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FEATURE ARTICLE

### **Making the Most out of Hospitality Services During the Festive Season**

As the festive season approaches, many Fijians are opting for online booking platforms such as Airbnb, Booking.com, and other similar services to secure their accommodation. While these platforms offer a wide range of options, including homes, apartments, and guesthouses, they also come with their own set of challenges and considerations for consumers. For Fijians choosing to book their holidays or short stays via these platforms, understanding the potential risks and benefits is crucial to ensure a satisfactory experience and to avoid common pitfalls.

This feature article serves as a consumer awareness guide, highlighting key issues in Fiji's evolving hospitality sector. Through examining real-life case studies and trends, we aim to equip locals with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions, and to understand their rights and responsibilities when it comes to booking holiday accommodation.

#### **The Shift to Online Booking Platforms**

In recent years, online booking platforms like Airbnb and Booking.com have gained immense popularity among Fijian travelers. What was once an exclusive domain for international tourists has now expanded to include local Fijians looking for more affordable, flexible, and unique accommodation options. These platforms offer everything from beachfront homes to city apartments, providing a wider variety of choices compared to traditional hotels or resorts.

While these platforms provide consumers with convenience, flexibility, and competitive pricing, they also come with a range of potential issues that could impact your travel experience. The ease of booking a stay with just a few clicks often masks some of the complexities involved in these transactions. For consumers, knowing what to expect and how to navigate these challenges is essential to avoid unpleasant surprises.

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Over the past few years, the Council has registered multiple cases against service providers for a range of reasons. Some of these issues include poor customer service, last minute booking cancellations or booking mix-up, unhygienic standards at hotels and eateries, undisclosed fees, among many others.

### **Case Study 1: Customer Complaints About Poor Service and Quality**

One recent complaint exemplifies the challenges many Fijians are now facing. A local customer, who had booked a two-night stay at a popular resort, was disappointed with the condition of the property. Issues such as poor cleanliness, a rundown pool, and unhelpful customer service were highlighted in the complainant's review. This particular guest expressed frustration with the lack of ownership from the hotel's management, which suggested canceling the \$1,600 FJD booking rather than addressing the concerns.

This situation points to an ongoing issue in the hospitality sector: the importance of maintaining high standards of service and property upkeep. Negative reviews like this can have a lasting impact on a business's reputation, and it is important for consumers to pay attention to the feedback provided by previous guests.

For consumers booking accommodations through online platforms, this is a reminder of the value of researching reviews before committing to a property. It is crucial to carefully evaluate user feedback, looking not only at ratings but also at detailed comments regarding cleanliness, communication, and the overall guest experience. In some cases, booking a home or apartment via Airbnb might offer more personalized experiences, but guests should always ensure that they are booking with reputable hosts who take the time to address customer concerns.

Besides the issues that consumers experience on arrival, there are numerous complaints around promotions and 'special offers' given by these service providers, which may entice consumers to opt for these deals, but in reality, they are not as they seem.

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## Case Study 2: The Price Match Guarantee Debacle

Another case study highlights the complications involved when booking through a traditional hotel chain. A local consumer tried to book directly with Hotel X, motivated by their advertised price match guarantee. Hotel X's promotion promised that if guests found a lower rate on a third-party site, the company would match the price and offer an additional 25% off. However, when the consumer found a lower price on a third-party site, Hotel X failed to honor the agreement. This left the customer feeling misled and frustrated.

This incident raises concerns about transparency and accountability in the hospitality sector, particularly in relation to promotional offers. While direct bookings often come with the promise of better rates, this experience shows that not all brands adhere to their own policies, leading to consumer dissatisfaction. For locals booking hotels or resorts directly, it is essential to read the fine print of promotional deals and to be aware that not all price guarantees are necessarily upheld.

For those booking through online platforms, it is also important to verify any offers or discounts through external websites and compare them with other listings. Sometimes, the rates advertised on booking platforms may not include additional fees or taxes, which can increase the total cost of a stay.

## The Importance of Understanding Your Rights

One of the most critical aspects of consumer awareness in the hospitality sector is understanding your rights. Whether you are booking through a third-party platform via the booking applications or directly with a hotel, knowing what protections you have is essential to avoid being taken advantage of.

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1. **Right to Cancel or Modify Bookings:** Different platforms and providers offer varying cancellation policies. For example, Airbnb allows hosts to set their cancellation policies, which can range from flexible (full refund) to strict (non-refundable). It is essential to read the cancellation policy before confirming a booking, especially during the high-demand festive season when last-minute changes are common.
2. **Right to a Refund:** In cases where the accommodation is subpar or significantly different from the listing, you are entitled to a refund or a resolution, depending on the platform's policy. For example, if you find that a property is misrepresented (e.g., not as clean, or not as described), you can file a complaint through platforms like Airbnb and request a refund or alternative accommodation. However, this process can sometimes take time, so it is vital to document any issues during your stay (e.g., photographs, written communication with the host).
3. **Consumer Council and Mediation Services:** In the case of unresolved disputes, the Consumer Council of Fiji can step in to mediate between consumers and businesses. Consumers who experience poor service, misleading advertising, or failure to honor agreements can file complaints with the Council, which works to ensure that businesses adhere to local consumer protection laws.
4. **Checking Reviews and Property Details:** One of the best ways to ensure that your booking meets your expectations is to thoroughly review the property's listing on platforms like Airbnb or Booking.com. Look beyond the star rating—pay attention to specific complaints or praises left by past guests. This can help you avoid unpleasant surprises and make a more informed decision.

## The Growing Role of Consumer Reviews

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Consumer Council of Fiji



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Mobile App

As more Fijians turn to online booking platforms, the importance of consumer reviews continues to grow. These reviews can be a double-edged sword for consumers. On one hand, they offer invaluable insights into a property's quality, cleanliness, service standards, and overall guest experience. On the other hand, they can be misleading if not read critically, as reviews can sometimes be biased or influenced by factors like personal expectations or isolated incidents.

Consumers should consider not only the average rating but also the trend of reviews. If most recent reviews highlight the same issues—such as cleanliness problems, poor customer service, or misrepresentation of amenities—it may be a red flag. Conversely, properties with consistently high ratings and detailed positive feedback tend to be more reliable.

## Conclusion

As Fiji's hospitality landscape evolves and more locals turn to online booking platforms like Airbnb and Booking.com, consumer awareness has never been more important. While these platforms provide an array of accommodation options at competitive prices, they also come with risks that require careful consideration.

Fijian consumers should educate themselves about their rights, including cancellation policies, refund guarantees, and the ability to escalate complaints to consumer protection agencies when necessary. Additionally, thoroughly researching properties, reading reviews, and understanding the terms and conditions of bookings are essential practices for avoiding dissatisfaction and ensuring a positive holiday experience.

By taking these precautions, Fijians can make the most of the expanding choices in the hospitality market, while ensuring that their festive season stays are enjoyable, stress-free, and within their budget. For any complaints and queries, reach out to the Council on our National Toll-free Line 155.

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