



How to  
**Get VIP Perks  
Wherever You Go**





# How to Get VIP Perks Wherever You Go

By Ted Bauman, Editor, *The Bauman Letter*

LET'S face it — it's a rough world out there, especially when it comes to travelling. Sometimes a freebie or upgrade is all you need to take an experience from stressful to tolerable. Other times, VIP benefits add to a little extra savings on an expensive vacation, or a touch of elegance that can elevate an ordinary occasion to something unforgettable.

Wouldn't it be great to experience this anywhere you go? We say you can!

By definition, VIP perks are exclusive, not something everyone gets. And quite often, the companies offering really nice perks would prefer that not everyone know the tricks of the trade to getting these special benefits.

Well, their former secrets are your rewards! In this special report, we've decoded all the hidden secrets to securing your share of these benefits. They're only meant for a select few; by following our guide, you're going to part of that exclusive club too!

## The Big Picture on Perks

Before we get into specifics, there are a few basic strategies that work in myriad situations. We heard these ideas come up over and over as we uncovered the secrets of VIPs:

- **Strategy 1: Pay a small sum to live large.** Some ways to secure perks, such as through credit cards and loyalty programs, come with an upfront cost. Don't discount them out of hand — they may very well be a great value for your money. Just be sure to make that calculation each time before you pony up an annual fee or membership cost.
- **Strategy 2: Make the most of your affiliations.** A great number of perks are available based on your age, career or other qualifications. We've heard of professional sports teams giving discounted season tickets (and all the associated perks) to those who serve the community as nurses, teachers, police officers, firefighters and members of the military. Most arts organizations have groups for young professionals and others, and offer extras like backstage tours and special receptions. Also, investigate perks you might already have access to through your alma mater, employer, health insurance company, credit card or a membership organization.
- **Strategy 3: Use stumbling blocks in your favor.** Notify staff of any slip-ups in their service or product, and do it quickly. In the moment, they have numerous options to make it right, including VIP perks. (Leaving a scathing review online may be satisfying, but getting a high-end perk could be even better.) Next time you're inconvenienced or disappointed by a service, rather than asking for a discount, see if the staff can elevate the remainder of your experience instead.

- **Strategy 4: Be nice and dress nice.** This will never hurt your chances of getting a perk. Experts who study VIP programs all agree that being polite and friendly (and yes, well dressed) is a more successful path to better treatment than demanding them, and complaining if they're not immediately forthcoming.

Be eager to have a positive experience and cast a favorable word of mouth. People in the travel and hospitality industry generally like to make people happy, so let them know you can be pleased.

- **Strategy 5: Become a regular.** Find businesses you like and frequent them. Larger companies will have organized loyalty programs to deliver perks, but it needn't be so formal. Every smart business, from the largest corporation to the modest family-owned shop, takes care of its best customers.

## Cruises: How to Discount Your Trip, Drinks and More

More than 22 million people went on a cruise in 2015, up nearly 4% from the year before. Some people go for the destinations or the on-board amenities or the entertainment and dining options. Drinking wine and cocktails is a part of nearly everyone's cruise experience — and a great place to score perks if you follow these tips:

- **Cruisesheet.com.** “In the know” cruise veterans say this website — [www.cruisesheet.com](http://www.cruisesheet.com) — offers some of the biggest discounts around. But the key to making best use of the site, say insiders, is keeping an open mind on your exact departure and return dates.

Why should that make a difference? Just like the airlines, cruise companies get more than their share of last-minute cancellations and plenty of berths on the ships that just never get sold. So rather than have their ship sail off only partly-filled, the cruise lines often mark down their fares in the final days before the departure date, taking their ticket prices down to a level where the company knows they will find a willing buyer.

That's where [www.cruisesheet.com](http://www.cruisesheet.com) comes in. These marked-down tickets are found by the website's “cruise search engine” and displayed on the site. The only thing a buyer needs is a flexible travel schedule and a love for cruising!

