

Let's be honest: Travelers, suppliers lie to each other

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Travelers lie. But why?

Is it because they're far away from friends and family, and bending the truth has few consequences? Or does dealing with the travel industry, which doesn't always have a firm grasp of the facts, give them a license to tell an occasional fib?

As America kicks off the busy summer travel season this Memorial Day, maybe we need to answer those questions. Because a little truth in travel on both sides of the counter could make your vacation a lot better.

Imagine a world where hotels no longer embellish their amenities and where consumers don't claim any false disabilities to take their pets on vacation as "emotional support" animals or jump to the front of a line at an amusement park.

Now, back to reality. Travelers aren't exactly shining examples of honesty, according to a recent survey. Americans ranked a dismal 23rd out of 29 nationalities polled by Hotels.com, when asked if they'd ever stolen something from a hotel room. (The most honest guests came from Denmark, Netherlands and Norway.)

And we have stories. Actually, they're more like confessions.

Jennifer Coburn, who is American, visited the Colosseum in Rome with her daughter recently. "A nice Scottish boy working there told me that if I were a member of the EU, I would get deep discounts on admission on museums and attractions throughout Italy," recalls Coburn, author of the book *We'll Always Have Paris*. "With a wink, he asked if I was any good at accents."

She was. Coburn pretended to be British for the rest of her trip, and "saved a great deal at ticket counters."

(Coburn says she dropped the accent after her husband pointed out that EU citizens' taxes fund the tourism attractions.)

Gia Fitzgerald says she "stretched" the truth about the circumstances of a breakup with her boyfriend. They'd planned to fly to Vail for a ski vacation, but only a week before Valentine's Day, she ended the romance.

"He was a great guy," she says. "But he wasn't ready to be in a relationship."

When Fitzgerald phoned United Airlines, she characterized the breakup differently. "I told them he broke up with me," she says. The agent sympathized and told her that she'd give her a full refund, even though her ticket was non-refundable.

This kind of behavior drives the travel industry crazy. They point out that lying has real consequences. Passengers who do deserve special consideration suffer when rules are tightened as a result of the abuse. But more to the point, why would customers do that kind of thing?

Maybe I can help. Travelers often tell lies because they feel as if they've been lied to. When they find a \$9 fare on a discount airline, they expect to pay \$9. When they're offered an \$89-a-night rate at a Las Vegas resort, same thing. Please, no mandatory "resort" fees. And car rentals – oh, don't even get me started on those. Once you add fees, surcharges and taxes, you're way over budget.

Similarly, the travel industry's propensity for exaggeration is a big turn-off, whether it's four-star hotels that only deserve three stars, imaginative product descriptions or fine print that hides significant restrictions.

The issue can be more than a financial inconvenience. For someone like Cory Lee, a wheelchair user, terms like "accessible" have a specific meaning. "I've found from experience that some hotels will lie and say that the room is accessible even though it is really not," says Lee, who writes a blog about disability issues. He has to ask specific questions like, "Does the room have a roll-in shower?" and "Is there an access lift on the pool?" And even then, he doesn't always get what he's promised.

There's absolutely no excuse for that kind of misrepresentation, either. But how do you change it? Maybe a good first step is to come clean about our problem. Only 8% of business travelers surveyed by On Call International admitted that they lied to their employer about their activities while on a work-related trip.

Just 8%? Come on.

The lying is rampant and unrestrained on both sides of the counter. Why can't we just admit it?

How to spot a lie

The travel industry likes to stretch the truth as much as you do – maybe more. Here's how to catch a travel company in a lie:

- **Is it too good to be true?** If a deal looks too good to pass up, you might consider passing it up. The industry's most common lies are about products that sound too good to be true. Those postcard offers of a "free" cruise are the most egregious examples.
- **Are they using hyperbole?** Everyone exaggerates in travel. But an excess of hyperbole – calling yourself the "biggest" or "best" – can be a sign that someone is telling tall tales. Don't become a victim of the rhetoric.
- **Are there warnings to heed?** Liars don't lie in a vacuum. Eventually, they're caught and their untruths appear in online reviews and in the advice of your travel agent. Do your research and ignore the warnings at your peril.

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