

# Crime Prevention News

To Enhance the Safety of Faculty, Staff and Students

Volume 2, Issue 1, February 2002



*Spring Break.*

## Spring Break

Attention all college students: If a spring break vacation package sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

That's the bottom-line advice Chris

DeSessa gives his students and his clients when asked whether he thinks a tour operator's price is a good deal or a rip-off.

Mr. DeSessa, who is both a professor of travel-tourism management at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, R.I., and a travel agent at Church Travel, one of New England's oldest and most reputable travel agencies, says college students are easy targets for disreputable tour operators.

### Seeking warm beach places

"Students have high hopes for an unforgettable spring break, and they yearn for warm beach destinations, like Florida and the Caribbean," Mr. DeSessa says.

"Combine that with the fact that most of them have limited budgets and very little experience in buying travel packages, and you can see why they are often the victims of spring break travel scams."

Most bogus offers are marketed two ways — through direct mail and over the telephone.

Many of the scam offers Mr. DeSessa has seen recently feature an offer of a cruise to

Nassau in the Bahamas.

"Beware of any inexpensive-sounding trip that includes a Nassau cruise," he says. "When you read the fine print, you'll see that it's really only a half-day cruise, and there are no cabins. Really, nothing more than a glorified ferry ride."

Mr. DeSessa also recalls one bogus tour operator, now defunct, that used to extract more money from the passengers after they had boarded the plane.

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*College students are often the victims of spring break travel scams.*

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"Someone from the tour company would come on board and tell everyone that they needed to pay more money, or the plane wouldn't take off," he says.

There are also several documented cases of travelers who were stranded at their destinations — the chartered flights they took never came to bring them home, forcing them to pay for expensive one-way return flights on commercial airlines.

### Awareness campaign started

The problem has become so prevalent that the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) and the National Tour Association (NTA) have launched public awareness campaigns that provide students and their parents with advice on how to avoid being victimized.

The good news is that, if you do your homework, your spring break vacation will earn high marks.



*"To Serve and Protect"*

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## Spring Break Safety Tips (cont.)

### **Consult with your local travel agent.**

A reputable travel professional can help you evaluate tour offers and compare them with packages from respected tour companies.

### **· Talk with someone who can vouch for the tour operator and the trip.**

Ask the tour operator for the names and phone numbers of other customers.

Then call and confirm that they are indeed satisfied customers. If the company balks at your request, consider it a warning.

**· Request all of the trip details in writing.** These include total cost (taxes, fees and charges, too), restrictions, cancellation penalties, and the exact names of airlines and hotels (ASTA travel agents are required to provide this information).

If the tour uses a charter flight, get the charter operator's name and address, and check its registration with the U.S. Department of Transportation, Office of Consumer Affairs, I-25, Washington, D.C. 20590.

**· Never give credit card information** over the phone to a company or person with whom you are not familiar.

**· Ask if the tour operator** belongs to a professional association, such as NTA, which offers a consumer protection plan.

**· Avoid booking a trip with a company** that sells directly through student representatives, rather than a reputable travel agent.

**· Make sure your trip has a guaranteed** departure and a guaranteed price.

### INFORMATION

· The American Society of Travel Agents publishes information on this issue as a public service through its Web site: [www.astanet.com](http://www.astanet.com). · For a free brochure, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to ASTA Brochure: Avoiding Travel Problems, 1101 King St., Suite 200, Alexandria, Va. 22314.

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*“Talk to someone who can vouch for the tour operator”*

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*While traveling you should always be aware of who you are doing business with. There are many street vendors and con-men that will take advantage of college students. For some of them this is the peak time for sales and the con-men are putting their kids through college on money they are ripping off of you! Always acclimate yourself to the area where you are visiting. Find out where local law enforcement and hospitals etc. are located. Always communicate with your fellow travelers where you are going and contact them if your plans change. ■*



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## Spring Break Safety Tips (cont.)

**Booking Your Trip:** We have all heard the horror stories! Companies book poorly planned vacations, overbook hotels and leave students stranded in airports for hours and sometimes days! Meal plans don't work, hotels are non-existent or unavailable and hidden charges pop up unexpectedly. Here's how they do it and how you can protect yourself:

**Overbooking, The Problem:** Company "XYZ" sells college spring break trips. XYZ, for example, may have a block of 50 rooms at a specific hotel. In an attempt to be sure the rooms are filled to capacity, XYZ overbooks the hotel by ten rooms to make up for last minute cancellations. At the last minute, the hotel realizes that they miscounted and the company can only have 40 rooms. When there are no cancellations, company XYZ discovers that they have overbooked by 20 rooms. That means that 80 students are without a hotel room. These students are then bumped and moved around to whichever hotels have space! Last year, one student tour company ended up having to rent buses for students to sleep in for the night! The buses were parked in a restaurant parking lot and the students were given sleeping bags.

