

PRIME TRAVELER

Lounge Access, Cracked

Every legal way into an airport lounge, with or without status, and how to stop paying more than you need to.

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GATE

01

BOARDING NOW

Why Most Travelers Overpay or Skip It

Most travelers do one of two things at the airport. They walk straight past the lounge, assuming it is only for first class and elite members. Or they pay whatever the door charges without checking whether a cheaper way in was already sitting in their wallet.

Both are expensive habits. Lounges are a business. Independent lounges sell access to anyone with a boarding pass, card issuers use lounges to sell premium cards, and airlines use them to reward loyalty and sell memberships. Each of those is a different door, with a different price, and different rules.

THE REAL QUESTION

It is rarely “can I get into a lounge.” It is “which door is open to me today, and what does it cost.” The answer depends on three things: what is in your wallet, which airline and ticket you are flying, and which airport and terminal you are in.

You are rarely locked out. You are usually standing at the wrong door.

Access Is Tightening: What Changed

Advice written a few years ago will mislead you. Crowding pushed several major lounge operators to restrict access, and the changes keep coming.

WHAT CHANGED AT DELTA SKY CLUBS (AS OF OCTOBER 2026)

- Delta no longer sells Sky Club day passes.
- Basic economy tickets are not admitted, whatever card, status, or membership you hold.
- Card access is counted in visit days. The Platinum Card from American Express allows 10 Sky Club visit days per year and the Delta SkyMiles Reserve card allows 15, unless the cardholder meets a high annual spending threshold. All entries within 24 hours count as one visit day.
- You need a same-day flight on Delta or a partner, and entry is generally limited to three hours before departure, except when connecting.

Card-issuer lounges have tightened too. Some issuers have reduced free guest access or added guest fees at their own lounges.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

1. A card benefit is not the same as unlimited access. Read the current terms, including visit caps, guest rules, and time windows.
2. Your fare type matters. The cheapest fare on an airline may exclude you from that airline's club even if your card would otherwise get you in.
3. Always have a second door in mind: an independent lounge, a day pass, or an app.

CHECK BEFORE YOU FLY

Search “[lounge name] access policy” on the airline or card issuer’s own site the week you travel. Blog posts age fast. Primary sources do not.