

## How to Avoid Bogus Holiday Rental Scams – Hints and Tips

There are many websites out there purporting to carry legitimate listings and advertisements directly from a villa owner. The stated advantage of renting in this way is that it cuts out the middleman and is therefore supposed to be cheaper.

Associação Safe Communities Algarve (SCA) has become aware of alleged scams operating in respect of holiday villas in the Algarve. The scams involve the victims arriving to find that the villa in question does not exist. It is important therefore that people are aware of the pitfalls and how to avoid these. Luckily there is excellent advice available on Blake Laphorn Solicitors website [www.blcliams.co.uk](http://www.blcliams.co.uk) and SCA is indebted to Lauren Hass a solicitor, the author of the advice for giving permission to SCA to publish this in full. SCA wants to take this opportunity to make all consumers aware of the pitfalls that can be encountered in booking rental accommodation through the internet.

This kind of scam seems to be happening more and more, and especially so in the run-up to peak holiday seasons such as Christmas, Easter or the summer. There is nothing worse than looking forward to a holiday in the sun and subsequently finding out that you have become a victim of a scam. Advice to reduce the risk of this happening to you is as follows:

1. Ensure the website is a legitimate entity. Just googling the name of the website with the words "complaint" next to it can produce some interesting results.
2. Legitimate holiday rental websites are not generally liable for any financial losses you have suffered as a result of falling victim to a scam, even if the criminal has used the site fraudulently. They simply provide a service for advertising holiday accommodation, and are under no obligation to carry out security checks to verify whether advertisers genuinely have holiday property available. In high profile incidences where a lot of victims have fallen prey to the same bogus rental owner, a few holiday websites have been known to provide some compensation. However, there is no statute or regulation which makes them legally responsible so you are reliant on the website's goodwill.
3. Some legitimate web sites have now reacted by offering insurance against bogus advertisers. Think about protecting yourself. If you are paying £6,000 for a holiday villa by bank transfer, would an insurance policy with fraud protection give you the peace of mind needed? Make sure you read the terms and conditions of the insurance policy, some have certain measures which you need to have done before they will pay out.
4. Bogus listings often copy and paste genuine accommodation details using different photographs of the villa. Use common sense. If the listing advertises an amazing price for a 16-room chateau in France, it may well be a scam. If it sounds too good to be true, it usual is!

5. A con man is likely to ask for the price of the rental upfront and also ask you to send it by bank transfer to a foreign bank account. If the IBAN has any other suffix than "GB", consider whether there are any alarm bells ringing. Once monies have been sent to such an account, professional scammers will generally withdraw the monies within 24 hours and it is almost impossible to get your monies back. That's if the name given to you by the purported villa owner is actually legitimate.
6. If you are ever asked to send monies by Western Union or telegraph transfer, be very suspicious. These payment methods are notorious for being abused by foreign criminal gangs as there is no consumer protection whatsoever. Once the monies have been sent, anyone can collect them from a Western Union office with minimal ID. **I have had several cases where obviously false passports have been used for collection from an office in London - the purported villa owner was allegedly resident in Portugal!**
7. If the rental agreement or rental contract seems in any way suspicious, then listen to your instincts. A lot of scammers seem to use US templates and the contract will talk about "attorneys" and "escrow" or mention "Barristers". Barristers will not become involved in contract drafting such as your holiday agreement and "attorneys" are US lawyers.
8. The website [www.ownersdirect.co.uk](http://www.ownersdirect.co.uk) has a Security Centre: read their tips here
9. If you want enhanced consumer protection, consider booking with members of ABTA or ATOL. You can check their websites in order to ensure the purported member is actually an official member.
10. If you are suspicious, consider obtaining the villa owner's contact details or even asking for a utility bill of the rental property. Ring the number given by the villa owner, if it is a mobile consider asking for a landline and check the prefix is correct for the country the villa owner purportedly resides in.
11. If you can, pay by UK credit card. As long as the sum you pay is over £100, you will have the protection of section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act 1974. Do not rely on Paypal buyer protection. Holidays are deemed as intangible, so they are not in fact covered by PayPal Buyer Protection.

If you keep the above in mind and retain your healthy scepticism, you should hopefully avoid any scams. If you are in some doubt, check your home or travel insurance - if you have added legal expenses protection with these insurance policies they may also offer you legal advice hotlines who can advise you further in relation to your concerns.

Additionally SCA advises people to check such websites carefully. Is there sufficient information concerning the company; registration details; testimonials; details of the company owner or key staff; back ground and history; credible contact details (don't forget a simple gmail or hotmail address can be anyone).

**SCA acknowledges with thanks Blake Laphorn [www.blclaims.co.uk](http://www.blclaims.co.uk) for sharing this important information.**

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