

FIVE WAYS TO A BETTER ROOM RATE + THE LATEST ON LOYALTY PROGRAMS

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

2014  
HOTELS  
SPECIAL

## THE BEST NEW HOTELS

OUR FAVORITES IN  
COSTA RICA / LONDON / ROME  
NEW YORK / AND MORE





## Q: I TRAVEL ONLY OCCASIONALLY ON BUSINESS. ARE HOTEL LOYALTY PROGRAMS STILL WORTH IT?

—ELIZABETH FRANK, KANSAS CITY, KANS.

**A:** As with frequent-flier programs, hotel loyalty clubs can offer even infrequent travelers benefits. At the very least, you can simply join a program and gradually accrue points. (They don't expire; you may have to show some annual account

activity, but that could be as simple as cashing in for a Starbucks gift card.) Most of the major loyalty programs have expanded redemption options beyond free rooms and upgrades in recent years, giving members the chance to trade points for gift certificates, concerts and events, and even airline tickets.

That said, it's still the serious road warriors who get the greatest return on their loyalty. At Starwood hotels, people who spend at least 100 nights a year at the company's properties are almost always upgraded to suites, can check in and out anytime that suits them, get personal concierge service, and receive twice as

many points for every dollar they spend. But that doesn't mean the rest of us can't reap some of these rewards. If you want the red carpet, here are a few rules for getting the most from your membership.

### Be a status seeker

The best way to maximize your points is to earn status. Look for programs that have a relatively low threshold for elite levels and a wide variety of hotels to choose from—making it easy to rack up qualifying nights. The **Hyatt Gold Passport** program elevates travelers to Platinum status once they've completed just five eligible stays or 15 eligible nights in a calendar year. Once Platinum, members get 20 percent off room rates, 2 p.m. checkout, space-available upgrades, and free Internet access. **Starwood Preferred Guest (SPG)** has similar benefits (4 p.m. checkout; upgrades; bonus points) for people who achieve the Gold tier, which requires 10 eligible stays or 25 eligible nights a year. For **Hilton HHonors**, it takes 20 stays (or 40 nights) to reach Gold status and really start reaping the rewards, such as →

### BY THE NUMBERS

# 225 Billion

The number of Marriott Rewards points issued to travelers in 2013.

## WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM? MY HOTEL IS OVERBOOKED!

### Do...



**Plan ahead.** Book directly with the hotel and confirm your reservation the night before.



**Ask to be comped** for your first night (at least) if you are moved to another hotel. You may also get restaurant or spa credits.

### Don't...



**Expect much.** Hotels usually move guests to properties of equal or lesser value. Your hotel doesn't want you too happy at the competition.



**Be late.** If you think your hotel is overbooked, arrive early. The last guest typically loses out.



## The Fix

complimentary upgrades, Internet access, and breakfast.

### Carry the right card

If you can't make a room-night minimum, you can sometimes leapfrog your way to a higher status through a hotel-branded credit card. Holding a **Citi Hilton HHonors Reserve Card** gives you automatic Gold status in the program, plus bonus points and certificates for free rooms as you spend. The **Hyatt Credit Card**, which upgrades loyalty-program members to Platinum level, offers similar rewards. The **Starwood**

### Preferred Guest Credit

**Card** from American Express won't immediately elevate you, but it does grant holders credit for five qualifying nights and two stays each year—in addition to bonus points for purchases. Likewise, the **Marriott Rewards Credit Card** offers night credits toward elite status.

### Think small

Brian Kelly, cofounder of The Points Guy website, which tracks hotel and airline loyalty clubs, advises occasional travelers to consider programs from smaller companies. To compete with the big hotel groups, they're often more generous. "What you give up in not having the enormous map of hotels around the world to choose from, you can make up in benefits," Kelly says. Free Internet is standard just for joining many of these programs, including **Fairmont President's Club**, **Kimpton's InTouch**, **Preferred Hotel Group's iPrefer**, and **Omni Select Guest**. Kimpton also

throws in mini-bar, hotel-bar, and spa vouchers, depending on the property. Fairmont offers members spa discounts and free shoeshines. Omni gives you complimentary water, coffee delivery, and pressing services. What's more, Kelly says, employees at these properties are more likely to give extra benefits to loyalty members, such as an impromptu upgrade.

### Be brand-agnostic

One important caveat: these hotel-branded loyalty programs don't recognize bookings made through third-party websites. So the discounted rates that you find on sites such as Priceline or Travelocity will not help you accrue points or build status. The good news: **Orbitz**, **Expedia**, and **Hotels.com** all have programs that offer users some variation of free nights, coupons, or vouchers the more you book. If you reach elite status with Expedia and Orbitz, you may get benefits such as free Wi-Fi, late checkout, and room upgrades at partner hotels.



**Q:**  
**MY HOTEL HAS A FREE TOWN-CAR SERVICE. HOW MUCH SHOULD I TIP THE DRIVER?**

**A:**  
Because they're providing a complimentary amenity, drivers are instructed not to expect tips. However, it's not uncommon for travelers to offer a gratuity. The minimum starts around \$5 and goes up as the distance increases. While chauffeurs are generally making above-market wages, they still appreciate being recognized for going the extra mile—literally.

### BY THE NUMBERS



# 300,000

The number of Starwood Starpoints a loyalty-program member bid to get courtside seats at the 2013 US Open.

## THE FINAL SAY

### Q: WHY DO EUROPEAN HOTELS REQUIRE PASSPORTS AT CHECK-IN?

**A:** There's a long tradition throughout Europe of statutes requiring hotels to collect information on guests—including name, nationality, and ID number—enabling law enforcement to cross-check for wanted individuals, criminals, or missing persons. The European Union has since made such data collection a requirement for hotels in member

states. Most of this information is simply stored to be made available to authorities upon request, though in certain areas (notably Italy), it is regularly collected. In the past, some hotels would hold guests' passports for hours or even overnight to manually complete the registration process. Today, you usually just have to show it at check-in.