



Connecticut BBB Warns Vacationers that Travel Club Memberships Don't Always Pay

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Would-Be Travelers Spending Thousands of Dollars on Travel Deals That Didn't Exist

PR9.NET June 18, 2008 - Wallingford, CT - With the skyrocketing cost of travel, consumers are increasingly susceptible to fraudulent offers from so-called "travel clubs" for special deals on vacations, and Connecticut Better Business Bureau is warning vacationers to be extremely careful if they sign-up with one of these businesses.

According to Connecticut Better Business Bureau President Paulette Hotton, "Unfortunately, many vacationers are being seduced by slick presentations by high-pressure salesmen who claim that joining a travel club will let them in on great deals that ultimately don't materialize."

In the first quarter of 2008 alone, consumers filed nearly 350 complaints with BBB about travel clubs in the U.S. Thousands of similar complaints have been filed with BBB in the last three years. All tell a story of being lured—either in person, over the phone or through the mail—to a high-pressure sales presentation with the promise of receiving free airline tickets, gas cards, or tickets to shows.

Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal has sued three companies for travel scams offering "free trips," airfare and other services to goad consumers into paying as much as \$9000 for discount travel service membership.

The lawsuit, filed on behalf of Connecticut's Department of Consumer Protection (D.C.P.) Commissioner Jerry Farrell Jr., accuses Rocky-Hill based Ultimate Travel Network, LLC, Ameri-world Group LLC, and Ted Wilkie, who was involved with both companies, of violating the Connecticut Unfair Trade Practices Act. Also named in the suit are Millenium Travel and Promotion Inc., of Orange Florida.

In a news release from the Connecticut Attorney General's office, Blumenthal characterized their sales tactics as bullying people into buying "monetary mirages—rendered worthless by concealed conditions and fees." D.C.P. Commissioner Farrell added "Ultimately there was nothing free about a trip from Ultimate Travel Network."

Travel Clubs are a "suspect industry" with BBB due to a high level of misrepresentation and dissatisfied customers. While there are many reputable travel clubs, complaints to BBB show that an alarming number of them promise discounts of up to 70% on hotels, airfare and cruises, but fail to deliver on their promises to members despite the high cost of joining.

Florida, a popular vacation destination for Connecticut residents, has several travel clubs operating in that state, including Advantage Travel LC, also doing business as Great Escapes. Central Florida BBB has received 110 complaints from consumers in 14 states, including eleven from people in Connecticut about Advantage Travel, which, according to complainants, lures people to their sales presentations over the phone and through mail solicitations with offers for "free" gasoline cards or vacations.

Complaints reveal that it is almost impossible to receive the "free" prizes. Some consumers who signed-up paid membership fees ranging from \$1,000 to \$7,000 and eventually found that the sales staff misrepresented vacation availability and the amount customers would save on travel.

Complaints to BBB reveal a pattern of problems with booking travel arrangements and evidence that the "deals" offered by travel clubs were no better—and often worse—than what customers found on their own. Complainants also state that sales presentations were extremely misleading and many felt they had been tricked into giving up their right to cancel contracts.

"Vacation clubs, special travel agent training and bargain-finder software often are not good deals because initial costs are rarely recouped by any future savings on travel costs, since the bargains and special deals don't really exist as portrayed in the sales pitches," added Hotton.

In addition to BBB, a number of state agencies nationwide are concerned over the number of complaints about travel clubs. Nearly a dozen state Attorneys General have held investigations into travel clubs. For people traveling to the Sunshine State, Florida's Consumer Services Division recently warned consumers that the number of complaints against travel clubs was on the rise after receiving 298 complaints about travel clubs in 2007—almost triple the number of the previous year.

Before signing up with a travel club, vacationers should do their research and check the company's Reliability Report with BBB at www.bbb.org to make sure that it is trustworthy.

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About Better Business Bureau Connecticut

Founded in 1912, BBB is an unbiased non-profit organization that sets and upholds high standards for fair and honest business behavior. BBB offers objective advice and a wide range of education on topics affecting marketplace trust. BBB also offers complaint and dispute resolution support for consumers and businesses. Today, 128 BBBs serve communities across the U.S. and Canada, evaluating and monitoring more than three million local and national businesses and charities. For more advice on finding companies and businesses, start your search with trust at www.bbb.org.

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