



Avoid Spring Break Scams

From the Office of Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson

For many college students, spring break offers the chance to take a break from the stresses of academic life and get away from the cold Minnesota winter by traveling south. There are many travel options available ranging from organized tours to planning the trip yourself. Although such vacations can be an opportunity to have a fun experience in a new surrounding, travel plans can be ruined if you sign up for a vacation package with a fraudulent operator. Every year, some students complain that they were swindled out of their money by unscrupulous operators that did not deliver what they promised. In some cases, companies made significant alterations to the travel plans at the last minute or tacked on additional fees. In others, package arrangements such as hotel accommodations turned out to be nonexistent or sub-standard. In worst case scenarios, students were sold packages that did not even exist and the “company” disappeared before they could obtain a refund. Don’t let these things happen to you. By taking a few precautions, you can contact a reputable company and make travel plans that make sense for you. The following tips can help you protect yourself and ensure that you get the travel package that you are expecting:

Purchase the travel package from a company you know. If you’re not familiar with a company, check its reputation. Many travel organizations belong to professional associations such as the American Society of Travel Agents, the National Tour Association or the United States Tour Operators Association. If you decide to buy a ticket on line, make sure that you purchase a ticket from a reputable company. Always research a company first and make sure that it is right for you before you sign on the dotted line.

Get it in writing. Some unscrupulous operators tack on additional fees and other charges which are not verbally disclosed in the initial sales pitch. Verify all arrangements in writing before you pay, including the total cost (including taxes, fees and charges), restrictions,

cancellation penalties and the exact names of airlines and hotels. Never sign contracts that contain blank spaces.

Read the fine print. Watch out for travel opportunities that are “subject to availability” or that can’t be used during the holiday or peak seasons. Words such as “offer” or “package” can be indicators of hidden fees or complex payment arrangements.

Don’t feel rushed. If a company is trying to rush you, it may be trying to scam you before you have enough time to think about it. Don’t deal with companies that request payment in advance or rushed payments.

Beware of “free trip” solicitations or “too good to be true” offers. Be suspicious of postcards, letters, bulk emails or phone solicitations claiming you’ve won a free trip. These offers usually don’t disclose the hidden fees involved, such as deposits, surcharges, excessive handling fees, taxes, or specific eligibility requirements. The Federal Trade Commission lists receiving a vacation prize promotion as one of 12 scams most likely to arrive via bulk email. Also, be wary of rock bottom prices that are simply too good to be true.

Watch out for vouchers. Steer clear of travel offers which ask you to redeem vouchers or certificates from out-of- state companies. The offers are usually valid only for a limited time and on a space-available basis.

Pay with a credit card. Consider using a credit card to make your purchase. Under a federal law known as the Fair Credit Billing Act, consumers have the right to file a written dispute with their credit card company if they are charged for products or services they did not receive. If the credit card company’s investigation finds in your favor, it may reverse the charges. Never give out your credit card, however, to a company you don’t know.

Verify the Charter operator's name. If a vacation package uses a charter flight, get the charter operator's name, address and verify its registration with the U.S. Department of Transportation, Public Charter licensing division at (202) 366-2396.

For further information about travel packages and tour operators contact:

Office of Minnesota Attorney General

Lori Swanson

1400 Bremer Tower
445 Minnesota Street
St. Paul, MN 55105
651-296-3353
1-800-657-3787
TTY: 651-297-7206
TTY: 1-800-366-4812
www.ag.state.mn.us

Federal Trade Commission

Consumer Protection
CRC - 240
Washington, D.C. 20580
1-877-FTC-HELP
www.ftc.gov

American Society of Travel Agents

(703) 739-2782
www.astanet.com

CrossSphere

formerly known as

National Tour Association

1-800-682-8886
www.crosssphere.com

United States Tour Operators Association

(212) 599-6599
www.ustoa.com

Better Business Bureau

2706 Gannon Road
St. Paul, MN 55116-2600
(651) 699-1111
Toll free: 1-800-646-6222
www.bbb.com