- **Cruise more than once on the same line.** If you're a repeat customer, join the company's loyalty program for liquid rewards. “Loyalty programs are a good way to get free or discounted beverages,” according to Terrance Zepke, travel author and blogger and host of the *Terrance Talks Travel Show*. Some offer frequent cruisers 25 to 50% off drinks, plus complimentary wine tastings. Others have nightly happy hours for repeat guests or provide complimentary drink tickets in lieu of happy hours.

- **Try a river cruise.** Smaller river cruises often include complimentary alcohol, often locally sourced, at night with dinner, Zepke says. Plus, they allow passengers to bring bottles aboard. That's not kosher on most major cruise lines, which are notorious for confiscating any bottles you bring back from port. “Believe me, folks have gotten plenty creative and the cruise lines have caught on to most schemes,” she says.

- **Do the math on “all you care to drink” packages.** Zepke says that most cruise lines offer them, and while some think they encourage binge drinking, she doesn't hold that view. “Folks that are going to overindulge are going to do so anyway. The rest of us just like to save money.” For the best value, look for a drink package that includes sodas, specialty coffees, energy drinks and bottled water. Carnival's Cheers! beverage program is \$49.95 per person per day and includes 15 alcoholic drinks and unlimited non-alcoholic beverages. Just be sure to buy in advance — the daily rate goes up to \$54.95 once you're onboard. Sometimes the cruise lines will even throw in these packages for free as an incentive, so do your research!

- **Say yes to ship-organized parties.** “Onboard events provide free booze,” Zepke says. Attend a captain's

party, art auction, wine tasting, champagne brunch or welcome or farewell soiree and you can expect free drinks.

- **Read the daily newsletter.** Even if the above-mentioned organized activities aren't your thing, don't toss that daily bulletin without skimming — it can be a valuable roadmap for free drinks onboard. “Two for one” drink specials are common, as are happy hours and “drink of the day” deals, but you have to know which bar or lounge is offering them. The duty-free liquor store on board often has complimentary tastings early in the voyage, too.
- **Pay with onboard credits.** Onboard credits (also called shipboard credits) are funds in an account that's usable anywhere on the vessel, and the credits can be applied to beverages, Zepke says. Watch for cruise packages that include onboard credits, or try one of these inventive ways to get them:
  - **Book a future cruise while you're still on one.** Many lines will grant you onboard credit of \$100 to \$500 per cabin for doing so, and some make it available to use immediately. If you're an established cruiser, it's great way to get free drinks.
  - **Open a credit card connected with the cruise line.** The major cruise lines all have branded credit cards, and each offers a sign-up point bonus that can be converted to onboard credits typically around \$100.
  - **Become a shareholder.** Here's a great perk: If you hold enough stock in the company that operates your cruise, they will treat you to onboard credits. For example, Carnival Corporation offers \$250 in onboard credit for sailings of 14 days or more, for anyone who owns 100 or more shares.
- **Book through a travel agent.** It's a good idea anyway, especially for newbie cruisers, Zepke says. “A cruise specialist has access to upgrades, shipboard credits, and other incentives,” she says. And in addition, you may be surprised with a nice onboard credit or bottle of wine in your cabin to thank you for the business.

## The “Bedroom-to-Anywhere” Exchange

This is a secret technique used by savvy, “in the know” homeowners to travel the world — for free vacations. You do it in five steps. Here's how it works:

**First**, list your house on Airbnb, the website that allows house and condo owners to rent out their homes on a by-the-night basis to travelers and tourists. Why Airbnb? In part, because as an Airbnb host, you get an insurance policy protecting you against damage by visiting guests. But also, Airbnb is preferred because they make it easy. The website handles the money and verifies the identification of the guests using your home.

**Second**, once someone agrees to the rental of your home through Airbnb, find your own nightly accommodations in town through Expedia or other hotel-booking websites. The idea here is to find a room that will allow to clear a nice profit between the money you pay for the accommodation (let's say that costs you \$100 a night) and the money you'll be receiving from Airbnb for renting out your home (which might be \$250 or \$300 a night, for example).

