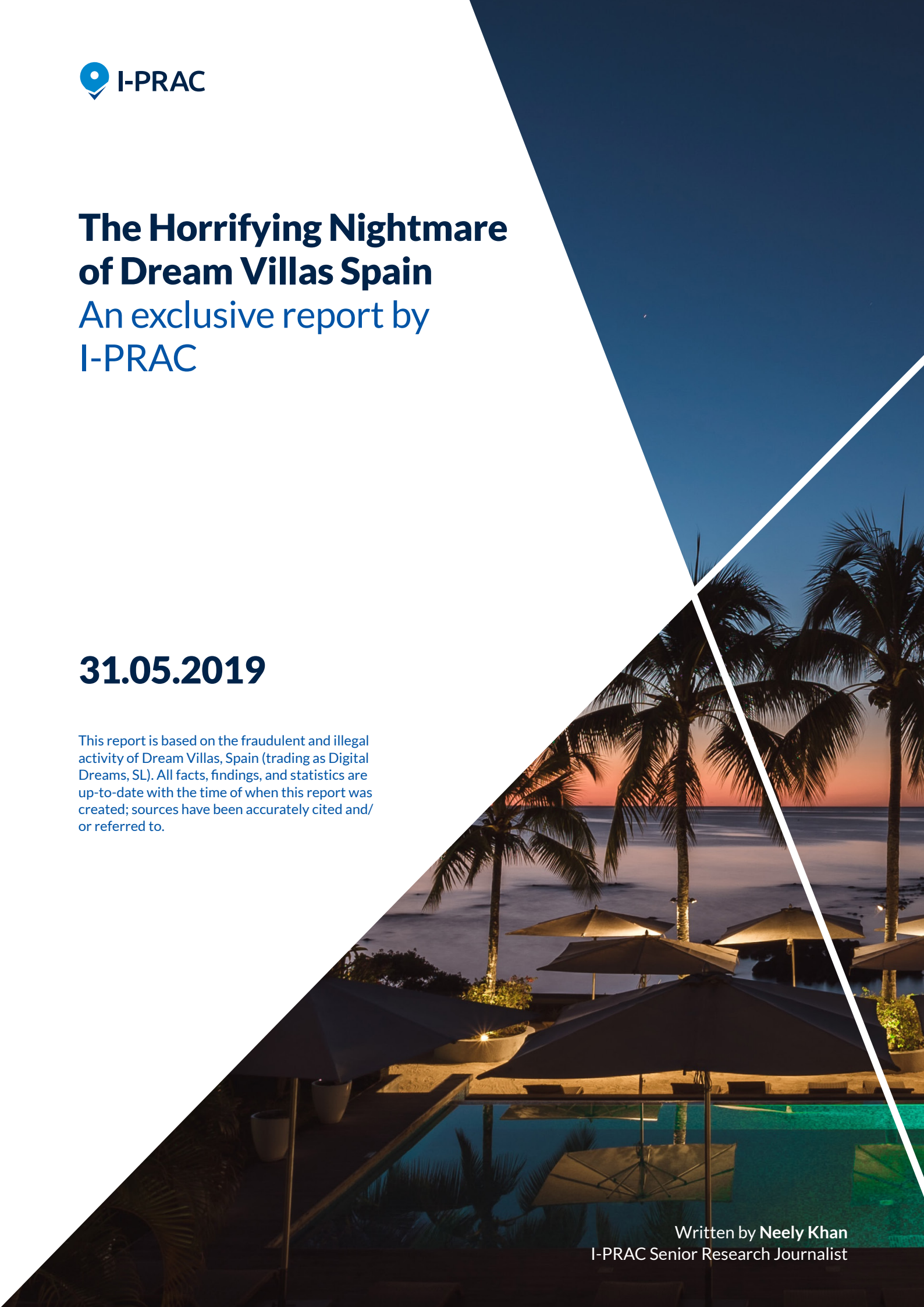


The Horrifying Nightmare of Dream Villas Spain

An exclusive report by
I-PRAC

31.05.2019

This report is based on the fraudulent and illegal activity of Dream Villas, Spain (trading as Digital Dreams, SL). All facts, findings, and statistics are up-to-date with the time of when this report was created; sources have been accurately cited and/or referred to.



