A LIFE

Well Traveled

PHASE 2 OF 3 · THE COMPLETE FIELD GUIDE

Points & Miles, Phase Two: Earn

Earning points fast without spending a cent more: welcome offers, bonus categories and card pairing, and how to pick a real trip and run the numbers.

PHASE 1 · CHOOSE | **PHASE 2 · EARN** | PHASE 3 · REDEEM

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PHASE 2 · LESSONS 5–7

Earn a lot, fast

Knowing what points are is one thing. Knowing how to earn a lot of them without spending a cent more is Phase 2. This is where it starts to click.

INTRO

Now let's talk earning

The foundation, then the fast lane

Quick refresher: miles and points are reward currencies. The airlines and hotels you transfer them to are the stores where you spend that currency. **That's the whole foundation.** In this phase you will learn to earn on groceries, gas, even your internet bill. It starts to feel like finding money you did not know you had.

This phase's four topics

- **Welcome offers:** the fastest way to a big balance
- **Bonus categories and card pairings:** thousands of extra points a year
- **Earning toward a goal:** a specific trip and a rough timeline to earn it
- **Perks you may already have** in a card you underuse

The fast lane

The fastest and best way to earn points and miles is a **welcome bonus**. The next lesson goes deep on how they work.

LESSON 5

All about welcome offers

The fastest way to earn a ton of points

TL;DR

Welcome offers are the fastest way to earn a huge chunk of points, as long as you do not overspend to hit them.

A welcome offer is the bank's way of saying thanks for joining. The formula never changes:

Spend [X amount] in [Y months] → Earn [Z points]

Amounts and time frames vary by card. Sometimes banks run a bigger, limited-time promotion, called a **limited-time offer (LTO)**. For truly extraordinary ones, deal-tracking newsletters send a special alert and flag when the offer is nearly over.

WELCOME OFFERS, CONTINUED

The four questions everyone asks about welcome offers

1 · Should I wait for a better limited-time offer?

The advice is not to wait. Open a card when you are ready. You never know when a special offer will appear, and just because a card had one at this time last year does not mean it will again. A card's past offer history can give context if you want it.

2 · What will applying do to my credit score?

The hard inquiry temporarily dings your score, usually **5 to 10 points**. For most people with good credit that is minor, and it typically recovers within a month or two.

BUT DO NOT APPLY FOR CARD AFTER CARD AFTER CARD

Taking on too much credit too quickly flags you as a risk. Banks wonder whether you lost your job, or are about to run up debt. Some issuers will automatically decline you if you have opened **5 or more cards in the last 24 months**. That is the well-known **5/24 rule**.

3 · Can I earn the same welcome offer twice?

Often **no**. The rule varies by bank (a few cards allow it twice), but generally, "you only get one shot." If you earned the bonus on a card, closed it, and later reapply during another active offer, you may not earn it again, although there are exceptions to this.

4 · What is the golden rule?

Never overspend to hit a bonus. Only count expenses you were already planning to make: the annual insurance premium, the property tax bill, a needed appliance, a business supply run. If hitting the minimum would require buying things you would not otherwise buy, the offer is not worth it.

WELCOME OFFERS RECAP

- Welcome offers are the fastest way to earn a big chunk of points.
- Open a card when you are ready, not because you are waiting for something better that may never come.
- Do not apply for too many cards too quickly.
- You often cannot earn a welcome bonus twice on the same card.

The planned-expense examples above are my own illustrations of the rule.

LESSON 6

The mistake almost everyone makes

Bonus categories and card pairings

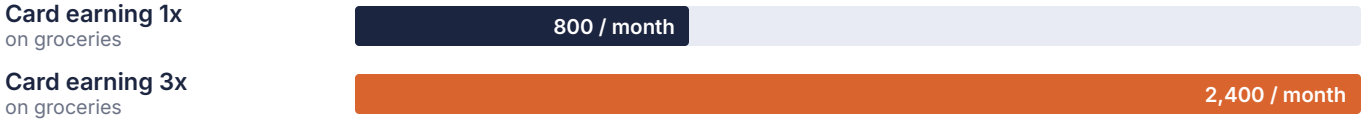
TL;DR

Not all purchases earn the same. Matching the right card to the right category can earn you 20,000+ extra points a year without spending a cent more.

The common mistake: when you start out, it is easy to put *everything* on one card. More spending means more points, right? Not quite. Every card has specific categories where it earns **more**, and a catch-all **base rate** for everything else. If you spend heavily in a category your card barely rewards, you leave points on the table every month.

The math on groceries

Say you spend **$800 a month on groceries** (not outrageous for a family right now).



Difference: +1,600 points a month, or +19,200 a year (9,600 vs. 28,800). That is the "nearly 20,000."

That is one category with zero extra spending. Now imagine doing the same across all your major categories.

What are bonus categories?

