

Search 1,000+ destinations

Plan Your Trip Times Picks

Go Select a Region or Country Select a Destination Go

PRACTICAL TRAVELER

Expanding Hotel Loyalty Rewards

By MICHELLE HIGGINS Published: June 1, 2011

TRAVELERS who prefer boutique hotels to big cookie-cutter brands have long faced a trade-off. While often more charming and memorable than your typical chain hotel, most independent hotels don't offer loyalty programs.

Enlarge This Image



Steven Guarnaccia

Not anymore. In an effort to compete head to head with chains, small hotel brands and individual boutiques have begun joining together to create their own loyalty programs with perks that reflect the personalized service and local flair that independent hotels tend to offer.

In March, Global Hotel Alliance, a collection of 12 luxury brands with more than 300 hotels, rolled out a loyalty program, GHA Discovery, that rewards frequent guests with insider experiences instead of points. (Examples include wine tastings at a local vineyard with the hotel's sommelier and a hot air balloon ride over Egyptian ruins.) Stash Hotel Rewards, which began last spring, allows guests to earn points for free nights at nearly 150 independent hotels across the country. And Voilà Hotel Rewards, a similar points-based program for upscale independent hotels that started three years ago now has about 235 hotels in its network.

At the same time, some major chains are tweaking their loyalty programs and introducing new rewards. In a campaign that started in March, Hilton has been de-emphasizing points and focusing on vacation experiences in an effort to rebrand its loyalty program, HHonors. The tag line: "Turn points into experiences worth sharing." And last year InterContinental Hotels & Resorts, which includes Indigo and Holiday Inn brands, began allowing members of its loyalty program, Priority Club, to use points in combination with cash to pay for any hotel — even those of competitors.

The new programs reflect two different perspectives on loyalty programs. Hoteliers in one camp believe travelers are burned out on points and that what they really want from a loyalty program is access to special perks and experiences they wouldn't be able to get on their own. In the other camp, hoteliers believe travelers still want points but are frustrated by the redemption process, which often involves complex reward charts or blackout dates.

Regardless of which camp you side with, the best program may simply be the one with the most hotels in the places you tend to visit. Big brands like Marriott and Starwood, both of which offer traditional programs with points that can be redeemed for rooms, still have the largest hotel networks, numbering in the thousands of properties compared with just a couple of hundred offered by the new independent hotel programs.

- RECOMMEND TWITTER COMMENTS SIGN IN TO E-MAIL PRINT REPRINTS SHARE

Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com. Privacy Policy | What's This? Log In With Facebook

What's Popular Now

The Bilingual Advantage It's Not About You

BOOK FLIGHTS Expedia

FLIGHT HOTEL PACKAGES CAR CRUISE ACTIVITIES Leaving from: Going to: Departing: 6/22/2011 11 AM Returning: 6/24/2011 11 AM Adults: 2 Seniors: 0 Children: 0 Search for flights

MOST E-MAILED RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

We don't have any personalized recommendations for you at this time. Please try again later.

Log in to discover more articles based on what you've read. PRESENTED BY

Log In Register Now Log In What's This? | Don't Show

Keep in mind that if it's only free nights that you're after, you don't even need a hotel loyalty program. [Expedia.com](#), which offers more than 70,000 hotels on its site, recently unveiled a program that gives customers one to four points per dollar spent, regardless of which hotel (or airline) is booked, that can be used toward future trips on the site. And Hotels.com, an affiliate of Expedia with more than 65,000 hotels in its loyalty program, offers a free-night voucher to members after they book 10 nights.

Still, the new independent hotel loyalty programs are worth considering, especially if you are looking for something beyond the big-name hotel brands. Here are four alternatives.

GHA DISCOVERY REWARDS

Member Hotels: Nearly 300 hotels in 48 countries; some properties are represented by smaller brands like Omni Hotels & Resorts in the [United States](#), Anantara Hotels, Resorts and [Spas](#) in [Asia](#) and Kempinski Hotels in [Europe](#), [Africa](#) and the [Middle East](#).

