

SPOTLIGHT: VACATION RENTAL SCAMS

DON'T GET CAUGHT WITHOUT A PLACE TO STAY



Planning a vacation? Short-term rentals can be a great alternative to getting a hotel; you can get all the comforts of home while visiting a new place. There are plenty of companies that offer vacation rentals and scammers want to take advantage of your need of a place to stay and a good deal. The SC Department of Consumer Affairs (SCDCA) urges consumers to exercise caution in their search for a place to stay!

The scam goes something like this:

You find a great house with all the bells and whistles for half the price! This deal is too good to pass up, so you e-mail the owner. All you have to do is put down a deposit and the house is yours. But before you know you've been duped, the scammer has your deposit and is headed for a dream vacation of his own!

Here are some tips to avoid the crooks:

- 1 Look up the owner.** You can seek out the real owner and their contact information by looking up the property on the Register of Deeds website. Be sure you are looking in the county in which the house is located.
- 2 Talk to the person.** Don't just rely on e-mail for communication. Be sure that you talk to the person on the phone. If they are unable or unwilling to do so, it could be a scam.
- 3 Be suspicious.** Does the owner have a free e-mail service rather than one that indicates they are an established business?
- 4 Ask for references.** Request that the owner give you references from other tenants. What was their experience with the transaction?
- 5 Pay by credit card.** Don't pay via wire transfer or bank account transfer. These methods immediately put the money in the scammer's hands and also are difficult to recover. Credit cards offer more protection in the event that the listing is fraudulent.
- 6 Background the property.** Check online for duplicate listings or negative information related to the listing/owner.
- 7 Get it in writing.** It is very important to get any verbal promises in writing. Review the contract carefully before forking over any cash.

LONG-TERM RENTALS

College students and others that are planning to relocate should be cautious, too. Follow the tips above but, also, keep the following in mind:



- Tour the whole property before putting any money down.
- If the owner is truly planning to leave their home in your care, they will probably want to meet and possibly interview you. It's a red flag if the person shows no interest in you.
- Scammers may try to gain your confidence by claiming to be out of the country for mission work or stationed over seas.

For more information on protecting yourself from identity theft, visit consumer.sc.gov and click Identity Theft Resources.



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