A **spend multiplier** is how many points you earn per dollar in a category (the earlier Amazon card earning 5x cash back is one). Most travel cards bonus at least a few of these:

- Dining and restaurants
- Groceries and supermarkets
- Flights and hotels booked directly with the airline or hotel
- Streaming services
- Gas stations
- Online shopping, and more

The trick is matching the card to where **you** actually spend, not where marketing says the "average person" spends.

Card pairing: powerful, but optional

No single card earns the most on everything. Most seasoned points travelers carry two or three cards (or many more) and use the right one for each purchase. A very common setup:

Card A

Earns the most on **dining and travel**

Card B

Earns the most on **groceries and everyday** spending

Everything else

Goes on whichever has the **best base rate**

NO PRESSURE

You do not have to open multiple cards right away. Go at your own pace. **Your one assignment:** look up what your current card earns in each major category. You may be pleasantly surprised, or you may spot a gap that tells you what a second card should do.

LESSON 7

Pick a trip, any trip

Let's run the numbers

TL;DR

Stop thinking about points in the abstract. Pick a real trip, run the rough numbers, and suddenly this whole thing makes sense.

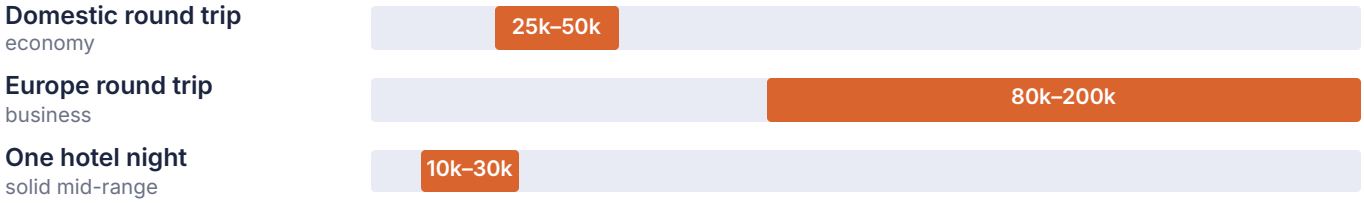
Welcome bonuses and category earning are the mechanics. What actually gets people moving is a *specific* trip. This lesson is a four-step visualization exercise.

Step 1 · Pick something

It does not have to be fully planned or even realistic yet, just exciting enough to motivate you. Examples from people who did the exercise: flying home to see Mom more than once a year; an Italy trip for a 10th anniversary that had been "someday" for years; a frequent business traveler (6'3") who just wanted a decent seat; a weekend surprise visit to a best friend in Phoenix. Write yours down, even in a phone note.

Step 2 · Get a rough sense of the points cost

Rough scale, before going deep on redemptions:



Scale runs 0 to 200,000 points. Business class to Europe is often cited at 80k–200k round trip.

Domestic example (round trip)

OPTION	ROUND-TRIP POINTS	TAXES & FEES
Better deal	27,000	$11.20
Other option	45,000	$11.20

WATCH THIS: NOT EVERY CARD TRANSFERS TO EVERY AIRLINE

To use points on **American Airlines** you would need a **Citi** card. **Southwest** needs a different card again. Knowing which cards transfer to which airlines can help you choose your card in the first place. A transfer-partner chart maps it out, and creative workarounds exist.

PLANNING A TRIP, CONTINUED

Same trip, three very different prices

Example: a trip to Paris, from Cleveland. There are no nonstop flights, so we have to connect somewhere anyway. That gives us a choice, so we picked the best options for our situation. The lowest points price is not automatically the best deal, because **taxes and fees** change the story.

CONNECT THROUGH	AIRLINE	POINTS	TAXES & FEES
Minneapolis	Delta	125,000	$5.60
Boston	United Airlines	115,000	$5.60
Chicago	Air France	60,000	$336.40

WHAT THIS EXAMPLE SHOWS

Sometimes **lower points means higher taxes**. Chicago on Air France is the fewest points (60,000) and the most cash ($336.40). But it is not always that way: Boston and Minneapolis both cost just $5.60 in taxes, yet Minneapolis asks for 10,000 more points.

POSITIONING

Positioning means getting yourself to the airport where the better deal departs or connects. Here the connection city decides which airline carries you across the Atlantic, and that airline decides the price. Sometimes positioning is built into one ticket, like these three routes. Other times it means booking a separate flight to a hub first. If you do that, leave plenty of buffer, because an airline will not protect you on a missed connection from a separate ticket.

Which is best? That is up to you. Fewest points, lowest cash outlay, or the connection that suits your schedule are all valid ways to choose.

Hotel example: a night in Florence, Italy

Mid-range stays typically run 10,000–30,000 points a night. In the sample search, **Accor** partners with Capital One, Citi and Bilt; **Hilton** partners with Bilt and others. The very high-priced result was a Hilton **Curio Collection** property: one of Hilton's luxury brands, so a five-star hotel in a great central location.

