



Live 5 Investigates: Dozens of complaints filed against local vacation clubs



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By Harve Jacobs
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CHARLESTON, SC (WCSC) - A Live 5 News investigation has uncovered dozens of complaints filed against businesses that sell timeshares and luxury vacation packages.

In the heart of Charleston's historic district, storefronts of Wholesale Escapes on South Market Street and Vacation Inspirations on Meeting Street offer information to tourists.

But once visitors stop in the sidewalk to hear the pitch, they learn there's much more to the free maps and guidebooks.

On their websites, both businesses proclaim the best deals on vacations.

Sharon and Steve Mitchell, who are from Alabama, visited Charleston in June.

The Mitchells say Vacation Inspirations offered them free carriage rides and a gift certificate for dinner if they listened to a travel presentation.

"They knew the things to say and they encouraged us to come and listen to their sales pitch," Steve Mitchell said.

The Mitchells say during the presentation they were shown first class locations for condos and hotel rooms.

"They get it for a discounted price and also cruises and tours and different trips like that, that most people would want," Sharon Mitchell said.

The Mitchells signed a one year contract with Vacation Inspirations at a price tag of more than \$5,000.

"It wasn't high pressure, but it was a little pressure to a kind of go ahead with the contract," Sharon Mitchell said.

After being told they could take a trip to Hawaii, the couple went back home to Alabama.

"When I got home and started looking at their website more closely and there were really no trips to Hawaii," Sharon Mitchell said.

The Mitchells went on Trip Advisor to look up reviews for some of the resorts listed by Vacation Inspirations.

"They had reviews, really bad reviews, dirty, roaches, bad locations, scary locations," Sharon Mitchell said.

Sharon Mitchell sent a letter to Vacation Inspirations, asking for a full refund.

"I told them I felt misled and they told me to write them a letter and it would take 30 days to respond."

The company wrote back: under South Carolina law, the Mitchells have no legal right to get out of the contract.

The letter stated purchaser "does not have the legal right to cancel the contract" and continued with "We look forward to assisting you with all your future travel needs."

We went to Vacation Inspiration's store downtown to ask about the Mitchell's dispute. An employee declined to speak with us.

The Mitchells also filed a complaint with the South Carolina Better Business Bureau.

We learned they are not the only ones.

In the last three years, 76 complaints against Vacation Inspirations have been filed with the bureau.

Many customers wrote they didn't get what was promised and could not get a refund.

However the BBB gave Vacation Inspirations a 'B' plus rating for its response to the complaints.

Vacation Inspirations is not a member of the BBB, but an attorney for Vacation Inspirations told us they work closely with the BBB and the state department of consumer affairs to resolve customer complaints on a case by case business.

He also says there are thousands of happy members and that often the complaint is about communication or a misunderstanding.

In the Mitchell's case, the attorney says the couple acknowledged they are not allowed to cancel by checking the box on the contract. He also says they checked "no" when questioned if they felt pressure to buy.

Vacation Inspirations also says the Mitchells made no effort to use the program they purchased.

The City of Charleston's attorney says during the past several years they received complaints about Vacation Inspirations and Wholesale Escapes.

Four years ago the city passed an ordinance to prevent deceptive, misleading and aggressive solicitation by businesses. The ordinance states in part: "Vacation time share and vacation clubs membership sellers and solicitors have... negatively affected the special character and welcoming nature of the City of Charleston."

"That prohibits approaching people on the streets to sell a time share or a club membership. It also prohibits fraud or deceit or misrepresentation in the sales tactics," City Attorney Susan Herdina said.

"If we would get to the point where the business is what we would consider under our business license ordinance a public nuisance. It frankly has not risen to that yet. We don't have the cases that can prove that."

It is unclear at this point whether the Mitchells will get their money back and say if they cannot come to an agreement with Vacation Inspirations, they may consider a lawsuit. Either way, the couple says they will come back to Charleston.

"It's sad that this one establishment put a sour taste in our mouths, but we're not gonna let it tarnish our thoughts of Charleston because it was an awesome city," Steve Mitchell said.

We also looked into Wholesale Escapes which has 68 complaints filed with the Better Business Bureau.

According to the BBB website, customers reported they didn't get what was expected and had trouble getting a refund.

The BBB gave that company an 'F' rating in part because they failed to respond to or resolve some of those complaints.

We reached out several times to Wholesale Escapes by phone and e mail, but have not heard back from them.

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