

TripAdvisor investigates suspicious online reviews

Luxury hotel suspected of shady review practice

- **TripAdvisor's top ranked eatery never existed**
- **EXCLUSIVE: Why TripAdvisor 'can't be trusted'**

Enjoy your stay, unless of course you don't. In that case, please don't tell anyone.

Claims some patrons were bribed to deter bad reviews.

A former employee has accused a luxury apartment chain of using bribery and evasive tactics to improve its reputation in online reviews.

Earlier this week, the ABC **exclusively reported** staff at Meriton Serviced Apartments was ordered to prevent unhappy customers posting reviews to TripAdvisor using a strategy internally referred to as 'masking'.

The former employee also claimed bribes were offered to customers to change reviews from a low to high rating in the five-star system.

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A spokesman for TripAdvisor confirmed an investigation into the claims was underway, but said he was not "at liberty" to elaborate on the details.

Meriton did not respond to *The New Daily's* requests for comment, although an internal email obtained by the ABC indicated the company intended to brush off the claims.

"All our hard work and efforts as a team can easily be shadowed by one disgruntled ex-employee," national manager Matthew Thomas wrote.

"It's during these times we need to stay focused and ... be seen as one strong and successful team."

TripAdvisor is investigating claims that Meriton Serviced Apartments has been manipulating guest reviews.

The former employee also claimed staff would 'mask' emails "dozens of times a day" by bungling email addresses so they would bounce back – and were chastised if they didn't.

"I have gone through the duty log for the past few days and a couple of accounts were not masked," a Sydney hotel manager told employees in a 2014 email.

"This guest was stuck in their shower and then had to pull the door off to get out. This should definitely be masked.

"I need each of you to ensure that you are being proactive to prevent these comments reaching TA (TripAdvisor)."

Investigation into the allegations is ongoing.

Fake online reviews rise

As online reviews become a popular source of pre-purchase information, they are also more commonly exploited, CHOICE head of media Tom Godfrey said.

“It just stands to reason that because they are so popular you are getting more people out there trying to influence your purchasing decision by writing fake reviews,” he said.

“There is no doubt about it.”

The New Daily reported in January some companies were also using the review system to hurt competitors by posting malicious reviews.

A survey by Accommodation Association of Australia showed a surprising number of consumers (nearly half) using negative reviews as a threat or asking for bribes to post a positive review (12 per cent).

How to tell if a review is fake

Although they can be useful, consumers should treat online reviews with caution, Mr Godfrey told *The New Daily*.



TripAdvisor uses “sophisticated automated tools and algorithms ... such as credit card and banking agencies” to spot illegitimate activity. *Photo: Shutterstock*

“Some of the clues you can look for are tone of voice and repetition [in the language], and overly glowing reviews, they can all point to someone trying to have you on,” he said.

“As a rule what you should do to avoid being duped ... is to seek out independent sources of information.”

In the case of hotels and accommodation, checking “multiple sources”, like a number of different review sites, was the best way to do this.

But if a review does lead to a rough night’s stay, there are options available to remedy the situation.

Initially try to sort it out with the provider by asking for a refund or a change of room.

“Put them under pressure, if you want a refund, great, but maybe you want an extra night’s accommodation, or some other form of remedy. In the case of a hotel, it could be as simple as seeking a room change,” Mr Godfrey said.

But the most basic defence to avoid being duped by a review was simple – you can’t always believe everything you read online.

At least a trusted, knowledgeable Travel Agent can use their client data and their own experiences to recommend and book and ultimately take ownership and responsibility (morally and legally) for what they book. Using a blogsite like TripAdvisor or someone that is real? You decide.