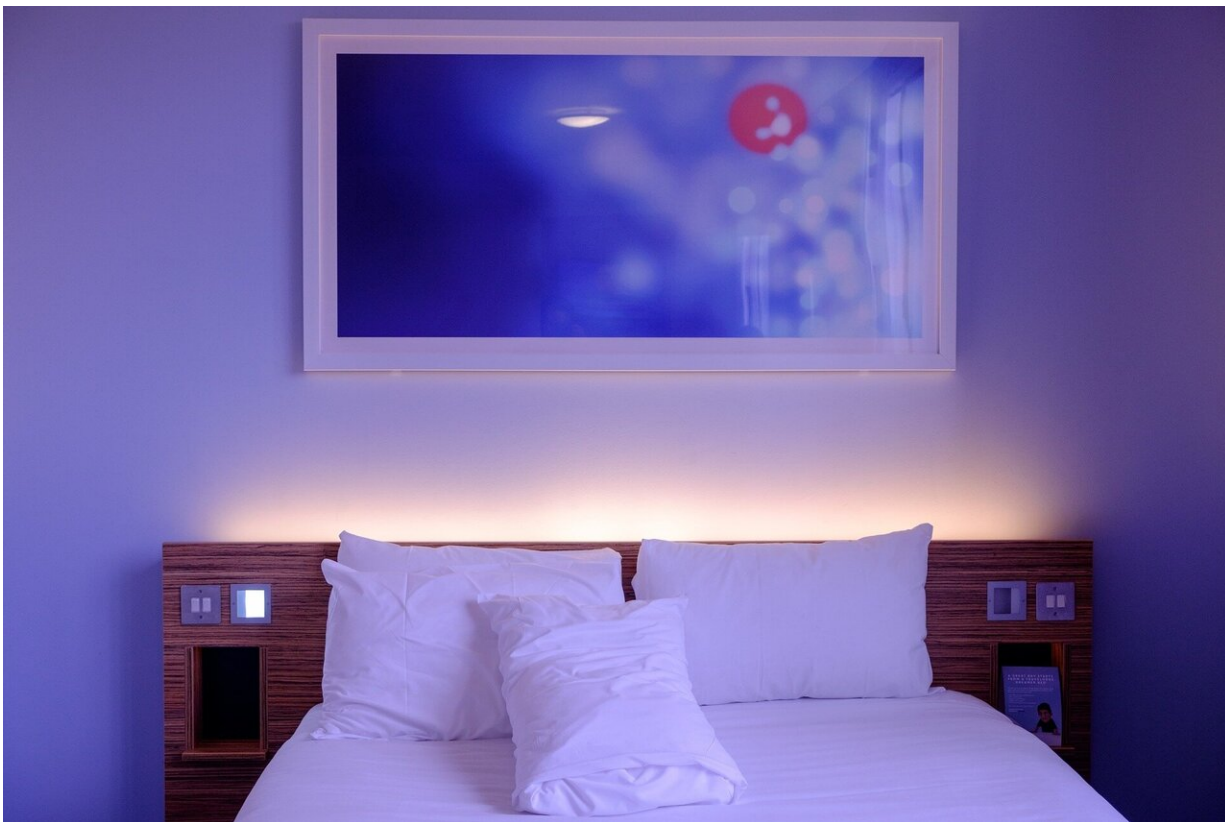


What to look for in hidden fees on travel sites

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How did a hotel room offer of \$137 a night for two nights turn into \$373.38?

Hidden fees.

Travel websites are notorious for hooking you with great offers, only to see them balloon to something you never agreed to in the first place.

"Once you get engaged, it's just too exhausting to move on," is the theory behind it, believes Richard Bangs, a former Expedia executive.

In the interest of saving you aggravation and time, some tips on what to look for when you visit these top travel sites:

Hotwire

This hotel site picks up unused hotel room inventory and sells it at a promised discount without telling you the exact name of the property before you book. So a two-night stay at a downtown hotel in Seattle sounds great at \$137 a night. But then Hotwire tacks on a \$95.38 "tax recovery and fees" surcharge and the bill grows to \$373. Explanation: "We retain our service fees as compensation in servicing your travel reservation."

Priceline

This is another site promising discount rooms, but check your discount first as you will pay in the form of fees for the service. Priceline calls it "compensation for our services and to cover the costs of your reservation, including, for example, customer service costs."

Expedia

The dominant site for airline tickets and hotel rooms—it also owns Hotels.com, CheapTickets, Orbitz, Hotwire, Travelocity and Trivago—doesn't appear to tack on fees, but you need to be on your toes when booking. For instance, we found a hotel in New York City for

\$119.24 a night. Two nights, plus \$21.09 for taxes, should come to \$259.57 by our estimations, but Expedia's checkout put us at \$280.66. What we missed at first: We were supposed to multiply both the room rate and the taxes by two.

Also, look out for great airline fares on Expedia—but be sure to note the airport listed first. We tried to book flights to Seattle from Los Angeles International Airport, where we were quoted \$169 roundtrip, versus an average of \$300 and up on other airlines. Once we clicked enough buttons to get to the cart, we saw that the flight actually originated from Ontario Airport, some 60 miles from home, not LAX.

AirBNB

The discount hotel alternative got a well-deserved reputation for offering lower-priced overnight stays, and the ire of the hotel industry, but the list of fees (cleaning, administration) have a way of making a \$50-a-night stay creep really high. That's how a \$96 a night townhouse in San Diego for two nights gets to \$308. One-third of the cost are fees—\$58 for cleaning, \$32 for "service" and \$26 in taxes. Of the [service](#) fee, Airbnb says, "This helps us run our platform and offer services like 24/7 support on your trip."

Booking.com

The hotel prices here are pretty straightforward, even though you have to navigate your way through "secret deal," offers that discount the [hotel](#) slightly, sometimes paying off. A room for two nights in Las Vegas, home of the notorious "resort fees," that consumers hate paying, is simple: \$178 (Booking.com adds the two nights together to give the total that will show up on your credit card) plus \$33.18 in tax (note, both night taxes are combined) and then the dreaded \$70 resort fee, bringing

the tab to \$281.18.

Trivago

Trivago Is a site that advertises heavily on TV, and, as one of the Expedia member websites, it comparison shops and generally brings people back to Expedia. Which is what happened when we searched for two nights in St. Louis, chose the Pear Tree Inn for \$115 a night, growing to \$268.94 once we multiplied the room taxes and room rate.

So what can consumers do? Aside from being a vigilant shopper, there's not a lot, except complain on [social media](#), and "keep searching," until you find a site with fewer fees, says Bangs, who now runs the travel photography app Steller.co.

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