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Feature Article

What Consumers Need to Know About OTA Cancellations

Online Travel Agents (OTAs) such as Booking.com, Expedia and Agoda have transformed the way consumers book holidays and accommodation. With just a few clicks, travellers can compare prices, view reviews, and secure accommodation months in advance. While these platforms offer convenience and competitive pricing, disputes can arise when cancellation policies are unclear or misunderstood.

The Consumer Council of Fiji continues to receive complaints from consumers who encounter difficulties when changing or cancelling bookings made through OTAs. One recent case demonstrates how confusion over cancellation terms can quickly escalate into a costly dispute.

Case Study: A Booking Dispute That Escalated at a Resort

A traveller booked two rooms at a resort in Fiji through Booking.com several months before his trip. A few days before arriving in Fiji, he realised he only needed one room and amended the booking through the OTA platform. However, upon arrival at the resort, he was informed by the hotel owner that he would still be required to pay approximately \$4,300 for the second room.

The resort argued that it had relied on the original booking and may have lost the opportunity to sell the room to other guests during a busy period. The consumer, however, believed he should not be charged for accommodation he neither used nor intended to occupy.

This dispute raises important questions about consumer rights, business responsibilities, and the role OTAs play in managing accommodation bookings.

Cancellation Policies Must Be Transparent

At the heart of many OTA disputes is the issue of cancellation policies. Consumers often assume that changing or cancelling a booking online automatically releases them from any financial obligation. However, this depends entirely on the booking conditions agreed to at the time of purchase.

Some accommodation providers offer fully flexible bookings, while others provide discounted rates under strict non-refundable conditions. In many cases, consumers may not fully

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understand the differences because the terms are buried in lengthy conditions or displayed in unclear language.

This is why transparency is critical.

Consumers must be clearly informed whether a booking is refundable, partially refundable, or completely non-refundable before payment is made. Important details such as cancellation deadlines, amendment fees, deposits, and penalties should be prominently displayed and easy to understand.

Hotels/Resorts Responsibilities

Businesses have a responsibility to ensure their cancellation policies are reasonable and properly communicated through the OTA platform. If a hotel or resort intends to charge consumers for late cancellations or unused rooms, this should be supported by a clearly stated agreement accepted by the consumer at the time of booking.

In the case brought to the Council, the dispute appeared to stem from uncertainty over whether the second room was genuinely non-refundable and whether the consumer had been adequately informed about the financial consequences of changing the booking.

The Council's position is that consumers should not automatically be held liable for excessive charges where cancellation arrangements and penalties are unclear. At the same time, accommodation providers are entitled to protect themselves against genuine financial loss caused by late cancellations, particularly during peak travel seasons.

This is where proper arrangements between hotels and OTAs become essential.

If a resort wishes to secure its revenue, it should establish clear booking conditions with the OTA platform from the outset. For example, the accommodation provider may require a deposit that becomes non-refundable after a specified number of days before check-in. Such policies must be transparently reflected on the OTA listing so consumers can make informed decisions before booking.

What Consumers Need to Know

OTAs act as intermediaries between consumers and accommodation providers. While they facilitate the booking process, they also play a significant role in ensuring accurate information

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is displayed. Consumers should not be caught in the middle of conflicting policies between hotels and booking platforms.

Before making any reservation online, consumers are encouraged to carefully review the cancellation terms and conditions. Travellers should avoid relying solely on promotional headlines such as “free cancellation” without checking the specific deadlines and exceptions attached to the offer.

Consumers should also keep copies of booking confirmations, screenshots of advertised cancellation policies, payment receipts, and any communication with the OTA or hotel. These records can become crucial if disputes arise later.

Another important consideration is timing. Consumers who know their travel plans may change should consider choosing flexible booking options, even if the initial room rate is slightly higher. Paying a little extra upfront may prevent significant financial loss later.

Hotels and resorts, meanwhile, should ensure staff are properly trained to manage OTA disputes professionally and consistently. Consumers arriving after long international journeys should not face confrontational demands for unexpected payments at reception desks. Such situations can damage trust and negatively impact Fiji’s tourism reputation.

Accommodation providers should also regularly review the information displayed on OTA platforms to ensure policies remain accurate and up to date. Miscommunication between hotels and OTAs can create confusion for consumers and expose businesses to complaints and reputational harm.

Conclusion

The growth of digital booking platforms has undoubtedly made travel more accessible and convenient. However, convenience should never come at the expense of transparency and fairness.

Consumers have the right to clear information, fair contract terms, and reasonable treatment when disputes arise. At the same time, consumers also have a responsibility to read booking conditions carefully and understand the commitments they are making before confirming a reservation.

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The Consumer Council of Fiji encourages both travellers and accommodation providers to prioritise clarity, communication, and fairness when using OTA platforms. Preventing disputes begins with ensuring all parties fully understand the booking terms from the very beginning.

As online travel bookings continue to increase, stronger cooperation between hotels, resorts, and OTAs will be essential in protecting both consumers and businesses from costly misunderstandings.

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