

The Washington Post

BY THE WAY

How to make sure your vacation rental isn't a scam

Scammers are getting more sophisticated, but Airbnb and Vrbo offer protections



Advice by [Christopher Elliott](#)
Columnist

March 15, 2023 at 7:30 a.m. EDT



Jennifer Austin had no reason to believe the vacation rental she booked on Vrbo was a scam. The photos of the home in Oro Valley, Ariz., featured a cozy living room with overstuffed furniture, a widescreen TV and a bathroom with designer soaps — all located in a “close-knit community.”

But the listing wasn't what she expected from the photos, says Austin, a retired software salesperson from Westford, Mass.

"It was a trailer," she says. "And it was in a trailer park."

When Austin checked in and discovered the problem, she asked for a refund. The owner pushed back.

"She said, 'You should have known it was a trailer,'" Austin remembers. "She refused to refund us. She got really nasty and threatened to sue me if I posted a bad review."

Situations like Austin's probably won't be the last. A Philadelphia woman recently found out that [her home was fraudulently listed on Airbnb](#) when a family showed up to check in.

It'll be a busy year for vacation rentals, with demand up 5.5 percent from 2022 and average daily rates projected to rise almost 2 percent, to a record \$278 per night, according to [AirDNA](#), which tracks Airbnb and Vrbo performance. With more rental units [flooding the market](#) — AirDNA's 2023 outlook forecast a record supply of 1.4 million listings in the United States and a 9 percent increase in nights listed from last year — there are bound to be a few scam rentals, experts warn.

"Scammers know you're looking for a great location that's available and affordable," says Phil Foxall, owner of [TNP Vacations](#) and a 27-year law enforcement veteran. "They're preying on your emotions to con you into stealing your money — and your vacation memories."

I know a thing or two about vacation rental scams; fraudulent rentals keep me busy as a consumer advocate. But I've also been living in vacation rentals almost full-time for the past five years. I've stayed in all kinds of places, including a sparkling new Vrbo rental in Cape Town, South Africa, that came with daily cleaning service and an "eclectic" apartment in Athens that reeked of cigarettes. (I checked out immediately and received a full refund.) I've fortunately never fallen for a listing that didn't exist.

So how do you know whether the place you're looking into is a scam? Here's a checklist to go through before booking your next rental.

Did you fully read the listing?

Sounds obvious, right? But read *carefully*. Austin booked a "manufactured home," which can sometimes mean a trailer. The listing should have offered a clue, prompting her to ask a few questions, such as, "What kind of manufactured home?" (Answer: It's a trailer on wheels.) And, "Can you tell me about the neighborhood?" (Answer: It's in a trailer park.)

Fortunately, Austin's case had a happy ending: She disputed the charges on her credit card and received a full refund.

Do they want you to wire money?

“Be wary of properties that ask for payment via wire transfer or prepaid debit card,” warns [Michael Sheridan](#), an associate professor in Temple University’s tourism and hospitality management department.

Some vacation rental owners will ask you to skip online platforms such as Airbnb or Vrbo and make a direct payment in exchange for a lower rate. But then you’ll forfeit the protections of those platforms. Both Airbnb and Vrbo offer service guarantees if the rental isn’t what you expect. But once you send money by wire or through a service such as Zelle, it’s gone.

Is the price too good to be true?

If you find that a rental costs hundreds of dollars less than the other homes in the area, chances are it’s a scam. Ryan Dame, co-owner of [Casago vacation rentals](#), says if you see a rental that looks like a steal, you may be about to lose your money. “If the price is too good to be true,” he says, “it likely is.”

Do the photos look fake?

If the interior looks like a spread in Architectural Digest, that might be a clue.

Vacation rental owners sometimes add unnecessary photos of bathroom amenities or a wine bottle with two glasses on a table. That can be a warning sign, because they add nothing to the listing.

Also look for a clear exterior shot of the property. Bottom line, says Connor Griffiths, CEO of the Canadian vacation rental company [Lifty Life](#): “Be wary of properties that have photos that look staged or fake.”

Does the description read like a bad translation?

If your vacation rental description contains misspellings, typographical errors or bad grammar, you may be looking at a fraudulent listing, industry watchers say.

“If there are spelling or grammatical errors in communications or the lease itself, it may be a red flag,” says Craig Stevens, CEO of [Shore Term Rentals](#). Although it’s rare, listings like these may be a sign that the rental doesn’t exist.

Did you read the reviews?

Reviews by past guests are one of the best ways to prevent a scam. “Be careful of those without reviews,” says Paul Becker, owner of [Bluewater Vacation Homes](#).

That may indicate that the rental isn't what it appears, especially if the price is significantly lower than those of competing properties. If you see two or three reviews that use the same language to describe their stay ("a hidden gem!"), they might be fake.

Does your listing appear on only one platform?

It's a good sign if a listing shows up on multiple platforms, especially Airbnb and Vrbo, the two major vacation rental sites. Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace may be sketchier. You can find whether your vacation rental is listed on other platforms by checking [HiChee](#), which also shows you where to find the lowest rate.

"With vacation rentals, the most important thing is to make sure you're booking with a reputable company," says Jessica Hinton, owner of [Barefoot Vacation Rentals](#). "When booking from a large platform like Airbnb or Vrbo, there are many protections." That includes relocating you to a new rental or reimbursing you if something goes wrong.

Did you double-check the website address?

Scammers are getting more sophisticated, says [Steve Weisman](#), a professor at Bentley University and an expert on white-collar crime. One ruse involves creating a site that looks like a legitimate platform, then demanding payment by wire.

His insider tip: Find the owner's name and check online with the tax assessor's office for the city. "See if the name matches that of the person you are dealing with," he says.

What if your rental isn't what you expected?

If you check into a vacation rental that doesn't meet your expectations, you have options. First, notify the host immediately that you have a problem and try to resolve the issue. If your host won't help you, remember that both Vrbo and Airbnb have published guarantees that your rental will be as described.

Vrbo's [Book With Confidence Guarantee](#) says that if the property is "materially misrepresented" in the listing, it will help you book a new reservation. Austin, the traveler who checked into a trailer, could have invoked the guarantee.

Airbnb's [rebooking and refund policy](#) says if the listing contains a "material inaccuracy," such as an incorrect home type or the wrong number of rooms, it will assist with rebooking a reservation.

Travel insurance generally doesn't cover a material misrepresentation, but as a last resort, you can dispute your credit card charges. Under the [Fair Credit Billing Act](#), you're protected for goods and services that you didn't accept and that were not as described in your agreement.