What It’s Worth

trips that are perilous, remote, and dangerous, and the occasional journalist on assignment. “A one-upmanship game runs with totalitarians. “Imagine how elite travelers are upping their one-upmanship game.”

How elite travelers are upping their one-upmanship game

In one single year, De Pecol was never injured or robbed and never got sick only once—in Papua New Guinea. Whether in Vanuatu, Mali, Tuva, or Benin, she discovered the take-home was the same: “The world is accepting and kind. People everywhere simply want to be healthy and happy.”

Still, those two trailblazers can’t hold a candle to Cassie De Pecol. Early this year, at age 27, De Pecol became, according to Guinness World Records, the fastest person to travel to every sovereign nation on earth. It took her 18 months and 26 days, and she did it with one pair of running shoes. De Pecol was never injured or robbed and never got sick only once—in Papua New Guinea. Whether in Vanuatu, Mali, Tuva, or Benin, she discovered the take-home was the same: “The world is accepting and kind. People everywhere simply want to be healthy and happy.”

Tom Straker and Fred Finn, meanwhile, have waged a decades-long battle to improve their drive from New York to London three times in one day,” he says. While Finn’s tally of nearly 16 million miles is astounding, Straker’s 18 million put him in the lead. With over 8,000 flights, the New Jersey–based auto-sales consultant has completed the equivalent of 722 circumnavigations of the globe, mostly on United, “which has never once lost a bag of mine,” Straker says. At his level, premier status is a mere trifle. Corporate suites at Chicago Bears games, meet and greets with United CEO Oscar Munoz, a chauffeured Mercedes to whisk him across the tarmac—these are the perks of the guy who has “enough upgrade certificates to paper over Lake Michigan.”

Is there satisfaction in being at the head of the travel pack? Yes and no. Straker likes flying and enjoys the quasi-celebrity status that comes with mingling among the crème de la crème. (“Kenny G was so nice,” he says.) But he has a lot of hats, he tells me. “I’ve actually had somebody say, ‘I hope you and your family die in your carbon footprint.’”

Lorentz, my Africa guide, thinks true rewards come not from accruing points or even ticking off destinations but from helping others. This past spring, Lorentz escorted the former CEO of a global colossalos to a new wildlife reserve in Zambia to engage with conservation teams on the ground. Another client quietly contributed $2 million for African sustainability causes. “Giving it away is emerging as a kind of post-one-upmanship,” Lorentz says. “If you’ve done better than everyone in your field, you can now help everyone else do better. Those are the real bragging rights.”

That may be true, but I wanted to find someone above the fray of competition, so I called the only warrior alive who can’t be outdone. Buzz Aldrin is arguably the most traveled person in history—Gemini 12, Apollo 11, the North Pole, South Pole, down to the Titanic in a submarine. He once hitched a ride on a whale shark near the equator. Aldrin says he’s been dreaming of missions to Mars lately, since he’s clearly got a lock on this part of the universe. Even at age 87, he’s still winning. “I’m in a wheelchair now,” he says, “which means they let me on any airplane first.”

Illustration by John Cunéo