### The Solution:

Certain hotels are known for overbooking rooms yet greedy companies continue to work with them. Ethical, legitimate businesses will not send customers to hotels that have a history of poor performance. Find a company that has been in business for at least 10 years and is familiar with the pitfalls of each individual hotel. Also, a good company will never "downgrade" your hotel category. If there is a mistake by the hotel, that causes an overbooking, they should move you to a hotel of equal quality or upgrade your accommodations at no cost **Note:** Some companies promise this but don't follow through with it! See the following excerpt from the Federal Trade Commission's "Complaint For Permanent Injunction And Other Equitable Relief" filed against Cerkenik-Anderson Travel, Inc. ("CATI"), doing business as College Tours, Student Tours and Mexico Tours

"11. Contrary to defendants' representations, in numerous instances, students who travel on CATI student vacation tours to Mexico do not receive the accommodation of their choice or accommodation at hotels of equal or better value and quality. In fact, students frequently arrive at their destination in Mexico, find that hotel rooms have not been reserved for them or have been overbooked, and are placed in accommodations of inferior, and in some cases, substandard quality, sometimes far from activities, shopping, or the beach, infested with insects or rodents, and without running water, linens, or towels. In numerous instances, the number of occupants exceeds the number of available beds.

-Complaint For Permanent Injunction And Other Equitable Relief  
-Federal Trade Commission

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## Name Changes

### The Problem:

*A hypothetical company named 'XYZ' Student Travel sells trips for Spring Break. After 5 years they have over 400 complaints to the Attorney General's Office in the state where they operate. They've been kicked out of the Better Business Bureau and lost all of their travel agent affiliations (like ASTA and IATAN). They declare bankruptcy to protect their assets and reopen under another name. They are now 'ABC Student Travel', they've been in "the business" for 12 years, they have a complaint free history and they are back selling trips!*

**\*WARNING: There could be companies selling trips on your campus today that have been, or are currently, under investigation and have re-opened under a different name.**

### The Solution:

*Ask the company how long they have been in business. Then ask how long they've been in business under their current name. Find out what state they are based in. Then ask if their offices have ever been based out of another state. Call the Better Business Bureau to confirm. The company should be able to give you their number. If they hesitate, aren't members, or refuse to give the number, **WATCH OUT!** Make sure that the info you got from the company jives with the info you get from the BBB. If a company does not belong to the BBB, ASTA & IATAN there is probably a reason! Be careful!*

## Meal Plans

### The Problem:

Company 'XYZ' advertises that you get free meals (often seven breakfasts and seven dinners) if you book your vacation with them. This is often a major selling point for the package and will cause students to overlook important factors such as reliability, dependability, and price. These meal plans have a very high perceived value and most students look for companies that offer free meals. Sales people will tell you that these are full buffets at the best restaurants and you get a different restaurant every night! What they don't tell you is that they send thousands of students to that particular destination and that all of them are trying to eat at the same restaurant that you are! That means waiting in a line for hours to eat whatever food they decided that you should eat. Here is another trick to watch out for: you are told that meals are free but you have to pay for the tip. Once you arrive at the restaurant you discover that the "tip" is mandatory and you don't get your meal until you pay the "tip". If you're lucky it's only \$1.00. So much for the "free" meal.

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Spring Break Safety Tips (cont.)

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## Meal Plans

### The solution:

Don't place a lot of emphasis on meal plans. Avoid "free" meals and never spend money on one! Find a meal plan that offers you the flexibility to decide where you want to eat and it should encompass a number of different restaurants and provide you with a discount such as "buy one, get one free".

**Remember that there are criminals just waiting for Spring Break so they can victimize college students.**

**While vacationing you should always:**

**Lock your room door.**

**Keep your valuables such as cash in the hotel safe or lockboxes.**

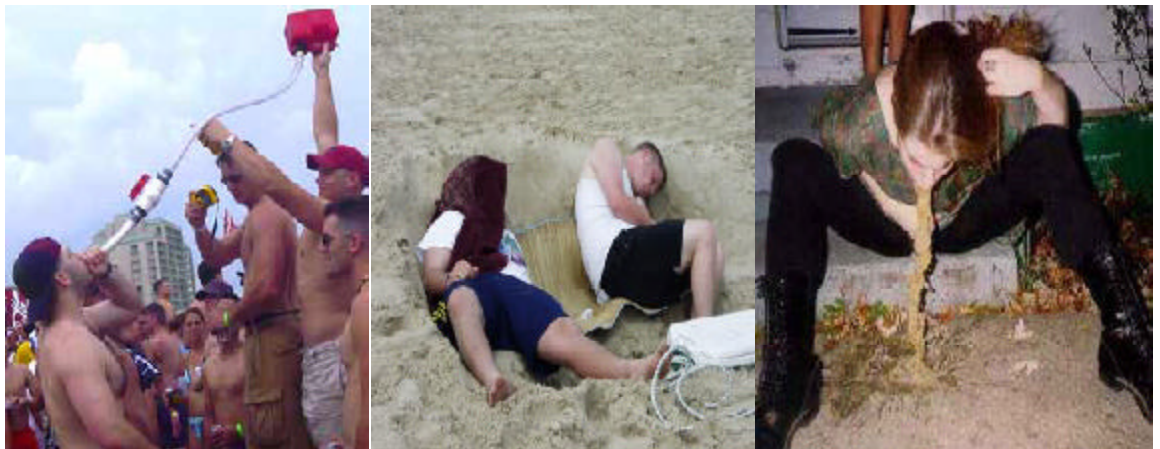
**Never accept an open drink from a stanger.**

**Watch the bartender pour your drink and hand it to you, don't be distracted by others.**

**Never accept any drug such as "Ecstasy"; it could be anything.**

**Beware of "date rape" drugs such as Rohypnol and GHB.**

**Rohypnol is still legal in Mexico and very prevalent in Texas.**



**Irresponsible drinking isn't glamorous.**