What You Get: Instead of points, members of this program receive perks and insider experiences designed by individual hotels. After one stay at any hotel in the group, guests are automatically enrolled as Gold members and are entitled to free Internet access, bottled water and other special activities upon their next stay, like a personalized brewery tour in [Boston](#) or olive picking in [Turkey](#). Those who stay more than 10 nights in member hotels over the course of a year qualify for Platinum status, which includes a delayed checkout time (3 p.m. instead of midday), automatic room upgrades and additional activities. Those who stay more than 30 nights earn Black status, which comes with earlier check-in times (9 a.m. instead of 3 p.m.), a 6 p.m. checkout time, and perks like laundry service, access to the executive lounge and so-called exclusive experiences like a private tour of the stables and stud farm of the Sheikh of Ajman.

LEADERS CLUB

Member Hotels: More than 430 luxury hotels and resorts that make up the Leading Hotels of the World consortium, including the Setai in [Miami](#), [One Aldwych](#) in [London](#) and [Alvear Palace Hotel](#) in [Buenos Aires](#).

What You Get: For \$100 a year, members are enrolled in Access Level, which comes with a range of perks, including free Internet access, daily continental breakfast for two, and a free night after five stays in a given year. For \$1,200 a year, members also receive guaranteed room upgrades, a Priority Pass card, which provides access to over 600 airport lounges in more than 100 countries, and concierge service to arrange anything members need before, during or after their stay.

STASH HOTEL REWARDS

Member Hotels: Nearly 150 hotels in the United States, including the Palms Hotel & Spa in Miami, [Hotel Valley Ho](#) in [Scottsdale](#), Ariz., and Grande Bay Resort on [St. John](#) in the United States Virgin Islands.

What You Get: Members earn five points per dollar spent on their room. Unlike traditional loyalty programs that require a fixed number of points for free nights based on the level of luxury of the hotel, Stash Rewards allows hotels to set award rates dynamically, based on the going rate for that room on a given night. For example, a night at the Mountain Lodge at [Telluride](#) in [Colorado](#) in May — one of the [ski](#) resort's slowest months — was priced at \$139 in a recent online search, or 11,680 Stash Rewards points. The same room during the peak Christmas period was \$319 or 30,950 points. Because hoteliers can manage the price of the rooms in points, they don't restrict availability during high season. You can also redeem for any room type, including suites.

VOILÀ HOTEL REWARDS

Member Hotels: About 235 upscale hotels in 22 countries, with a heavy concentration in [Spain](#). The collection includes a number of small luxury chains like Amari in [Thailand](#) Continental Hotels in [Romania](#) and Husa Hotels in Spain.

What You Get: A traditional tiered points program for independent hotels. Like most mass hotel chain loyalty programs, Voilà has three membership levels: [Phoenix](#), Orion and Centaurus, with perks linked to status. At the base level (Phoenix), guests earn 10 points for every dollar spent and get priority check-in and complimentary newspapers. After 10 nights in a consecutive 12-month period, guests receive Orion status, which comes with free upgrades, early check-in or late checkout and a 25 percent earning bonus. Points can be redeemed for free nights or miles on several airlines including Delta, Mexicana, Qatar Airways and [India's Kingfisher Airlines](#).

A version of this article appeared in print on June 5, 2011, on page TR3 of the New York edition with the headline: Expanding Hotel Loyalty Rewards.

COMMENTS

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

More Headlines From Around the Web

Sponsored Links

CAREONE

[Staying at home this summer? Get awesome stay-cation ideas.](#)

VOGUE

[Happily Ever After: Anne Hathaway](#)

STYLELIST

[Scout Willis Shows off her College Dorm Room to StyleLikeU](#)

CAREONE

[Journey Out of Debt: "Shh! It's used" & other money secrets.](#)

Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

[Travel and Vacations](#)

[Hotels and Motels](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



DINING & WINE »



[At the National Archives, Life, Liberty and Carp](#)

TELEVISION »



[Paris Hilton, Trying to Catch the Spotlight Again](#)

OPINION »

Op-Ed: Waiting for a School Miracle
Be skeptical of stories of rapid educational transformation, writes Diane Ravitch.

HEALTH »



[Eating Fat and Staying Lean](#)

OPINION »



[Room for Debate: Should He Still Be a U.S. Target?](#)

MAGAZINE »



[Can Bill Simmons Win the Big One?](#)

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Autos](#) | [Site Map](#)

© 2011 The New York Times Company | [Privacy](#) | [Your Ad Choices](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Terms of Sale](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertise](#)