

## Special

## Credit cards

## REWARD programs

make it easier to travel the world – or walk the red carpet

Canadians love their reward cards. That's what a study by research firm Maritz revealed earlier this year, when it found that 94 per cent of Canadians belong to at least one rewards program.

As rewards programs have become more popular, consumers have also become savvy about how they're earning and redeeming their rewards. Credit card companies have responded with products that give consumers more of what they want: flexibility, ease of use and enhanced rewards.

"Consumers want to have a choice about when and how they redeem," says Laurel Ostfield, a spokesperson for Capital One Canada. "They also want a program where rewards are easy to earn and easy to redeem."

Consumers certainly have a lot to choose from today. There are dozens of credit cards in Canada that offer rewards redeemable for a wide range of products and services – from flights and hotels to electronics and groceries.

Credit cards that offer travel rewards continue to be the most popular among Canadians, and the latest products have been designed to meet consumers' growing demands for flexibility and ease of use.

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**"Canadians are still looking to redeem their points for travel, but now they're also looking for flexible options, with fewer restrictions on when and where they can use their points."**

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on when and where they can use their points," says Megan McKee, director of rewards and strategy at American Express Canada.

The new American Express Gold Rewards Card gives cardholders complete flexibility and freedom to redeem their points for travel. A cardholder simply books the travel, pays using the Gold Rewards Card and then calls American Express once the charge has appeared on his or her statement. American Express in turn uses the cardholder's points to cover the cost of the charge.

With the Capital One Aspire Travel MasterCard, cardholders can also apply their points toward any travel they book on their card. They do this by calling Capital One or by logging onto the bank's easy-to-use redemption site.

Similarly, the TD First Class Travel Visa Infinite Card lets cardholders use their rewards to cover travel charges on their credit card.

TD Canada Trust offers the added convenience of its TD Rewards Centre, a service that cardholders can use to book their travel arrangements.

TD this month is launching a new travel website, Expedia for TD, exclusively available to its travel cardholders, says Christina Panay, vice president of Canadian Credit Card Products at TD Canada Trust. "This will make it even easier to book travel and redeem TD Points, through a one-stop planning and



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PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

booking online experience," she says.

For BMO World Elite MasterCard cardholders, redeeming points for travel is as easy as clicking their mouse; BMO has an online Elite Rewards Centre where travellers can book flights, hotels and package vacations at highly competitive rates.

"The points can be used to cover not just the value of the flight, but also taxes," says Jennifer Weisman, head of credit card marketing at BMO.

At American Express, the rewards go well beyond travel. Customers who carry the Starwood Preferred Guest Credit Card from American Express can also use their Starpoints to bid on exclusive experiences, such as walking the red carpet at a movie premiere, meeting singer Katy Perry or cadging for a professional golfer.

A number of credit cards are also offering the most flexible of rewards: cash. Consumers with "cash-back" cards can earn back a percentage of their purchases. Examples of these cards include the TD Rebate Rewards Visa Card, the Aspire Cash World or Platinum MasterCard from Capital One, and the TrueEarnings Card from Costco and American Express.

## INSIDE

Stretching the family budget with **Rebecca Eckler**. Page 3



When choosing a credit card, travel writer Julia Dimon recommends one that provides comprehensive travel insurance, including coverage for emergency medical services, trip interruption, flight delay and car rental theft. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

## PROFILE

## Travels with Julia

Julia Dimon has walked the beaches of Zanzibar, hiked the jungles of Thailand, and spied on lions and cheetahs on the Serengeti plains of Tanzania. Yet these adventures take up only a few pages of her travel calendar; over the last decade the Los Angeles writer, television host and travel expert has journeyed to more than 80 countries on all continents.

"I've been doing this professionally for a long time, and one of the questions people often ask me is: how do I pull this off financially?" says Ms. Dimon, whose mother is also a travel writer. "People want to know how I live this lifestyle."

So how does she do it? Ms. Dimon points to an important tactic in her travel-focused financial strategy: credit card rewards.

"Reward points are a really great way to supplement your travel," she says. "The trick is to get a credit card that you can use to earn and redeem points while you're travelling, but can also earn you points when you're home, between trips, and spending on

**"The trick is to get a credit card that you can use to earn and redeem points while you're travelling, but can also earn you points when you're home, between trips, and spending on everyday things."**

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Writer, television host and travel expert

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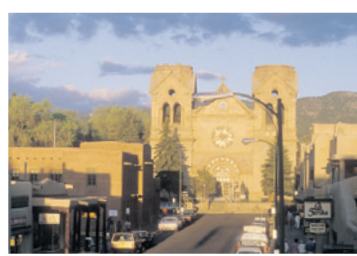
When choosing a card, it's a good idea to go with one that provides comprehensive travel insurance, including coverage for emergency medical services, trip interruption and flight delay, car rental theft and damage, lost or stolen baggage, hotel or motel burglary and accident insurance.

This type of comprehensive insurance is critical for frequent travellers, says Ms. Dimon, and "you'll usually have to pay an annual fee," she explains. "But it's worth it, because you shouldn't be travelling without travel insurance."

Among the cards in her wallet, Ms. Dimon favours the American Express Gold Rewards Card, which lets her earn double points on many travel and everyday purchases, and one point for every \$1 spent on all other purchases. A 15,000-point welcome bonus – awarded after reaching \$500 in purchases within the first three months of card membership – gave her an immediate head-start with her rewards.

## EXPERIENCES

## Lead me to temptation; deliver me to Santa Fe



Santa Fe, New Mexico's state capital, offers a high-desert environment, Southwest history and culture, superb cuisine and collection of art galleries ranked second only to New York City.

FROM TOP: CHRIS CORRIE; MARKKANE.NET; DOUG MERRIAM; JACK PARSONS

For years, my wife Louise and I had heard people rave about Santa Fe, New Mexico's charming state capital – its high-desert environment, Southwest history and culture, superb cuisine and collection of art galleries, ranked second only to New York City. We dreamed of going.

This year, to celebrate our 10th wedding anniversary, we made that trip happen.

Two words of advice if you travel here: bring your credit card; you'll want to try, eat and buy everything. And know when to put it away; Santa Fe's finest offerings are worth it, but they're not cheap.

Liberated by the savings we achieved using Air Miles to cover our flight and rental car, we splurged on a stay at the luxurious, yet rustically appointed, Rosewood Inn of the Anasazi.

Pedestrian-friendly Santa Fe is best experienced on foot. Staying at the inn put us in the heart of this town of 67,000 people, steps from attractions such as the Palace of the Governors, San Miguel Mission and Georgia O'Keefe Museum.

Everywhere we turned, art galleries begged exploration, including the 200 that line nearby Canyon Road. Perusing these galleries, as well as shops hawking everything from chic, designer fashions to kitschy souvenirs, was an escape from our usually hectic life.

Every meal was a treat, too. We were encouraged to try fine dining at restaurants including Geronimo, Martine's and the elegant Anasazi Restaurant, in our hotel. All were heavenly. For breakfast we were hooked on Pasqual's, an organic eatery with funky Tijuana-style décor. A quick bite on the rooftop patio of the famous Coyote Café proved that in Santa Fe, even casual dining can be gourmet. A half-day class at the entertaining and inspiring Santa Fe School of Cooking showed us how it's all done.

What made our Santa Fe experience particularly enriching, though, were its genuine, welcoming residents, who are drawn to this arts-intensive community from all corners of America. It's easy to see why they choose to call it home.

Writer **Randall Mang** visited Santa Fe in May.