

Travellers get less protection

TRAVEL

Holidaymakers now have less financial protection when they book with a travel agent, following changes by holiday trade association Abta.

Abta, which represents the majority of UK travel agents and tour operators, says its members no longer have to offer travellers financial protection if they sell accommodation-only holidays online, while tourists can no longer expect a refund if a travel agent goes bust before it's booked your holiday.

Abta has also withdrawn from the Office of Fair Trading's approved codes scheme because its consumer code no longer meets the OFT's financial criteria. If a body is signed up to the OFT scheme, it means it offers consumers more than their basic legal rights.

Abta said it has taken these measures to stop cowboy travel agents becoming Abta members and then ripping off consumers.

Michelle Smyth, of Which? campaigns, said: 'We want Abta to ensure people understand exactly what these changes mean for them.'



TAKE ACTION!

Check your paperwork

■ When booking with an Abta travel agent, make sure you get confirmation and booking details from the supplier of your holiday. If you don't, you may not be financially protected if your agent goes bust.

OFT pushes for better complaints information for customers

Fitters get service makeover

KITCHENS AND BATHROOMS

Some of the biggest names in fitted kitchens and bathrooms have been forced to become more open about their complaints service, under pressure from the Office of Fair Trading (OFT).

Several years ago, the watchdog insisted that B&Q, Dolphin Bathrooms, Kitchens Direct, Magnet, MFI and Moben sign up to an independent complaint resolution service called Qualitas.

When companies such as these take full payment upfront for installation, customers are at a disadvantage as there's less incentive to finish a job properly, according to the OFT.

Our lawyers had heard from a string of customers who hadn't heard of Qualitas



We've consistently highlighted how customers aren't aware of Qualitas



However, they can do it as long as customers can take complaints to Qualitas.

But Which? and the OFT became concerned that companies weren't doing enough to tell complainants that Qualitas existed. Our lawyers had heard from a string of customers in dispute with these firms who said they hadn't heard of it.

During a recent review of the scheme, the OFT persuaded the companies to boost information – in some cases, this meant mentioning Qualitas on their website.

Another payment protection scheme has also had a revamp recently – but Which? is concerned about a loophole that remains. In 2001 we told how a kitchen and bathroom industry body hid behind small print to avoid refunding customers' deposits when a member firm went bust. The following year it offered a compromise deal for customers after we intervened.

The body – now called the Kitchen, Bathroom and Bedroom Specialists Association – had said its protection scheme didn't apply because the firm had taken more than a 25 per cent deposit, which broke its rules. Although the association recently sought to improve its Consumer Care deposit scheme, with help from the OFT, this loophole remains. Which? has asked the OFT to investigate.

Public vote New postal charges

Since 21 August, the cost of posting a letter has been determined by its size and thickness as well as its weight (see 'New pricing for letters', August 2006, p6). We asked: Do you understand the recent changes to the way Royal Mail is charging for sending post?

Survey of 1,035 adults carried out online for Which? by Explorandum between 11 and 13 September. Findings don't necessarily represent our views



PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN TRENHOLM

Drivers risk serious knee injuries in a front-on car crash

Fiat agrees to recall Grande Punto cars



We highlighted problems with the Fiat Grande Punto in *Which? Car* last month

CARS

Fiat is recalling UK models of its Grande Punto after we highlighted how drivers could suffer severe knee injuries in a crash. We pushed for the recall in *Which? Car* last month after we spotted the safety problem.

European left-hand-drive models have a metal plate inside the steering column, which helps spread the load in a severe front crash. But when we inspected a right-hand-drive UK model, we found there was no metal plate, meaning drivers could potentially suffer crippling knee injuries in a front-on crash.

The left-hand drive model achieved a maximum five stars for adult occupant protection in the Euro NCAP crash tests. Fiat has promoted this high safety rating in its advertising, but without the plate the car would receive only a four-star rating.

When we first put the problem to Fiat, it told us that it had improved the design and added the plate to all right-hand-drive models made since the end of June this year.

'Without the plate, the car would receive only a four-star rating'

Fiat has agreed to recall and update all affected vehicles, a move we welcome. But it has yet to tell us how many cars already sold are affected or confirmed the vehicle identification number (Vin) from which the change was introduced.

As soon as we hear more from Fiat we will publish details at www.which.co.uk, hopefully with specific instructions about how to identify whether your car is affected and what to do. In the meantime, please call the Fiat customer support line for advice.

Which? car expert David Evans said: 'We were disappointed to find this problem on a car so heavily promoted on its safety. I'm pleased that Fiat has changed its production. But there are still many cars in owners' hands that won't meet the claimed safety standards.'

TAKE ACTION!

Contact Fiat

For more information, contact Fiat on 00800 34280000

Which? tackles EasyCar's confusing website

Liz Edwards helps driver who hired car for wrong country



Driving abroad fills me with dread. But one challenge you don't expect is to hire a car for one country, only to find that you've hired it for another.

This is what happened to Swiss-born Odile Churchward-Gogniat, a former amateur rally driver who lives in Leicester and often flies to Geneva and drives a hired car to her parents at their mountain home.

Conventionally, Geneva Airport is in Switzerland. But it also has a foot in France. This has legal implications if you hire from the wrong side.

Earlier this year, Odile saw an offer on EasyCar's site for Geneva Airport, and booked. Unknown to her, the booking was for the French sector, not the Swiss one. This meant that not only did she not get a motorway pass (mandatory in Switzerland), she also set off without snow tyres. She'd expected these as standard – which they would have been on the Swiss side. In winter, failure to have snow tyres leaves you uninsured in an accident.

Says Odile: 'There was a snow storm and I nearly lost control a couple of times. I asked police to check the car and they said, in an accident, I'd be liable to criminal charges for driving without being equipped for winter conditions.'

EasyCar says its website is clear about winter equipment, and the letters 'Fr' appeared on Odile's booking. However, it refunded her £147 hire cost as goodwill and agreed to consider putting a warning sign at Geneva's French-side hire desk.

The AA offers tips about driving in specific countries at www.theaa.com/motoring-advice.