

Travel will cost you — but how much?

THE WASHINGTON POST

The quoted rate for an “amazing” three-bedroom condominium in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, looked too good to be true. The unit, which featured flat-screen TVs, beds with “lush, warm comforters,” a gourmet kitchen and a lanai overlooking Lake Pend Oreille, cost only \$1,900 for the month.

And guess what? It *was* too good to be true.

Buried in the fine print, I found a notice about a “guest service fee” of \$30 per night. “This will show up as an additional charge on all reservations,” the rental agent’s website warned me. And then another surprise came via email: “Please note that the quotes given do not include utilities.”

How much was the actual cost? After factoring in rent, housekeeping and all taxes and fees, it would have cost \$4,494 — more than double the initial rate.

The practice of quoting a low rate and then adding taxes, fees and other charges is called drip pricing. It’s a strategy most commonly associated with large hotels, with their mandatory “resort” fees, and airlines, which charge extra for luggage and seat assignments. But increasingly, other parts of the travel industry are turning to drip pricing to make an extra buck. You may be surprised where you’ll find it.

I was. The Coeur d’Alene rental fees caught me off guard. My family spends months at a time on the road, and we wanted to see Idaho in the fall. My exchanges with the rental company were polite, but frustrating. I spotted the fine-print warn-



TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT
chris@elliott.org

ings and asked for an “all-in” price. After recovering from sticker shock, I asked if they had a less expensive unit.

The response: silence.

Travelers are wired to hate this kind of pricing, says Prince Ghuman, a researcher and professor of neuromarketing at Hult International Business School in San Francisco. He says our brains set an expectation based on the initial number.

“When travel businesses show a lower price, the brain uses this number as an anchor of expectation,” he says. “When this expectation is violated with surprise fees, it hurts the business.”

Drip pricing is already illegal elsewhere. In Australia, businesses must “clearly” disclose a full price at the beginning of the online purchasing process. Consumers can report violations to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, the country’s consumer-protection and competition agency, which can lead to enforcement action. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission looked into drip pricing in 2012,

but stopped short of requiring businesses to quote an all-in price up front.

Mandatory hotel charges continue to climb. Resort fees are up 11 percent for the year, to an average of \$21 per night, according to ResortFeeChecker.com. “Las Vegas, for example, is one of the most expensive cities for resort fees,” says the site’s editor, Randy Greencorn. “The average resort fee in Las Vegas is almost \$30 per night, with many hotels charging \$45 or more.”

When it comes to pricing, timeshares are an almost constant source of complaints.

Lisa Ann Schreier, author of *Timeshare Vacations for Dummies*, says one “gotcha” is the cleaning fee, usually between \$50 and \$200.

As I write this, I’m staying in a vacation rental in Sedona, Ariz., with a nonrefundable cleaning fee of \$375 per month, which seems a little high. A monthlong rental in Fort Collins, Colo., in June didn’t have a cleaning fee, although I spent the morning of my checkout cleaning to show my

gratitude.

Also, if you’ve signed up for a promotional package offering a cheap stay, a discounted show, or cut-rate theme park tickets in exchange for your attendance at a timeshare sales pitch, make sure you go.

“If you don’t attend or fail to complete the sales pitch, you’re very likely looking at paying a very steep penalty, which in most cases will be more than what you could have booked the stay for yourself,” Schreier says.

Restaurants are playing the game, too, with mandatory tips that can raise your bill by 18 percent or more. And vacation rental sites often will show you a grand total before you book, but it’s late in the process — about the time you get to the final booking screen. Although that wait-until-the-end approach may be legal, it also feels deceptive to many travelers.

Christopher Elliott is a consumer advocate, journalist and co-founder of the advocacy group Travelers United.

Get \$300 in Value!

ON SELECT PLEASANT HOLIDAYS VACATIONS TO HAWAII, MEXICO, AND THE CARIBBEAN DURING THE EXCLUSIVE

AAA Travel Sale

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL AAA BRANCH AND YOU MAY RECEIVE:

- Limited-time special offers on a variety of other land and cruise vacations
- Exclusive Member Benefits
- AND MORE!

HURRY!
LIMITED-TIME OFFERS!

**OFFERS ARE ONLY VALID OCTOBER 1 – 20, 2018
CALL OR VISIT TODAY!**

O’ahu, Hawai’i

CALL: 888-467-4957, Press 2
CLICK: AAA.com/Travelsale
VISIT: 14 Branches in North Texas to Serve You

*The value listed is per booking and equals the total of a \$150 savings per booking¹ on select vacations plus the \$150 in activity vouchers². ¹Pleasant Tropical Days \$150 savings per booking is valid on new bookings made August 24 – October 31, 2018 for travel August 24, 2018 – June 30, 2019. Blackout dates apply December 21, 2018 – January 3, 2019. Round trip airfare from the continental U.S. and minimum 5 nights’ accommodation at a participating hotel or resort required to receive Tropical Days offer. Savings is per booking and is applied at time of booking. ²\$150 in activity vouchers are valid on new bookings made August 24 – October 31, 2018 for travel August 24, 2018 – June 30, 2019. Blackout dates apply December 21, 2018 – January 3, 2019. Round trip airfare from the continental U.S. and minimum 5 nights’ accommodation at a participating hotel or resort required to receive Tropical Days offer. For Mexico, Hawai’i and select Caribbean destinations, \$100 value in activity vouchers is combinable with standard Member Benefit activity voucher of \$50, totaling \$150 value in activity vouchers per booking maximum. Ask your AAA Travel Agent for qualifying destinations. Activity voucher does not apply to air/car only bookings. Valid toward the purchase of a select optional activity. Not valid for hotel direct activity bookings. Voucher is non-refundable, non-transferable and has no cash value.

Celebrate the Humanities with the
Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture

THE HIETT PRIZE IN THE HUMANITIES LUNCHEON

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2018
THE RITZ-CARLTON, DALLAS

Honoring Dr. Christopher J. Lebron,
Philosophy Professor and Author of
The Making of Black Lives Matter.

EVENT DETAILS AND TICKETS
AT DALLASINSTITUTE.ORG

MOUNTAIN TIME EXPO

MOUNTAIN FUN STARTS HERE

Oct 19th, Oct 20th, Oct 21st
Dallas Market Hall

Resorts, Ski/Snowboard Gear, Winter Apparel, Bikes, Travel Accessories, Mountain Property for sale, Lift Tickets. Travel Packages, Climbing Pavilion, Revolver Brewing Beer Garden, Ninja Nation Obstacle Course, BMX/Skateboard Area, the Texas film premiere of Warren Miller’s Face of Winter, presented by Volkswagen. Tickets and info at mountaintimeexpo.com.

Shop | Explore | Play | Compare | Try Out | Watch | Drink | Learn | Buy!

Whether you ski, snowboard, climb, bike or sit by the fire with a warm drink, the Mountain Time Expo has something for you.

Mountaintimeexpo.com

Get the Inside Scoop

The Dallas Morning News is introducing an exclusive Facebook group just for members. Facebook members have a special opportunity to peek behind the curtain to see the reporting process and the decisions that editors grapple with on a daily basis.

The Dallas Morning News
dallasnews.com

facebook.com/groups/dmnsusbscribers