Written by **Neely Khan**
I-PRAC Senior Research Journalist

The Brief: Uncovering Holiday Rental Nightmares

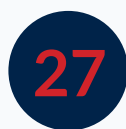
It's frightening to think that the words "holiday" and "nightmare" could even be associated together, as it isn't something you would normally imagine. However, what we're about to expose in this exclusive report is a horrifying (and notably, growing) problem that the industry not only has to face, but is inclined to take some responsibility for.

As one of **I-PRAC's** dedicated research journalists I, Neely – along with the rest of the team – am taken aback by the number of holiday rental scams that have been reported to us in the last 3 years alone. What raises even more concern is that a colossal chunk of these reports, have specifically named one fraudulent "company" in particular: **Dream Villas Spain**, or otherwise operating as **Digital Dreams SL**.

According to **I-PRAC's** recent investigations, it is estimated that the scheming operators behind Dream Villas Spain have put unsuspecting families close to **£600,000** (collectively) out of pocket, since 2017. After causing such catastrophic financial and emotional damage to their victims, I'm here to expose the terrifying lengths that **Dream Villas** has gone to, and how their fraudulent methods have been far more calculated than anybody could have ever imagined.

Before we explore our first case study, it'll be useful to know that the company that I'm investigating on behalf of, **I-PRAC** (short for International Property Rental Approval Certification) is one of the leading ambassadors of protecting travellers from property rental fraud, on a global scale. Essentially, **I-PRAC** is a verification platform, that carries out rigorous checks on property owners and rental agencies who offer short-term holiday and business rentals.

By ensuring that they're "**I-PRAC approved**", rental operators can guarantee that they are 100% legitimate and therefore, offer all-round peace of mind and security. Candidly, the company itself was set-up off the back of a family's story, and their devastating experience of holiday rental fraud. This story unfortunately became one of many for **I-PRAC's** founders, **Chris Maughan** and Mary Tangale, and their expert team.

A dark blue circle containing the number 27 in a bold, red, sans-serif font.


2017

27 reports to I-PRAC, mentioning Dream Villas Spain

A dark blue circle containing the number 43 in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

2018

43 reports to I-PRAC, mentioning Dream Villas Spain

A dark blue circle containing the number 19 in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

2019

Between the months of Jan-April (4 months only)

19 reports to I-PRAC, mentioning Dream Villas Spain

Case Study #1

The Kennedy Family

TOTAL LOSS: up to £5000

World's leading chocolate taster and owner of Kennedy's Publication's UK, Angus Kennedy was aghast when he and his family arrived at their supposed Palma based villa, for a family holiday.

**“But I don’t rent it (*the villa*) out”
said Klaus, the German owner of
the villa that had been listed on
dreamvillaspain.com.**

Somehow, the con artists had managed to capture high-quality photographs of Klaus's luxurious villa for their website, including the interiors; and had even gone as far as listing fake **Trustpilot** reviews. Kennedy described the fraudulent operation as a “very professional job”, and one that he did not suspect at all, until his family arrived at Palma de Mallorca Airport, with no sign of their pick-up taxi as promised.

Sadly, the realisation came too late. Kennedy was left stranded outside this magnificent looking villa, with a devastated wife and tired and disappointed children, who were looking forward to their Easter break.

Kennedy explained that during the time of booking, the website homepage seemed perfectly genuine and promised to “Create Your Dream Holiday Experience and Exceed Your Expectations”. Shockingly, it listed over 700 other lavish properties, all of which were part of this massive scam.

Alarm bells started ringing for the family when they tried contacting Dream Villas from the airport and the phone lines just went dead. There were no contact numbers for the supposed taxi company that had been “scheduled” to pick them up on their documents, or any means of getting through to the fraudulent operators.

