

## 5 Tips for Planning Travel Abroad

When you are traveling abroad you will undoubtedly find yourself dealing with a large number of companies that you are unfamiliar with, and whose policies and procedures are different from what you are used to.

One of your objectives when traveling abroad should be to minimize the opportunities for screw ups that might jeopardize your enjoyment and cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars more than you were counting on.

Here are some tips for when you are planning your next trip abroad.

### 1. Whenever possible, deal with people and businesses you know

Buying a cut rate vacation package from a company you have never dealt with before may seem smart at the time. But if you have no experience with the company, you really have no guarantee that everything promised in your travel package will actually come off as expected.

Talk to friends and relatives about travel companies they have dealt with. Look for reviews on the internet. Deal with companies who have been around for a while and are members of professional associations such as the American Society of Travel Agents, the National Tour Association or the United States Tour Operators Association.

### 2. Start planning well in advance

If you are planning a major vacation abroad start researching at least a year or two in advance. Search the internet for information about your destination. There are many travel sites devoted to providing information about special air flights, hotel rates, local customs, and things to see and do in the country you are planning to visit.

Hook up with one or two companies or travel agents that sound promising. Ask them for information, or ask to be put on their mailing list. Talk with them occasionally and follow their promotions. This will give you an idea of the type of service they provide and the costs involved. It will also help you to learn the vocabulary and give you a better idea of the proper questions to ask.

### 3. Be wary of telemarketers with travel deals

Telemarketers and vacation resellers are in the business of selling surplus travel and accommodation for other companies. They want to make the sale, and beyond that are not interested in your satisfaction, or whether you actually get the product you bargained for. Be aware that they have no responsibility to you after the sale has been made, and it might be difficult to get exactly what you thought you were getting from the company that is actually providing the service.

Many resellers will use ads in the newspaper or on the internet, or will send unsolicited faxes that offer cut rate vacations. Without some background on the company offering these "deals" you have no way of knowing if they are legitimate. The fact is the "deals" often contain hidden costs or they may require you to attend a sales presentation to qualify for the discount.

Certain practices used by these companies are dead giveaways that there is something fishy about their service. For instance don't deal with a company that wants to send a courier for your payment or asks you to send money by overnight delivery. Even giving your credit card information to such a company is very risky. So the best policy is not to deal with companies you don't know or don't have good reason to trust.

### 4. Don't pay until you have verified details of your travel package

One important advantage of dealing with a travel agent or tour operator that you know and trust is that they can make most arrangements without full payment from you. This allows you to withhold a substantial part of your payment until you see the complete details of your trip. If your agent is booking flights, hotels or cruises for you they should be able to provide, in writing, a complete itinerary with names, addresses and telephone numbers so you can verify the bookings. Your agent or tour operator should also provide complete cancellation and refund policies.

If you deal with cut rate tour resellers it may be difficult to get these details, and you will probably be required to pay the full cost in advance. Nine times out of ten they will say "We need full payment to hold your spot and guarantee these low prices." But once you have given them your payment

you have very little leverage. If it turns out that you are not satisfied with some of the arrangements they will simply say "You get what you pay for."

#### 5. Never give out your credit card information on the phone to strangers

Most people who think paying online is risky are only too happy to give out their credit card information on the telephone to individuals they know nothing about. It is true that there are safety mechanisms built into the credit card system. But it is also true that someone who has your credit card information can do serious damage to you in a very short time. And even if you can eventually straighten out the mess, you will have been seriously inconvenienced in the meantime.

The general rule is that you should not give out credit card information to companies you are not familiar with. This means that if you are buying travel services from someone on the other end of your telephone you should not be prepared to pay by credit card.

Of course that presents a problem, since the alternative would be to send a check or money order, and they may not be prepared to wait a few days to receive it. That is good enough reason to look for a different service provider.

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