

Negotiating the murky world of travel review sites

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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When planning a trip, most people rely on travel review websites such as Trip Advisor to see how tour companies, hotels or restaurants stack up. Years ago, reviews were the domain of those who did this for a living or were involved in the travel industry, but today regular folks write most online reviews.

The system has become more democratic, or at least that's the theory. We don't have to rely on travel agents, guidebook authors and other so-called experts to tell us what's hot and what's not. We can also tap into the experiences of ordinary travellers who have done the trip or stayed at the hotel. But when anyone and everyone can write reviews, often anonymously, how reliable is the information?

The simple answer is that we don't know. Was that negative review justified, or was it done by a chronic complainer who is seldom satisfied with anything? Was the "everything was perfect" review done by a happy-go-lucky guy who never complains? Even people with the best intentions may not get the facts straight.

Sometimes it gets sinister. A positive or negative rating on Trip Advisor can make or break a travel-related business, so there's tremendous pressure to be portrayed in the best possible light. While most reputable businesses play by the rules, the anonymous nature of the online world makes it relatively easy to cheat. A hotel owner might get several friends to send glowing reviews to Trip Advisor and even negative reports about the competition. Shady companies may provide services to boost a travel company's rating through fake reviews.

While such fraudulent practices aren't allowed and companies involved are penalized if found

out, the chances of getting caught are slim enough that it remains a problem. Trip Advisor even indicates on its site that it does not fact-check reviews, authenticate a reviewer's name, or verify that a reviewer stayed in the hotel.

To show how unreliable the system is, a British writer doing an exposé last year managed to get his restaurant, The Shed at Dulwich, rated the number one restaurant in London on Trip Advisor. The only problem was that the restaurant didn't exist. He made it all up and had friends using different computers write a series of enthusiastic reviews. The place was said to be so exclusive that it didn't take walk-in traffic. You had to call ahead for reservations, and people who called were told that the restaurant was fully booked for the next

few weeks. The fact that it was so hard to get in seemed to make it all the more desirable.

When the story of the scam broke, it caused quite a fuss and called into question the integrity of online review sites.

Despite these issues, online resources still provide a valuable resource. It is likely that most people making comments, both good and bad, are just regular folks who are simply giving an honest opinion of their experiences. The trick is sorting those from ones with hidden agendas.

Critics suggest ignoring extreme reviews, both good and bad, and looking at those in the middle that tend to be more measured, pointing out both the positive and negative.

A five-star rating where everything was "awesome!!!" might be

suspect. A totally negative posting, where absolutely everything was wrong, might suggest that someone has an axe to grind. The real world, in most cases, is somewhere in-between. Also, check to see what other reviews those reviewers have done. Do they usually provide balanced, useful information?

Look at different sites for a wider range of opinions. Hotels.com and Expedia, for example, claim that their ratings come from verified guests.

For our own travel planning, we tend to use trip reports on travel forums more than straight reviews.

Trip Advisor has the most forums, but there are numerous others, such as the Thorn Tree forum, which is associated with Lonely Planet guides. People ask

and answer questions on practically anything to do with travel. Trip reports can be useful, especially when people talk both about what they liked and didn't like. Anyone trying to pass off public relations fluff is often called out by others on the forum.

The more sources you find, the better the chances of making informed choices. It may sound like a lot of work just to choose a hotel for the night, but when you're shelling out big bucks for a two-week resort stay or an expensive tour package, it pays to get a variety of opinions. Above all, take everything you find with a fairly large grain of salt.

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