

The EU Sweep

By Svetlana Rose Curmi

In today's ever technological and fast moving world, many tend to resort to the internet as a tool through which to purchase their needs, possibly even booking a well-deserved holiday online! Some might be sceptical, yet the EU is doing much to safeguard consumers' interests.

In September 2007, a systematic check of almost 400 airline ticket selling websites was carried out by national authorities responsible for the safeguarding of consumer rights in 16 participating Member States? More than 50% of websites swept showed irregularities. This resulted in authorities contacting companies and asking them to rectify their sites or clarify their position.

In EU jargon this enforcement exercise is commonly known as the EU Sweep, whereby a systematic check is carried out simultaneously in different Member States to investigate breaches of consumer protection law.

Malta was also one of the participant countries, the exercise having been carried out by the Consumer and Competition Division in collaboration with the European Consumer Centre. Two sites were flagged for misleading information, having posted an advert promoting thousands of free seats. Yet, when checked it resulted that there were no free seats available, and when available flights were identified, none of these were completely free of charge.

The 2007 Sweep was the first of its kind and set out to identify airline ticket selling websites which appeared to be in breach of the consumer protection law, that is, with no clear pricing, no availability of offers and ambiguous contract terms.

A report published by the European Commission in February 2008 shows that more than 130 sites were subject to enforcement action. So far, more than half have been corrected.

The European Commission is planning another Sweep this year. Preparations are at an advanced stage, as is work on joint enforcement actions with smaller groups of Member States.

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