A LIFE

Well Traveled

PHASE 3 OF 3 · THE COMPLETE FIELD GUIDE

Points & Miles, Phase Three: Redeem

Turning points into an actual flight or hotel room: travel portals versus transfer partners, the step-by-step transfer process, how to judge whether a deal is actually good, and two real bookings worked start to finish.

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

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INTRO

Now let's talk redeeming

Choosing the card was Phase 1. Earning the points was Phase 2. This is the phase that makes the whole hobby make sense — turning a balance sitting in an account into an actual seat on a plane or a night in a hotel.

Quick refresher: points and miles are reward currencies, and airlines and hotels are the stores where you spend them. In this phase, you'll learn the two ways to spend that currency, how to tell a great deal from a mediocre one, and exactly how the booking process works end to end.

This phase's four topics

01 Portal vs. transfer

The easy option and the valuable one — and when each makes sense.

02 The transfer process

Six steps, always in the same order, so you never strand your points.

03 Judging a deal

The simple math that tells you whether a redemption is actually good.

04 Real bookings

Two examples, worked start to finish, so you can see exactly how it plays out.

THE BIG PAYOFF

The single biggest decision in this phase is portal or transfer. The next lesson goes deep on why transferring usually wins — and when it doesn't.

PHASE 3 · LESSONS 8–11

Turn points into a trip

Two paths get you there: the easy one and the valuable one. This phase is a quick self-assessment of which to use, then the exact steps for both.

LESSON 8

Two ways to spend your points

Portal or transfer — know the trade-off before you book

TL;DR

Book through your card's travel portal for simplicity, or transfer to an airline or hotel partner for a lot more value.

Everything in the points and miles world comes down to two things: you earn points, then you redeem them, ideally for a lot more than you put in. When it's time to actually use them, you have two options.

1

The travel portal

Your card issuer's own booking site. Points are typically worth a fixed amount here — usually about 1¢ each, so 50,000 points is roughly $500. It's simple, availability is solid, and there's no research required. The trade-off is a hard ceiling on value.

2

Transferring to a partner

Move your points into an airline or hotel's own loyalty program and book directly with them. The same 50,000 points can now be worth $1,000 or more, depending on what you book — sometimes a business-class seat for close to an economy-level point cost. The catch: transfers are one-way and permanent, so the research has to happen first.

3

Why booking direct matters

It's almost always better to book directly with the airline or hotel than through a third-party site, whether you're paying cash or points. If something goes wrong — a cancelled flight, a room issue — the airline or hotel takes much better care of someone who booked directly than someone who went through a middleman.

WORTH KNOWING

You still earn a multiplier on points when booking direct with an airline or hotel using these cards — it's usually just lower than the portal's bonus rate. That's a Phase 2 topic, though; this phase is all about what you do once the points are already sitting in your account.

LESSON 9

The transfer process, step by step

Six steps, always in this order

TL;DR

Know your partners, find the space, compare, transfer, wait, and book immediately — always in that order.

The process works the same way no matter which bank or card you're starting from.

1 **Know which programs your card reaches**

Not every card transfers to every airline or hotel. Keep a list of exactly which partners your specific card reaches, so you know your options before you start searching.

2 **Find the award space first**

Search each airline's own site using their award booking tool, before you touch your points. Check more than one program — the same flight can price very differently depending on which loyalty program you book it through.

3 **Pick your best option**

Compare availability and point cost across everything you have access to. You're looking for solid availability at a price that genuinely makes sense.

4 **Transfer only when you're ready to book**

Once points leave your card issuer and land with an airline or hotel, that's final. There's no transferring them back. Be sure before you click.

5 **Wait for them to land**

Most transfers complete in minutes; some take a day or two. If points don't show up right away, try logging out and back into the airline account before you worry.

6 **Book immediately**

Award space can disappear while you're still thinking it over. The moment your points land, book the thing.

GOOD TO KNOW

Transfer to the airline actually selling the ticket — which isn't always the one flying the plane. Award space tends to open up either far out (330–365 days ahead) or close in (1–4 weeks before departure). And transfers move in 1,000-point increments, with a 1,000-point minimum.

LESSON 10

Is this actually a good deal?

Part research, part math

TL;DR

Finding a great deal is part research, part math. The formula below tells you whether something is really worth it.

Before you decide on anything, search across all the transfer partners your card reaches. Then run the numbers so you're comparing options honestly, instead of just eyeballing point totals.

THE FORMULA

cents per point = (cash price of the trip ÷ points required) × 100

Aim for 1.5¢ per point or better. Below that, paying cash and saving the points for something bigger is often the smarter move.

- **Taxes and fees are part of the equation**

  Don't ignore them when you compare. A lower point price with much higher fees can easily cost you more overall than a slightly higher point price with low fees.

- **Paying cash is sometimes the right call**

  It's okay when the cash option wins. Save your points for the redemption where they'll really shine, and let a cheap cash fare stay a cheap cash fare.

- **Confirm space before you transfer**

  All of this math only matters once the seat or room is actually available to book. Check availability first, then decide if the price is worth it.

RULE OF THUMB

1.5¢ per point or better is generally a strong redemption. Below roughly 1¢, you're usually better off paying cash and keeping the points for later.

LESSON 11

Two real bookings, start to finish

The part where it stops being theoretical

TL;DR

Find the seat, transfer, book immediately. Here's exactly how the whole process plays out, twice.

