

How to steer clear of rental property scams

Searching the internet has become the norm for consumers looking for homes to rent, with classifieds websites recording huge traffic increases in this category over the past few years.

However, it seems that not a week goes by now without a media report of a potential tenant being scammed out of their deposit and even their first month's rental by someone who actually did not own the property that was advertised as "to let".

And this can of course be financially devastating for consumers, so the rental experts at RentalsDotCom, the rental property management arm of Harcourts Real Estate, have put together the following guidelines to help potential tenants hang on to their hard-earned cash.

- ❖ Be wary of advertisements where the monthly rental quoted is a lot lower than the average for the area in which you are interested. Remember the old adage that if it seems too good to be true then it probably is. A "bargain" rental is usually indicative of a property in really bad condition – or a "hook" to generate interest among the gullible and inexperienced.
- ❖ Be wary of bogus landlords who send you on a wild goose chase. Such people will typically leave you standing outside a property that is allegedly "to let" while they claim to be stuck in traffic, or held up at the office, or attending to a sick relative, so that they can't bring you the keys. They will typically also promise that you can have the property and that they will not show it to anyone else if you just pay the deposit "in the meantime".
- ❖ Another twist on this scam is for the bogus landlord to claim that the property is to let because they are out of the country for several months working or doing charity work, but that if you deposit money to their local account they will mail you the keys, or get a friend to hand them over.
- ❖ Also, you should not be taken in by bogus landlords who say they can't show you the property right now because their current tenants don't like to be disturbed, but that you can go and see it from the outside and pay a deposit to secure it if you like the look of it. Typically they will then promise that you can have your deposit back if you change your mind after you see the inside.
- ❖ Where the property address is not provided in the advertisement, ask for it as well as a photograph and double check that it is not listed anywhere else on the Internet as being to let or even for sale. Scammers often hijack information from for sale listings, knowing that in those circumstances a few more people passing by to look at a property from the outside – or "waiting for keys" - are unlikely to make the real owners suspicious.
- ❖ Similarly, if the property is in a block of flats, see if you can find a caretaker who will know if it is genuinely to let, or check with a letting agency that has other flats in the building to let and ask them if they know anything about this one. If anything seems vague or unclear to you, keep your money and look for another unit.
- ❖ When you are answering an ad from a private landlord, make sure you get their name and ID details as well as their phone number, and look them up on the internet or social media to see if you can find them. For a small fee, you can also search the Deeds Office records or property portals to see if they are the genuine owner. You are also quite entitled to ask for proof of ownership.

- ❖ For obvious security reasons, you should never go alone to view a rental property, and never take any cash with you if you are planning to pay a deposit – even if the property is in a safe neighbourhood. There are many other payment options these days and if the landlord insists on cash, rather arrange a meeting on another day in a convenient public place, and once again take a friend with you.
- ❖ For safety's sake, you should also always pay the first month's rent with a credit card, so the payment can be reversed if it turns out that you have been scammed after all. And when you sign a lease, you should make sure that the address on the lease agrees with the street address or flat number of the property you have viewed. It is not unknown for bogus landlords to get their hands on the keys to an empty property which they can show you, and then put a different address on the lease before taking your money.
- ❖ Lastly, you should be especially careful when renting holiday properties, as these listings are much easier to fake, and scammers know that you can't view the property before deciding to take it. Ask for detailed information about the property and use Google maps to see if it actually exists. If the property is in a resort or complex, contact the resort or complex management independently and get them to confirm details about the unit and the owner. Be very wary if anyone starts pushing you to make an urgent payment to secure a booking or is vague about the information you require. Also be careful of people who ask for all your personal details so they can "check your credit record" – they may be running an identity theft scam as well as property scam.

In short, when renting a property, you should never, ever part with any money or personal information until you have made absolutely certain that the offer is legitimate and you will get what you are paying for. And with so many con artists operating in the real estate field now, the very best way to do that is always to rent through a reputable letting agency that already has all the paperwork on the property, uses proper lease documentation and will keep your deposit in a proper trust account. .

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