Step 3 · Add up what you have (or will have)

THE WORKSHEET

Welcome bonus points you expect

+ Monthly points from normal spending

+ Points already sitting in forgotten loyalty accounts

= Your starting point

– Rough cost of your goal trip

= The gap: points you still need to earn

Work backwards from the gap to estimate how long it will take. **Timing note:** points generally show up on your *next statement*, so a spending spree will not produce instantly usable points.

Step 4 · Go check your old accounts

This surprises people every time. An airline from a 2019 work trip, a hotel program from a conference, a rewards balance you never looked at. **Check them.** A pleasant surprise may be waiting.

Tools worth knowing: an award-search tool for finding flights and cash deals, a transfer-partner chart, and a points-value calculator.

RECAP

Phase Two recap: what you learned

Before the redemption strategies begin

LESSON	THE TAKEAWAY TO KEEP
Lesson 5 · Welcome offers	The fastest way to a big balance. Open a card when you are ready, count only planned expenses, and do not apply for too many cards too quickly.
Lesson 6 · Bonus categories	Matching card to category can add 20,000+ points a year with no extra spending. Pairing two cards is powerful, but optional.
Lesson 7 · Pick a trip	Choose a real trip, price it in points, compare programs, and watch the taxes and fees. Add up what you have, find the gap, and check old accounts.

REFERENCE

Phase Two vocabulary, decoded

Welcome offer
Spend X in Y months, earn Z points. Usually once per card.

Limited-time offer (LTO)
A temporarily elevated welcome offer.

Red alert
A special notice about an exceptional limited-time offer.

Hard inquiry
The credit check when you apply. It costs roughly 5–10 points that usually recover within a month or two.

5/24 rule
Some issuers decline applicants who opened 5 or more cards in the past 24 months.

Base rate
What a card earns per dollar on everything outside its bonus categories.

Bonus category / multiplier
A spend type (dining, groceries, and so on) that earns extra points per dollar, such as 3x.

Card pairing
Using two or more cards so each handles the categories it earns most on.

Award flight
A flight booked with points or miles. Prices are often quoted one way, so double them for a round trip.

Taxes & fees
The cash you still pay on an award booking. It varies wildly by program ($5.60 to $336.40 in the Paris example).

Positioning
Getting yourself to the airport where the better award departs or connects, sometimes on the same ticket and sometimes on a separate one.

Award search tool
A tool for finding award flights and cash deals side by side.

The numbers worth remembering

NUMBER	WHAT IT MEANS
5–10 points	Typical temporary credit-score dip from a hard inquiry.
5 cards / 24 months	The 5/24 threshold for some issuers.
19,200 a year	Extra points from $800/month of groceries on a 3x card instead of 1x.
25k–50k	Domestic round trip, economy.
80k–200k	Europe round trip, business class.
10k–30k a night	Solid mid-range hotel, in points.
60k vs. 115k–125k	The Cleveland to Paris example: fewest points came with the most cash ($336.40), but not always.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your Phase Two action plan

Every step below comes straight from the lessons. Work through them in order.

Earn

- [ ] **Open the card when ready,** and note the welcome offer's spend, time window and reward.
- [ ] **List planned expenses** that will cover the minimum spend. Do not manufacture extra spending.
- [ ] **Check application count.** Have you opened 5+ cards in the last 24 months?
- [ ] **Look up your card's earn rate** in every major category. Note any gap that a second card could fill.

Visualize and plan

- [ ] **Pick a real trip** and write it down.
- [ ] **Price it in points** using an award-search tool or the airline and hotel sites. Compare programs, and remember taxes and fees.
- [ ] **Check old loyalty accounts** for forgotten balances.
- [ ] **Do the math:** welcome bonus + monthly earn + existing points − trip cost = your gap. Divide by monthly earn for a timeline.

Six mistakes to avoid in Phase Two

- **Overspending for a bonus.** Count only planned expenses.
- **Waiting for a better offer.** It may never come. Apply when ready.
- **Applying to everything.** Too many cards too fast looks risky and can trigger 5/24.
- **Everything on one card.** Base-rate earning leaves category bonuses behind.
- **Ignoring taxes and fees.** The fewest points is not always the cheapest trip.
- **Expecting instant points.** They usually post on your next statement.

WHAT'S NEXT

Next up: Phase 3, Redeem. You will learn how to actually book flights and hotels with the points you have earned.

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Ready to turn points into your trip?

Points get you to the door. A well-planned trip gets you through it. If you would like a hand pricing a trip, choosing where to spend, or building an itinerary, I would love to help.

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About this guide. This is a summary of an introductory points-and-miles course, condensed and reorganized in my own words with worked examples and reference tables. Figures such as card fees, credits, transfer partners and point costs are as presented in the source material and change frequently, so confirm current terms with the issuer or program before applying or booking. This guide is educational and is not financial advice.