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Big, beautiful and absolutely bogus



Post, The Washington Post

When renting a vacation home online, watch for red flags: Does the advertiser want you to wire money? Is he pressuring you to act fast?

If the ad for a vacation home sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Rental scams are on the rise.

By **BRIGID SCHULTE**, Washington Post

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It was nearly closing time when I got to the Western Union counter and carefully filled out the form to wire nearly \$1,000 to a complete stranger.

I felt uneasy. But Deron Milton was offering a two-bedroom penthouse vacation apartment rental in a prewar building in New York's Gramercy Park overlooking a Zen garden with a swimming pool and fitness center for \$150 a night. Part of me just knew it sounded too good to be true. But another part just really, really wanted it to be true.

I'd spent many a bleary-eyed late-night hour searching Priceline and [Hotels.com](#) and other sites for affordable places to stay, in vain. So I turned to Craigslist and found Deron Milton's ad and a host of other gorgeous vacation apartment sublets for cheap, cheap, cheap.

Now, I suppose, is when you all want to scream, "Don't be so stupid! Just walk away! Don't do it!"

Oh, there were plenty of signs: Deron Milton answered my initial e-mail almost immediately -- at 3:43 a.m. one night. I merely thought, "These New Yorkers are as crazy as I am, staying up so late." His phone number was always busy. And he wanted me to wire the payment to some guy named Hank in New Jersey.

I'd heard of Craigslist scams -- the apartments or cars that turn out not to exist.

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But I had looked up 72 Irving Place in Emporis.com, a New York real estate website, and seen that it was a real building. I'd found this Hank in New Jersey and left him a message.

Standing at the Western Union counter, I hesitated. I pulled out my BlackBerry and sent a note to Deron Milton. "Should I do minute transfer or overnight?"

FBI details signs of such scams

It will hardly surprise you to learn that Deron Milton -- whoever he was, if that was even his real name -- was running a scam. Just a few hours after I left the Western Union counter, he began advertising another New York vacation apartment rental on Craigslist at another address using the same photos I'd been taken in by.

And there were many others. People calling themselves Angela Gomez, James Pascale, Robin William, Joe Collins, Herbert Mouscardy. All offering too-good-to-be-true places at unbelievably low prices. Herbert Mouscardy even sent references. This one, bad English and all, is from someone named Tom Bruce: "Herbert's place really made our trip to New York unique and I would definitely choose to stay here next time

visiting and about the Deposit, you shouldn't be worry about that."

Yes, vacation rental seeker, you should "be worry." Although there are plenty of legitimate offerings on Craigslist and Vacation Rental by Owner and HomeAway and a host of other sites, the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center reports that sham vacation home offers are the latest in a long list of online fraud operations it tracks.

The center began noticing the scams last year, said Charles Pavelites, the special agent who heads the complaint center. Then officials started hearing so many stories of travelers showing up with their luggage to locked doors, nonexistent apartments or surprised families sitting down to dinner who had no intention of renting to vacationing strangers, that they began to gather them on a new website: Looks toogoodtobetrue.com. And the crooks, Pavelites said, are masters of social engineering.

"They've got it figured out -- what will you fall for?" he said. The signs of a scam, Pavelites said, are pretty clear:

- They ask you to wire money. Which, he said, you should *never* do. Paying by credit card at least ensures that you'll get your

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money back if you're scammed. Once you wire it from your bank account, it's gone.

- They pressure you to act fast, warning that others are interested and you'll lose out if you don't decide quickly.
- They use bad English syntax. Milton's silly-sounding Craigslist advertisement should have been my first clue: "Manhattan Classy Private Apartment Rental!" Who uses words like "classy" anymore?

At the top of the Craigslist vacation rental page is a link to a detailed page on common-sense steps to take to avoid being scammed -- among them, deal locally when you can and meet with people in person; never wire funds via Western Union or MoneyGram; never give out financial information. Craigslist makes it clear that it is not involved in any transactions and bears no responsibility; that buyers are very much on their own.

I did notify Craigslist via the report-abuse link about the two different Gramercy Park listings using the same photos, and they were promptly removed.

Landing a real rental

After I decided to write about my experience, I tried calling and e-mailing Deron Milton again to see what he had to say for himself. The number I had didn't work. I have yet to hear back from him.

I went back to Priceline and Craigslist to continue looking for apartments. Suddenly it was crystal clear which listings were bogus. The lush photos looked as if they were ripped from architectural magazines. And the prices were too enticingly low.

I found a legitimate listing that connected to a legitimate website, talked to a live human and rented a cute one-bedroom with a loft on the Upper West Side, for a fair price. Charles Isaacs, who runs AtHomeUs.com, had to talk me off the ceiling to convince me that the apartment was real.

"With every single e-mail I get, I have to prove myself, prove that I'm not going to scam someone. And I don't always win," Isaacs said. "Craigslist used to be so beautiful. There was so much trust. But now ... you really have to be careful."

And that means, sometimes, walking away from the deal that really is too good to be true.

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