**Third**, when you stay at the local hotel (while your Airbnb guests use your home), pay your hotel bill with a credit card that allows you to earn travel miles on the airline of your choice. The rules for accumulating frequent flier miles can be complex, but the main point is to get as many points as you can, which you can then put toward a pair of future roundtrip flights for your vacation. Importantly, make sure you pay off your credit card bill — otherwise the interest charges would eat up (and then some) whatever benefits you'd earn through your travel miles.

If you do it right (and repeat the process a handful of times over the course of a year) you'll accumulate a

nice bit of profit. Make sure to put away the money you've earned from this "bedroom-to-anywhere" exchange; when you think the time is right, those profits become the treasure chest you use to find your next great vacation adventure.

## “Backpack the South Pacific”

When it comes to visiting the tropical islands and coral atolls of the south Pacific, two images come to mind. One is crystal blue waters, palm trees and coral reefs. The other image is how thin your wallet's going to be after you finish paying for the trip.

Visiting an exotic south Pacific island like Vanuatu or Bora Bora is expensive. It costs a lot to fly there and back; there's not much anyone can do about that part. But once you get to these fascinating locales, visitors often find that the accommodations, food, island transportation and entertainment options aren't cheap either.

But veteran travelers say there is one island that the budget-minded among us would be happy to visit: Fiji.

Actually, Fiji is more accurately known as not one island, but a regional archipelago of palm-fringed islets with names like Viti Levu, Mamanuca, and Yasawa. If you love unpretentious opportunities for diving, hiking, rafting, and island hopping, Fiji is the place to go.

Just how cheap is it? As of early 2016, you could book a memorable vacation's worth of beachside accommodations, island hopping (and a lifetime of experiences) for as little as \$900. No wonder this island chain is so wildly popular with Aussies and New Zealanders already.

## How to Score Free Rounds of Golf

- **Get a credit card with golf-related benefits.** The Citi Prestige credit card offers three free rounds of golf every calendar year. You can claim these complimentary rounds at upscale courses in the U.S., Canada, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. But buried deep in the card's terms and conditions is another remarkable benefit: cardholders are eligible for up to 18 free rounds at certain courses in Asia (three rounds each at six specific courses in China, Malaysia and Singapore). The annual fee is steep, however, at \$450.
- **Become a mystery shopper.** Think mystery shopping is just for retail stores? Think again, says Mike Mershimer, president of MSPA-NA, the professional trade association for the industry. Airlines, casinos, bowling alleys, fitness centers, Caribbean resorts and, yes, golf courses all use mystery shopping services, he says. To find these assignments and which companies offer them, start at the MSPA-NA job board ([mspa-na.org/jobboard](http://mspa-na.org/jobboard)) for posts from its member companies. (There are a few mystery shopping scams out there, he says, so working with vetted organizations is key.) Of course, you'll need to pay your dues a bit before getting the most plum assignments, but they are certainly out there, and the industry is hiring: "We're desperate for mystery shoppers," Mershimer says.
- **Work in a golf shop.** Looking for a part-time gig? If you enjoy helping others, assisting in a shop could be a boon to your game. Free rounds at the course are a standard perk of the job, according to the PGA.

## Get Free Hotel Rooms and Upgrades This Way

- **Automate it.** Similar to airfares, hotel rates are fluctuating constantly. Booking site [tingo.com](http://tingo.com) promises that it will monitor your reservation, and if a better room becomes available at a lower price, they will notify you and offer an upgrade.

