

Consumer Alert



A publication by the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs



Warmer Weather Invites Travel Abroad, Scams at Home

Spring has sprung. Summer is close on its heels. And while Palmetto residents enjoy more balmy, bright, even blisteringly beautiful days than our northern neighbors, many still need to get away...to travel.

As you daydream, travel agents stand on-call to plan your perfect vacation. Many offer great deals on lodging, food, airfare, and entertainment packages and can often provide flexible dates and travel options.

Just the same, many clubs resort to high-pressure sales tactics and gimmicks with much less than your best interest at heart.

While travel may be down compared to previous years when the economy was more spirited, the Research and

Innovation Technology Administration still recorded nearly 765,000 airline passengers last year. To bring it home, here are some facts about South Carolina travel and leisure from the South Carolina Department of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism (SCPRT).

According to the SCPRT, the average size for a traveling party to South Carolina is just two people. Over a quarter of South Carolina trips include children. Most visitors stay close to three nights per visit and spend an average of \$634 per group. The overwhelming majority - 86% - of folks drive themselves with just 8% coming by plane.

Furthermore, nearly 80% of visitors to the Palmetto state are here for personal reasons -- whether it's visiting friends and relatives, sightseeing, or just enjoying some sun and sand.



And when it comes to the perfect time to travel, the evidence suggests spring and summer are the favorite seasons. The months of March through August garner roughly 60% of visitors annually.

With so many seasonal visitors, it's no wonder the travel clubs are trying to encourage the use of timeshare destinations. But many consumers just don't bite on the offer. Roughly 1,250,000 visitors stay in condos or times shares when they visit South Carolina. Compared to the estimated 8,750,000 lodging needs each year,

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The warm weather invites many consumers to visit their local swimming pool. New federal regulations help to ensure it's not just a fun swimming season, but a safe one. Read more.

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School May Be Ending...But The Hunt Has Just Begun

As the high school graduation season arrives, parents and students alike are excited about new beginnings. This time of accomplishment and joy should not be short lived, so congratulations to all expected graduates! As the summer approaches, it is important to start applying for financial aid; however, please be cautious. The South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs is warning all parents and students to watch out for fraudulent loans, grants and scholarships. Many are made available for the aid in college tuition through agencies, websites, and anywhere else that will attempt to lure prospective students and parents to apply. Having a proper knowledge of the types of loans, grants, and scholarships that are legit and knowing how to spot the rip-offs and scams will be essential in the process of starting college.

Loan, Grant & Scholarship Scams:

Scam artists pose as scholarship representatives and offer to complete application forms. Some charge for information that can be obtained for free. They may also guarantee financial aid or request financial information to confirm a scholarship or grant. Another likely indicator of a scam is guaranteed approval of a scholarship or grant.

In contrast, legitimate scholarships and grants require the applicant to complete all paperwork and never require bank account or credit card information. Legitimate scholarship services provide scholarship information for free, but do not guarantee which students will be awarded scholarships.

RED FLAGS include scholarships or representatives that...

- Request credit card numbers or bank account information
- Claim that a company can offer “exclusive” information
- Promise cash for an upfront payment or registration fee
- Offer a lower interest rate in advance for a fee
- Claim the company will convert a loan into a grant for free

Prevention: What You Can Do

- Identify if the information is FREE elsewhere
- Do NOT send personal information via e-mail
- Do NOT use personal information as your username or password
- Do NOT pay for a service before receiving it
- READ all terms and conditions carefully



**Don't be too quick to sign on the dotted line.
Make sure the scholarship or student aid
opportunity is legitimate.**

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Department Honored at BBB Torch Awards

The Better Business Bureau (BBB) of Central South Carolina and Charleston's annual Torch Awards, which was recently held at Seawell's in Columbia on March 25, 2010, honored businesses who demonstrated outstanding customer service during 2009. Among the organizations honored was the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs (SCDCA).

President Jim Camp presented the Department with the award for its continued partnership with South Carolina Better Business Bureau chapters. SCDCA was commended for outstanding efforts to protect consumers in the marketplace while assisting businesses in developing and maintaining positive relationships with their clients. "The BBB is pleased to salute Brandolyn Pinkston and the SC Department of Consumer Affairs for their tireless efforts on behalf of SC consumers. The BBB is very appreciative of the strong working relationship we have developed between BBB and SCDCA," said South Carolina BBB President Jim Camp.