As a result, the family lost nearly **£5000** in villa booking fees, airport transfers, and other “perks” that had been deceptively promised by the scammers (all paid through direct bank transfer); this figure also includes the additional money spent on alternative accommodation in Palma where the family was forced to spend the rest of their holiday.

Kennedy has reported that he communicated with a woman by the name of “Rosetta” in one of his social media videos, and is keen to share his devastating story with as many holidaymakers, as possible.

Dream Villas: A Company Operated by Con Artists

A simple Google search of “Dream Villas, Spain” will immediately bring the heinous crimes of this bogus company to light. They are not listed at Companies House nor are they a registered ABTA (Association of British Travel Agents) member; however, reports from several sources have confirmed that the company has been trading as Digital Dreams SL and is a Google verified business*. (*taken from The Mirror Online)

As well as costing travellers hundreds of thousands of pounds, the operators of Dream Villas are responsible for ruining family celebrations, children’s first holidays, and business for other legitimate rental agencies.

Their main website, **dreamvillaspain.com** (which has now been closed down), was a sinister trap for unsuspecting holidaymakers, as it boasted images of palatial villas, many of which were being advertised at a reasonable and very tempting price. These images were stolen from legitimate holiday rental websites; a crime that is shockingly easy to commit, as genuine photos of properties often fail to display a protection logo.

According to reports from **The Sun**, Dream Villa’s website itself, is said to have been running for at least 2 years; and whilst the headquarters are claimed to be based in Palma, **Jordi Cerdo** (President of the federation of tourist holidays) has been quick to stress that the company itself is Czech, in a recent interview with **Majorca Daily Bulletin**.

Either way, one thing that we *can* confirm, is that Dream Villas has been illegally running as a global operation.

Whilst the Kennedy’s paid their funds into an account in Madrid, another devastated family has been reported to pay their deposit into an Ireland based bank account; various investigations have been opened.

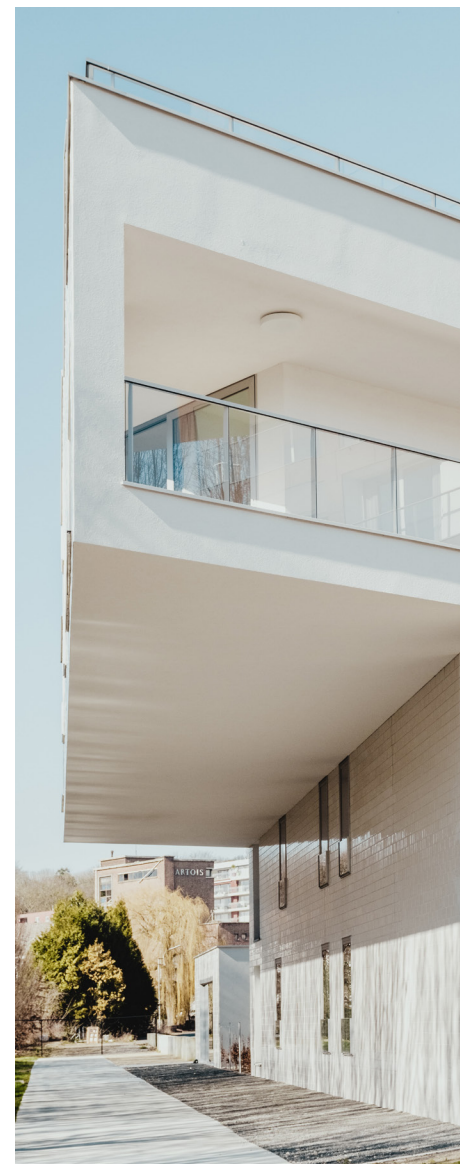
The shameless, fraudulent activity of Dream Villas has even brought legitimate rental agency owners to the end of their tether; one of whom is **Clare Taylor** of Keys & Concierge.

