

Just imagine: your dream getaway, all paid for through credit card points. It sounds too good to be true. Unless...

Credit card companies offer a wide range of point offerings in order to reel in new customers. And I mean, if you're going to spend money, you might as well get some rewards, right?

There are thousands of posts out there explaining how to maximize travel points and which cards are best for what, but what I couldn't find very often was anyone's actual experience using the travel point method.

Hence this post. My husband and I got on the travel point bandwagon back in 2018 and decided to use travel points to pay for a two week trip to New Zealand. As credit card newbies, this was a daunting task.

In this post I'll go over what we did and what key takeaways I realized after our trip. Let's go!

My travel reward experience

It's January 2018. I have been working in my new big girl job for 8 months. My husband was finishing up his undergrad. And we got the itch to travel. Instead of easing into traveling, we decided to dive in head first. At the time, neither of us had any credit cards at all. I started following an instagram account that was all about this couple that had managed to [save up enough credit card points to do a year long trip across the world](#).

I figured, if they were able to plan a trip for a year, I could easily do a two week trip, right? Well... yes and no.

We did our research and decided to use the Capital One Venture card. At the time, the card was offering 60,000 points after you spent \$3,000 in the first 3 months. This brings me to my first takeaway...

Rule #1: Only spend money that you have

THIS. If you take nothing else away from this post, remember this. There is no way to earn free rewards if you are spending money you don't have. Period. You will just end up trading points for credit card debt.

An easy way to make sure you are only spending money that you already have is to look at your monthly budget (and if you aren't already making monthly budgets, do it!). Look at how much you normally spend per month and see if you will be able to meet your credit card's spending bonus minimum in their time frame.

If you don't think you will be able to meet your credit card's bonus minimum based purely off of your regular spending, no need to give up! There are a few simple things you can do to hit the minimum without spending more money than you have.

The first thing you can do is save up for a big purchase ahead of time, and then purchase it with your new card. Say you are looking to get a new tv. You know your budget for this will be about \$600. Start putting \$100-\$200 aside every month before you sign up for your card. Then, when you have your new card, make your purchase using the card and pay for it with the money you set aside.

Another thing you could do is to ask close family and friends to put their expenses on your card. Going out to dinner with friends? Put the entire meal on your card and have your friends Venmo you their share. Are your parents planning on making a big purchase? Same thing. Have them put the purchase on your card and send the money to you to cover the cost. I never personally used this method, but I wish I did. We had some friends that used this method and not only did they hit their minimum spend in record time, they only used a little bit of their own purchases to do it!

Lastly, depending on your card, you can apply your credit card points to your current balance. We used this to our advantage when buying our flights to New Zealand. We had about \$600 more that we needed to spend to hit our minimum spending amount, but we had no more purchases that we needed to make. We ended up buying our flights on the card, which allowed us to hit the qualifying spend amount. Then, when our rewards hit our account, we selected to use it to pay off our card (which we got down to just be our flights). Let me tell you, using free money to pay for our flights felt GOOD. Definitely worth the effort!

Know what your credit card points are worth

Not all credit card points are created equal. Annoying? Yes. True? Also yes. Luckily, there are many people out there who have done the hard work of figuring out what points are worth for you. I personally like using the [guides created by NerdWallet](#). They are easy to understand and they update them regularly.

Another thing to be aware of is that point value can vary depending on what you're putting them toward, even all from the same card. If you are mostly looking to cover hotel costs, look for cards that specialize in that.

Make a trip budget ahead of time

This is something that I definitely did not do but wish I did. It can make your trip sound more boring when you have a budget for it, but trust me. It will save you so much worry and stress while you are on vacation.

After our initial sign up bonus with our Venture card, we kept using that card to save up points that we could use to pay for our expenses while on our trip. What we did not think through, though, is the amount of expenses we would rack up. If we would have actually planned out our spending for the trip, we could have planned and used our points more wisely.

Part of the reason we did not plan our budget very well is that we were going to be in a foreign country and did not know their prices and cost conversions to the American dollar. Looking back, it was a silly thing to hold us back from planning a budget. It probably would have taken us all of 30 minutes to look at the money conversion rates and what the average cost of food, gas, and activities would be.

I highly recommend making a trip budget before you leave for vacation. Look at average costs of the things you know you are going to spend money on, and allocate an amount you will allow yourself to spend every day. If we would have done this, we probably would have cut back a little on all of the delicious chocolate and ice cream that New Zealand offers. While amazing, the chocolate didn't last forever and I probably didn't need to consume about a pound of it every day (don't judge me, alright?).

#### Make a point earning plan

This is also something that I wish I did before our trip to New Zealand. We started planning for our trip in January, and we went on the trip in September. That gave us 8 months to plan out our trip and save points. It took us 3 months to save up enough points for our flights, so that left us with 5 remaining months. We ended up saving enough points to pay for our rental car and about half of our Airbnbs.

While that covered a lot of our trip, I think if we would have given ourselves a full year to save points, we probably could have covered all of our expenses. After we did our initial sign up bonus, we didn't have a real plan as to how we were going to save the rest of our points. We kind of just blindly spent on our Venture card and hoped for the best.

If we would have planned it all out, we would have had enough time to get another card with a signup bonus (these are the fastest way to rack up points) and could have done more research on which cards earned the most points on what we spend our money on.

#### Look at other card benefits as well

Besides points, credit cards offer a lot of other benefits as well. What we really liked about the Venture card was that we could use it in other countries for no international transaction fee. AND the points on purchases in other countries were doubled. So we earned a lot of points while on our trip.

One thing that was offered that we didn't pay attention to until it was too late was our card offered free TSA precheck. Meaning if you signed up for TSA precheck with this card, Capital

One covered the cost. Sadly for us, we didn't think about reading all of our card benefits, and purchased TSA precheck on our own.

All credit cards have some sort of benefits tied to them, but travel cards have some of the best (in my humble opinion). Look around and see what you can find!

Overall takeaway

Okay, so this has been my long-winded way of saying that if you want to pay for a trip using credit card points, it is doable even for credit card beginners. But you have to put in some research and planning to get the most out of it.

Overall, our experience was great and we learned a lot. We have used sign up bonuses to pay for flights since our trip. I suggest that if you really want to cover your entire trip, start early! You don't even have to have your entire trip ready to go or even know where you want to go. Start earning points. Keep track of your travel cards and your rewards. You will thank yourself later when you are sipping margs on the beach thinking about all the money you saved.