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Budget Hotel Bookings Online May Be Scam

By PAT MILTON
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NEW YORK — Kelly and Deidre Britt were thrilled to find an Internet listing for a three-star Manhattan hotel "suite" at a bargain \$250-a-night for their family's trip to the Big Apple -- until they opened the door to the room.

The two rooms were filthy and musty, with paint peeling off the walls. The towels in the bathroom were matted with hair. The fold-out couch was wedged too close to the kitchen sink to open.

"We should have seen a red flag when the taxi driver couldn't find the place," Deidre Britt said.

The suite was not in a highly rated hotel as advertised, but on the fifth floor of a pre-World War II apartment building in midtown Manhattan. Oh, it did come with a view -- of a rusty fire escape visible through a dirty window. There was no flat-screen TV, no concierge, no maid service, no bargain.

The Britts were snookered in a widening scam where landlords pawn off apartments as hotel rooms to cash in on New York City's tourism boom. They are posting rooms on popular Internet travel sites, where the legitimacy of the advertisements are not always checked, officials say.

"Tourists are being lied to and tenants are being harassed," said John Raskin, a community organizer for Housing Conservation Coordinators, a nonprofit affordable housing group in New York. "And the landlords have a greedy agenda."

The problem has become so egregious that the city's building department launched a special unit to investigate complaints about illegal hotels. Assemblyman Richard Gottfried, who formed a task force on illegal hotels last year, said the scams are "growing like an epidemic."

Over the last nine months the unit has conducted 35 inspections sparked by complaints, said Robert Iulo, the city's assistant buildings commissioner. Most of those inspections resulted in violations being filed against the building's owner, with a fine of up to \$2,500 fine for each offense.

The charges usually stem from violations of zoning codes or the building's certificate of occupancy, requiring its exclusive use as an apartment house for long-term residential use, Iulo said.

"They are courting disaster because these buildings are not equipped with hotel safety requirements such as lighted exit signs," Iulo said.

The scams also worry tenants of the apartment buildings, who can be intimidated by strangers traipsing through the hallways or cramming into elevators with backpacks and luggage.

The Britts, who have started a Web site to warn other unsuspecting tourists, filed a consumer fraud complaint with the New York attorney general and the City's Building Department, leading to charges against the manager of his nightmare apartment.

Two violations against the company, one for illegal use and the other for inadequate emergency power, are pending, said Building Department spokeswoman Jennifer Givner. Eight complaints were filed against the property since January.

Britt visited Expedia.com, an Internet travel site, to find a hotel in New York. He clicked on the "hotels" category and one of the featured hotels was a Lincoln Centre apartment listed by another Web site, WooGo.com.

Howard Silverman, manager of The 63rd Street West Realty, which owns the property, was not available to comment. Messages left for a spokeswoman for Expedia.com, were not returned. A message for Anna Adams, manager of customer affairs for WooGo.com, was left with her assistant.

Bill Gannon, of West Greenwich, R.I., was sickened when he and his family checked into his \$260-a-night bargain Internet discovery -- the same bogus hotel as the Britts.

"There were no lamps, not even an overhead light," Gannon said. "When we complained, they sent up a grungy warped lamp."

The next day the Gannons moved to Doubletree Suites. It was double the price but worth the money, said Gannon.

"We love New York," Gannon said. "Next time I wouldn't look so hard for a bargain."

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