

Travel Scams

consumer *brief*

Vacations are supposed to be carefree times to relax and reconnect with nature, friends and family. However, for consumers who unknowingly book their trips through dishonest travel agents, vacations can be expensive disappointments.

According to the National Association of Attorneys General, travel scams cost consumers \$12 billion annually. Unsuspecting consumers win “free” trips, which may require them to spend most of their vacation in timeshare presentations. “Free” cruises end up costing hundreds of dollars, and a “free” airline ticket may require purchase of a second ticket at an escalated price.

Fraudulent companies promote their travel packages through the mail, by phone, unsolicited e-mail or faxes. Vacations represent a real investment of both time and money, so when planning your next vacation, remember to:

- Stay away from travel offers which use high-pressure sales tactics and have deals that sound “too good to be true” because they probably are.
- Do not be pressured into making an uninformed decision or commitment. Remember, a good offer today will be available tomorrow.
- Be extremely suspicious of postcards and telemarketers saying you have been “selected” to receive a “spectacular ‘no cost’ vacation.”
- Seek the advice of a reputable travel agent and verify your arrangements before you pay.
- Buy travel insurance if it’s possible that you won’t be able to make the trip. That way you won’t lose the entire cost of the trip, only an insurance fee.

- Learn travel-industry vocabulary like “blackout periods,” dates usually around holidays or peak seasons when you are not entitled to use travel discounts; and “subject to availability,” which means you may not be able to get the accommodations you want when you want them.
- Make sure you get all of the details about your vacation in writing, especially regarding restrictions, cancellation penalties, refund policies and additional charges like taxes and service fees. If they do not provide it, make sure to request it. Check to be sure these documents reflect the same terms to which you agreed.



- Pay by credit card. If you don’t get what you paid for, you may be able to dispute the charges with your credit card company. However, don’t provide your account number to anyone over the phone unless you know the company he/she represents is reputable. Some telemarketers may say they need your account number for identification or verification purposes - they don’t. Your account number should only be used to bill you for goods and services.

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800-242-5846 › New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs
www.NJConsumerAffairs.gov



- Obtain a contact number to verify your travel arrangements prior to your vacation and make sure nothing has changed (i.e., travel times, dates, check-in, air travel, etc.).
- Investigate charter flights. Charter flights can provide excellent value, and they often operate non-stop in markets where scheduled flights would be less direct. A public charter may include only flights, or may be sold as a complete package, including hotels, guided tours and ground transportation. Either way, your rights are spelled out in an “operator/participant contract” that the operator or your travel agent should give you to sign at the time you purchase your trip.

The Department of Transportation requires charter operators to disclose certain information in their contracts about the restrictions that they impose and also rights that you have under its rules.

Charters and scheduled flights operate independently of each other. If there’s a delay on the scheduled flight connecting you to the city where your charter departs, causing you to miss your charter, you lose your flight and money. **Bottom line:** leave plenty of connecting time between charter and scheduled flights when making your arrangements.

You can buy trip cancellation insurance. These policies usually provide a refund in case you must cancel due to illness or death in the family. Your travel agent or tour operator can tell you how to buy the insurance and what health conditions it does or doesn't cover. Charter cancellation insurance often won't pay you if you must cancel because of a preexisting condition.

You alone are responsible for knowing if you need a visa and passport for your trip. You can be certain about the visa and passport rules of the countries you plan to visit by calling or writing their embassies in Washington, D.C., or their consulates in some major U.S. cities.

If your luggage gets lost during your tour, there may be a dispute over who is liable. The charter airlines process claims for bags that were lost or damaged while in their possession. If it is not clear where the problem occurred (e.g. between the airport and a hotel), the operator and the airline may both decline liability. To cover yourself, find out if your renter’s or homeowner’s insurance policy covers losses that happen when you’re away from home. You might also ask your travel agent if there’s a one-

time baggage insurance policy available to cover baggage problems while you are on your charter trip.

If you think you have been scammed by a public charter or want more information about public charter flights visit: www.dot.gov/airconsumer .

Or write or call:

U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590 | **855-368-4200**



- Keep a record. Ask for the full name of the travel company and record their contact information. It may also be helpful to get the name of the travel representative who is booking your trip.
- Check out the company before you buy. Contact the Division of Consumer Affairs at 800-242-5846 to see if any complaints have been lodged against the travel firm or the travel provider.
- Be aware. Fraudulent businesses often change their name to avoid any associations with past scams.

DIVISION OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS
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