

CONSUMER'S EDGE

CONSUMER PROTECTION DIVISION, MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

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HOW TO ENSURE SPRING BREAK IS THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME

Spring break is a common time for families, college students and individuals to go on vacation, but it's also a common time for scam artists to target unsuspecting victims. With flyers, and online ads touting fabulous beach vacations at a low price – “A week in Cancun, all-inclusive for only \$399!” – that dream “spring break” vacation turns out to be a rip-off or a disappointment. Scam artists may take a payment and disappear, or supply a trip that was not what was promised – with shabby accommodations a long way from the beach, unsatisfactory or nonexistent meals, a “cruise” that turns out to be a ride on a decrepit ferry, and none of the parties and other extras that were promised. Some vacationers may have arrived at their destinations to find their hotel overbooked.

The best way to ensure a trouble-free trip is to do some research before choosing a vacation package. Here are some ways to check out a tour operator and a particular vacation package:

Beware of “too good to be true” deals. Just because a tour operator advertises in a well-known publication or website does not mean it is legitimate. Avoid high-pressure sales pitches, telemarketers that say you have “won” a bargain trip, and offers that require you to send a cashier's check by overnight delivery.

Use a reputable travel agent or tour company. Find out how long the tour operator or travel agency has been in business. Check to see if a company is a member of the American Society of Travel Agents or the United States Tour Operators Association. Check out a company's complaint record with the Consumer Protection Division or Better Business Bureau. If the company is located out of state, check with that state's Attorney General's office or local Better Business Bureau.

Understand that charter flights and packages are subject to change. Delays are not uncommon with public charter flights, often used for spring break

trips. U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) rules allow a charter flight to be delayed up to 48 hours before you have the right to cancel and get a refund. The charter operator does not have to provide alternate transportation or compensate you for your expenses. Also, charter flights can be canceled for any reason up until 10 days before the trip. A charter operator can also change the



departure date, the city your flight leaves from, or the hotel accommodations included in your package. The contract for a charter package should tell you the conditions under which the charter operator can make changes to the itinerary. According to DOT rules, you have a right to cancel a charter package and get a full refund if the operator makes a “major change.” Major changes include a change of date or city for the departure or return, a hotel substitution to a property not named in the contract, or an increase in the package price of



more than 10 percent. Charter flights can make a travel package more affordable. However, if you are unwilling to accept the uncertainties of charter travel, look for a travel package that uses scheduled commercial flights.



Get all information in writing. Find out exactly what is included in your trip, and what isn't. Make sure you get a detailed, written contract that names specifically which hotel, airline, and airport will be used. Read the contract to see if the tour operator may substitute another hotel. Good questions to ask include: Is the "beachfront" hotel really on the beach, or a few blocks away? What is included in the meal plan, and are there rules that might make using the plan inconvenient? Is the price the total price, or will you have to pay anything additional upon arrival? Is the price based on hav-

ing a large number of people per room? Are the water-sports and sightseeing tours mentioned in the pamphlet included in the package price, or would they cost extra? If problems are encountered during the trip, can the tour operator or travel agency be contacted for help?

Ask about refund policies. Find out what will happen if the trip is cancelled. Read the contract to see whether the tour operator can cancel a departure for lack of bookings. If you booked the trip through a travel agency, and the tour operator went out of business, would the travel agent refund your money? If you should cancel, what are the rules for a full or partial refund? You may want to buy trip cancellation insurance, which can provide a refund in the case of illness, a death in the family, or other unforeseen circumstances. It will not provide reimbursement if you simply changed your mind about the trip. Also, some trip cancellation policies will provide a refund if the tour operator or travel agency goes out of business – as long as the policy was not purchased from that company.

Payment. Don't pay the whole amount of the trip far in advance. If possible, pay by credit card, which will give you the opportunity to dispute the charges through your card issuer if you do not receive what you paid for.

HOW TO CONTACT US

Consumer Protection Division

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- **General Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-8662
Toll-free: 1-888-743-0023 TDD: 410-576-6372
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/
- **Health Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-1840
Toll-free: 1-877-261-8807 TDD: 410-576-6372
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandcares.org
- **For information on branch offices** in Largo, Salisbury, Hagerstown, and a full list of offices across Maryland, visit:
www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/contactus.aspx

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