Taylor explains that Dream Villas “...are getting away with millions. They are just laughing. They don’t feel threatened at all”.

What’s shocking is that Taylor has spotted 5 of her properties on fake websites this year (2019), with listings on **dreamvillaspain.com**, including her own personal villa. When confronting the scammers online and asking them to remove the listings, they simply replied, “Send us proof that it is yours”*.

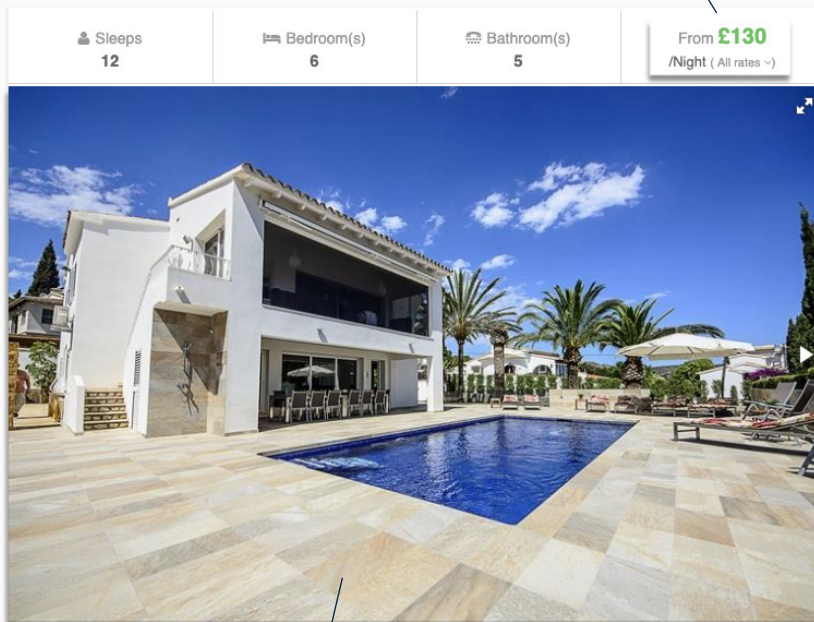
This is the outrageous extent of how callous the operators of Dream Villas are.

* As per The Sun news



Reasonable price
(but not so cheap to raise suspicions)

Fake/stolen logo



Credit: dreamvillaspain.com

Unprotected image stolen from
legitimate website

All fake

Case Study #2

The Sittingbourne Sisters

TOTAL LOSS: £5000 paid upfront into a bank account



Following the death of their mother, mums Petra and Sam Deleslie were looking forward to a much-needed dream break in Alicante. For some of the children in their family, this would have been their very first holiday.

Dedicated healthcare worker for the NHS, Petra booked a month-long stay in a luxury villa in Moreira, via **dreamvillasspain.com**. Excited by a deal that seemed so “reasonable” at first, she paid **£5000** upfront for the lavish holiday for 18 people, through direct bank transfer.

The nightmare started when Petra’s daughter’s boyfriend came across a story about a family who had been scammed by the same company. At this point, Petra’s heart sank, and she began to anxiously question why she hadn’t received any confirmation emails or communication after settling the initial deposit.

Devastatingly, after contacting her bank, Petra was told that there was nothing she nor anybody else could do, unless she could prove that the family had been scammed. The scammers replied to her last email (that demanded a full refund), telling her “not to worry” and that they would return her money in full, if that was what she wanted.

As expected, there was no sign of a refund, let alone any form of further communication. The sisters were forced to accept that they weren’t going to get any of their hard-earned holiday money back.

