

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK AIRLINES

United increases spending needed to get elite status

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United Airlines has boosted the amount of money frequent fliers are required to spend to achieve premier flying status in 2016.

To reach that level, customers will have to travel the same 25,000 miles or 30 segments in 2015 as this year, but they must also spend at least \$3,000 on tickets. That's up from a spending requirement of \$2,500 in 2014 to gain 2015 status.

Spending requirements will rise for Gold status (from \$5,000 to \$6,000), for Platinum (from \$7,500 to \$9,000); and for Premier 1K (from \$10,000 to \$12,000).

Raising the spending requirement is bad news for fliers barely achieving

thresholds but good news for those solidly in those categories, making their benefits more exclusive.

Elite status benefits include seat upgrades, bonus reward miles and travel services, such as priority check-in and boarding.

The changes are similar to those announced recently by Delta Air Lines.

American Airlines is the only major network carrier that does not require minimum spending amounts to achieve elite flier status, but officials have said they have not

ruled out the idea for the future.

United attendants take buyout: About 2,500 United flight attendants opted for buyouts of up to \$100,000, the airline said.

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That's about 400 more flight attendants than the airline expected would take its offer, but all will be accommodated, a United spokeswoman said.

In September, United said it would offer some flight attendants buyout packages as it recalls flight attendants who are on voluntary and involuntary furlough. United currently has 1,450 flight attendants on furlough.

United, which has more flight attendants than it wants, offered lump-sum payouts of up to \$100,000 for those who apply for the early out and meet certain service and eligibility qualifications. They had until the end of October to apply for the buyouts.

The company awards early outs in seniority order.

Flight attendants represented by the Association of Flight Attendants are in union contract negotiations with the airline.

A United spokeswoman has said the buyouts should have no impact on the flying public.

Finnair from O'Hare: Finland's Finnair will start flying from O'Hare International Airport next summer, from June 13 through Oct. 17.

Airbus A330s will depart from Chicago and Helsinki, Finland, on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays, with flights leaving Chicago at 10 p.m.

Finnair flies between Asia, Europe and North America, carrying more than 9 million passengers annually, the airline said.

Finnair has won the Skytrax World Airline Award for best airline in Northern Europe for the past five years.

Turkish upgrades its O'Hare rides: Next May, Turkish Airlines' direct flights from O'Hare to its hub in Istanbul will use larger Boeing 777-300ER (extended range) aircraft, an upgrade over the Airbus A330-200 it uses now, airline officials said.

The move means the fast-growing airline, voted the best airline in Europe for four straight years by Skytrax, will be expanding its daily service in Chicago, flying 349 seats per flight instead of 250.

The number of business-class seats will expand from 22 to 49, including full lie-flat seats, said Levent Selvili, general manager for Turkish in Chicago. The new aircraft also will have Wi-Fi.

"We believe that this growth will bring profit to Chicago and also profit to

Turkish Airlines," Selvili said.

The airline has been flying from Chicago since 1997.

Nut-allergy sufferers appeal: Nuts can pose a serious threat to allergy

sufferers, and increased travel during the holidays increases that risk, said Naperville's Amy Wicker, founder of AllergySafeTravel.com. Wicker's daughter suffers from severe nut allergies.

Wicker said nut-allergy sufferers — and parents of children who are sufferers — don't want to infringe on other passengers' rights. It's a safety issue.

"We simply are asking that airlines make an on-board announcement that passengers should refrain

from opening nuts or nut-based snacks for the duration of the flight," Wicker wrote recently on her site. "We would also like to see airlines create a buffer zone within the plane that disallows any nuts or snacks with nuts."

Wicker noted that four airline passengers went into anaphylaxis on planes during the summer travel period, with three of those flights making emergency landings as a result.

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