

TRAVEL

A scramble, but worth it for the points

BY LAURA LIPPMAN

On the shortest day of 2017, a day with less than eight hours of daylight available in my corner of the Northern Hemisphere, I squandered any opportunity I had to soak up some vitamin D, choosing instead to sit in planes and airports. I was a woman on a mission. An inane, pathetic mission, but a mission nonetheless.

Three weeks earlier, I had decided to fly from Baltimore to Providence, R.I., have lunch with a friend, then return home in time for dinner. Projected time on planes: 2 hours 30 minutes. Projected time in airports: three hours. Projected time in cabs to and from airports: 70 minutes. Estimated time in Providence, not counting airport or taxi: 2 hours 20 minutes. And that was if nothing went wrong — a big “if” four days before Christmas.

No, I was not delivering an organ for transplant, although that should have been my cover story. I was on a quest to earn 297 T.Q.P.s — tier qualifying points — in the Southwest Airlines Rapid Rewards program. Since 2009, I have effortlessly qualified for the airline's A List program, in part because I was on a book tour every year except 2013. In the heady days of 2014, I made it to the next level, A List Preferred, minutes before the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve.

Last year, however, I once again didn't publish a book. As the year wound down, the graphs showing my progress toward the A List remained stubbornly fixed at 34,703 T.Q.P.s and 20 flights.

To qualify for 2018, I needed either 35,000 T.Q.P.s or 25 flights by Dec. 31.

There was no weekend in which I could travel, no weeknight available for me to be away from my chaotic household. My one business trip in December was to New York, where it made no sense to fly Southwest, as the only non-stop flights are to Islip on Long Island. The almost-three-hour regional Amtrak was the far better bargain in terms of time.

You might have inferred by now that I am a bit of a travel nerd, someone who knows that Dulles Airport is abbreviated IAD, that one should never use the ladies' room closest to the gate of your just-arrived plane and that T.S.A. personnel at New Orleans's Louis Armstrong International Airport excel at



ARIEL DAVIS

finding forgotten corkscrews in carry-ons.

During my daughter's toddler years, I could break down her stroller faster than most travelers can remove their shoes. I sincerely loved the 2004-5 reality show “Airline,” which showcased Southwest staff.

I'm also a grade-grubber, and the very name of Southwest's loyalty program, A List, brings out the worst in me. Obviously.

So I found the two easiest day trips out of Baltimore: Providence and Raleigh, N.C. No contest: While Raleigh is closer, Providence is both cheaper and

home to my friend, the novelist Ann Hood, who is always up for lunch. And as a former flight attendant who has more airline miles than any civilian I know, Ann understands insane loyalty to a loyalty program. She evinced no shock at my idea, just booked a table at Camille's, an Italian restaurant in Providence's Federal Hill neighborhood.

You may wonder what was at stake in all of this, what benefits one reaps from Southwest's A List. There are four: priority boarding, free same-day standby, priority check-in and security lane access, and a 25 percent earning bonus on every ticket purchased.

Because I'm a Global Entry Program member and therefore usually a T.S.A. PreCheck flier, Southwest's “Fly By” priority lane doesn't matter to me. But given Southwest's open-seating policy, priority boarding is important. If you're A List, the airline automatically checks you in 36 hours before the flight, all but guaranteeing a spot in A, the first boarding group. Otherwise, the ticket-holder needs to check in exactly 24 hours before the flight to get the best boarding position available — or pay an extra \$15 for Early Bird check-in.

I know, I know: I'm playing for peanuts, a teeny, tiny bag of honey-

roasted peanuts, but I care about priority boarding. There is only one cabin class on Southwest, so one can't aspire to an upgrade. If I didn't qualify for A List in 2018, I would have to pay for Early Bird or resign myself to a year in the B or C groups. If I flew 20 flights on Southwest, as I had in 2017, Early Bird fees would add up to \$300. A round-trip ticket to Providence, booked three weeks in advance, cost \$230.96. That represents a saving of almost \$70. The Points Guy blog values Southwest A List benefits at \$685, with priority boarding accounting for \$250 of that total.

But those are all facts gathered after

the fact. I got on that plane to Providence — which left 20 minutes late, cutting into my on-ground, out-of-airport time in Rhode Island — sure of only two things: I would have the 297 points I needed even if the plane had to turn around after takeoff, and I was probably going to have veal Parmesan for lunch.

Why does A list status matter to me? First, modern plane travel is dehumanizing and demoralizing. I am loyal to Southwest because the employees tend to be cheerful, instead of giving off the prison-guard vibe I've encountered on some other airlines. It's also the busiest carrier at the airport 20 minutes from my house, with the most flights in and out.

Finally, I am conflict-averse. I don't want to scramble for bin space or aisle seats. Boarding early limits testy encounters.

No one enjoys even the smallest drop in status. Once you stop taking off your shoes in airports, you want to keep them on.

Yet I feel squirmy admitting this. The rigid delineations among tiers in loyalty programs are uncomfortably vivid metaphors for the way we live now, no matter how euphemistic the terms. (I'm “Ruby” on OneWorld flights, which sounds impressive. It's not.) In the spring of 2015, I flew to New Orleans with my mother, a once avid traveler who had been homebound in the last years of my father's life. I accompanied her in the regular security line; in the time it took us to clear it, my husband and daughter sailed through the PreCheck line and ate a sit-down lunch. This irked me. No one enjoys a perceived drop in status, no matter how small the stakes. Once you stop taking off your shoes in airports, you want to keep them on.

