

DON'T BE A VICTIM OF A VACATION RENTAL SCAM

Vacation rental scams are not new and these scams are big business for criminals all around the world. As you consider issues like size, cost and location, also consider that rental listing could be a scam. Not only are vacation rentals usually high-ticket items, but they are also intangible (no physical item to send or collect), and booking can happen fast, instantly even.

Imagine showing up to a vacation rental, only to realize that it doesn't exist, or that there is already another legitimate reservation of another family at the home, leaving you and your family with no place to stay and most likely out hundreds and even thousands of dollars.

Some fake listings are elaborate and often are stolen or hijacked from legitimate real estate or rental listings. These crimes often go unreported, as some guests are embarrassed, oftentimes due to the obvious but ignored signs. Most guests are rightfully upset and report to local authorities, but due to the majority of these crimes being international, they are almost impossible to trace and even harder to prosecute.

Ryson Recommends the Following:

Book with a local property manager. If guests have any questions about the photos, description, amenities, floor plan/layout, community of the home, view, distance and how to access the beach, places to eat and things to do, our team lives in the area and we have been to our homes. We have been to many of the best places to eat and all the fun things to do on Galveston Island. We can help you find the perfect home, the closest grocery store, best restaurants, favorite attractions and help you live like a local.

Ask a lot of questions, and ideally, speak with the host. Ask questions that aren't directly related to the property. See what they know about the area. Ask about local attractions, events, restaurants, grocery stores, weather, city ordinances, history or anything that comes to mind. If their responses don't jive with easily verifiable information, run.

Be mindful of the payment type requested – typically Western Union, MoneyGram, cash, check, certified check, cashier's check, Venmo, Zelle, CashApp, Green Dot, iTunes, Amazon, any pre-paid gift card or the most popular for scammers, wire-transfer. These payment types are typically irreversible and hard to trace. Scammers move the funds to another bank account almost immediately, close the first account and vanish with your money. Even if a scam, you will most likely never see that money again. Use a credit card whenever possible to make your payment. Credit cards provide some payment protection for their users.

Craigslist seems to see its fair share of these listings. Craigslist is not the only site with fraudulent activity, and not all Craigslist listings are fraudulent. However, because anyone can create a listing and there is absolutely no protection for guests, scammers are drawn to this site. Extra caution is highly advised to verify the validity of property listings advertised on Craigslist.

Craigslist offers the following advice:

- Never give out financial info (bank account, social security, PayPal account, etc).
- Never wire funds – anyone who asks you to is a scammer.
- Refuse background/credit checks until you have met the host or landlord.

Search the internet for the property name with the city and state the property is located, and search again by the property address. It is possible the property has been listed on multiple channels. Check out the provided search results, and see if any of them are of the same property. If so, do these

listings appear to have the same host? If not listed by the same host, reach out to the host listed in the search results. They may be able to provide helpful information in making your decision.

Enter the property address in Google Maps. Use the “street view” function; does the exterior appear to be the same property? If you know someone who lives near the area, ask them to check out the property for you.

Verify the photos listed and perform a reverse image search on Google – or in Google Chrome, right-click the photo and select “Search Google for this image.” Scroll down to “Pages that include matching images,” for other website listings that include a similar image. Often these search results will include other vacation rental channels and hopefully the property manager for your listing. If you notice any discrepancies, or if you find the same description or photos posted by two different hosts, think twice about renting the property.

Review that the URL is exactly as it should be. Scammers have been pretty creative and created sites that appear to be legitimate well-known brands, but the URL is off by a single character or has an added word. Review the known URL for that brand and look for differences.

Carefully review all information provided in search results. Do the bedroom and bathroom counts and description of the home match?

Run a reverse search of the host’s phone number. Does this information match up with the host? A fake listing may use the name of the actual host, but will list an alternate email and phone number; possibly even with a local area code, but typically calls are forwarded out of the country.

Verify the owner or property manager. If the home is privately owned, check out the local public property tax records available online. Does the owner match these records? If the property is professionally managed, review their business; do they have an online presence (direct website, social media, Better Business Bureau, Google Business listing in good standing, an industry association member). You can also call the local tourism office or Convention and Visitors Bureau and ask if the property manager is known to them.

The scammer may say they are out of the country, out of state, out of the local area or moving, but they will get you the keys and get you checked in. They may say they have a lawyer or an agent working on their behalf, and may even send you fake keys.

Does the listing description and communications by the host demonstrate a good grasp of spelling, capitalization, punctuation and general grammar? Pay attention to the Rental Agreement. Some scammers may be pretty good about this by now, but if anything seems off or illegal, be wary, very wary.

If something seems too good to be true, it most likely is. We cannot stress this enough – if the cost for the property is a lot less than the other properties in the area, it is a bad sign. Trust your gut on this.

If you come across any of these types of ads, the Federal Trade Commission wants to hear about it – report fraudulent or suspected listings, whether you lost money or not, at [ftc.gov/complaint](https://www.ftc.gov/complaint).

If you sent money to a rental scammer, contact the company you used to send the money, and tell them the transaction was fraudulent. They may not be able to get your money back, but it is important to alert them of fraud.

(sourced and copied from the <https://www.galvestontxbeachrental.com/blog/vacation-rental-scams/> website)