

5 Scary Travel Scams to Watch Out for in 2021

(Courtesy of Caroline Morse Teel, SMARTERTRAVEL)

As travel resumes, so have travel scams. Scammers are getting more sophisticated, and can easily trick travelers out of their hard-earned vacation money. We've uncovered five of the most common travel scams for 2021, so you can outsmart the scammers.

Fake Car Rental Scams

With rental cars in short supply for 2021, desperate travelers looking for any vehicle to rent are particularly vulnerable to scammers. Amy Nofziger, Director of Victim Support for the AARP Fraud Watch Network tells us one common scam for 2021 involves criminals creating fake car rental company websites, and then buying ads for their fake pages to show up for search terms such as "cheap car rentals". The unsuspecting browser would then call the fake customer service number on the page (which appeared to be for a legitimate car rental company) and be told that the cheap rate was only valid if they pre-paid with a store-bought gift card (like an American Express gift card). The victim would buy a gift card and use it to secure their reservation, only to find out upon arrival at the real rental car counter that they were scammed and no car was available.

"Free" Vacation Scams

If you get a phone call, email, or postcard telling you that you've won a free vacation (and just need to pay taxes and fees) or offering you a deal that sounds way too good to be true, walk away, says Nofziger. If the deal is coming from a legitimate travel company, look up the information for that company separately (don't use the contact information that was sent to you, which could be redirected to a scammer) to verify separately.

One other red flag to watch for—if the company is asking you to pay with a prepaid gift card or debit card, it's likely to be a scam, because it's significantly harder to get back stolen funds on those types of cards rather than a credit card.

Vacation Rental Scams

Found a picture-perfect vacation rental online? Make sure to check the vacation rental site's fraud policies to make sure you'll be protected in case your booking turns out to be a scam. Nofziger recommends carefully following the booking platform's guideline's on accepted payments to best protect yourself and to always pay with a credit card for extra protection.

Common vacation rental scams involve fake listings, inaccurate listings, or renters sending you a fake cashier's check or money order for more money than they owe you (and asking you to send them the excess amount before you realize the check is fake).

Unsure about the vacation rental company you're thinking of booking with? Check the Better Business Bureau (BBB) website for complaints, says Nofziger. You can also search the company name plus the words "scam", "fraud", or "complaints" to find cautionary reviews online.

Fake Airline Sites

Similar to the car rental scam above, fake airline sites have become prolific lately. If you search for cheap airline tickets and find a ticket reseller that you've never heard of, proceed with caution. "The red flag is they will always ask you for payment in a gift card, bitcoin, or other non-traceable forms of payment", warns Nofziger. "Be very careful when on any travel website of pop-ups. We have heard from many consumers that thought they were on the correct website when they entered their payment information when in fact it was a third-party pop-up travel site where the prices were increased and the cancellation policies were different."

TSA PreCheck/Global Entry Scams

Another place to watch out for spoof websites is when applying for TSA PreCheck and Global Entry. These fake sites look just like the government ones but will steal your sensitive personal information and money. In the example pictured, the first (paid) result that comes up when you search "Global Entry" is for a third-party Global Entry site, not the actual government website.

If you're applying or renewing your membership, don't search for "TSA PreCheck" or "Global Entry". Go directly to the official government websites via cbp.gov and tsa.gov.