You've found an award you love. Now what? This is where people tend to freeze up a little — it's one thing to browse options, another to actually move points and click "book" on real dates. It's simpler than it feels. Here's the process.

1 **Find the flight first**

Search each airline's award tool, or compare several programs at once. Confirm the seat is really there. Don't touch your points yet.

2 **Then, and only then, transfer**

Once you've confirmed the seat exists and you're ready to commit, start the transfer. Some airlines let you place a courtesy hold on the seat while your points are in transit — use it if it's offered, it genuinely helps.

3 **Book the second your points land**

Award space can disappear while points are in transit. The moment they arrive in your airline account, book immediately. Don't wait.

DOUBLE-CHECK THIS

Make sure the name on your bank account matches your airline or hotel account exactly — middle names, suffixes, all of it. A mismatch can get the transfer stuck, and that's not a fun problem to have.

BOOKING EXAMPLES, CONTINUED

Two trips, worked start to finish

Same process both times — search, transfer, book — but two very different outcomes once the numbers were actually run.

Example 1 · New York to Paris, in January

This search meant checking several transfer partners and comparing economy and business class across each one. The standout find: Singapore Airlines came up as one of the best options for this particular route — a program most people wouldn't think to check first. That's the whole point of shopping around instead of defaulting to the most obvious airline.

Example 2 · New York to Amsterdam, in April

This one got interesting fast. The option with the lowest point cost wasn't actually the best deal once taxes and fees were factored in. And the cash fare on this particular route was cheap enough that it genuinely made more sense to just pay for it and save the points for something bigger. That's a completely valid call, and one experienced points travelers make often — points are most powerful when you use them strategically, not just reflexively.

WHAT THESE EXAMPLES SHOW

The cheapest-looking option on points isn't always the cheapest overall once fees are counted. And sometimes the right call is not to redeem at all — pay cash, and save the points for a trip where they'll be worth a lot more.

RECAP

Phase Three recap: what you learned

The whole system, now complete

LESSON	THE TAKEAWAY TO KEEP
Lesson 8 · Portal vs. transfer	Portals are simple but capped near 1¢ per point. Transferring can be worth 2–10x more, but it's one-way, so the research comes first.
Lesson 9 · The transfer process	Confirm the award space exists before you transfer anything. Six steps, always in that order: know, find, compare, transfer, wait, book.
Lesson 10 · Judging a deal	Run the cents-per-point math every time, and count the taxes and fees. 1.5¢+ is a strong redemption; sometimes cash is simply the better call.
Lesson 11 · Real bookings	Find the seat, transfer, book immediately. Shop across partners — the most obvious program isn't always the best one.

THE THROUGH-LINE

Choose the right card. Earn with intent. Redeem with patience. That's the entire system — everything else is just practice.

REFERENCE

Phase Three vocabulary, decoded

Travel portal
Your card issuer's own booking site. Points are typically worth about 1¢ each there.

Transfer partner
An airline or hotel loyalty program that your bank lets you move points into.

Cents per point (CPP)
What a point is worth in cash terms: cash price ÷ points required × 100.

Award space
The specific seats or rooms a program actually releases for points bookings — separate from general availability.

Transfer ratio
How many partner points you receive per point moved. Usually 1:1, but worth checking before you transfer.

Hold
A courtesy reservation some airlines offer on award space while your points are in transit.

Partner award
A flight operated by one airline but booked using a different, allied program's points. The pricing airline isn't always the one flying the plane.

Positioning
Getting yourself to the airport where the better award actually departs or connects, covered more in Phase 2.

The numbers worth remembering

NUMBER	WHAT IT MEANS
~1¢	Typical value per point when redeemed through a travel portal.
2¢–10¢+	Typical value per point via transfer partners, depending on the redemption.
1.5¢	A solid rule-of-thumb threshold for calling a redemption a good one.
1,000	The minimum transfer amount, and the increment size, for most bank-to-partner transfers.
330–365 days	One of the two windows when award space most often opens up — far out.
1–4 weeks	The other window — close to departure.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your Phase Three action plan

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

- [ ] **Decide your approach for your next trip.** Portal for simplicity, or transfer for more value and more research.
- [ ] **Look up which programs your card actually transfers to,** and keep that list somewhere handy.
- [ ] **Search for award space before you transfer anything.** Confirm it's really there first.
- [ ] **Run the cents-per-point math** on anything you're considering. Aim for 1.5¢ or better.
- [ ] **Double-check your name matches exactly** between your card account and the airline or hotel account.
- [ ] **Pick one small, low-stakes redemption to try first** — a short domestic flight, or a free hotel night, works great.

Two mistakes to avoid in Phase Three

- **Transferring before confirming space.** Transfers are permanent — once points leave your card account, they can't come back.
- **Ignoring taxes and fees.** The lowest point price isn't always the cheapest trip overall.

ONE LAST THING

You now have the whole system: choose, earn, redeem. The only thing left is to actually do it. The first redemption is the hardest one — after that, it gets easier every single time.

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Ready to book your first redemption?

You've got the whole system now — choosing, earning, and redeeming. If you'd like a hand finding your first redemption, pricing a real trip, or just want someone to double-check the math, I'd 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 transfer ratios, award costs, and taxes and fees are as presented in the source material and change frequently, so confirm current terms with the program before transferring or booking. This guide is educational and is not financial advice.