



Release at Will

USTOA ADVISES: CHECK OUT YOUR TRAVEL COMPANY

Why Membership Matters

When it comes to making travel plans, where you start may be as important as where you're going. "People plan their trips carefully, but they don't always check out the company they are traveling with," cautions Bob Whitley, president, US Tour Operators Association. He suggests one way to determine a company's reliability is to look for membership in a professional association.

However, Whitley advises that membership criteria differs among associations, especially in the area of consumer protection. "For instance, USTOA membership standards are the most rigorous in the entire travel industry and USTOA is the ONLY travel industry organization that requires each member company to post \$1 million in order to reimburse consumer deposits if the company goes out of business."

Rigorous Membership Standards

To qualify for USTOA Active Membership, a tour operator or vacation packager must have been in that business in the U.S. for not less than three years under the same ownership or management. The company must operate tours totaling a minimum annual passenger or sales volume (7,500 passengers or \$7.5 million land volume), and supply references from 18 industry organizations. Finally, the company must participate in USTOA's Travelers Assistance Program which among other things requires posting \$1 Million bond for consumer protection.

Membership in USTOA requires Active Members adhere to a strict code of ethics. One of the most important ethical requirements is truth in advertising, which mandates that members represent truthfully and accurately all facts, conditions and demands relating to tours and travel packages. Prices must always be clearly and accurately stated, including all accommodations and services used, and any changes or substitutions must be communicated in a timely manner to the travel agent and/or client.

"While nothing is 100% infallible," says USTOA President Bob Whitley, "as an organization, we have set the strictest financial requirements in the industry to ensure and demonstrate a high degree of stability and solvency for our members and consumer protection for our customers. This ensures that when travelers choose a USTOA member, they are selecting a company they can trust."

USTOA'S Travelers Assistance Program:
Protecting Your Cash & Peace of Mind

Protecting consumers has always been in the forefront of USTOA's goals. As a cornerstone, USTOA's Travelers Assistance Program requires each Active member to post a \$1 million bond with USTOA in case of bankruptcy or other insolvency. The bond is just one part of an overall effort to help consumers in case of a USTOA member's insolvency. The plan also calls for USTOA to continue to inform consumers on their rights of recovery, and provide a consumer information center through its website (www.ustoa.com or www.ustoa.travel). USTOA will also ask its member companies, on a voluntary basis, to provide assistance to affected travelers in whatever way they can. This can take the form of issuing credits for future planning, providing free travel, or honoring deposits already paid. In addition, USTOA will serve as a clearinghouse of information, apprising travelers and the press of options available.

"Some of our members have also chosen to carry their own additional coverage on top of the USTOA Travelers Assistance Program," notes Whitley. Nevertheless, the plan should not be construed as a 100% guarantee," he says, adding that for maximum protection travelers should pay for their vacation with a credit card, and purchase travel insurance that covers travel supplier bankruptcy.

For more information on the USTOA Travelers Assistance Program, as well as a listing of USTOA member companies consult the USTOA web site: www.ustoa.com or www.ustoa.travel.

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Contact:

Linda Kundell

Kundell Communications

T: (212) 877-2798

F: (212) 877-3387

E: LRKPR@aol.com –or–

Kundellcom@nyc.rr.com