The Psychology of Scamming: How Dream Villas Manipulated Unsuspecting Travellers

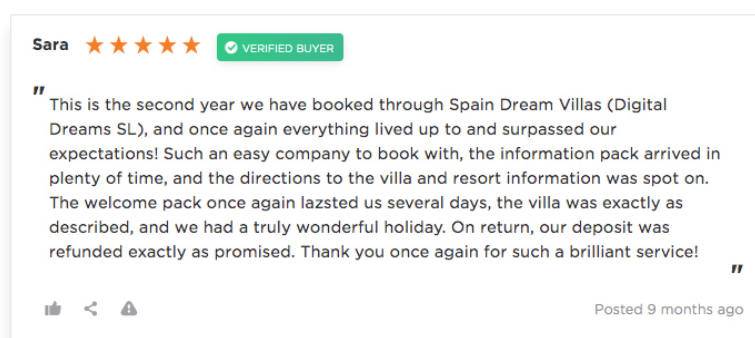
Although we have received a number of complaints about Dream Villas at I-PRAC, it is clear that the vast majority of victims are still not reaching out to share their story. This, we believe, is mainly due to the guilt and shame people feel, after they have been conned out of thousands of pounds.

Victims are often quick to blame themselves; unaware that there are holidaymakers from all walks of life who are suffering from the same devastating ordeal, every other day.

The fact is, people tend to book holidays through rose-tinted glasses. The scammers at Dream Villas were aware of this, and had been taking advantage of their victims' optimistic state of mind from the get-go; proving that this truly was a cold and cruelly calculated scam.

Upon visiting Dream Villa's main website, excited holidaymakers would be sinisterly welcomed by alluring images (of beautiful properties and happy "customers") and the insincere promise of dream holidays and exceeding expectations.

Another legitimate rental agency owner who suffered a loss because of Dream Villas, was **Nick Cooper**, of Villa Plus. He reported to **The Mirror** that a staggering 10,000 images had been stolen from his own site and repurposed onto fake ones, including **dreamvillaspain.com**. However, these sophisticated scammers strived to remain one step ahead of the game, as they backed these images and professional website copy with fake



Credit: reviews.io

reviews. We recently stumbled across a stream of positive reviews on **reviews.io**, a platform that supposedly allows its users to "Read and Write Genuine Reviews".

Astonishingly, "**Digital Dreams SL- Spain Dream Villas**" has been recommended by **44%** of reviews (582 in total) on **review.io**. Whilst the most recent reviews are exposing the company for their appalling, fraudulent activity, the earlier posts are rating them with 5 stars and highly recommending them to anyone visiting Majorca; every one of these fake entries has been shared by "Verified Buyers".

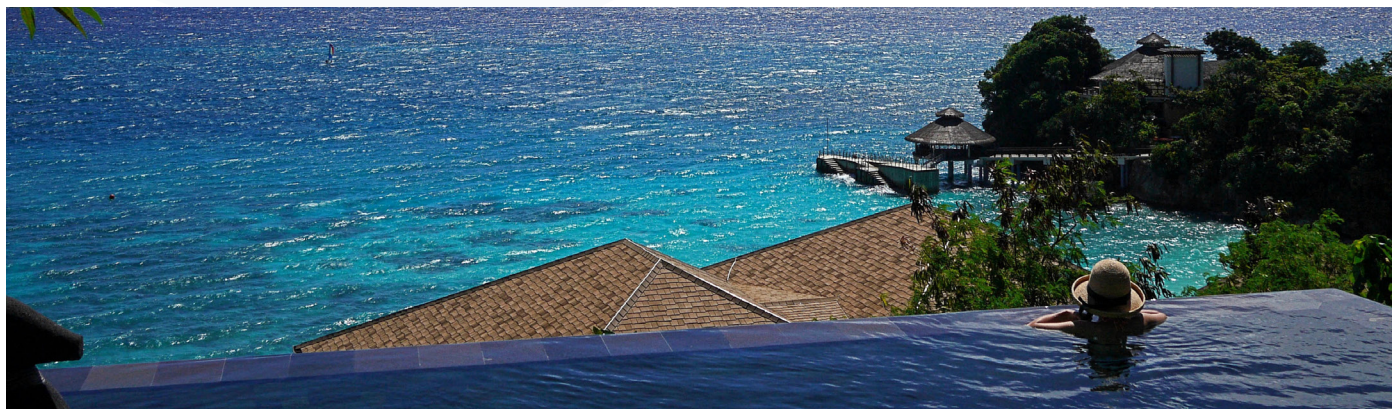
It is a common misconception that these scammers are one-man-bands, "pulling pranks" from their one-bedroom apartment, or the spare room in a take-away shop.