Death Threat Accompanies Scam Call

Phone scams, as described below, continue to annoy and aggravate South Carolinians. But a recent scam report goes much beyond that and carries with it a rude reminder. After receiving a call from someone claiming to be their grandson, an older couple in the low country identified the caller to be nothing more than a scammer out for a few hundred bucks.

When the husband refused to pay the demanded money to bail their son out of jail (his declared location and the reason for the call), the scammers got ugly...and violent. The husband said he became very concerned when the scammer issued a death threat and promised to do a number of other violent and abusive acts against his wife. The couple became increasingly alarmed when the caller used information that only a close friend or relative would know. The couple filed a police report and were able through help from SCDCA to get media coverage of their story in an attempt to shame the scammer from any further phone calls.

This story, however, is an all too vivid reminder that frustrated scammers can turn from deceptive to dangerous if they feel a consumer might respond to increased pressure or threats. SCDCA urges consumers that identify a scammer not to match any increase in volume or threatening language, but rather to simply hang up immediately.

Phone Scams Continue to Plague Palmetto Residents

The Internet has become a method used to gather vast amounts of information and communicate simultaneously; however, there are people who use this method to gain access to consumers' names, phone numbers, and addresses. Scams are prominent throughout the Internet, mail, and telephone; nevertheless, it is easier to read a document on the Internet or from the mail, and simply throw it away knowing it is a scam or labeling it as trash. It is more difficult, though, when a scammer calls a consumer's home to verbally persuade them. Recently there have been several new telephone scams pertaining to health care. Someone may call stating they need to update your Medicare benefits because of governmental changes. They may even claim to be a government official. They will request personal information to verify your identity. Another prominent telephone scam claims to represent the Obama Housing Stabilization Plan, which does not exist. The caller, claiming to be from Expert Financial Service (1.800.557.5144), will ask a series of questions and request \$1200 in application fees in exchange for a lower interest rate on the consumer's current mortgage. Some scams use valid information to manipulate consumers into sending or wiring money to their account. The scammer will use a valid name of a close relative, stating he or she is in jail in another country and needs you to wire a certain amount of money for their release. These are only a few of the many telephone scams that are currently circulating the state. Under no circumstances should a consumer send money upfront or to an unsolicited source.



Best policy when it comes to phone scams: hang up!

National Consumer Protection Week Activities Huge Success

Throughout the second week of March the Department of Consumer Affairs partnered with agencies, businesses, and organizations to provide consumers with the information to become financially literate and knowledgeable. Shred Days are always popular and an efficient

method to protect yourself from Identity Theft. This year there were three shred locations Aiken, Columbia, and Charleston. Shredding was performed onsite by Shred 360, which shredded approximately 60,000 pounds of paper.



The Department also hosted a 30-minute webinar on the Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility, and Disclosure Act (CARD Act) designed for the General Assembly, but open to the public.

Financial Toolkits consisting of brochures on debt, credit, lending, and identity theft, as well as a DVD, provided consumers with updated information on how to become financially literate and responsible. The Financial Toolkits were distributed at the Shred Day locations, the State House, and mailed to consumers at request.



Months prior to National Consumer Protection Week the Department held an essay competition entitled, "If I Had \$100..." for fifth and sixth graders. The purpose of the essay competition was to encourage students to be thinking about fiscal responsibility and money matters. The Department was enthused at the 600 entries and chose five students as the winners. During Consumer Protection Week the five winners were recognized at the South Carolina Capital Rotunda on the Statehouse grounds. Each winner received a \$100 savings bond, courtesy of the South Carolina Bankers' Association. Senate and House members from the student's districts were in attendance and representing the Direct Selling Education Foundation (Washington, D.C.) was Dr. Eunice Dudley, co-founder and CEO Dudley Products of Greensboro, NC. Although National Consumer Protection Week is just one week out of the year. The Department of Consumer Affairs works avidly all year to help protect and inform the consumers of South Carolina. NCPA activities reflect the Department's year-round endeavors.



Pool Update: New Regs Provide Peace of Mind

As the summer months approach, beach trips and swimming pool outings will be the norm. This should be a time of play and laughter as long as safety is priority number one. There are precautionary measures that everyone should take if they plan to be in the water this summer. Pool owners, public and private, should also be aware of all requirements to keep their pool up to compliance.

Parents please be aware and responsible during these summer months, many safety measures can and should be taken to avoid any accidents.