The morning after my flight to Providence, my Rapid Rewards account showed me back on the A List. I needed only 34,813 more T.Q.P.s or 28 flights to get onto A List Preferred; the catch was that I had only nine days left to achieve this. The only way to do that would have been to fly Business Select round-trip to Los Angeles at least three times, which would have cost more than \$3,000. I passed.

Melding Mexico with India

BITES

BY BROOKE PORTER KATZ

Despite being almost 10,000 miles apart, Mexico and India have surprising similarities when it comes to food. The chefs Norma Listman and Saqib Keval discovered exactly that one night in Mexico City, when they created a menu for a friend's dinner party. The result is what may be the capital's most inventive new restaurant, Masala y Maiz, in the residential neighborhood of San Miguel Chapultepec.

The project was never supposed to happen. After years working in some of the San Francisco Bay Area's top restaurants, Ms. Listman, a Mexico native, moved back to Mexico City last year to pursue the study of corn and start a tortilleria. The California-born Mr. Keval — who is of Indian and East African descent — stayed in Oakland, hosting community-based dining and activism events. But then came an offer that the real-life couple couldn't refuse: a lease on a three-story building in Mexico City, complete with a research kitchen and studio apartment (currently in use as a chef-in-residence program).

But their road has not been an easy one. The original opening date was planned for Sept. 20, 2017, the day after an earthquake ravaged the city. Instead, for the next month, they delivered hot meals all over the city. Then, after a successful October debut, they were closed in April for bureaucratic reasons still unclear to them. Refusing to pay a morbid, or bribe, to the government (as is common in Mexico), they spent the next five months hosting pop-ups in restaurants around town while continuing to



A selection of dishes at Masala y Maiz in Mexico City. After a series of bureaucratic hurdles, it is open again.

submit, and resubmit, paperwork.

Finally, they found an ally in someone who secured a meeting with a higher-up to review their case, and in September, the doors opened once again. “To me, it's a victory for all and a way to show the community that it is possible to fight the system,” Ms. Listman said.

As to their food, “we spent a lot of time researching, finding flavors that overlap. Almost everything on the menu exists in each of our cultures in some way,” Mr. Keval said.

First up were the esquites Makai Pakka, inspired by both Mexican street-

food corn and a dish that Mr. Keval's parents made in Kenya. The twice-cooked heirloom kernels were plump, meaty and had a discernible pop. Once stirred in, a dollop of chile mayo made with blue-corn husk ash added a welcome kick. Next, seared peel-and-eat jumbo shrimp were liberally coated with a smoky, maroon-colored masala.

But no dish exemplified the owners' cerebral approach better than uttapam, a tangy pancake that's miraculously both crispy and spongy and layered with a zigzag of tart tamarind-date chutney, a simple oil-based salsa, tangy yogurt and soft cubes of potato. The dosalike base is made from Mexican rice and garbanzos that go through four stages of fermentation (a process the chefs tested countless times).

A neighborhood ordinance dictates that the restaurant can't be open for dinner (except for private events) or serve hard liquor. So the short-yet-stellar drink list includes hard-to-find natural wines and a custom-made hibiscus flower mead.

While the menu is rooted in both worlds, the restaurant's identity is decidedly, and proudly, Mexican, as seen in its organic vegetables, ceramic dishware, denim uniforms and even its salt.

The owners have ambitious plans, including a rooftop garden, fresh tortillas and rotis, whole-animal roasting, and an on-site mill for processing corn. “We're going to serve a lot of indigenous varieties,” Ms. Listman said. “The best thing we can do is cook what is here.”

Masala y Maiz, Calle Gobernador Protasio Tagle 66A, San Miguel Chapultepec, Mexico City; masalaymaiz.com. An average lunch for two, minus drinks and tip, is 570 pesos (about \$30).

Where Americans are headed

BY SHIVANI VORA

If you want to avoid the crowds this fall and winter, you may want to steer away from New York, Italy, Mexico and Kenya. These spots are apparently among the most popular destinations for Americans headed on a vacation over the next few months.

NEW YORK On Booking.com, the city was the top booked destination in the country by Americans looking to take a trip around Sept. 15 to March 15.

And according to the airfare comparison app Fareness, New York had the most airfare bookings from Sept. 15 to March 15, compared with any other domestic destination.

ITALY Already a top summer destination for many Americans, Italy is increas-

ingly a popular place in the fall, when prices tend to be lower.

Data from ForwardKeys, a research firm that analyzes 17 million flight bookings a day, shows that bookings to the country through the end of this year increased 23.8 percent over last year.

Travel experts say that fall and wintertime vacationers to Italy tend to head to the Alps for skiing, Milan for shopping trips and Rome for a culture fix.

MEXICO According to Travelport, a travel technology company that analyzes booking data, Mexico had the most bookings from United States travelers from October through January.

On the popular Riviera Maya, the wellness focused resort Chable Maroma, the second location of the Chable brand (the first is in the Yucatán), has opened. And in the spring

break destination Cabo San Lucas, the addition of several resorts including Chileno Bay Resort & Residences and the Montage Los Cabos, is extending the area's audience.

KENYA American demand for vacations in Kenya was tepid for several years because of the country's political unrest and fears over Ebola. But with those concerns somewhat eased, it's now a hot ticket destination for American travelers.

Travelport reported a 28.8 percent increase for December 2018 bookings to Kenya, compared with 2017, and ForwardKeys reported a 27.2 percent increase in bookings from mid-September through December. A big reason for the increase? Experts cite the debut of a nonstop Kenya Airways flight from New York to Nairobi.

The New York Times

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