

## Travellers beware

Vacationers booking package tours for winter-escape holidays should make sure they know the full price of the trip before signing up.

"Add-ons to the advertised price of a trip can include mandatory meal plans, extra fees for the use of hotel facilities and service charges, just to name a few examples," says Hal Burns, travel registrar at the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations (MCCR).

Burns cautions consumers to be aware there may be a substantial difference between the price the buyer sees in an ad and the final cost that appears on the travel contract.

"The great majority of travel agents try to ensure the price they advertise is the before-tax price consumers will eventually pay," he says. "But there are exceptions."

Consumer Ministry staff recently looked into several cases of excessive add-ons to packages. In some instances "mandatory options" brought the lowest available price up to double the advertised rate.

Burns says, even with the best intentions, agents can't prevent travel prices from rising this year.

Current increases in fuel prices will affect more than just air fares. For example, many tropical resort hotels use diesel-fueled generators to power restaurants, laundries, air conditioners, and pool-filtration systems. They are necessary because local public utilities can't cope with hotels' power demands in many areas.

But when the fuel price increases, the extra cost of running private power systems can zap vacationers' hotel bills. Added to the increased cost of transporting food and other goods, the rise in the price of your room could be substantial.

But, once a contract has been signed with an Ontario registered travel agent, provincial law protects consumers from getting a shock when they pay the final tab.

"Under the Travel Industry Act, if the price of the holiday increases by more than seven per cent, for any reason except changes in government taxes, consumers have the option of cancelling the trip with a full refund, or, if available, accepting comparable alternate travel services," explains Burns.

A little knowledge about the act can help consumers any time, but in the current economic climate, experts consider it a necessity.

"With money tight and prices on the rise," says Burns, "consumers should make doubly sure they're aware of the price-increase protection offered by this law."

In addition to providing pricing protection, the Travel Industry Act makes agents responsible for any substantial changes to services offered in your package.

To make sure your holiday is protected by the Travel Industry Act, deal only with an Ontario registered agency. Consumers should look for an MCCR certificate hanging on the office wall.

Buying from a registered agent insures Ontario vacationers against another problem - the bankruptcy of a travel agency or wholesaler.

The Travel Industry Compensation Fund can return up to \$3,500 per individual claim for travel services paid for but not received. The industry-sponsored fund, supervised by a board of trustees, only returns money lost due to a bankruptcy or insolvency. Quality complaints are not considered.

For help planning your next vacation, request a free copy of the brochure Travel Tips, by writing to MCCR's Consumer Information Centre, 555 Yonge St., Toronto, Ontario, M7A 2H6.

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