



The Travel Hacks *Playbook*

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Pay Economy Prices.

2026 EDITION

"Built on conviction. Not commission."

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A Letter From Nevil

Dear reader,

Most Indians treat credit cards as a payment tool. The savvy 5% treat them as a wealth-building lever — one that funds international holidays, premium hotel stays, and lounge access while costing nothing extra.

I have spent years studying the points-and-miles game, learning what works in the Indian credit card market and what does not. This playbook is the distilled version of that learning. No fluff, no fake urgency, no recommendations bought by banks.

A family of four can comfortably save ₹4-8 lakhs a year through smart credit card strategy and travel hacks. For most readers of this guide, that means at least one international family holiday paid for purely through points and miles.

Read carefully. Apply selectively. The strategies in this playbook will still be valid in 2027, 2028, and 2029, though the specific cards mentioned will evolve. The principles — those will hold.

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PART 1

Foundations

Chapter 1: How the points-and-miles game works in India

Credit card points and airline miles are a parallel currency. You earn them by spending. You redeem them for travel and lifestyle benefits. Done casually, they offer 1-2% return on spend. Done strategically, they generate 8-15% effective return — sometimes more.

The Indian market has matured rapidly since 2018. Today, Indian residents have access to:

- Premium credit cards with reward rates competitive with US/Europe (HDFC Infinia, Axis Magnus Burgundy, AmEx Platinum)
- Co-branded travel cards (Vistara, Air India, IndiGo, Marriott Bonvoy)
- Domestic and international lounge access through Priority Pass, DragonPass, and Diners Club
- Airline frequent flyer programs (Vistara Club, Air India Maharajah, Singapore Airlines KrisFlyer)
- Hotel loyalty programs (Marriott Bonvoy, IHG One, Hyatt) with strong India presence

The "game" works because banks pay reward providers, hotel chains pay loyalty programs, and airlines distribute miles as marketing. You arbitrage between these systems by directing your existing spend through the right cards and redeeming where points are most valuable.

THE CORE INSIGHT

The math, in one paragraph: A ₹3 lakh/month spending family on a 4% net rewards stack (after annual fees and bonus categories) earns ₹1.44 lakh/year in points. Redeemed for business class flights at 5x face value, this becomes equivalent to ₹7.2 lakh of travel value. Or, redeemed conservatively for cashback, ₹1.44 lakh of straight savings. Both are real.

Chapter 2: Welcome bonuses — the easy wins

The single highest-yield strategy in the points game is welcome bonuses. New cards typically offer 5,000-50,000 points for hitting a minimum spend in the first 60-90 days. These bonuses alone, if you can earn them legitimately, fund 1-2 international trips per year.

Major welcome bonuses in 2026

Card	Welcome Bonus	Min Spend	Annual Fee
HDFC Infinia (Metal)	12,500 reward points	₹50,000 in 90 days	₹12,500 (waivable)
Axis Magnus Burgundy	25,000 EDGE Miles	₹1L in 60 days	₹12,500
Axis Atlas	5,000 EDGE Miles + voucher	₹1L in 30 days	₹5,000
AmEx Platinum	~₹50K in vouchers	On approval	₹60,000+
SBI ELITE	Free flight ticket	On payment	₹4,999
ICICI Emerald	12,500 reward points	₹2L in 90 days	₹12,000
Marriott Bonvoy HDFC	1 free night certificate	₹1L in 90 days	₹3,000

These offers change quarterly. Check the bank's official website before applying. Avoid third-party sites that show outdated bonuses.

How to maximise welcome bonus value

- Apply for cards in sequence (not simultaneously) — typically 3-4 month gaps to avoid CIBIL hit
- Plan welcome bonuses around large planned expenses (insurance premiums, school fees, travel pre-bookings)
- Never spend extra just to hit minimum — that defeats the purpose
- Track minimum spend deadlines carefully — most are 60-90 days from approval
- Keep a spreadsheet: card, application date, bonus deadline, current spend toward minimum

Chapter 3: Building your credit card stack

A "card stack" is your portfolio of cards, each chosen for a specific purpose. Most reward optimisers use 2-4 cards strategically rather than collecting many cards casually.

The 3-card framework

For most Indian families spending ₹1-3 lakh/month, three cards cover 95% of optimisation:

1. Daily-driver card — earns well on general spend, accepted everywhere. HDFC Infinia, Axis Magnus, or AmEx Platinum.
2. Online shopping card — bonus rewards on Amazon/Flipkart. Flipkart Axis or Amazon Pay ICICI.
3. Travel-specific card — for airline tickets and hotels. Axis Atlas or a co-branded airline card.

When to add a fourth card

A fourth card is justified only if you have a specific niche need:

- Fuel-heavy spending — BPCL SBI or IndianOil HDFC for fuel surcharge waivers
- Frequent international travel — Forex card with zero markup (HDFC Multi-Currency)
- Restaurant heavy — HDFC Diners Club Black or AmEx Gold for dining bonuses
- Hotel loyalty stacking — Marriott Bonvoy HDFC for status credits

IMPORTANT

More cards is not better. Each additional card has an annual fee, requires minimum spend to be worthwhile, and adds complexity. The best stacks are deliberate, not accidental collections.

