



Getting Started With Miles: How To Fly For Free

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Outlet: Travel with Bender

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I was off to New York.

As we drove into Montreal the first stop was the airport. Josh dropped me off to catch a 1-hour flight to New York's La Guardia airport. I was excited to be attending the Blogger Bash and BlogHer conferences, where Travel With Bender was to receive an award.

Why Montreal? Being a lover of bargains, I used Google Flights to reverse-engineer where the cheapest flights to New York were leaving from, and instead of heading east to Nova Scotia we changed our plans and drove west to Quebec.

And that's when I first heard about Aeroplan. They invited me to try their service, and since I'd never flown on loyalty miles before, I was curious to try something new.

In Australia we had a frequent flyer account with Qantas, and Aeroplan seemed to be Canada's most popular loyalty program alliance. I'd heard many stories from travellers about the generous points programs in the US and Canada, and now could finally see for myself what all the fuss was about.

Aeroplan 101

Aeroplan connects a growing network of over 75 partners where you can earn and redeem miles (points), representing more than 150 brands. These cover hotels, car rental, experiences, travel insurance, charities, environmental causes and of course, flights.

Flight partners, Air Canada and Star Alliance, offer flights to more than 1,300 destinations worldwide, so your earned miles can actually get you somewhere you want to go.

How Do You Get Miles (Points)?

The most common way to earn Aeroplan Miles is on eligible flights operated by Air Canada, Air Canada Express, Air Canada Rouge as well as other Star Alliance member airlines.

The amount of miles that you will earn varies depending on the length of the flight, the price of the ticket and the airline you are flying with. The miles are calculated automatically based on the actual miles flown (not kilometres) with a 500-mile minimum payout for shorter flights.

Other easy ways to obtain miles include:

- Sign up for an affiliate credit card for everyday use – every time you spend money you earn miles. Use it for everyday purchases like groceries, gas/petrol, bills and even online shopping. In addition, most affiliated cards offer a big welcome bonus (enough to receive at least a domestic 1-way US/Canadian flight for free).
- Spend money with partners who offer bonus miles (such as Esso, Home Hardware, Shop.ca and more).
- Sign up for Aeroplan during a bonus points period
- Transfer miles from another Aeroplan member
- Transfer miles/points from another loyalty program supported by Aeroplan or via a 3rd party such as Points.com

The secret to earning lots of miles quickly is to combine the offers and earn twice in the same transaction! For example, use an Aeroplan credit card to pay for your car hire from Hertz, and you earn miles for the credit card purchase PLUS miles on the offer from Hertz.

What Should You Spend Those Miles On?

The most popular way to spend your miles is on flights – after all, who doesn't love a free flight? Many loyalty point experts believe the most cost-effective way to spend miles is flights, but of course feel free to spend them on whatever makes you happy.

Aeroplan have an online store which makes it easy to redeem your miles for just about anything from an iPad Mini to baby toys. And Distinction status members have exclusive access to an online auction site called dExclusives.

For me it was going to be flights all the way. In return for my miles I received a return ticket from Montreal to New York.

Here is an example of Aeroplan's domestic flight rewards so you can calculate how many miles it takes to fly:

One-way Fixed Mileage Flight Rewards

One-way Fixed Mileage Flight Rewards require only 50% of the miles needed for round-trip flight rewards.



From / To:	Cabin	Canada & Continental USA		Hawaii	Mexico	Caribbean & Central America	Northern South America	Southern South America	Europe 1	Europe 2	Asia 1	Asia 2	Middle East & North Africa	Indian Subcontinent	East, West & South Africa	Australia, New Zealand & South Pacific
		Short-haul*	Long-haul													
Canada & Continental USA	Economy	7.5K	12.5K	22.5K	20K	20K	25K	30K	30K	37.5K	37.5K	45K	40K	50K	50K	40K
	Premium Economy	10K	20K	32.5K	25K	25K	32.5K	40K	37.5K	45K	62.5K	65K	67.5K	65K	65K	67.5K
	Business	12.5K	25K	40K	30K	30K	37.5K	47.5K	45K	52.5K	75K	77.5K	82.5K	75K	75K	80K
	First	-	35K	55K	42.5K	42.5K	52.5K	67.5K	62.5K	72.5K	105K	107.5K	115K	105K	105K	110K

* Short-haul Fixed Mileage Flight Rewards are available on Air Canada, Air Canada Express and the Canadian domestic partners.

What Are My Miles Worth?

According to US News a good rule of thumb is to “Never redeem your miles when you'd get less than a penny a mile. The average customer should aim for two cents a mile. Getting three or four cents per mile is tough, but if you can get it then you're really getting a lot for your miles.”

If you're a beginner to loyalty miles like me, here are 2 examples of how to spot the best value:

iTunes \$50 Gift Card

Value: \$50

Cost: 6,500 miles

Calculate: 50 divided by 6,500 equals 0.769 cents per mile.

Return Flight from Seattle to New York (1 person)

Value: \$750 (approx)

Cost: 25,000 miles

Calculate: 750 divided by 25,000 equals 3.0 cents per mile.

Is Flying On Miles The Same As Paying For A Flight?

When booking a flight, log into your Aeroplan account and follow the instructions to complete a booking.

After booking my Air Canada flight I received the normal airline confirmation via email. So far so good.

I had trouble checking in online and had to do it at the airport, but that could have just been because I'm Australian :)

I arrived at the airport for my flight, checked in and all went smoothly.

Air Canada's service was surprisingly enjoyable - they had entertainment screens and complimentary refreshments on board. The 1-hour flight was over before I knew it.

I didn't notice any differences in services, check-in process or flight experience.

Tip: While Air Canada doesn't have any blackout periods, there are a limited number of seats available on each flight available for reward travel. So it pays to book your flights as far ahead as possible.

Verdict

Who doesn't love to travel for free? And if you can earn miles from your normal everyday spending to fly around the world, then it's an easy choice for me. In fact, I can see how collecting miles can become so addictive. Maybe there's a future for me as a points guru after all.

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