

SCAMS

How to avoid turning your break into a bomb
By Erin Dionne

Every year thousands of students head for sandy shores and warmer climates for spring break. And every year, some get scammed. Companies appear on campus as early as October touting deals to places like Mexico, the Bahamas or Florida. They offer low rates on brightly colored flyers claiming that \$399 will get you to places like Jamaica with airfare, hotel and some meals included, for a five-night stay.

Sounds too good to be true? It probably is.

We've all heard horror stories from students who were stuck in airports for days, or whose hotel room "water view" was really an algae-filled swimming pool. A couple of people I know had their rooms robbed, and their cash and cameras stolen, on spring break in Jamaica.

But how to know what deals are real and which ones are going to turn your dream vacation into a nightmare?

The Federal Trade Commission (ftc.gov), a governmental organization dedicated to helping consumers avoid being victims of fraud or deception, has created a plan called "Operation Trip Trap" specifically geared toward travel-related fraud. It's a combined effort between law enforcement and consumer education groups targeting companies that misrepresent vacation packages. You can go to ftc.gov/os/1999/9908/statecases.htm for a list of travel companies that the FTC has filed action against. Be sure to check out any company that you're working with before you hand over your cash.

If you do get scammed, or want to find out more ways to protect yourself, visit the American Association of Travel Agents web page (astanet.com) and check out the "traveler's rights" and "alerts for consumers" sections. •

Keep these tips in mind when planning your trip:

- Be wary of charter flights. They can change their departure times and don't have to provide an alternate means of transportation to your destination. When paying them, your check should be made out to an escrow account (required by federal law). Contact the Dept. of Transportation (dot.gov) to check if the charter company is legit.
- Pay by credit card. You have more consumer protection if things go wrong when you use plastic over cash or checks. A no-brainer: stay away from companies that say they'll send a courier over to pick up your cash or check.
- Avoid making a quick decision. Some companies try to pressure you into signing on right away—"good deals go quickly," etc. Don't fall prey to it. Check out the names of satisfied customers first. If the company can't provide you with any, don't get on board.

Have a Healthy Spring Break

- In Mexico and Central America, never drink the tap water. That means no ice in drinks, keeping your mouth closed in the shower, and brushing teeth with purified water. In the same countries also avoid raw foods, salads and milk products.



- In Mexico and Central America, pickpocketing is rampant. Men: Put wallets in your front pocket, or wear a money belt. Women: Wear purses with the strap running across your chest.
- Cancun has tight hotel security. If a hotel requires a waterproof wristband, wear it. If you have a guest in your room, let the hotel know—you could be kicked out otherwise.
- Use the hotel safe deposit box for valuables. And carry a photocopy of your passport somewhere in your bags.
- To get the best price while bargaining, walk away when the vendor quotes a price. Keep doing this until you get the price you want.
- Nobody (except tourists) wears shorts in Mexico City.
- Bring your own toilet paper—a couple rolls will get you through a week. It's worth it. —Gina Fraone

NEAT NET TRICKS Advice for savvy computer users By Jack Teems

Never miss a class—or a party—with your own computer clock at timeanddate.com. Choose up to 16 time locations, customize a calendar and use the meeting planner to stay organized.

- Enter the digits found beneath the barcode of audio books, computers, DVDs, music, software, videos, paperbacks and so on at BarPoint (barpoint.com) and you'll get specs, places where you can buy the products and price comparisons.
- A free service at pcpitstop.com examines your computer's configuration, performs benchmark tests, and offers tips on solving problems and improving performance. You'll get data on the system, memory, disk, video, Internet, Windows, security and other useful stuff. Needs Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher to work.

- Until your PC has a better way of handling images, WinGrab will help fill the gap. It's a free utility for Win 95/98/NT/2000 (<http://w1.2518.telia.com/~u251800188/wg/>). It captures a full screen or active window with the touch of a hotkey, and saves the image in .jpg, .png, .tif or .bmp format. It also creates index pages with thumbnail images, prints a series of images or multiple photos on one sheet, serves as an image viewer, and more.

Munge Those Spammers

It's interesting that some dictionaries have not yet picked up the word "munge." One source says it was in use in Scotland in the 1940s and in Yorkshire in the 1950s to denote munching something up in a masticated mass. These days the word has evolved

into altering one's email address as a defense against spam. Give it a try, particularly if you post a lot on newsgroups (Usenet) where your email address can be easily harvested. Simply change the last part of your address so that it becomes worthless to the spam harvesters. For example, if you are JoeJones@mindspring.com, post your messages as JoeJones@_NO_SPAM_mindspring.com. A bonafide correspondent will note the need to remove `_NO_SPAM_` from the address; a bot will not. You should take care to munge the portion of the address after the @; otherwise, your service provider will still get the spam. •

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