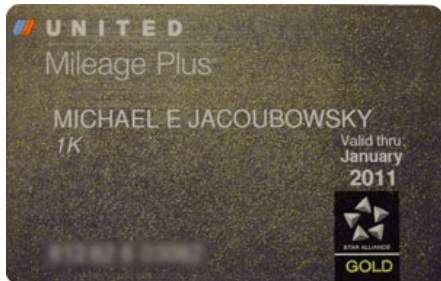


It was fun while it lasted (1K "elite" status on United Airlines)

What is a 1K? It's the highest "earned" level on status on United Airlines. It's not the highest level overall; nothing like the character in "Up in the Air" played by George Clooney. For that, the qualifications aren't published but it's obvious you've got to be buying a lot of full-fare business & first-class tickets. At United, that status is known as "GS."



The coveted United 1K card, something I will likely see only once in my life, at least one with my name on it.

For most people, it means they fly too much and spend too much time away from home and too much money on mediocre motels and too much time in security lines. What you get in exchange for all that is the opportunity to board a plane earlier than everyone else (why this is a big thrill I don't know; people rationalize that they need to get on the plane before the overhead space is filled up), a reasonable chance to get free upgrades into a first class seat when flying domestically and just enough chance to get an upgrade on an international flight that you spend more \$\$\$ than you have to so you can get a qualifying fare, cross your fingers, and discover that you're #3 on an upgrade list of 40 people (looks good!) but only #1 & #2 made it. You're also better taken care of when things go wrong, whether due to a mechanical issue or weather.

In 2009, I accidentally flew too much. It wasn't planned, it just happened. A number of trips back to Trek, the usual trip to DC for the Bike Summit, France in July for the Tour de France, and the biggie... a 15,000 mile round trip to Australia (Karen, my wife, really wanted to hold a Koala Bear. So we've got a \$6000 picture of her holding a Koala Bear in the living room). Now, it normally takes 100,000 miles to get 1K status, and that's 100,000 "BIS" (or, Butt in Seat) miles, not credit-card miles, not miles flying on award tickets. But in 2009, the airlines were in the toilet, and United offered something called "DEQM", or Double Elite Qualifying Miles, where you got credited for two miles for each mile flown in the last quarter of the year, which coincided with the trip to Australia. That put me within 12,000 miles, so a very creative routing for a trip to DC put me over the top (5 flight segments in one direction!).

I'm not 1K material. I don't have the time or money to afford to fly that much, although truth be told, I have been bitten by the travel bug. I enjoy seeing new places, especially if I can bring my bike and ride! But there was no way I could maintain 1K status, especially since there was no DEQM promo for 2010. I did manage to squeak by with 50,000 but-in-seat miles, enough to qualify for 1P, a lower level of status that doesn't allow for international upgrades without a hefty co-pay and use of frequent-flyer miles (generally making it too expensive to consider) but I do get to sit in exit rows at no extra charge, still board the plane earlier than most (but not on United's "Red Carpet"), and can still visit airport lounges on international trips at no charge. But, no more exclusive phone number that always gets answered by someone whose first language is English, no more boarding on the Red Carpet, and upgrades on domestic flights will be fewer and far between.

I will still maintain an allegiance to United, because even the lowest-level elite flyers have access to E+ seating (4-6 inches of extra legroom), and United flies the places I need to go. Madison Wisconsin. Washington DC. Paris, France. London, England. And all manner of places in-between via their partner airlines (called "Star Alliance" and including Lufthansa, USAirways and many others). And I cannot deny that United has gotten me out of jams when weather has gone bad in DC and Wisconsin; many times I was one of those folk that got on a plane while most others were left behind. Plus, elites get much shorter check-in & security lines & a free baggage allowance.

But life near the top ends shortly, as the timer says. It was fun while it lasted, but it's also somewhat liberating not having to fly on a United plane if another Star Alliance airline has a better schedule or fare, and not having to buy a more-expensive international fare so it might get upgraded. I won't miss that. Much easier knowing it won't happen than hoping against hope that it might. :-)