- **Have appropriate expectations.** A reasonable request is an upgrade to a room one level nicer. Don't expect to access the presidential suite from your standard room. Also, know what your particular hotel has at its disposal. A higher-end hotel will have more potential VIP perks available than a budget one.
- **Check in later in the day.** By this point, the front desk clerk has a better idea of what rooms are filled for the night and may be more willing to upgrade you. Alternately, some experts say you can score a sweet deal at this point by walking in without a reservation. If the property is close to selling out, the staff may work with you on a rate so they can get bragging rights of reaching 100% capacity.
- **Tell your story.** If it's an extra special occasion, a friendly clerk may be willing to give you a nicer room or a better view. One tactic to try: Lobby on behalf of your travel companion rather than yourself. ("My mom hasn't had a vacation in ages!") Beware, however, that many people staying in hotels are likely to be celebrating special occasions too, so make the request memorable. For example, one industry insider said he would be much more likely to upgrade someone "celebrating" a divorce.
- **Consider tipping to secure perks and upgrades.** You're used to tipping someone who helps with your bags but have you thought about doing the same with a front desk clerk? Perks like an upgraded room, free parking or free breakfast can really add up over a multi-day stay. Here's how to do it: Include a \$20 bill when you hand your credit card to the front desk clerk, and say (genuinely) that you'd appreciate anything he or she can do.
- **Try a new property.** Recently opened hotels are trying to build awareness and get people talking about their amenities quickly, so they may be more liberal with dispensing those perks in the first few days after launching. This can also work with a hotel that's just been renovated, opened a new restaurant or hired a new chef. Ask if there's a way you could sample the new features — gratis of course — in exchange for spreading the word.
- **Spend a little more in the beginning.** If you have the absolute cheapest room in the hotel, an upgrade request likely won't work, as the property is already not making much money from you. Aim for a mid-range room, at least one step above the lowest level.
- **Join a loyalty program.** It's usually as simple as sharing an email address, and typically there are worthwhile benefits, such as early check in, late departure, free WiFi, free breakfast, and priority upgrades. Many also let you accrue points to eventually earn free stays. Prefer to stay in more unique, non-chain hotels? You still have options to get perks. Independent hotel collections Preferred Hotel Group, Leading Hotels of the World, and Small Luxury Hotels of the World all have loyalty programs. Small Luxury Hotels touts space-available room upgrades to all members.

## Free Airline Tickets, Seat Upgrades & How to Get Them

- **Redeem your frequent flier miles — and do it soon.** "Miles are in a spiral of declining value," according to Tim Winship, editor-at-large at SmarterTravel.com. He explains that in recent years it's become more difficult for average travelers (those who don't fly frequently on business) to earn enough miles for an award trip or free upgrade. For those who do have enough, it's hard to redeem. And things are only going to get worse, Winship warns. "Redeem your miles as soon as you reach an award threshold," he says. "It's a depreciating asset."
- **Zip to the front of the security line – by applying for a frequent flier credit card.** If you have stellar credit, this is one bright spot amid the bleak frequent flier landscape. As loyalty programs have been stripped of value, the credit cards linked to these programs have increased in value for benefits like priority check in and boarding, free checked bags and lounge access. What might just be the biggest little-known benefit to holding one of these cards in your wallet? Entry to the "elite status" rapid-entry

security line. Almost any frequent flyer card will do it for you, which means less time waiting and no jostling with the hoi-polloi. When you get to the TSA security area at the airport, show your frequent flier card to the agent when he asks to see your boarding pass. Nine times out of ten, the agent will send you over to the short, elite-level line (though you still will have to go through the usual x-ray, metal detector and scanning machines everyone else does, of course). If the agent disagrees, the worst that can happen is he or she will point you to the regular security line. No harm, no foul.

- **Fly solo.** There will likely be just one first class seat available, and airlines don't like to split up a party.
- **Resist the urge to choose a seat when you book.** If all that's available are middle seats in the last rows of the plane, there's no risk in waiting to commit. By the time you fly, there could be more comfortable seats available. Or you could get very lucky and be placed in an open business or first class seat (being a loyalty member helps).
- **The VIP “whisper key”: volunteer to be bumped (before they ask!).** When a flight is overbooked, gate agents seek volunteers to move to later flights with tempting offers of round-trip flight vouchers and other incentives that increase in value the closer it gets to departure time. You could wait it out, or try approaching the agent before the mayhem and offer to volunteer — in exchange for the best offer they'll make that day. You may be able to secure other perks, too. For example, if your current itinerary has a layover, ask to be booked on a flight that's direct. Or request cash toward a future flight instead of a voucher for fewer restrictions.

