

TECH / CORONAVIRUS

Airbnb Said It Would Give Full Refunds For Coronavirus Cancellations. Vrbo Told Renters To Take A Hike.

The home-sharing platform is siding with its hosts over renters — which consumers may not forget.



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As the death toll from the novel coronavirus reaches 9,786 across the world, vacations are off — but travelers who booked their accommodations on home-sharing platform Vrbo say they aren't receiving full refunds for trips they booked before the pandemic.

Vrbo's refund policy requires its hosts to give back only 50% of the money people paid to book. Anything more than that is at the hosts' discretion. Many stranded travelers are furious over this and the leadership of Vrbo, owned by Expedia Group, has said little to comfort them.

“Vrbo needs to step up as a company since we apparently can't rely on the kindness and understanding of the hosts,” Marissa Collum, whose mother booked a Vrbo rental, told BuzzFeed News. “We want to practice what the CDC is saying and not travel, so we just have to pay this guy for nothing unless Vrbo takes a stand.”

A Vrbo spokesperson directed BuzzFeed News to a statement on its website, which read: "Vrbo is refunding 100% of the money it makes through traveler service fees when someone must cancel a trip due to COVID-19, whether the cancellation is government-mandated or because you're prioritizing the health of your family and loved ones."

“We're just taking the 50% that the owner is giving us and fighting the payment with Chase Bank,” Tatiana Martinez, who was planning to attend Coachella with friends before the virus hit, told BuzzFeed News. “There's not much else we can do at this point. Unless Vrbo changes their policy.”

Some VRBO renters are struggling to recoup even the 50% from hosts. “Our owner has refused to cancel our reservation (which means we cannot receive a refunded service fee) and will not apply any type of refund,” one renter, Ashley Gordon, told BuzzFeed News.

Despite consumer complaints, the home-sharing platform has not followed the lead of rival platform Airbnb, which on Saturday said it would give customers a full refund after days of limiting refunds only to certain countries. The hospitality industry is currently in free fall, with hotels, airlines, and rental companies with thin margins struggling to stay afloat.

Vrbo isn't going to be hurt as badly as an empty restaurant or hotel, since it makes its money on commissions and has fewer capital costs, Dr. Cihan Cobanoglu, a professor at the College of Hospitality & Tourism Leadership at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, told BuzzFeed News.

“Their income goes down, but I don't think it's [the same as] a restaurant, which is closed now. Or a nightclub or a hotel, which doesn't have any guests,” he said. “It's different. I think they are trying to make money. They are trying to get more money, as much as possible.”

And while hosts may appreciate Vrbo's decision, Cobanoglu said travelers will not. “This kind of behavior is something that consumers will punish,” he said. “They will not forget.”

It's true. As of Thursday, Vrbo's Facebook page was littered with complaints.

“We were told by the owners of the property — ‘it ain't nothing but a little cold and some good clean mountain air will do you well,’” one renter said. “We need to cancel or reschedule our trip. I called your contact number and received an email with the wrong travelers name on it as well as ID number. Please help, your company is better than this!”

“The property owner will give a refund if there is an emergency due to a hurricane but a national emergency doesn't qualify!” another said. “They were willing to refund the cleaning fee but we

are still out \$1200!! I am high risk due to medication I take for [rheumatoid arthritis]. My family can not afford to lose this money.”

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