The reality is, the majority of fraudulent rental agencies are being operated by sophisticated and dangerously intelligent organisations. The crooked minds behind Dream Villas had educated themselves on latest trends and consumer behaviour, and were likely to have even gone as far as investing in pay-per-click and keyword research, so that their website would rank high every time a traveller would search terms like "holidays in Majorca" on Google.

By mastering the art of building relationships with customers and covering all bases as far as "social proof" was concerned, Dream Villas had callously concocted a vicious cycle that left some innocent holidaymakers near-bankrupt, with a few even needing therapy to cure them of their emotional trauma.

Case Study #3

The Bolton Family



TOTAL LOSS: £1300 (deposit for a family holiday)

West Midlands based Susan Bolton had spent weeks finding the perfect holiday villa for herself, her husband, and 2 children. Not long after the Angus Kennedy incident, she found a beautiful villa listed on **dreamvillasspain.com**, complete with convincing images and appealing descriptions.

Susan transferred a **£1300** deposit into a bank account, after which she never heard from the company again. Serious suspicions kicked in when she contacted Dream Villas regarding an airport pick-up and received no response. Then, to their absolute horror, Susan and her husband discovered that the exact villa they had supposedly booked for their holiday had been listed as “available” on a completely different website. The couple immediately went to the Press to share their devastating experience, where they learned that many other families had fallen victim to Dream Villa’s criminal activity.

The Equivalent to Robbing a Bank: When will the Authorities Shut the likes of Dream Villas Down?

The internet is flooding with questions like these, what is stopping the authorities from convicting scammers like Dream Villas or at least helping victims reclaim their money?

Unfortunately, the process is not quite as straight-forward as we'd like to hope. Even though the main website for Dream Villas has now been shut down, the chances of victims receiving any kind of "compensation" is unlikely. In fact, after delving a little deeper, we have come across reports* that claim that these two other rental agency websites have the same property listings as Dream Villas, and present them in a very similar way:

<https://www.travelvacationtour.com/ref-villa181/l.181>

> This website appears to be down

<https://www.grouptravelplus.com/en/holiday-villa-elena/l.181>

> This website is still live

**Comments from the Kent Online article*


The problem is, getting a website "shut down" is both costly and time-consuming. Firstly, the only way it can happen, is via an Official Court Judgement, meaning that the police

are ultimately powerless as soon as a fake website has been reported. The judgement process itself can take several months or even years to pass, during which time the fraudsters have already set-up another platform to continue their criminal activity on. Unfortunately, website hosting platforms such as GoDaddy and Wix.com will not close any website down, until they have received an Official Judgement from the court.

To make things even more complicated, we must also keep in mind that whilst a company like Dream Villas has been operating in Spain, the website itself could be hosted in the Czech Republic; authorities therefore, would need to obtain a Czech court judgement. Frustratingly, we are going round in circles.

Dream Villas has Targeted Thousands:





12. Re: Spain Dream Villas?

6 Mar 2019, 15:05


OMG! Please do not say this. I have just booked with them and paid the whole lot to [Ireland](#). I'm usually so cautious but everything seem genuine. What can I do? The owner has not confirmed receipt of the money even though it cleared my bank a week ago. Feel sick!

TC C

10 posts

Reply

Report inappropriate content



8. Re: Spain Dream Villas?

4 Mar 2019, 18:45

I've been dealing with this company since last Thursday, I found a beautiful villa in [Alicante](#), which they drew a contract up on, but wanted a bank transfer direct to the owner in [Ireland](#) for the full amount or half now half in 3 months, something not sitting right with me, their emails have no footer etc, when I said i wasn't willing to pay direct, they emailed back immediately saying that they have spoken with the owner and I can pay by credit card straight to them and they will pass on payment as they have payment protection (not that I can see this anywhere!), I think its fair to say this is a dodgy company!