PART 2

Earning Points

Chapter 4: The earnings hierarchy — which card for which spend

The single decision that compounds the most: which card do you swipe at any given merchant? Done right, you earn 5-10x more rewards than swiping randomly.

General principle: bonus categories beat base rate

Most premium cards earn 1-2% on general spend. But specific categories on specific cards earn 5-15%. Always swipe the card with the highest category rate for that specific transaction.

2026 spend-by-card cheat sheet

Spend Category	Best Card	Rate
Online shopping (Amazon)	Amazon Pay ICICI	Up to 5%
Online shopping (Flipkart)	Flipkart Axis	Up to 5%
International spend	HDFC Infinia / AmEx Plat	3-3.3 RP per ₹100
Hotel bookings	Marriott Bonvoy HDFC	6 points per ₹150
Restaurants	HDFC Diners Club Black	10x reward points
Fuel	BPCL SBI / IOC HDFC	4.25% cashback
Insurance / utility	HDFC Infinia	3.3 RP per ₹100
Travel (airline direct)	Axis Atlas	5 EDGE Miles per ₹100
Everything else	HDFC Infinia / Axis Magnus	3.3 RP per ₹100

Chapter 5: Bonus categories and milestone rewards

Beyond the regular spend rate, most premium cards offer milestone rewards — bonus points or vouchers for hitting annual spend thresholds. These can effectively double your annual reward earnings if planned around your natural spend.

Examples in 2026

- HDFC Infinia: 10,000 bonus points on ₹4 lakh quarterly spend. ₹40K in bonuses for ₹16L annual spend.
- Axis Magnus Burgundy: Tata Tier benefits and milestone vouchers worth ₹50K+ at ₹15L annual spend.
- SBI ELITE: Free flight ticket on ₹4 lakh annual spend.
- Vistara Cards: Tier upgrades at specific spend thresholds (Silver, Gold, Platinum).

How to plan around milestones

List your planned annual spends (insurance, school fees, family travel pre-bookings, electronics purchases). Map these against milestone thresholds. Concentrate spend on the card whose milestone you can credibly hit.

Chapter 6: Stacking with everyday spend

"Stacking" means earning rewards from multiple sources on a single transaction. The masters of this strategy double or triple their effective earnings.

Common stacks

- Online shopping stack: Card cashback + bank cashback + portal cashback (CashKaro, Magicpin). 5-8% effective return on Amazon/Flipkart.
- Travel stack: Travel card miles + airline miles for the same flight + portal cashback. 10-15% effective return on direct airline bookings.
- Hotel stack: Marriott Bonvoy points + status night credits + AmEx FHR benefits. Up to 20% effective return at Marriott properties.
- UPI stack: Some banks offer 1-2% cashback on UPI through Rupay credit cards — useful for small recurring transactions.

PART 3

Redeeming for Maximum Value

Chapter 7: Award flight redemptions explained

How much your points are worth depends entirely on how you redeem them. Cashback gives 1 paise per point. Direct flight booking gives 0.5 paise per point. Award flight redemption can give 2-5 paise per point — and on premium cabin redemptions, sometimes 8-12 paise.

Sweet spot redemptions in 2026

- Vistara Club: India to Singapore in business class for ~25,000 CV points (worth ~₹1.5L cash)
- Air India Maharajah: India to London Premium Economy for ~70,000 miles
- Singapore Airlines KrisFlyer: India to Australia Saver Award for 56,000 miles
- Etihad Guest: India to North America for 88,000 miles
- Qatar Privilege Club: Middle East one-way redemptions at low rates

Transfer partner strategy

Most credit card programs (HDFC Reward Points, Axis EDGE Miles, AmEx MR) allow transfers to partner airlines. Best transfer rates in 2026:

- Marriott Bonvoy → Vistara: 3:1.1 (becomes 60K Vistara from 180K Bonvoy)
- AmEx MR → Marriott: 2:3 (1L MR becomes 1.5L Bonvoy)
- HDFC RP → Vistara CV: 2:1 (rates vary by card tier)
- Axis EDGE → Marriott: 5:4

Chapter 8: Hotel loyalty programs

Hotel loyalty offers two compounding benefits: points-based free nights, plus elite status with upgrades, late checkout, and breakfast. A traveller who spends 30+ nights per year can extract massive value.

Best programs for Indian residents

Program	Strength	Status Match Available?
Marriott Bonvoy	Largest Indian footprint (Taj-area)	Yes (Hyatt → Marriott)
IHG One Rewards	Great PointBreaks deals	Limited
Hyatt	Best-in-class transfer ratios from Chase M&S	M&S (occasional)
Taj InnerCircle	Domestic Taj/Vivanta benefits	No (homegrown)
ITC Club ITC	ITC properties	No

The 5th-night-free trick

Marriott Bonvoy gives every member a 5th-night-free perk on award redemptions. Booking 5 nights at a JW Mumbai using points requires only 4 nights worth of points. On a long Indian holiday (Goa, Kerala, hill stations), this is significant.

