



Republic of Namibia

Financial Intelligence Centre

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FRAUDULENT TRAVEL SCAMS

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1. Background

The Financial Intelligence Centre (FIC) has worryingly observed an increasing trend in what is commonly known as “Travel Scams”. Fraudsters use these schemes as a way of illicitly soliciting funds from members of the public through deceptive, dishonest and fraudulent means. These scams often result in huge financial losses for victims. These losses, accompanied by the potential laundering activity of such funds by perpetrators are reasons for the need to join hands and combat such activities. The FIC is sharing this publication to help contribute to such efforts.

2. How do these schemes operate?

Traveling can be very exciting, however it can get very expensive and bargains may be tempting. Fraudsters are aware of this and they offer so-called incredible or unbelievable deals or bargains that can enable persons to save on relatively costly trips. The perpetrators make use of various advertisement platforms to promote their travel packages such as social media, newspapers, telephone, unsolicited e-mail or faxes and other online networks. Below are some of the common travels scams:

2.1 Advance Payment Travel Scam

The fraudsters contact their victims using different platforms claiming that they have won a “free luxury vacation” or a “free cruise”. However, the victim is required to pay the taxes, port charges or some other fees in advance.

2.2 Flight Phishing Scam

Scammers send out fraudulent emails pretending to be from airlines or travel agencies that are designed to infect a user’s device (cellphone, tablet or computer) with malware. These emails have subject lines relating to flight confirmations. There is usually also an attachment or a link that a receiver of the communication (email/text message) needs to open or follow to supposedly view their receipt. If the receiver/user accesses or opens such link, it allows the scammer to monitor the victim’s online activities and/or steal their personal data.

2.3 Free or “Discounted” Vacation Scam

This scam involves fraudulent offers of free or discounted vacations. The potential victim receives a call/email/text message, advising that they have won a vacation or they have been awarded a credit or discount on a destination vacation. A condition of accepting that free or discounted vacation is that they immediately make bookings or certain arrangements to reserve their space or a ship or confirm vacation. The victim could be requested to provide personal information to book the vacation and a credit card number to make an advance payment or deposit to secure or guarantee the trip.

2.4 Fraudulent Rental Scam

This scam involves fraudsters posting a destination property for rent, usually online. Adverts posted by fraudsters always list a considerably lower rental cost. Once the potential victim contacts the "renter", they will be asked to provide a "deposit" on the rental to secure the booking. Once the potential victim arrives at the property, it is only then that they realize it was all a scam. The rental or property does not exist, or the condition has been misrepresented. At times the property exists but was never available for rent.

2.5 High-Pressure Booking Scam

This scam involves fraudsters contacting potential victims demanding they book for a trip/travel immediately or the deal will no longer be available. Some booking sites will promote “flash deals” that have an expiration date. Upon booking, one needs to make payments or avail personal information and it is often late when we realize that there was no deal in the first place.

2.6 Bait and Switch Bookings Scam

This scam usually involves the scammer selling to the potential victim what looks like a great accommodation, only to find that it is “unexpectedly” unavailable. The scammer will however offer a substitute accommodation however it is less impressive or for a much lesser premium than the amount initially paid.

3. How do I protect myself from these schemes?

- a. Never give out personal information or credit card information over the phone;
- b. Do not entertain travel offers which use high-pressure sales tactics and have deals that sound “too good to be true”;
- c. Do not be pressured into making uninformed decisions or commitments. Take time to consider the offers made. If need be always consult others;
- d. Be extremely suspicious of travel offers claiming that you have been selected to receive a spectacular vacation at no cost or extremely discounted rates;
- e. Seek advice from reputable travel agents and verify your arrangements before making any payments or giving personal information;
- f. If possible, ask to see the property before you pay for it. If not, verify the property exists. Verify ownership if possible;
- g. Do not use an untraceable payment system, like cash or money orders;
- h. Be cautious when it comes to email offers, especially if they are from an unknown sender or company;
- i. Do not book on a site that does not have reliable web address, such as the URL beginning with: “https://”. If there is no “s” at the end, it is not a secure site;
- j. Book for accommodations through trusted sources.
- k. Always ask for references.

4. What to do if you become a victim of a Travel Scheme?

- a. Report the fraud immediately to the FIC or the nearest police station;
- b. If you have provided the fraudsters with your bank account details, alert your bank immediately. If any, instruct the bank to stop facilitating any direct payments/deductions from your account to such schemes;
- c. Keep any written communications you have received. They may help law enforcement authorities;
- d. Be aware that you will likely be a target for other frauds as scammers often share details about their victims to such other fraudulent schemes. As such, other fraudulent schemes will reach out to you, using different identities, to enable the commitment of further frauds against you; and
- e. Beware of the **fraud recovery fraud**. This is when fraudsters target former fraud victims and claim to be law enforcement officers or lawyers from legitimate organization. They advise the victims that they can help them recover their losses, but they request a fee.

REMEMBER

Travelling is an amazing adventure, however, owing to the money involved in funding travel activities, there is an element of risk involved. Although most people you meet will be pleasant, there is always a chance that someone will be dishonest in an attempt to defraud you in some way.

Most travel scams can be avoided by simply researching on what they are offering and speaking to people with relevant knowledge before committing to any offers.