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Feature Article

Don't be fooled by Pictures!

'Value for money', is a cliché for some consumers. For many who spend their hard earned cash to make a living always want to get the best services or products in return for their money.

And, when taking a holiday, many consumers look for the best for their family, friends or relatives.

Apart from good food, consumers look for cleanness, proper facilities in terms of bathroom, hot water, air-conditioning, bed-bug-less mattress, a bit of spa and shopping, a clean beach and serenity.

With the power of internet, most resorts, hotels, home stays and even budget accommodations are going online with their advertisements. What you see in those pretty pictures isn't always what you get. Unfortunately, there are some promotional materials either on-line or off-line that display tempting photos and slick video promotions that makes one believe they'll be soaked in luxury as soon as they step foot into the lobby.

They say 'pictures speak volume' and people believe in those pictures. Upon walking into the hotel rooms, those beautifying glimpses turn grim. They don't get exactly what they were expecting or what they were hoping for. People see worn-out rooms, faded curtains, torn bedcovers with yellowish pillow cases and leaking toilets. The rooms may be large and spacious yet with a rather unwelcoming ambience, and lounge services too slow. The breakfast spread, is not continental as promised via online pictures and promotional materials.

These photos or images posted on hotels/resorts websites are enticing and often mislead travelers. In the past years, the Consumer Council of Fiji has come across cases where consumers (particularly, the foreigners holidaying here) have expressed concern over the misleading online advertisements by some resorts/hotels.

In one case, a couple holidaying at a resort claimed they were lured into booking in a resort advertised as a 'luxury deluxe bure'.

This was certainly not a case of luxury holidaying. There was no air-conditioning and the fan did not work overnight as there was no electricity. Food was on a 'take it or leave it' basis with limited options. For breakfast, they were told that there was no bread and that they had to make their own

tea'. To make it worse, the shower was an outside cold tap with no privacy. The price quoted was in USD.

In another case, Elizabeth (a foreigner), discovered an appealing island resort on a website. She made the bookings and paid a sum of \$3,992.62 for five days. Anticipating a clean and serene environment, she was disappointed when she checked in. Her children and husband cried foul when they were greeted with some little creatures in their bathroom, unclean bed covers, broken floor tiles and unhygienic conditions in totality.

It is unfortunate that some resorts/hotels fail to provide what they display on websites.

It is advisable for consumers to also check on:

Cancellation policies: One of the most common complaints by consumers is that they didn't realize that the reservation they booked was nonrefundable until they tried to change or cancel it. This is because consumers fail to ask whether their payment will be refunded upon cancellation of booking or not. Always ensure to enquire about this; and,

Pre-signing inspection: ask to see the room before you actually sign in, there may be something you overlooked or the hotel ignored to mention. Your room might be right above the disco or undergoing renovations. If you're not happy, don't be afraid to say so.

Consumers must understand that although online booking offer convenience and low prices but it comes with a risk. Risk is even bigger when the accommodation is booked through a booking agent. It is advisable to book through a travel agency or book directly with the hotel.