



AIRLINE NEWS

Deals 'too good to be true': Why booking flights on third-party websites can be risky



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Key Points

Third-party booking platforms can offer great airfare deals but fewer traveler protections.

Experts recommend booking directly with your airline or a personal travel agent.

Travelers say customer service can be hard to reach at online travel agencies if something goes wrong.

"How to travel better" is a series focusing on uncomfortable or inefficient travel experiences and how the industry can do better. If you'd like to contribute to our future reporting and share your experience as a source, you can click here to fill out this quick form.

Julia Carlson's Spring trip to Cancun was supposed to be celebratory. Her son and niece were graduating from high school, and Carlson and her sister were planning the getaway with them to mark the occasion.

"We're not rich people. We saved all of our money to do this," she said.

They booked their flights and hotel through Expedia, but shortly before the trip, they got a notification from the resort that it would be closing due to COVID and was canceling their stay.

The hotel quickly refunded the charges for their rooms, but Carlson said she is still struggling to get a refund or even a credit from Expedia for her flights.

"I thought I was actually being smart going through a third party because I thought we'd be protected. In the end we lost a lot of money," she said.

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Through emails, phone calls, letters and online chats, Carlson said Expedia has given her mixed messages about what she's entitled to as a result of the cancellation and, at times, has offered her as little as \$50 in credits for future bookings on \$3,000-worth of airfare that she's already purchased.

"They're thieves, they're crooks, and they get away with it over and over again," she said.

USA TODAY previously reported on the pitfalls of booking trips through third-party booking platforms, but industry experts say there's an extra layer of complication when it comes to purchasing flights on sites like Expedia, Priceline, Orbitz and others.

Fewer protections

"Airlines and these third-party companies may not exactly be playing on a level playing field," said Kyle Potter, editor of the Thrifty Traveler website.

In general, he said, the Department of Transportation currently has stricter regulations for airlines, including a rule that allows customers to cancel tickets for a full refund within 24 hours of booking, even if they booked a nonrefundable fare.

That rule doesn't apply to websites like Expedia, sometimes called online travel agencies or OTAs.

Even when flights are canceled by the airline, which entitles passengers who booked directly with the carrier to a refund, OTAs may still only offer vouchers or credits.

Tough to travel: Why the visa process could be 'discouraging visitors' and keeping families apart

"My best guess is these third-party companies feel like the regulations as written give them more wiggle room to stick people with travel credits and vouchers rather than a refund," Potter said.

The DOT is soliciting public comment on rules that would tighten restrictions on OTAs when it comes to refunds, but for now, travelers need to be careful when they book.

"Just be aware of the small print, the terms that they may have themselves," said Nadia Henry, who goes by Sparkle professionally and founded the travel agency Travel with Sparkle.

Lackluster customer service

Flyers who book on third-party platforms also often can't contact the airline directly for customer service.

"Generally speaking, airfare policies dictate that whoever sold you the ticket is responsible for servicing the reservation. Priceline's customer care team will help customers make changes directly and advocate on their behalf if necessary," Jeremy Ellis, vice president of customer care operations at Priceline said in a statement.

An Expedia spokesperson said in an email that airlines will automatically rebook travelers if their flight is changed or canceled within 48 hours of departure, but all other itinerary alterations have to go through the OTA.

"If your travel is further out or you want to proactively make a change to your flight, you can do so by logging into your Expedia account or using the app to access your itinerary and using the self-service tools ('cancel for credit' or virtual agent)," the spokesperson said. "If those tools can't help with your request, it's time to call in and speak with an Expedia agent."

Polarizing promotion: Southwest Airlines gives out ukuleles on a flight

'The worst part ... is getting on the flight': How cruises work for plus-size passengers

Expedia's parent company, Expedia Group, owns other booking platforms, including Orbitz.

But, according to Sparkle, getting in touch with a customer service agent at one of the OTAs can be a frustrating, time-consuming process.

"I have a cousin (who) uses Priceline because he has a Priceline credit card and he had to sit on hold for two hours."

Carlson also said she found Expedia's customer service options difficult to deal with.

"I've sent letters, I've sent emails. They'll hang up on you, or they just won't respond," she said.

Potter said customer service issues are common with OTAs.

"No matter who you're booking through, you're putting your travel in the hands of a middleman," he said. "It slows everything down and adds a layer of complication that people can't really afford right now."

He added that sometimes, the lower prices OTAs advertise are a result of their lower overhead, which comes in part from thin ranks of customer service agents.

"A travel agent, a human being that you talk to on the phone when you're booking your ticket, you're paying someone for that service," Potter said. "In a lot of cases with these OTAs, you're paying for a lack of service."

Better to book directly or with a travel agent for the holidays

We're in the valley between summer and winter travel peaks right now, but as you prepare to book flights to see your family or for that winter getaway, the experts recommend going through the airline directly or using a personal travel agent.

"The advantage of booking directly with the airline is that you can reach directly the airline and they can go in and make the ticket changes yourself ... If you do it online, you have to go through the source that you booked the ticket through," Sparkle said. "Same thing with a travel advisor ... If they book it through us, we have control of it, and we're able to make any changes ourselves for the client."

Fall getaways: Amtrak has you covered for foliage spotting this autumn

Sparkle also tells her clients that they should be careful to avoid connecting at airports that get a lot of snow over the winter whenever possible, and should always purchase travel insurance in case something goes wrong.

Though, sites like Booking.com insist they offer travelers flexibility and protection on every booking.

"When requesting or making flight changes, whether voluntary or involuntary, Booking.com's customer service team for flight services is available 24/7 to support customers and advocate on their behalf," a Booking.com spokesperson said.

Booking.com's parent company, Booking Holdings, also owns other sites including Priceline and Kayak.

Potter also suggests avoiding OTAs for holiday travel.

"If there's any time when we're going to see another flareup in the disruptions like we did over the summer, it's during the holidays," he said. "If things go wrong, is it worth saving \$30 per ticket when you're putting yourself at the whim of a third-party company."

For her part, Carlson said, she's planning to book directly with airlines from now on.

"If it looks too good to be true, it most definitely is," Those low prices, you will pay for in the end no matter what."

What has been your experience booking through third-party apps?