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These Lesser-Known Hotel Loyalty Programs Offer Free, Instant Rewards

On a recent trip to Paris, it wasn't the elaborate Michelin-starred dinners that blew me away, but breakfast at the Ritz. A parade of baskets heaped with flaky croissants and pains au chocolat, silver platters of sliced fruit, and eggs as light as air were all elegantly presented on starched white linens in a glass-enclosed winter garden. The best part: It didn't cost me a thing. As a newly minted member of the Leaders Club loyalty program, which I joined for free right before my stay, the €66 (\$73) breakfast was included, from my first Paris morning to the last.

Loyalty programs can seem like a never-ending hustle of chasing down and redeeming points and miles. But smaller brands sometimes eschew those currency systems entirely, offering valuable perks—like that princely morning meal—for anyone who signs up. That makes them a welcome complement to such known commodities as Marriott Bonvoy or Hilton Honors, whose good stuff (namely upgrades, free breakfast, and late checkout) doesn't kick in until you attain a certain level of hard-won elite status.

Here are five under-the-radar, free-to-join programs that provide instant travel gratification.



The Post Oak Hotel in Houston. Source: The Post Oak Hotel

I Prefer Hotel Rewards, by Preferred Hotels & Resorts

The network: More than 650 properties across 85 countries. These include such well-known five-stars as the Grand Hotel Tremezzo on Lake Como, Italy, and the Post Oak Hotel in Houston. In addition, there are 90 Preferred Residences—think beachfront condos in Turks and Caicos and swanky apartments in London and Paris where members can earn and redeem points.

The immediate perks: New members enjoy early check-in and late check-out privileges, room upgrades when available, and free Wi-Fi. The first of those may be the most covetable—the ability to check into a hotel first thing in the morning after a long overnight flight is priceless.

The longer game: This is the world’s largest point-based program for independent hotels. Unlike major hotel programs in which you’re accruing points and miles that can be exchanged for dynamically priced rewards, this system is refreshingly straightforward: For every \$1 of eligible spending at Preferred properties, you’ll earn 10 points, which can be redeemed for discounts on future stays. Rack up 25,000 points within a calendar year to attain Explorer status, which earns you free welcome amenities (a bottle of wine or local souvenir, depending on the hotel) plus bonus points.