



Don't Let Phony Deals and Booking Snafus Spoil Your Spring Break Plans

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MADISON – On the back of this winter's low temperatures, it's natural to daydream about sun-filled days on sandy beaches. Spring break is just around the bend and many Wisconsin residents are eagerly planning their getaways. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) asks vacation deal seekers to watch for scams and pitfalls that can drain their accounts and sink their trips.

"A trip typically requires significant planning and research, and there are a number of factors to consider when making your purchase," said Michelle Reinen, Director of the Bureau of Consumer Protection. "Shoppers should be leery of too-good-to-be-true offers for getaway packages and should follow up with airlines, travel services and accommodations after making reservations to ensure that the booking requests are confirmed with the end provider."

Watch for scams using free or discounted travel in their pitch:

- Mailings, telephone calls, websites, emails or faxes may offer exotic cruises or trips to tropical paradises, but they are often pitches for worthless "vacation certificates" or vouchers. These "prizes" are typically sales gimmicks to get you to make a purchase, attend a sales presentation or commit to a membership contract.
- A "free" vacation offer may come with a request for payment for fees or taxes. Don't pay it. Remember that a legitimate company will not ask you to pay for a prize.
- Scammers post too-good-to-be-true offers for vacation rentals in online classified ads using pictures and text stolen from real estate listings. The owner will offer excuses for why they can't meet in person and ask that you wire money or make a payment using a pre-paid debit card in order to hold the rental. Before you make any agreements or payments on a rental through an online ad, search for information about the address of a rental property. If the property is supposedly located in a resort, contact the front desk of the resort to confirm details about the location.

Apart from outright scams, know that booking a reservation through a third-party cost comparison website is NOT the same as having a ticket. There is a gap in time between when you make a reservation and when the airline issues a ticket or the hotel locks down a room, and problems can arise during that disconnect. There have also been instances where shoppers used unfamiliar booking sites and learned at the airport that they did not have a ticket to fly. After making a reservation through a third-party service, always call the airline, hotel or transportation service with your confirmation numbers in hand in order to ensure that your booking is actually in place.

Additional booking tips to help avoid complications when making travel arrangements:

- Never make a purchase through an unfamiliar travel service without first researching that company to gauge its legitimacy.
- When comparing travel deals from different providers, make sure to take into account all possible fees from the providers as well as their cancellation policies.
- Double check that all of your party member's names and your contact information are correct before you finalize a travel package purchase.

- Regardless of whether you book through a third-party site or directly through a hotel or airline, use a credit card – especially if you have a travel-focused card that offers trip interruption and trip cancelation coverage.

For additional information or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at datcp.wisconsin.gov, call the Consumer Protection Hotline at 800-422-7128 or send an e-mail to datcph hotline@wisconsin.gov.

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