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Scam Alert – Travel Scams

by Stacie Harris, Economic Crimes Unit

For every scam that is found out and shut down, 3 or 4 more pop up, whether they be new or old. Some are scams that we haven't heard of for awhile, but tend to make a comeback every now and then. Travel scams have been around for years and with the rising gas prices, it seems to be a prime opportunity for con-artists to make a few bucks.

With gas prices as high as they have been in years, everyone is looking for a great get away deal to save money. At the same time that you're looking for these deals, there are people out there that want nothing more than to separate you from your money and leave you holding your bags with no place to go.

If you were to see a trip advertised for 10 days to Greece priced at \$199 and this trip was to include roundtrip airfare, hotel and food, this would be the time to start reading the fine print and looking for the hidden "add-on" costs. As stated by Mark Kayler of About.com, "No vendor wants to lose money without gaining some other advantage in the process".

Reported incidents have been of a company mailing out what appeared to be travel vouchers good for 2 roundtrip airfare tickets. The generic vouchers were not being honored by the airlines listed. The toll free number listed on the voucher was for you to register to attend a time share/travel club presentation wherein the high pressure sales pitch would be presented to you. For those that chose to sign up with this company, they found out later that their up to \$4,000.00 investment was definitely not worth what they were receiving. The valid airline tickets that were finally presented to them, if even presented at all, had so many blackout dates, times and locations that it made it virtually impossible to ever take the trip. Other members found that the prices that they were paying in the travel club were little to no savings compared to what they would have paid had they booked with a travel agent or direct with the hotel or airline. These kinds of scams are hard to prosecute because technically, you are getting something for your money, just not exactly what you expected.

Words such as "free" or "complimentary" are used on mailings to distract you from seeing the truth as to what is really being offered. If you're presented with an offer that states if you will only agree to listen to a 2-hour presentation of their business in exchange for complimentary tickets for a free steak dinner, movie tickets, the ballet, etc., ask yourself these questions:

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For these so called "free" tickets, do you really want to give up 2 hours of your vacation to listen to these high pressure sales pitches that will make you feel obligated to purchase/invest? Can you absolutely say without a doubt that you won't be suckered into investing any money into a business that will never follow through with what they promise? Can you just say "no" at the end of the presentation and walk away? If you choose to attend the presentation and do purchase/invest in the company, **READ THE CONTRACT!!!!!!** If the contract does not have something in it that states what was promised to you, do not sign it unless those promises have been added to it and signed off on by someone in an upper management position in the company. The easiest way to put this, if the promises are not written into the contract, then they do not exist. Also make sure to have a copy of everything that you signed. Having them state that they will send the copies to you in the mail is not a good sign and chances are you will never receive it and have nothing to prove what you were actually promised or what they were obligated to provide.

Ways to avoid travel scams:

1. Use a reputable travel agency or purchase direct from the airline, hotels, etc.
2. Avoid companies that state that this is a once in a life-time deal and must be booked immediately.
3. Contact the State Attorney General's office, Consumer Protection Agency and/or the BBB to see if there is a history of complaints. Verify that the company is bonded or a member of a reputable travel society.
4. Get everything in writing. Make sure that you have all promises in writing, a copy of the company's cancellation policy and what their refund policies are.
5. When purchasing your vacation, first make sure it is from a reputable business, then purchase it with a credit card. You may have additional rights to dispute the charges if they don't live up to or supply you with what was promised.
6. If someone phones, mails or emails you that you've won a "free" vacation, but then asks you for a credit card number, that should immediately send up red flags warning you to stop and tell them NO.

~ IDENTIFY A SCAM BEFORE A SCAM IDENTIFIES YOU! ~