



ATTORNEY GENERAL OFFERS TIPS TO AVOID TRAVEL SCAMS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

SPRING BREAK AND SUMMER VACATION ARE just around the corner, and many travel agencies will offer vacation packages or travel specials. Before committing to a vacation promotion or travel offer, take the following simple precautions to help ensure you enjoy your vacation without losing your hard-earned money to a travel scam.

Ask for the offer in writing. Timeshare resorts, travel clubs and other companies often provide vacation certificates or coupons to customers who agree to attend a marketing presentation describing the company's various products and services.

A typical vacation certificate may arrive unsolicited by mail, fax or e-mail, or you may receive a telephone call informing you that you have been "selected" to receive a "free vacation." The offer may include airfare and hotel accommodations. All you have to do, they say, is participate in the company's sales seminar.

Ask for the offer's details in writing, including cancellation and refund policies. Contact our office or your local Better Business Bureau to check the reliability of any company offering a travel bargain, especially businesses offering a timeshare resort or other vacation deal in exchange for attending a sales presentation.

Read the fine print. Once you receive the travel offer in writing, take the time to read the fine print and pay special attention to asterisks or footnotes. Often, these are indicators of restrictions, including limitations on the length of your stay or prohibitions on certain days or times of

departure. Fine print may detail additional charges that you are responsible for, such as transportation fees and taxes.

In 2006, our Consumer Protection Division won a \$64 million verdict against a travel company that misled the public about so-called "free vacations." Investigators discovered that the company failed to provide information about a variety of fees, deposits, airline and hotel taxes and other costs linked to their offers.

The company also tightly restricted the dates on which these trips could be taken. The "free" vacation offers were only valid for one year, and consumers had to submit reservation requests at least 90 days before the desired departure dates. The company disclosed none of these restrictions until after the presentations and consumers had signed up.

Do not offer to pay a company without thoroughly reviewing the travel offer and understanding its limitations.

Confirm reservations independently. Another complaint associated with "free" or low-cost vacations is that promises for "five-star hotels" often result in small, cramped rooms with bad food and questionable facilities. When travelers complain to the travel promoter, the promoter "finds" an "upgrade," usually at a much higher price, and leaves the travelers responsible for the added expense.

Check reservations and availability on your own. Request brochures directly from the hotel and find out what features

are included in the price. The promoter may rave about a hotel's beautiful golf course, but that does not mean a round of golf is included in the package.

Ask the vacation promoter whether you can make your own travel arrangements if the designated hotel is booked. Smart travelers compare rates with those available through other travel agencies.

Remember that Internet specials on airfare or hotel accommodations do not guarantee that you will receive special requests, such as a room that allows pets.

Protect your identity. Do not provide credit card information over the phone or Internet unless you initiated the call or communication. Make travel arrangements only with businesses you trust.

Two years ago, our office took legal action against an operation that heavily promoted sweepstakes drawings for vacations and other prizes as a way to obtain consumers' personal information. The perpetrators then sold the personal information to a third-party business without consumers' permission. Be careful not to give out confidential information for a travel promotion if you don't know how it will be used.

Secure your passport early. Finally, remember that U.S. citizens are now required to have a valid passport to exit and re-enter the United States, even for travel to Mexico and Canada. Consult a trusted travel agent to get passport information and updates, along with timely advice on all your travel needs.

POINTS TO REMEMBER



TIPS TO AVOID TRAVEL SCAMS

- Make travel arrangements only with companies you trust.
- Get any travel offer in writing. Be aware of restrictions and extra fees.
- Check airline and hotel reservations independently to avoid unpleasant surprises.
- Never provide confidential information over the phone or Internet unless you initiated the communication.

For more travel tips, find your local **Better Business Bureau** at www.bbb.org, or visit the **Federal Trade Commission** online at www.ftc.gov.

For more information on this and other consumer topics, visit the Attorney General's Web site at www.oag.state.tx.us.



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