## Driving a Deal for a Free Chauffeur Ride

- **Let your airline drive you.** Some airlines offer chauffeur service for their first and business class customers. How can you get this perk without paying the high price tag? On some airlines, you're eligible for the service even on award tickets. And though most carriers offering the perk are international, global airline partnerships can enable you to book with your U.S.-based carrier's frequent flier miles. For example, Etihad Airways, based in the United Arab Emirates, offers Etihad Chauffeur on first and business class tickets and these seats can be booked using American AAdvantage miles. On Virgin Atlantic, chauffeur service isn't included on first class tickets, but it's available as an upgrade that can be purchased with frequent flier miles.
- **Get a free private driver.** If you're not already a user of ride-hailing services such as Uber and Lyft, where you use a smartphone app to request and pay for private car service, consider trying it out. Both companies offer a free first ride up to a certain amount. To find current codes, Google “[company name] promo code.”

## Sail Around the World for Free...With These Three Words

**“Be a friend.”** Believe it or not, those are three words that will get you on an awful lot of free sailing trips. Why? Sailing is fun, but it's also hard work. And while sailing can be a solitary endeavor, sharing the experience with another human being on board makes it all that much more of a satisfying experience.

With that in mind, there are websites you can visit, such as [www.findacrew.net](http://www.findacrew.net), that specialize in hooking up yacht owners with prospective crew members (even if they're inexperienced landlubbers). Not many yacht captains will turn down the chance to bring on an extra person to help trim the sails, swab the decks, keep watch at night — and keep company over the dining table down in the galley.

Take the trip of a lifetime when you join as volunteer crew on someone else's vessel. There are opportunities for all levels of experience, and websites like [findacrew.net](http://findacrew.net) make it easy to get in touch with boat owners

seeking assistance. Imagine living on the Mediterranean, sailing across the Atlantic, or staying on a yacht in Venice — all real experiences from users.

## Get Your Free Car Upgrades and Perk

- **Use This “9 Digit Code” to travel the EU by car — without renting or buying.** If a trip to Europe is in your future, you may want to get around by car but not worry about the driving rules in various countries (not to mention figuring out distances in metric!). The service BlaBlaCar, currently in 22 (mostly European) countries, has you covered. On the site, you can find and communicate with local drivers going your way and share the ride costs. It’s like having a private driver and local tour guide for a fraction of the cost. To access the site in English, select United Kingdom as your country. How do you pay? After you’ve signed up to the secure website and entered your credit/debit card payment information, you’ll receive a nine-digit booking code from Blablacar via email or text message. Once your ridesharing driver picks you up, you give him or her the booking code. Once the driver enters it on his phone, Blablacar releases the payment to the driver’s account.
- **When renting a car, book the cheapest one.** Everyone wants those, so the company will be more likely to be out of stock and upgrade you. For the best shot, go early in the day before most people have returned their cars. The agent may try to sell you a nicer car for an upcharge, but if you refuse, he or she has no choice but to give you a better model for free.

