

[Scam reveals an excellent reason for using a travel agent](#)

AFTA's statement that “**without an AFTA travel agent, you're on your own**” has never seemed as relevant as last weekend, when a story surfaced about a massive scam perpetrated by criminals against hapless consumers making their own travel bookings.

Fairfax media broke a story about scammed Australian holidaymakers pursuing a class action lawsuit against one of Britain's (and the world's) largest banks – Barclays.

Rather than book through a travel agent, the story related, many prospective tourists over the past 18 months have booked holiday stays directly online. They have then gone on to wire millions of dollars into accounts with London-based Barclays Bank. The consumers thought the money was going to pay for holiday stays booked through popular holiday rental websites like HomeAway and FlipKey.

However, it seems that criminals have used “phishing” scams to hack into websites, assume the identity of holiday property owners and then steer customers to placing money directly into a Barclays Bank account run by the same criminals.

That's a new twist on the more usual phishing scams, which seek to trick internet users into revealing their bank account details. This particular variant, it would seem, cons unwary internet bookers into making a payment to an account they believe is run by a travel accommodation provider. The account may be with a reputable bank, but the account is in fact operated by fraudsters.

Luxury Balinese villas are proving attractive bait, the Sun-Herald says. Customers think they have booked and paid, only to arrive and find the property has never heard of them.

Fairfax Media said on Sunday that a group of Australian victims and Bali villa owners have hired a top London law firm to sue Barclays over the matter. They contend that Barclays should vet the identity of its account holders.

The story quoted a Barclays Bank response: “Barclays can confirm that in opening and managing accounts, it complies with all regulatory requirements including in respect of identification and verification. When we are made aware of inappropriate conduct on accounts, we will immediately investigate and take the necessary steps to close them.

***“We recognise that some consumers' interests have been damaged as a result of the conduct of some customers and that money has been lost. Regrettably, we are unable to provide any refund for individuals who lost money before we were made aware of the situation.*”**

“We regularly give advice to our customers to help them to avoid this type of fraud, for example by using reputable third party payment processing sites rather than making a direct transfer to the seller's bank account.”

The victims could have saved themselves a great deal of money and anguish by using a travel agent.

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