- Supervise children at all times in and around water.
- Install barriers around pools.
- Install alarms on doors leading to pools.
- Provide safety covers for drains and the pool itself.
- Know how to swim, and teach other friends and family.
- Get water rescue, first aid, and CPR training.
- Keep a first aid kit around pools and on beach trips.
- Keep a phone at the pool .

For all pool owners, whether managing a backyard pool or a public pool, there are requirements that must be met. One main focus is the pools drains and drain covers. Covers are to display (per ASME standard):

- Use - single or multiple
- Flow rate GPM
- “Life” (number of years)
- Wall and/or floor mount
- Manufacturers name
- Model number



Pool fun
begins with
pool safety!

Drain covers made during the summer of 2008 used the ASME symbol and/or the “ASME/ANSI A112.19.8-2007” mark. Since November 12, 2008, newly made drain covers should have the “VGB 2008” marking. The drain cover manufacturer should provide a certification document with each drain cover stating that it complies with the requirements of the Pool & Spa Safety (P&SS) Act. If there is no mark or clarity regarding a cover’s certification, contact the manufacturer and ask for a copy of the certificate. Also keep a record of where and when the cover was purchased. All drain covers must be compliant with the ASME/ANSI A112.19.8-2007 standard. If covers are field fabricated, a Registered Design Professional or a licensed professional engineer (PE) can specify that pre-existing grate(s) meet the ASME/ANSI A112.19.8-2007 standard.

So remember as the summer approaches make safety preparations and regulations a top priority among your household. When it comes to community swimming, pool owners should make sure all requirements have been fulfilled that will not only comply with the law, but will also provide families greater peace of mind as their little ones make a splash this season.

Scholarships continued...

Parents and Students: Please exercise significant caution during this celebrated time and be mindful of the scams, fraudulent acts, and rip offs that are looming about on the Internet. One website – www.FASFA.org – provides a safe and simple way to apply for federal and financial aid. For more information, contact the Department of Consumer Affairs at 803.734.4200 or toll-free in South Carolina at 800.922.1594 or visit us at www.sconsumer.gov.

Travel Clubs continued...

time shares clearly are not the preferred option for Palmetto state visitors.

But don't be fooled. Travel clubs still manage a sizable profit margin, even during rough economic times. Why? Because they offer no-hassle, convenient deals for consumers that want to travel but do not want the time commitment required to plan a trip.

Many times, however, this convenience comes with a hefty price tag. So, before you sign a travel club contract or a timeshare agreement, consider the following with a significant amount of caution.

Don't be fooled by free plane tickets, loaded gas cards, and other gimmicks. Don't pay the entire contract upfront. Make sure you have a reasonable cancellation policy. Don't sign a contract with blanks.

Remember:

You do NOT have a 3-day right to cancel if the contract was signed at the travel club's regular place of business.

Determine if annual maintenance fees or other re-occurring fees exist. Identify the locations and times that are available during any given time period.

(You don't want to end up on the slopes when you intended to be on the beach.)

Money paid upfront may not be refunded if the company goes out-of-business or bankrupt. Keep in mind that you can do much of the travel planning online at little cost and minimal inconvenience.



Recall Round-Up from CPSC

This feature in the Consumer Alert lists recently recalled items. Your retailer should have information for you, if you purchased a recalled product. If you find a recalled item still on the shelf, contact the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission immediately. For a complete list of recalled products and information, you can visit www.cpsc.gov to receive e-mail alerts.



Gund Baby Books

Hazard: The styrofoam used to fill the book binding can detach, posing a choking/aspiration hazard to infants and young children.



Agio International Gas Fire Columns

Hazard: Gas can leak from connections in the column, posing a fire hazard to consumers.



Bauer Children's Hockey Sticks

Hazard: Paint and decals on the sticks, shafts and blades contain excessive levels of lead, violating the federal lead paint standard.

Ottoman Bed Mattresses by PBTeen

Hazard: The Ottoman Bed mattresses fail to meet the mandatory federal open flame standard for mattresses, posing a fire hazard to consumers.



South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs

Established by the Consumer Protection Code in 1974, the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs represents the interest of South Carolina consumers. Our mission is to protect consumers from inequities in the marketplace through advocacy, mediation, enforcement, and education. The Department strives to be a **CREDIT** to our State: **C**ompetence **R**espect **E**quality **D**edication **I**ntegrity **T**imeliness. For more information on the SCDCA, visit www.sconsumer.gov.

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