## Skip Airport Security Lines with These Tips

- **Get TSA PreCheck.** Travelers who have been approved through this Transportation Security Administration program have a special notation on their boarding pass and breeze through security via a separate lane. Plus, they do not have to remove toiletries or laptops from their bags, or take off their belts, jackets or shoes. Sounds great, right? To apply, you’ll visit an application center in-person, provide proof of identification and your fingerprints, and pay an \$85 application fee. The designation is good for five years.
- **Join Clear.** The service Clear (clearme.com) claims to speed its members through security in less than 5 minutes using kiosks that verify your fingerprint and scan your irises. You can start the application process online, but there is an in-person step at an enrollment center where your fingerprints and iris image are captured. It costs \$179 per year, so check first if your home airport is among the 13 in which it’s currently available.
- **Try a trick to access the airline’s priority security lane.** One travel blogger reports being able to regularly access the priority lane by flashing the airline’s basic loyalty card, not the elite status card it’s designed for. It’s a bit sneaky and takes advantage of the poor training given to employees, but it’s worth a shot to save your time. And if it doesn’t work, just play dumb.
- **Flying internationally? Consider becoming a “trusted traveler.”** If you fly outside the country regularly, you know that U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s inspection and questioning can be even more time-consuming than the TSA’s. That’s why you’ll want to register with one of CBP’s Trusted Traveler Programs, Global Entry or NEXUS, to help speed you through. Global Entry costs \$100 to apply, is valid for five years and gives you TSA PreCheck status. NEXUS costs \$50 to apply, is also good for five years, and grants both Global Entry and TSA PreCheck privileges. NEXUS seems like the clear winner, but because the application centers are only in cities near the Canadian border, such as Seattle and Detroit, it’s not convenient for everyone. Also, some credit cards refund the application fee for Global Entry as a perk, making that program more attractive for some.

## Fly on a *Private Jet* for Less Than First Class

**Rent a last-minute deal through JetSuite.** Private plane? It's not as out of reach as you might think. Jet charter company JetSuite posts daily "SuiteDeals," where they offer a whole aircraft seating four to six people for just \$536. The catch? The deals are very last-minute, and the flights are one way, because you're filling in gaps as JetSuite relocates its planes to serve customers paying full price. But if you can swing the logistics, it's a VIP perk few ever get to experience.

## Free Tours and Experiences

- **Buy tickets early and watch your mail.** Often organizers of arts or community events will have coordinating programs to enrich your experience, such as Q&As, backstage tours or celebrity meet and greets. They will notify ticketholders about these through mailers or brochures in the weeks ahead of the event.
- **See where your money is going.** For charities or nonprofit organizations you donate to regularly, ask if there are private tours available. Many offer them to donors or potential donors.
- **Mystery shopping can help here, too.** As of this writing, MSPA has opportunities for sightseeing bus tours in San Francisco, Miami and Washington, DC. You'll be reimbursed for the ticket costs—and get paid—just for writing a review.

## Get Your Free Newspapers and Magazines This Way

**Claim airline miles for a subscription.** Frequent flier miles are a pretty valuable commodity for most of us; when it comes to spending those precious points for something other than airfare, most experts say "Don't do it."

But getting free newspapers and magazines is the exception to the rule. You can actually get pretty good value per mile when you redeem frequent flier balances for magazine or newspaper subscriptions, especially if you're getting a subscription to a premium publication like the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and a handful of others that command higher subscription fees.

**Outsmart newspaper paywalls to see content for free.** An increasing number of news websites limit how many articles you can read for free, urging you to subscribe for full access.

There are two ways around a newspaper's paywall:

1. Most Internet browsers have a "private mode" of some kind (for example, you can switch Google Chrome to what the company calls "incognito mode") which prevents the newspaper's website from tracking how many articles you've read.
2. The second trick is to access the newspaper's content from social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. You can click on links posted by friends or go directly to the organization's page and read as much as you like.

## The Key to Yet More VIP Perks

The other thing about the "perks game" is that it never ends! A company may take away one perk, for reasons that may not be entirely clear to anyone but themselves, but then add in some other benefit to make another part of its clientele happy.

Airlines, for instance, are forever adjusting their frequent flier programs. Their reasons for doing so may have to do with the popularity (or lack thereof) of the airline with businesspeople and other regular travelers. Sometimes they're trying to gain "marketshare" with a particular group of fliers (families with children, as one example) and adjust their perks accordingly.

So it helps to keep reading the fine print of these programs, and keep checking around on the Internet. You'll stay on top of the latest changes, and keep finding great new perks for the benefit of yourself and your family.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ted Bauman', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Ted Bauman, Editor  
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