

Travel tips

Whether you are off to see the sights, ski the slopes, or sunbathe on the sand, it pays to be an informed travel shopper. To help you avoid vacation frustration, the Bureau of Consumer Protection offers these tips.

- **Get recommendations.** Ask family and friends to recommend businesses with a good track record.
- **Verify and clarify.** Call to verify your reservations and arrangements. Get the details behind vague promises that you will be staying at a “five-star” resort or sailing on a “luxury” cruise ship. When you have the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the airlines, car rental companies, and hotels you will be using, confirm all arrangements for yourself.
- **Put it on paper.** Get the details of your vacation in writing. Get a copy of the company’s cancellation and refund policies before you pay for the trip, and ask “What if...?” Consider whether some form of travel cancellation insurance may be appropriate. Make sure the product you purchase is from a licensed insurance company. The U.S. Travel Insurance Association (www.ustia.org) maintains a list of licensed travel insurance companies.
- **Pay by credit card.** It gives you more protection than paying by cash or check. If you do not get what you paid for, you may be able to dispute the charges with your credit card company. However, do not give your account number to any business until you have verified that it is reputable.
- **Ask questions before joining a travel club.** Sometimes a “free trial” membership can result in monthly charges on your credit card. Find out what you will get for your money and how you can cancel.
- **Consider using a travel app.** A travel app can help you search for airfares and hotel rates, get fare alerts and real-time deals, and manage your itinerary.
- **Ask about mandatory hotel “resort fees.”** When you book a hotel room online, you expect that the rate you see is the rate you will pay. But extra costs often called “resort fees” – for services like fitness facilities or Internet access – can add to the per night cost of your stay. More important, the fees are mandatory: you must pay them regardless of whether you use the services. Many people do not find out about the fees until they arrive at the hotel – or worse, when they check out. You cannot compare rates for different hotels unless you know all the fees. If you are not sure whether a website is showing you the total price, call the hotel and ask about a “resort fee” or any other mandatory charge. Listing the “resort fee” *near* the quoted price or in the fine print – or referring to other fees that “may apply” – is not good enough.
- **Be on the alert for the telltale signs of a travel scam.** Unsolicited faxes or emails for deeply discounted travel packages promise the world. But the fraudsters behind these offers will leave you at the gate. Think twice if you cannot get a person on the phone to answer your questions or if the ad does not give the company’s street address.

Signs of a scam

Scammers may call or use mail, texts, faxes or ads promising free or low-cost vacations. In reality, those vacation offers may end up charging poorly disclosed fees or

may be fake, plain and simple. Here are some tell-tale signs that a travel offer or prize might be a scam:

- **You “won a free vacation” but you have to pay some fees first.** A legitimate company will not ask you to pay for a prize. Any company trying to sell you on a “free” vacation will probably want something from you – taxes and fees, attendance at mandatory presentations, even pressure to buy “extras” or “add-ons” for the vacation, etc. Find out what your costs are before you agree to anything.
- **The prize company wants your credit card number.** Especially if they say it is to “verify” your identity or your prize, do not give it to them.
- **They cold-call, cold-text, or email you out of the blue.** Before you do business with any company you do not know, call the Attorney General and local consumer protection agencies in the company’s home state to check on complaints; then, search online by entering the company name and the word “complaints” or “scam” and read what other people are saying. Robocalls from companies trying to sell you something are almost always illegal if you have not given the company written permission to call you. That is true even if you have not signed up for the national Do Not Call Registry.
- **They do not – or cannot – give you specifics.** They promise a stay at a “five-star” resort or a cruise on a “luxury”

ship. The more vague the promises, the less likely they will be true. Ask for specifics, and get them in writing. Check out the resort’s address; look for photos of the ship.

- **You are pressured to sign up for a travel club for great deals on future vacations.** The pressure to sign up or miss out is a signal to walk away. Travel clubs often have high membership fees and limited choice of destinations or travel dates.

Lodging guidelines

The lodging industry is becoming stricter with its reservation rules. And you may encounter the following problems, especially in large tourist areas:

- Having to forfeit your deposit upon canceling a reservation.
- Being billed for a room even though you did not use it.
- Minimum stay requirements.
- Not receiving the services or amenities that were advertised or represented.
- Being billed at higher room rates than the “special rate” advertised or quoted.

Consumer complaints are often the result of lack of disclosure or miscommunication between the business and the consumer. Policies vary. So ask questions when you reserve a room, request all your reservation information in writing. Remember: If a lodge holds a room for you and you do not cancel in advance, you will likely be charged a fee. Lodges that

reserve by the week may impose higher cancellation or no-show fees. By canceling well in advance, the traveler will avoid fees and keep the lodge from losing business.

Confirm the current room rate at the time you make the reservation to avoid potential misunderstandings at check-in/check-out. Ask for written confirmation verifying the rate once you make your reservation.

Coupons, special offers & gift certificates

When reserving a room using a coupon, special offer, gift certificate or membership discount, be sure you tell the reservation clerk. Read the coupon, special offer, gift certificate or membership discount offer carefully for any special conditions or limitations on its use and application.

Payment

Prior to giving out your credit card number, ask about the cancellation policy and request a written copy be mailed to you. Make sure you understand whether the room will be held or guaranteed with your credit card number. If you cancel the room reservation, be sure to ask for a cancellation number and the name of the person who gave it to you.

Confirmation

Once you have made your reservation, many motels will assign a confirmation number or will follow up with a confirmation letter or email. If this is not automatically done, ask the reservation clerk for a

confirmation number and for a mailed card or email confirming your room, rate, length of stay and the special amenities (fireplace, whirlpool, non-smoking). Even if you are given a verbal confirmation number, you should also get it in writing. If you do not receive any type of confirmation, be sure to call the motel and reconfirm your reservation. (If the reservation is made just a few days in advance, a mailed confirmation may not be available.)

Credit or charge card blocking

Be aware of credit or charge card "blocking." "Blocking" is not a practice initiated by the lodging industry but is the only way charge card companies will ensure payment at check-out. The clerk contacts your credit card company to give an estimated total. If the transaction is approved, your available credit is reduced by that estimated amount. That is a "block." Be aware that if you use a different card or cash to pay your final bill, the company that issued the card you used to check in might hold the block for up to 15 days after you have checked out. That is because it was not notified of the final charge and did not know you paid another way. This becomes a problem if you are near your credit limit. It is not only embarrassing to have your card declined, but if you have an emergency purchase to make you may not have enough available credit. To avoid this, use the same card at departure to pay your bill or be sure to ask the clerk to remove the "block" from

the first card you used when you leave.

For more information

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

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