definitely look into that one if you're two people or four people and you might not need to pay extra for anybody else.

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Pam: Do you know is it are any game or any drives included with that or is that or the drives on top of that, I would imagine at that?

Megan: I'm honestly not totally sure. Somebody literally just this morning posted in our Facebook group they just booked it. Okay. And these are all these ideas are ideas that people have shared that they have booked. And so, but somebody had a really rave review about it. So I don't know how much extra it would cost to stay.

Jess: I'm looking it up right now, and it has really amazing reviews. Like it has 4.8 stars on Google reviews. I have actually seen that this lodge mentioned in a few different Facebook groups I'm in. So I don't know if like, maybe it wasn't, maybe it's more recently a Marriott, you know, or I don't know, but I've, but it's definitely, I feel like if you have a family, this one is much more doable than the Masai Mara that, uh, Megan's about to get into.

Megan: Yeah. And honestly, now that we're all talking about it, if you want to book it, I would go book it now. As Marriott changes their award pricing, as soon as this gets more popular and some traction, the price is going to go up.

Pam: Yeah, the one that you're going to talk about next in Kenya started out at 75k a night. And you know, as you're going to tell us in a minute, it's a lot more than that now.

Jess: Okay, I just looked it up. It says, this is for the Leopard Sands. It says, "Our rate includes all meals, coffee to go, non-alcoholic beverages, boma dinner with traditional African entertainment, and two shared game drives per day with refreshment with refreshments."

Megan: Whoa. That's a deal. Everybody should go book that one if you want to do a safari on point.

Jess: Megan, you better... Is this one you're thinking about?

Megan: I don't think we have enough Marriott points for this. I might maybe I'll find it in the Chase portal. I'll see if it's on Points Boost.

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Jess: Yeah, I don't know if I'll ever... I got to drink a lot of Starbucks to get enough Marriott points to stay there.

Megan: Alright, next is some options in Kenya. So obviously the top option, JW Marriott, Masai Mara. As Pam said, this used to be 75,000 points a night. It is now the lowest nights I can find are 214,000 points per night. And your max occupancy is two people.

A person in our Facebook group said that they had booked it and then inquired about adding their young child like four or five years old on a cash rate. And they said that the cash rate was so crazy that they just canceled the trip. She was like, we're not paying that. So I would assume it's a lot. This is really not a great option. So it was like \$1,200 to add a third person just for the one room for to add a third person to one room.

Jess: Per night? \$1200 per night.

Megan: Yeah, so you might as well just book multiple nights, I guess, if you're sitting in millions of Marriott points, I guess.

Pam: Well, I know that I hadn't, I had checked a while ago, um, and the cost per night, it's I couldn't tell you how much it is now, but at one point, it was \$1,500 per night per person, which really, when you're counting all your food, all your game drives, all the things that go into make a safari, I thought was actually fairly reasonable because safaris can be really pricey. This is not your budget safari too.

This is going to be much more, I believe, in the caliber of TAASA. Um, I've seen the tents, uh, you know, I've read reviews from people on that. This is really, really nice. I'm really excited about this, but I'm even more excited that they're honoring my old price for it because I don't think I could come up with that many Marriott points either to stay. I think we're staying, we're doing the four nights, fifth night free, so.

Jess: And how many points did they work a deal for you?

Pam: They gave me it for the introductory that I had. So I mean, that's just a...

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Jess: You better enjoy it, Pam.

Pam: I know. I know.

Jess: It better not get canceled this time.

Pam: Yeah, really. So they were very kind.

Jess: I think when this hotel first came out and it was at that low points rate, that was an absolute steal. It was. I think now, like when I shared when I shared our trip to Tanzania, I had a lot of people asking like, did you think about going to the JW Marriott, Masai Mara? And I was like, honestly, no, because I would need 1.5 to 2 million Marriott points for our family of five. And I have like 100.

So I'm not, I don't even know how I would potentially rack up that many Marriott points. I think if you're going with two people and you're getting the fifth night free, it's a lot more doable. It's still going to be 800,000 Marriott points, but it's a lot more doable than, you know, a family needing two or three tents at the at the Marriott.

Pam: Yeah. Well, I also think at that price, it might be more worth looking at what it costs in cash to pay there and then just using, you know, staying an extra night with points so it's not costing as much or using your miles to fly over and back and, you know, kind of doing the hybrid model like you guys did.

Jess: Yeah, for sure.

Pam: So I'll let you know, though. I'll keep you posted all about it.

Megan: All right. And then a new option is the Asilia Africa through Hyatt. There are 15 properties through Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, but as we know, when Hyatt adds these fancy partners, they are not the Hyatt award chart. These start around 130,000 Hyatt points per night. Again, the cash rates were around \$1,300 a night for two people, and the lodges are all-inclusive. Everything's included. So, cash rate on this one, and you could just earn a bunch of Hyatt points, might be a better option. But this, I'm honestly considering looking at

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some of these just because I think to just have an option where you can at least earn points on your stay would be a really great option.

