



The Smart Traveler

Safe Trips On The Information Superhighway

(NAPS)—A group of travel experts is working hard to make certain that people who plan a trip over the Internet don't get taken for a ride.

The experts at the nonprofit United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA) point out the Internet doesn't have to be a new frontier for travel misrepresentation and fraud, if you know what to watch for.

Some 59 million people now use the Internet to plan travel, according to the Travel Industry Association of America and, of those, 16 million book their trips online.

While the vast majority of travel Web sites are legitimate, the Internet does make it easy for some companies to fool unsuspecting customers, notes Bob Whitley, USTOA's president.

The association advises consumers to beware of online travel fraud. Before putting down a deposit on a vacation booked over the Web, it says, people should safeguard themselves by finding out if the company is a member of a reputable travel industry organization such as USTOA or the National Tour Association.

"We are seeing a rise in complaints about companies that misrepresent themselves over the Internet as members of recognized travel industry organizations," says Whitley.

The problem facing online consumers is that any travel company can set up a Web site and claim that it is a member of a travel organization. Consumers may be falsely led to believe that they are protected by the companies claiming to be members, when, in fact, they are not.

USTOA, for example, requires all its Active Members to participate in a \$1 million Consumer Protection Plan. The plan requires each company to set aside a fully

The Smart Traveler's Planning Kit



Always check the credentials of any online travel company with which you do business.

secured \$1 million bond or letter of credit to reimburse consumer payments, should it go out of business.

In addition to dealing only with reputable companies, experts recommend following some simple advice to avoid falling victim to travel fraud:

- Prices that seem too good to be true, probably are.
- Avoid doing business with companies that require customers to buy or sell travel certificates.
- Be wary of companies that claim to make you an "instant travel agent."
- Avoid shopping with companies that seem to be pressuring you into putting down a deposit on a vacation.
- Always double check with the organization in question or with your travel agent to be sure of a tour company's membership status.

USTOA maintains a listing of its Active Member companies on its Web site, www.ustoa.com. To learn more, you can either e-mail information@ustoa.com or phone 1-800-GO-USTOA (468-7862) for a free "Smart Traveler's Planning Kit."