

*Protecting Wisconsin Consumers for 75 Years*

## Travel tips

Whether you're 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.

- **Buy your vacation package from a business you have confidence in.** Ask family and friends to recommend a company with a good track record. Think twice if you can't get a person on the phone to answer your questions or if the ad doesn't give the company's street address.
- **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.
- **Verify and clarify.** Call to verify your reservations and arrangements. Get the details behind vague promises that you'll 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'll 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, and ask "What if...?" Consider whether some form of travel cancellation insurance may be appropriate.
- **Use a credit card to make your purchase.** 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 give your account number to any business until you've verified that it is reputable.
- **Avoid a travel club flub.** Ask questions before joining a travel club. Sometimes, a "free trial" membership can result in unauthorized charges on your credit card. Find out what you'll get for your money and how you can cancel.

- **Won a "free" vacation?** Not so fast. Scam artists may tell you you've won a "free" vacation, but then claim to need your credit card number for "verification." Tell them to take a hike. If the promotion is legit, you never need to pay for a prize.

## Lodging guidelines

The lodging industry is becoming more strict 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 when you call to reserve your room, ask questions and 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.

### 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. If this is not automatically done, ask the reservation clerk for a confirmation number and for a mailed card 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 don't 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.)

### Room rates

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.

### Credit or charge card blocking

You should be aware of the newest practice in making a reservation—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've checked out. That's because it was not notified of the final charge and didn't 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, contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection at:

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