

# How to receive the best value from your Aeroplan miles

## TALES FROM THE ROAD



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If you're confused over what is happening with Aeroplan, you're not alone. Aeroplan started out as Air Canada's frequent flyer program. Then Air Canada sold it, bought it back again early in 2019, but announced that it will roll out a new program to replace Aeroplan in June 2020.

They made a few changes in recent months, some good, some not. On the positive side, you can now cancel your bookings within 24 hours and get a full reinstatement of points at no charge, or cancel your flight up to two hours before departure, with a fee of \$125. While \$125 is still substantial, it's less than before and is less than cancellation fees for many highly restrictive airfares.

On the negative side, you could previously add up to two stopovers to a return flight. Now it is restricted to one.

Many users have a love/hate relationship with Aeroplan. It's possible to find excellent value, but the system can be exasperating. Often flights aren't available for dates you want to fly, or they have sky-high fees.

To see if you're getting sufficient value, a useful exercise is to calculate what an Aeroplan mile is worth. Look up the fare you would pay if you simply bought a ticket instead. Subtract the amount of taxes and fees for an Aeroplan ticket to the same destination, and then divide that amount by the



Aeroplan has made changes recently, and while some are good for consumers, others aren't. | GETTY IMAGES

number of Aeroplan miles needed.

Say you want to fly from Saskatoon to Los Angeles next February. In a recent search, the cheapest fare we found was around \$400 return, taxes included. An Aeroplan ticket would cost 25,000 miles plus \$224 in taxes and fees. The difference in cash outlay is \$176. Divide that by 25,000 and the value of an Aeroplan mile is \$.007, well under one cent.

It's different with a more expensive route, such as flying from Saskatoon to St. John's, N.L., in July. The lowest fare we found was \$807 return. Or we could use 25,000 Aeroplan miles and pay \$229 in taxes and fees. In this case, we get more than two cents per Aeroplan

mile, more than twice the value of the previous example.

High fees on some flights are the biggest irritant with Aeroplan, in many cases so high that you may as well just buy a ticket. Fees include items such as airport taxes, which are the same as we would pay when buying an airfare. The fee to watch out for is the carrier surcharge, which varies with the airline used. As an example, we checked Aeroplan redemptions on flights to Paris, using Air Canada. From most Canadian cities, the carrier surcharge alone was \$550.

Of the 26 airlines in Star Alliance, some impose a surcharge on Aeroplan tickets, such as Air Canada,

Austrian Airlines, and Lufthansa, although many do not, such as United, Swiss, Turkish, Ethiopian, Scandinavian, Singapore, South African, Avianca, Copa, EVA, and Brussels Airlines.

For international flights, we make a point of looking for non-surcharge airlines, which isn't always easy. Sometimes it takes a fair amount of fiddling around with different dates and routes on the Aeroplan website to find something that works.

When it's difficult finding available flights, a strategy that sometimes works is adding a stopover, which may bring additional airlines and routes into the mix. For

example, our latest long-haul trip using Aeroplan was to South Africa earlier this year. We could find space for the outward flights to Cape Town using Ethiopian Airlines, which had convenient connections and no surcharge.

Finding return flights was a struggle; only airlines with ridiculously high surcharges showed up. Since Africa is close to halfway around the world, we checked routes coming back over Asia instead, and found a route using Singapore Airlines and EVA Airlines, both of which are highly rated and have no surcharges on Aeroplan. This route showed up because we chose Taipei as the stopover. This is the hub for EVA, which fortunately had space on its flights to Vancouver.

As a bonus, we decided to extend our stop in Taipei for a few days to have a look around. This didn't cost any more Aeroplan miles and the total taxes and fees for this round-the-world routing amounted to \$165 each, less than we would pay for many domestic flights, even though our connecting flights in Canada were on Air Canada. Go figure.

With changes coming, should you use your Aeroplan miles before the new program comes out, or trust that the new one will be as good or better? Opinions abound on both sides.

Air Canada indicates that we will be able to convert Aeroplan miles one-to-one into the new program. But the devil will be in the details. Whether it will be better, worse, or have significantly different rules isn't clear. It's a question of whether you would rather deal with the devil you know or the devil you don't know.

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# Christmas in a seniors care home can be disappointing

## SPEAKING OF LIFE



JACKLIN ANDREWS, BA, MSW

**Q:** Years ago, I used to think that Christmas was the most wonderful season of the year. I would be up early Christmas morning to finish filling Christmas stockings for the children, then off to the kitchen to put together a big Christmas breakfast before we opened our presents.

Then it was back into the kitchen to slow roast a huge turkey, to serve a wonderful meal, and to sit back at the end of the day feeling most satisfied with Christmas.

It is different now. I hate it. I am in a seniors' home (we used to call them old-folks' homes). I am not too bad but many of the residents here struggle. At least half of them cannot walk and probably about the same struggle with their memory banks.

My son phones me for a short talk Christmas Day. That and a dried cooked turkey meal make Christmas for me.

That is it. What a disappointment.

My girls usually drop around sometime in the new year to bring me some kind of a little present but nothing more. It feels like they have more of an obligation than they do a Christmas chime. Everything is so very different. I miss my Christmas and I don't know what I can do about it.

**A:** I am reasonably certain that you cannot do much to improve your Christmas mornings these days.

I cannot say that I blame you for being disappointed. For whatever reasons those who are in charge of long-term care facilities seldom budget sufficient funds to carry them into seasonal celebrations Christmas morning.

We cannot change their system but we might be able to help you capture a moment of relief from your personal distress. Let's give it a try.

For starters, did you know that people who are able to feel grateful for whatever blessings they have



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tend to do better overall than do those who are bitter and disappointed? I am sure that you can find something in the day to appreciate.

Look at the phone call. That short phone call you are going to get from your son may not be much but it is a break in the day for you and you know that it is going to happen. Make sure that you enjoy those few moments talking to your boy, that you have fun anticipating the call before you are called to the

phone, and that you let your son know how utterly important his call is to you. I think that it is called making a mountain out of a molehill, in this case the mountain being your gratitude for the call, the molehill being the Christmas call.

I don't know how long you have been in the home where you are living but my guess is that you have been there long enough to know which of your fellow residents are well enough to engage in reason-

able conversations. You might want to take advantage of that.

To get into reasonable conversations with those who are capable you can begin by noting how lucky all of you are to have another day to celebrate. It does not even have to be Christmas. Sometimes the morning sunrise is as inspiring as are our holiday festivals. Enjoy the sunrise with your fellow residents.

As a last thought, you are likely to find those on staff who are disappointed that they have to work on Christmas day and those who are eager to share the day with you. The latter are easier to find. They are the ones who beam when they say Merry Christmas to you early in the day. Those are the staff with whom you want to spend some time and those are the staff to whom you need to say thank you.

It is, after all, a thank you for another day, and it is that thank you, or so my studies tell us, that takes you down the path to more satisfaction, not just for Christmas but also for all days.

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