

Carry On: American Express Lounges Cut Back On Free Plus Ones ..... 2

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## PERSONAL JOURNAL

### Carry On: American Express Lounges Cut Back On Free Plus Ones

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Phoenix -- One of the top perks of access to airport lounges -- bringing family members and partners along to eat, drink and relax for free -- increasingly comes with a price tag.

Maddie Davidson and her family hiked to the American Express Centurion Lounge in a neighboring concourse at Sky Harbor International Airport a few weeks ago to enjoy free breakfast and some mimosas before a flight to Orlando, Fla. She was surprised when the front desk agent at the lounge said the price for her husband and two children was \$110.

Beginning this month, American Express lounges no longer allow most travelers with its premium credit cards to bring two free guests. Adults now pay \$50, children ages 2 to 17, \$30. (Ms. Davidson said she paid up because "my kids were hungry and we made them walk all this way.")

American Express's change shows how the great airport lounge crackdown isn't letting up. Delta Air Lines, which last year put passengers on the clock to help manage crowds at its Sky Clubs, has since instituted new changes including higher fees for guests, higher annual fees and eligibility requirements for annual club memberships and limits on passengers traveling on basic economy tickets.

Lounge operators say they want to restore the premium experiences that their most valuable travelers expect.

Travelers with lounge access have long derided overcrowding, and plus ones, especially young ones, are a frequent complaint. A member of one platinum cardholder group on Facebook called the Feb. 1 policy change "the first day of the daycare ban."

American Express's platinum card, which includes access to the Centurion Lounges and to Delta Sky Clubs when cardholders fly Delta, costs \$695 annually, up from \$550 in 2021. The company, which faced skepticism when it raised prices, says it logged record sign-ups in 2022 as travel roared back.

Pablo Rivero, vice president and general manager of American Express's global lounge experiences, says lounge access is one of the top card perks cited by cardholders. (He declined to say what, if anything, tops it. Other travel benefits include a \$200 annual credit for airline incidentals, annual hotel credit for certain luxury stays and Clear and PreCheck credits.)

Mr. Rivero plays down complaints about chronic overcrowding at the 13 Centurion Lounges in the U.S., saying travelers never wait more than 10 or 15 minutes to enter. (I had to wait about 10 minutes to enter the lounges in Phoenix and Las Vegas this month.)

He says the company's decision to charge all but its highest-spending cardholders to bring guests, announced more than a year ago, is designed to ensure a great experience as travel booms. The company is also adding and renovating lounges, with an expanded lounge in Seattle making its debut last week.

"We want to be there for our cardmembers when they decide to visit us," he says.

Whether ending guest freebies will ease crowding at the Centurion lounges is unclear. Many card members can still bring family members for free by adding them as an authorized user on the card. Three additional users ages 13 years and older can be added for one fee of \$175 a year. Mr. Rivero wouldn't disclose what percentage of Centurion lounge visitors traditionally have brought guests, saying only that it varies widely.

"There are people that never bring a guest and there are people that bring multiple guests," he says.

In Phoenix, where the Centurion Lounge is adjacent to an Escape Lounge also open to American Express platinum cardholders, a Centurion employee told me crowds have been noticeably lighter because free guests are still allowed next door.

Some travelers interpret American Express's new guest policy as aimed at reducing the number of families in lounges, especially during spring break, summer and other busy travel periods.

Mr. Rivero says no one is being denied access under the new policy and noted that the lounges lowered the guest fee for children as part of the policy switch. Previously, someone bringing in more than two guests paid \$50 per person regardless of age. That was lowered to \$30 for children, he says. Delta charges \$50 for guests regardless of age. American Airlines still allows most visitors to its Admirals Club lounges to bring guests for free.

Todd Kagler has shelled out hundreds of dollars a year for the American Express Platinum card since the credit-card giant started opening Centurion lounges a decade ago.

Because of the new guest policy, the Baltimore **technology** sales executive and his wife sat down this month to determine whether the card is worth it.

Mr. Kagler vacations frequently with his grandchildren and books flights with connections in cities with a Centurion lounge, he says. On a big family trip to Mexico in December, they brought five grandchildren ages 2 to 13 for free into the Centurion lounge in Dallas under the old platinum card guest policy. (His wife and son are authorized users on the account so the three of them were each allowed two guests.)

He says he decided to stick with the platinum card after tallying up the other travel benefits he uses. But his grandchildren won't be joining him in the lounge en masse anymore.

"If it's just one kid with us, I probably would do it," he says.

Ms. Davidson, who manages a service division for a contracting company in Vancouver, British Columbia, says her sons' lounge days are history. They enjoyed french toast, muffins, fruit, apple juice and time on their iPads in the Phoenix Centurion lounge earlier this month but the \$110 is too steep given cheaper options elsewhere at the airport. She thinks young children should be admitted free to the lounges. "I will definitely reconsider this card," she says, "as I feel this is absurd."

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