

Using a Lodging Broker Site?

Services like Airbnb, HomeAway, FlipKey, and Vrbo offer consumers an alternative to the traditional hotel experience. In most cases, these companies act as brokers for private property owners, who offer lodging, homestays, or tourism experiences. Many travelers have utilized these services and had wonderful travel experiences. However, despite the best efforts to police the online sites, the potential for scams is real. Since an informed consumer is the best defense against fraud, here are a few things consumers should do when making reservations.

1. **Verify the host.** Check the host's profile to insure they have provided a genuine government ID and that they have maintained an overall high rating from guests. Consider running a reverse image search on the host's profile picture if one is available.
2. **Reverse image search the property's photo.** Scammers will often swipe photos of properties from other sites and set up fake profiles. Be wary if you find the same property listed on different sites with different contact information for the hosts.
3. **Check the reviews.** If a listing has few or no reviews, check to see if the host has reviews for other listings. You can also ask for referrals from past tenants and even the cleaning crew.
4. **Verify the description of the location is accurate.** Once you have the physical address for the listing, do a little research to verify the area, local attractions, and amenities are as listed in the description. Try using Google Street View to view the location and its surrounding area.
5. **Know the cancellation policy.** If a host must cancel a reservation, guests are usually notified and provided a refund or an account credit. Scan the listing for cancellation alerts, which should appear whenever a host cancels a booking. Some scams involve the host notifying the guest that the property has become unavailable and asking the guest to cancel the reservation. If the guest cancels as requested, they may be subject to the cancellation policy and probably will not receive a refund.
6. **Don't book via private email or pay directly to the host.** Don't communicate with the host outside of the booking services direct messaging system, especially regarding payment. Legitimate hosts should never ask potential guests to take their business off the official site. Customer support will rely on messages sent between you and your host through their system to help resolve any issues. You may lose some of the protections offered by the booking service if you go outside their system.
7. **Book travel on a credit card.** Never wire transfer money to pay for your reservation. Credit card companies often provide travel insurance or issue a chargeback in the event you are a victim of fraud. Verify that your credit card company offers these protections.
8. **Be wary of phony links and phishing.** There may be legitimate reasons for a host to contact you via email. Be careful about providing additional identifying information and be cautious about clicking on any links. Scammers may try to steal your information or money by sending you to a website that only *looks* like the legitimate booking service's site.

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9. **Take photos and video of a property when you arrive and when you leave.** This may help prove any issues experienced at check in or refute any claims of damage while you were a guest.

When searching for lodging or booking your reservation, remember, as in most things, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Every potential guest should conduct a little research on their potential rental. A few simple checks may be all that stands between you and becoming a victim of fraud.
