

TRAVEL TALK

BY CHASE BINDER

Bud and I used to be almost ridiculously loyal to our preferred airline, USAirways. We used their affinity card almost exclusively—the one exception being for trips abroad when we would use our Capital One “no foreign transaction or conversion fees” card. But the world has changed. USAirways merged with American Airlines. The perks of the “merged” affinity card have changed, and not for the better. We’re semi-retired and traveling more domestically than internationally at the moment. This puts us in the market for low-cost airfares, especially for flights to and from Florida—and, frankly, I’ll take them on any airline I can find. The heck with loyalty! Luckily, we have some options, and it looks like even more will be popping up over the next few months. But as you can imagine, each option has pros and cons.

Last month I needed to make a quick 3-day trip back to New



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Hampshire, and decided to look at some of the new low-cost airlines. I started my search on Cheapo Air (cheapoair.com), one of my favorite search engines for user-friendly functions to filter for arrival/departure times, number of stops and other important factors. Cheapoair.com pointed me to a \$63 base fare, one-way, from Fort Myers to Boston. Wow! I went directly to Spirit

Air (spirit.com), set up a free account and booked my flights.

Enter the world of the new low-cost airlines! I quickly discovered that \$63 fare was indeed no-frills. I got a seat and one “personal item” (think one small bag that fits under the seat). If I wanted to check a bag or have a carry-on bag (in addition to my one personal item), the fees would start piling up. If I wanted to select my seat in advance or have any kind of early boarding—more fees. In fact, all those “extra” options require a bit of navigating through the purchase screens, not to mention adding a potential \$100 or so to the fare.

But Spirit Air was a great match for my needs for this particular trip. I had just one small bag, which met the dimension requirements for a personal item. I was traveling alone—no need for a particular seat. The schedule was non-stop, Fort Myers to Boston and back, and midday departure/arrivals.

I had been warned about the lack of leg room. Sure enough, leg room was tight, though not uncomfortable for my 5’2” frame. What surprised me was that seats are bolted upright—no reclining even an inch or two! But for a midday 3+ hour flight, not a problem for me.

Low-cost, no-frills airlines may or may not work for you—but I am hearing that the Big Three (Delta, United and American) are feeling the pinch and want to get into the game over the next few months, so you’ll have another option. Delta will likely be first, offering a new fare called “basic economy.” If you’re wondering how more basic economy fares can actually get—go back and look at how Spirit structures their fares. You won’t be able

to select your seat in advance. You’ll board last. They’re still working out the number of things they can remove. There are a couple of positives, though. If you have an affinity card and use it to purchase your ticket, you’ll probably get a free checked bag, in addition to getting some miles added to your frequent flyer account. The important thing is to read the fine print and see if you’re giving up something critical—or if the added fees to get something you need put you right back at a regular economy anyway.

The last option available for getting back and forth to Florida, or any domestic destination, on the cheap is to use frequent flyer points. Again, there are pros and cons. Bud and I like to save our miles for upgrades to Business or First Class on long-haul flights abroad—where 100,000 miles can get you a ticket valued at \$8-10,000. Why chew up miles for a domestic ticket worth \$2-300? If you’re even thinking about a big Bucket List trip, exploring the use of frequent flyer miles should be tops on your list.

Frequent flyer programs have changed too over the past few years. Most allow one-way bookings and offer reduced miles for certain days of the week. You might need 25,000 to get down Florida on a weekend, but only 12,500 to go on a weekday. The same for the return—a potential savings of 25,000 miles if you have flexibility. Or, perhaps you can use frequent flyer miles one way, and find a cheap one-way fare for the return. If you’re sensing that finding the best option for domestic air travel takes time, right you are! Airfare price structuring is getting more complicated by the day. But it *can* be done!

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