Chapter 9: Lounge access strategy

Airport lounges turn travel from stressful to comfortable. A family of four at a domestic departure can save ₹2-4K on food/drinks; at international terminals, even more. Plus the productivity and wellness benefit.

Lounge programs to know

- Priority Pass — universal program; AmEx Platinum and HDFC Infinia include unlimited visits
- DragonPass — Asia-focused, often comes with Axis cards
- HDFC complimentary lounges — Domestic visits via Diners Club International
- Axis Reserve lounges — Luxury Tata-managed lounges in select metros
- Air India Maharaja Lounge — Free for Star Alliance Gold/elite passengers

Family lounge strategy

Most premium cards extend lounge access to a primary card holder + 1-2 guests. For a family of four, optimise by ensuring both spouses hold cards with lounge access — this typically covers all 4 family members.

PART 4

Defence & Optimisation

Chapter 10: CIBIL and credit score management

Multiple cards done wrong hurt your CIBIL. Done right, they actually improve it. Here's the difference.

What helps your CIBIL

- Total available credit (more is better) — increases your "credit headroom"
- Lower utilisation ratio — keeping balance below 30% of limit
- Long credit history — older cards help even if rarely used
- Mix of credit (cards + secured loans) — shows creditworthiness
- On-time payments — single most important factor (35% weight)

What hurts your CIBIL

- Multiple applications in short period — each pulls 5-10 points
- High utilisation (over 70% of limit)
- Closing old cards — shortens credit history
- Missed payments — even 1 day late hurts
- Cash advances on credit cards — strong negative signal

Chapter 11: Common mistakes to avoid

After working with hundreds of clients, the same mistakes repeat. Avoid these and you will outperform 95% of card users.

Carrying balance

Interest at 36-42% wipes out years of rewards. If you carry balance, stop the points game and clear debt first.

Applying for too many cards too fast

3+ applications in 90 days hurts CIBIL meaningfully. Space applications 3-4 months apart.

Chasing welcome bonuses without strategy

Each card has annual fees and minimum spend. Get a card only if you can use it.

Forgetting milestone deadlines

Welcome bonuses lapse if you miss the spend deadline. Track them.

Cashback mindset for premium cards

Premium card points are worth 3-5x as travel rewards vs cashback. Redeem accordingly.

Ignoring fees

Annual fees of ₹12,500+ require ₹4-5 lakh annual spend on the card to be worthwhile. Calculate before paying.

Missing fee waivers

Most premium cards waive annual fees on hitting spend thresholds. Track this milestone too.

Chapter 12: Annual review framework

Run this annual review every January to keep your card stack optimised.

Step 1: Review last year

- Total annual spend by card
- Total reward points earned
- How those points were redeemed
- Effective return on spend
- Annual fees paid vs benefits received

Step 2: Identify gaps

- Categories where you over-spent on a low-rewards card
- Cards you carried but rarely used
- Welcome bonuses you missed by not applying for new cards
- Travel that you paid cash for instead of redeeming points

Step 3: Plan next year

- Decide which cards to keep, which to close, which to add
- Plan welcome bonus applications for the year
- Plan large purchases around milestone thresholds
- Schedule annual statement review for end of December

A Final Word

You now have the framework. The principles in this playbook have generated significant value for the families we work with — from doctors paying for their international vacations entirely through points, to NRIs maintaining premium hotel status while travelling between India and their country of residence.

Two final suggestions:

First, start small. Pick one card from this guide that fits your spend profile. Use it deliberately for 90 days. Track what you earn. Then expand.

Second, treat this as part of your wealth-building strategy. A family that saves ₹4-8 lakh annually through travel hacks, and invests that into a 12% SIP, accumulates an extra ₹85L-₹1.7Cr over 20 years. These are not small numbers.

NEXT STEP

Need a customised card stack for your situation?

Lael Smart Finance offers personal credit card strategy advisory. We analyse your last 6 months of spending, design a 2-4 card stack tailored to your patterns, plan welcome bonus applications, and provide ongoing deal alerts.

Book a call: laelsmartfinance.com/contact

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Disclaimer

This playbook is for educational and informational purposes only. It does not constitute financial advice, investment advice, or a recommendation of any specific credit card or financial product.

Credit card terms, reward rates, and welcome bonuses change frequently. Always verify current terms with the issuing bank before applying. The information in this guide reflects market conditions at the time of writing (early 2026) and may not be current at the time you read it.

Lael Smart Finance is an AMFI Registered Mutual Fund Distributor. We do not receive any commission from credit card issuers for the cards mentioned in this playbook. Recommendations are based on independent analysis.

Credit cards involve risk. Carrying balances at the high interest rates typical of Indian credit cards (often 36-42% annualised) can quickly destroy any value generated by reward programs. Always pay your full statement balance on time.

For personalised advice on your specific financial situation, consult a qualified financial advisor.

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