

Holidaymakers lose £7m in 'sophisticated' booking frauds

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More than 2,600 people reported being sold fake airline tickets GETTY IMAGES

British holidaymakers were duped out of more than £7 million by travel fraudsters last year.

More than 5,000 people reported falling victim to travel scams, a 14 per cent increase compared with 2017. Experts say that the real figure could be significantly higher as people are often too embarrassed or reluctant to contact the police.

The average amount lost was £1,380 per person, according to figures compiled by the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau. The police say that the scammers are using ever more sophisticated techniques to dupe travellers.

More than 2,600 people reported being sold fake airline tickets. In August, the peak month for summer holiday departures, £450,000 of losses were reported. Passengers are issued a fake "PNR", a flight booking reference, and e-tickets, only to later find that the airline has no record of their booking.

Many discover the deception only when they try to check in online, typically less than 24 hours before departure, or at the airport.

The figures were released by the Association of British Travel Agents as part of its annual holiday fraud awareness campaign. Mark Tanzer, its chief executive, said: “The cost to victims is not just financial; this crime causes very real emotional distress. Fraudsters are using increasingly sophisticated methods to target destinations and times of year when demand is high and availability limited, as they know people will be looking for good deals.

“As victims often find out just before they travel, or even in the resort, that they have been defrauded, it can then be very difficult and expensive to obtain a legitimate replacement booking, compounding the financial costs and emotional distress suffered by victims.”

More than a quarter of reports related to accommodation fraud. Fraudsters typically create fake websites or social media profiles to promote properties that they have no right to market. They cannot take card payments, so typically ask victims to pay via a bank transfer, which is not protected by the Consumer Credit Act.

Fraudsters are increasingly targeting religious trips, such as the Hajj. Last year the average loss to British Muslims was £10,000 per reported case.

Pauline Smith, head of Action Fraud, said: “There is a startling emotional impact of falling victim to holiday fraud bringing the feeling of embarrassment and disappointment to those we love, so we want to ensure that people feel better able to protect themselves.”

CASE STUDY

Libby Palmer, 48, had always wanted to stay on a houseboat in Amsterdam. She found one on a “very professional-looking” website and booked it for her birthday celebrations with friends (Ben Clatworthy writes).

Ms Palmer, from London, said: “They asked for a £500 deposit as well as the rental fee, which I thought was reasonable given it was quite cheap and I thought they wanted to protect the boat.”

Ms Palmer agreed to use a money transfer service to pay £845 to a Polish bank account. She was asked to fill out several forms and supply a copy of her passport. She believed that the payment was protected. "It all seemed very above board and professional," she said.

"After I had sent the money, they went to ground. I didn't get an email saying they had received the money and there was no receipt . . . I heard nothing more from them. I was gutted."

She was unable to make contact using the telephone number on the website.

Ms Palmer's bank said that it could not help and the money transfer service said it offered no protection against fraud.