Daniel G
St Albans, United...

2 posts

Reply

Report inappropriate content

Spotting the Sinister Signs of Holiday Rental Fraud, In Time

It is without a doubt that Dream Villas has caused its victims long-lasting damage through meticulous planning and research. By identifying the most popular tourist resorts for Brits (the likes of Majorca, Alicante, and Ibiza), they were successfully able to target unwary holidaymakers and lure them into a vicious trap.

The fraudsters have even recognised that websites such as **TripAdvisor.Com** are the usual “go-tos” for travellers, and took full advantage of this. Whilst the screenshots on the previous page show negative reviews about Dream Villas on TripAdvisor, the same post has received a few “reassuring” responses, which highly recommend the scam company and claim that the operators have been unfairly misrepresented.

One post that stands out in particular is from a user by the name of “David”, from London.

“Hi, I really don't know why some people posted this kind of negative reviews. I really wish that TripAdvisor will check proof of identity reviews before are listed on this forum. The company is real and highly recommended. We have a partnership with them to advertise few villas in Marbella and Costa del Sol and our guest was always satisfied with their services. Spain Dream Villas are a verified business on google with positive guest comments on google and reviews.co.uk. Great company and maybe because they have great prices and a lot of services is not good for other competitor rental agency.”

Upon visiting David's TripAdvisor profile, we can sensibly assume that his account was set up purely for the purpose of sharing fake reviews, on behalf of Dream Villas. His statistics indicate that he has made only 1 contribution, has zero followers and is not following any other users himself.

Another red flag is that David created his TripAdvisor profile in March 2019, exactly the same time as when he shared the aforementioned review. Although it can seem like a lot of additional “investigation”, by remaining vigilant and looking into even the most genuine-seeming reviews, travellers have a better chance of protecting themselves against holiday rental fraud and saving their hard-earned cash.

It is also well-worth remembering that being a Google-verified business does not count for much, when the business itself is not listed at Companies House. The immediate warning signs as far as Dream Villas is concerned, is that they are not a member of **I-PRAC** nor **ABTA**. For anybody who is looking to book with a holiday rental agency, it is paramount to keep up-to-date with industry standards and genuine verification platforms.

The general consensus is that travellers **under any circumstances** should not make payments to rental agencies via direct bank transfer. Lured in by the reasonable rates and “promise” of things like free welcome packs, all the victims of Dream Villas processed funds to bank accounts in Madrid and Ireland, making their stolen money impossible to reclaim.

What we advise at **I-PRAC** is that if a holiday rental offer seems “too good to be true”, then it most likely is. Since Chris Maughan and Mary Tangale launched the company in 2016, we have without a doubt noticed an increase in the number of scam stories being reported; however, we also know that a number of victims are still anxious to reach out. This ultimately means that our jaw-dropping statistics about holiday rental fraud, don't even scratch the surface.

To ensure peace of mind and 100% security, it is highly recommended that travellers book holiday villas that are **I-PRAC approved**. The short-term rental industry is seeing phenomenal growth and it has now become more important than ever to follow-through with the process of due-diligence, and make it impossible for fraudulent operators like Dream Villas to con innocent people out of their hard-earned money.



I-PRAC Head Office

Lower Ground Floor, One George
Yard, **London**, EC3V 9DF, UK

Call (0) 207 125 142

Email info@i-prac.com

www.i-prac.com

Application Centre

Bldg Five Universal Square, Devonshire
St N, **Manchester**, M12 6JH, UK

Call (0) 1613 936 081

Media Centre

Bldg Five Universal Square, Devonshire
St N, **Manchester**, M12 6JH, UK

Call (0) 1613 936 081