

Protecting Wisconsin Consumers for 75 Years

Vacation offers

Vacation promotions offering trips to tropical paradises, exotic cruises, gambling trips, or exciting locations are made through mailings, telephone calls, media advertisements, websites, or emails. Unfortunately, consumers usually find out too late that it is not a free vacation, but rather a vacation certificate.

A vacation certificate is nothing more than a piece of paper to request a vacation and validation may not be indicated until arriving at the destination. Many of these certificates have requirements of making a purchase, joining a membership, or attending sale presentations before the certificate is issued or validated.

Promoters typically pay very little for certificates used as premiums or sales gimmicks which usually cost the recipients hundreds of dollars in the end.

There are major differences between travel packages offered by travel agents, and tourist attraction locations where ownership of a vacation with specific times and dates of departure, arrival, activities, lodging, and

→ *Get all information in writing and carefully review the material before investing, signing, or using any part of the trip.*

transportation take place. Do not be misled by promoter tactics to make certificates appear to be packages.

“Bonus coupons” or the addition of “special offers” can be another ploy to lure participants. Often times these enticements are readily available for free to anyone visiting the vacation area.

Complaints on file show many vacation promoters misrepresent the terms and conditions of vacations, fail to give refunds, or go out of business altogether. The number of complaints against a promoter can be found by contacting the Bureau of Consumer Protection. Caution is needed when there are no records of complaints, as many of the problem promoters frequently change their names and locations.

Deposits, signatures or usage

Do not sign for, pay, or use any part of an offer before getting all the details in writing.

Requiring a deposit, signature, or partial usage before releasing any details is the goal of many schemes. Any prior action of acceptance or commitment can make cancellation more difficult even if the details were not fully disclosed. A post card, flyer, or presentation is no substitution for written details.

Never provide credit/debit card, checking, banking or saving account information prior to careful review of all written specifics and details. Financial information is not required to verify identity or to consider a written vacation offer. Financial information is needed to make an unauthorized charge or withdrawal. A check is all that is needed to pay a known and authorized amount that is in writing for a specified reason. When not paying by check – provide only the information for the method being used. Be careful when only debit card

payment is accepted as credit cards carry better protection against unexpected charges.

Ask questions and get it in writing

Some promoters offer a 900 area code number for more information about vacation deals. Placing a 900 call will result in a phone bill charge. Calling 809, 876, 758, 664 and others will also result in international calling or pay-per-call fees. Domestic, international, and unexpected fee generating area codes can be identified in telephone directories, on the internet or by contacting an operator.

Exactly how much is it going to cost?

- Ask about taxes, transportation, meals, or other handling fees. Get specifics – “meals included” may mean a doughnut and cup of coffee on two of the mornings.
- Ask for a breakdown of all additional out of pocket costs or verification of items or services being included at no additional fees, charges or costs. A “free” vacation with additional costs is not “free”.
- Ask about cancellation, refund, and rescheduling policies. Get specifics in writing because many times the promoter can keep all, or part of, the money under partial or nonrefundable policies.

- Ask how refundable deposits are handled. Often it is applied directly toward non-included out-of-pocket costs.

What special conditions or terms are involved?

- Are you required to attend a sales presentation? If so, how many, how long are they, and for what purpose? Be prepared for high pressure and lengthy pitches on topics like timeshares, travel clubs, products, opportunities, investments, or services. Be suspicious of requirements to purchase, sign-up, or trial offer acceptance.
- When two people are required to travel together, and all, or part of the second person’s costs are not included, be aware the additional costs are typically at or near full price. This amount not only covers available reduced rates for the second person, but can leave enough to pay for the “free” one – with the promoter or provider making a profit.

What are the specific arrangements?

- Get restrictions in writing – travel, lodging, or other vacation offerings may be prohibited on holidays, weekends, prime tourist periods, or attraction and event scheduling.
- Get limitations in writing. Such as, is the offer limited to the first three participants.

- Get the exact name, location, and room accommodations of the hotel and check it out. Assurance of “first” class accommodations does not guarantee excellent location – being close to attractions, activities, interests, or safety.
- Get the name of the airline. Ask if reservations can be made directly with the airline or only through the promoter.
- Get the same details for a vacation offer - similar to booking a trip with a travel agent. Flight, seat, and room numbers. Dates and times of meals, events, activities, check-in, check-out, ground transportation, and free time.

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

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