



Rich Americans paying extra for VIP view of fireworks

This year, a number of Americans will be celebrating July 4th in VIP-style

By Charles Passy

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Ah, the Fourth of July, that all-American day to enjoy a picnic on the lawn, take in a concert of patriotic music and, finally, behold a glittering display of fireworks.

But this year, a number of Americans will be doing their partying in VIP-style. That's right: Even this most fair-minded and fun of holidays has gone glam.

In cities from New York to Florida to California, July 4th event organizers, including municipalities and nonprofit groups, are setting up VIP sections that offer patrons better access, preferred parking, as well as drinks and food. And that's on top of the packages that private tour operators and hotels are putting together.

In some cases, the VIP price tag is not that significant. In West Palm Beach, Fla., the city charges \$25 for a Club 4th package to attend its downtown fireworks display. (Among the package's perks are two complimentary alcoholic beverages and the chance to cool your heels in an air-conditioned space.) But in other instances, the cost has headed into quadruple-digit territory: Consider the Platinum package offered last year by Three Sixty, a St. Louis rooftop bar, to tie in with the city's big fireworks display. It ran \$1,500-plus, which covered provisions for up to 10 patrons — tax and gratuity not included. Bar sales manager Amber Brda says the price was right because of the venue's special location.

"It's like you can almost touch the fireworks from up here," she says. (The bar is not offering the package in 2014 only because the city has moved the fireworks to a different area, Brda adds)

It's no secret as to why there's been a big VIP push on Independence Day, say those who are promoting the packages. Fourth of July events attract crowds in the tens — even hundreds — of thousands. In fact, the New York fireworks display, sponsored by Macy's, sees attendance in the millions. All that elbowing for position naturally makes some attendees eager to find a hassle-free solution. And businesses are more than happy to comply — if anything, offering VIP ticketing or services has become, almost ironically, fairly mainstream. Even the local bowling alley may now have a VIP lane.

Plus, with cities and nonprofits, there's the fact that fireworks displays cost money to produce — during the height of the Great Recession, some cities had to curtail the festivities altogether -- and VIP revenue can help offset the expenses.

“There are so many things we have to pay for. We're not a charity,” says Bernie Keisling, director of the Central PA 4th Fest, held at Penn State University. The nonprofit festival sells VIP viewing passes, with closer access, for \$25 apiece. A VIP package, with four passes plus preferred parking, goes for \$100.

Still, not all of this sits well with Fourth of July traditionalists, who see the holiday as one that must adhere to the very values of equality on which this country was founded.

“It should be about people coming together. It should be about family and community. It should not be about expensive ways to watch the fireworks,” says Chris Edwards, an economic analyst with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

The issue has come up before. In 2012, New York City officials voiced disappointment that a fundraising group connected to one of the city's parks sold premium seats — at \$200 apiece -- for viewing the Fourth of July Macy's-sponsored fireworks; the group countered that there were still plenty of viewing areas open to the public for free.

That's also the argument that City of West Palm Beach community events manager Mary Pinak makes. As she explains, as many as 100,000 local residents are expected to attend the Fourth of July fireworks and festivities in her city for free, so the 275 who chose to pay the \$25 for the Club 4th VIP section are hardly getting in anyone's way.

Plus, Pinak considers \$25 to be a relative bargain, especially if you factor in the food and drinks included in the price. And if nothing else, she says, “there are nice bathrooms” in the VIP area.