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Vacation home scams online: If it's too good to be true . . .

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It was nearly closing time when I got to the Western Union counter at Harris Teeter. I'd already tried one Western Union closer to my house that was locked up for the night and one at a nearby Giant with a broken machine. I 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.

We'd decided at the last minute to take the kids to New York for spring break, and I'd spent many a bleary-eyed late-night hour searching Priceline and Hotels.com and other sites for affordable places to stay. I wasn't having much luck. 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. But instead of seeing a red flag, I merely thought, "These New Yorkers are as crazy as I am, staying up so late." The phone number he gave me was always busy. And he wanted me to wire the payment to some guy named Hank in New Jersey.

Now, I'd heard of Craigslist scams -- the apartments or cars that turn out not to exist. But I'd done my due diligence. I'd looked up 72 Irving Pl. in Emporis.com, a New York real estate Web site, 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. But true to the lengths some human beings will blindly go to in order to delude themselves when they want something so badly, I pulled out my BlackBerry and sent a note to Deron Milton. "Should I do minute transfer or overnight?"

At this point, it will hardly come as a surprise to 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." Or at least be careful. Though 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 only the latest in a

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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 they 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 Web site:

[Lookstoogoodtobetrue.com](http://lookstoogoodtobetrue.com). And the crooks, Pavelites said, are masters of social engineering.

"They've got it figured out -- what will you fall for?" he said. Some put their prices right in line with other, legitimate offerings, he said. Some steal legitimate rental listings or photos off legitimate sites. Or even legitimate brokers' names. Some set up fake companies, create fake e-mail accounts. "Anything that appears to give them more legitimacy."

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 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. ("I want to finalize this reservation procedures [sic] with you soonest. I have got lots of inquiries here and wouldn't want to disappoint," Milton wrote me in one e-mail.)

-- Another big giveaway: 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?

It's not as if the fine people at Craigslist hadn't warned me. At the top of their vacation rental page is a [link](#) to a detailed page on some very common sense steps to take to avoid being scammed -- every single one of which I had nearly broken. Among them, deal locally when you can and meet with people in person; never wire funds via Western Union or MoneyGram (ahem); never give out financial information.

They also make clear that Craigslist is not involved in any transactions and bears no responsibility. Though there are links to fraud reporting sites, the message is clear: Buyer beware, you are very much on your 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.

On The Post's [Story Lab blog](#), I revealed my idiocy to the world and asked for others to share stories of getting suckered or nearly suckered by vacation rental scams. One, shockingly, wrote that he wired money sight unseen to someone in Italy and found a key and a wonderful villa awaiting him on the Amalfi Coast. But the far more common story people told me was about falling for what looked like a great deal and either wiring the money and losing it or nearly wiring it before coming to their senses.

"I saved \$1,000 in the last minute," Asaf Yoselevski, a law student who lives in Israel, wrote after Googling Angela Gomez and finding my post. He had hoped to get an apartment on 55th Street near Lincoln Center for \$110 a night. "The money was already transferred via Western Union services, but I withdrew it at the last minute."

Another reader wrote that she was about to wire money for an apartment on Broadway when she traced Herbert Mouscardy's e-mail address to a Nigerian Internet service provider.

Daniel Best, a comic book artist in Australia, lost \$4,000 on a rental apartment scam, "which caused us to have to cancel our trip entirely -- mainly because we had nowhere to stay and no money to afford to rent even a hotel room. It was very distressing." His blog post on his experience has now become a worldwide

and ever-growing collection of the stories of the scammed.

Catherine Dandel of Seattle wrote that she nearly sent Deron Milton money for a vacation home in Gig Harbor, Wash., that he was advertising on Craigslist. "I would be honored to provide your family accommodation in my house," he wrote her.

None of this is a surprise to Jessica Ader, an agent with CityRealty, an online real estate consulting business in New York.

"We get calls like this at least two to three times a week, usually on the ones that seem just too good to be true, and they are," she said. "We've had people say, 'Oh my God, I just sent my Social Security number!' or, 'I just sent a check for \$2,000!' And we say, 'Sorry, you're screwed.'" With Ader's help, I did some sleuthing. She pulled up 72 Irving Pl. on her database. "Nothing has been sold or rented here for several years," she said. And penthouse Milton advertised on the sixth floor? "The building has five floors."

Herbert Mouscardy was offering Apartment 1A, a 1,400-square-foot, three-bedroom space at 36 W. 35th St., with a gorgeous chandelier, for \$150 a night. In his ad, he notes: "This flat is located on the tenth floor. The building has two elevator banks and one of the elevators will drop you in front of the flat."

So I called Greg Darden, president of the building's co-op board. "There is no 10th floor," he said. "This building has seven stories. There's only one creaky elevator. And Apartment 1A is on the first floor." No one named Herbert Mouscardy owns it.

I found a Herbert Mouscardy on Facebook. He said he was an accountant in the Bronx, that he doesn't know anything about the scams, that his wallet was stolen four years ago and the police keep calling asking what he did with all the wire transfers. "I keep telling them, I never got any money."

In the end, after wavering at the Harris Teeter Western Union counter -- going off to buy raspberries, or to try calling Hank from New Jersey or Deron Milton, then coming back, like a moth to a flame, I ended up walking away and not wiring the money. But I attribute that more to the common sense of the guy behind the counter than to any particularly good judgment of my own. "You haven't talked to the person?" the Western Union guy said, shaking his head. "I wouldn't do it."

The next morning, Hank from New Jersey called, urging me not to send my money. Hank, who asked that I not use his last name because he's embarrassed about all this, was traveling in Romania a few years ago. He met some college students and wanted to help them. They said they were trying to get an import-export business going in the States and needed his help picking up wire transfers at the Western Union. Good-hearted Hank was snookered into becoming what the FBI calls a "mule" -- picking up scammers' cash. "I feel like a fool," he said. "I have a PhD. You'd think I'd know better."

About an hour later, Deron Milton himself called, wondering why I hadn't made the money transfer. The caller ID showed the number as 0000012345. In heavily accented English, he asked if I needed any questions answered before wiring the money.

I said I had just one: How could he, knowing that I was a mother with two young children, knowing that I would show up at 72 Irving Pl. and find no apartment and no sixth floor and be out \$1,000, "How could you leave me out there on the street with my kids with nowhere to go?"

Click.

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.

Undeterred in my apartment hunt, I went back to Priceline and yes, Craigslist. All of a sudden, it was crystal clear which listings were bogus. The lush photos looked like they were ripped from architectural magazines. The English was off. And the prices were too enticingly low.

I found a legitimate listing that connected to a legitimate Web site, talked to a real live human being and wound up renting a cute one-bedroom with a loft for the kids 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. When he said he took credit card deposits, I breathed easier, but I truly didn't believe it until we had the key in hand.

"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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