Jess: I mean, you'd earn a ton. You'd if you especially if you have a Hyatt card, you're looking at earning a ton of Hyatt points from a stay like that. But I agree with you, though that 100, 130,000 Hyatt points a night is a non-starter.

Megan: Yeah.

Jess: But, you know, \$1,300 per night isn't terrible. The cash rate isn't terrible.

Megan: No. And I mean...

Pam: I want to play devil's advocate with you. Because there that's 130,000 points, and you, it's counting all these other things, but it's, you know, people paying 150,000 Marriott points just to stay on the beach. So, I mean, you know, sometimes we get so used to Hyatt being, you know, so reasonable that was, "I'm not paying that much," but yeah, I've paid that much in Marriott points for a stay that's much less. So I think, you know,

Megan: I mean, now that Bilt is coming out with their new cards, it might be an easy way to rack up those points and... especially if you're two people. I think that's my hang-up. When you're five people, that's a lot of points to stomach.

Pam: Yeah, it does make a big difference. It's a lot easier for me to say when I'm just with two people. Exactly.

Megan: But yeah, but these really looked wonderful. They kind of looked same, along the places that we stayed on our trip, where we paid all cash. And there are so many, so many other options that are even like low, low cash rates. Like there, you can go from actual camping all the way up to beyond luxury, like Ritz-Carlton luxury. And so like, don't again, like Jess said, like these are just some ideas that we have found that are very popular, especially in our Facebook group, where people are constantly sharing what trips they're booking. But there are other options out there.

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Pam: Yeah, and I, we also have written a post about the Silla Africa through Hyatt, so check those out too. You know, I think basically it comes down to when there's just some trips that you have to get away from the idea that you're going to get there for nearly free. You're going to have a huge discount.

Points and miles are going to get you're going to, you know, not have to pay for your flights over and back. You can probably pay for a hotel, um, in the little town in Africa that you're going to stay for a few days before you go on your safari. So, you know, the idea of really not paying for anything is out there a bit. I think I'm going to get pretty close with my, um, Kenya trip, but that's basically because I'm being honored a deal that, you know, isn't going to be honored, you know, any other time.

But there are a couple ways that you can reduce some of your actual costs. And that's with certain credit cards. And so we've talked a lot about the Capital One purchase eraser. Anything that codes is travel, you can erase.

So if you've got some Capital One Venture Miles, maybe through cards that you and your husband have, then, you know, you may be able to say, this is how we want to use it. We really want to get this down as much as possible and use that Purchase Eraser.

Now, if you don't have the Venture, the Venture X, you'll have to start with the Venture card first because they've got that new family rule, and you'll want to get that one first because you can't get the welcome offer on both of them in 48 months. And so you're going to have to wait 48 months, too. So to get the Venture X. So that slows you down a little bit. But you know, get your husband on it, you get on it, get some Capital One business cards too, you can end up saving, you know, getting quite a few Capital One Venture Miles. That's an idea.

Another idea is a card that I haven't ever gotten. I know Jess got this is a cashback card like the Chase Ink Premier®, which I believe usually offers about a thousand dollars back as its welcome offer, and then you can just take that cashback and plunk that right onto your safari. And I think just did that for a Disney Cruise. It won't count for your 5/24, you and your husband get it, you've got at least \$2,000 that you've saved, because it doesn't earn transferable

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Ultimate Rewards® points, but definitely a way, something that you can think about.

Jess: Yeah, I totally agree, and I agree with your statement about, you know, there are a lot of people who are like, "I need to get my flights and my hotel covered, or I'm not doing it right. I'm doing something wrong." And I would say on a trip like this, give yourself permission if you have the funds to not try and cover every single thing.

In Part One, I talked about, you know, I flew my family of five round-trip in business class to Tanzania. The cash price of those flights would have been \$28,000. Now, I'm not going to say I saved \$28,000 because I never would have paid cash for those, but I got \$28,000 in flights for just maybe a thousand or two dollars in taxes. And that's nothing to sneeze at, you know? And so do what you can and use your points the way you want to use them. You do you, and just try and make it work for you.

Pam: You know, absolutely. Points and miles can turn your dream African safari into reality. You've seen how it's done it for the three of us. I'm going to head a fourth time. It I mean, yeah, no, third time. Megan's already planning, and she just got back from a trip.

So we hope that you found this episode fun, inspirational. It's giving you some ideas on how you can leverage points and miles for your flights, your hotel, maybe even both. If you enjoyed our episode today, be sure to leave us a review. It really helps other people find our podcast, and we really appreciate it. We appreciate your support so much. Let us know if you get that safari trip planned with points and miles.

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