

# Five simple data security questions to ask your travel agent this festive season

 By [Amit Parbhucharan](#)

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When making getaway plans and booking lodges, tours, B&Bs and travel accommodations, it's common practice for many busy professionals here in South Africa to engage the services of independent travel operators or small private travel agencies - especially so ahead of the summer festive season. These travel operators are often highly trusted individuals, such as a personal colleague or someone the traveller has been dealing with for a long time.



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Travel businesses and relationships such as these are fantastic, and we fully support and encourage the development of these small enterprises (anyone who helps you take an enjoyable holiday is, by definition, a wonderful person).

However, we do want to warn travellers to take precautions to ensure that their personal data is safe in their travel operator's hands. Too often, the security safeguards in place are meager and inadequate when you account for the sensitive nature of the personal information that travel and hospitality businesses are gathering and processing.

As an example of the sensitive data that travel operators keep within their care, travellers might think of the times when they've been asked to fill in and sign a booking form – complete with personal information and sometimes including credit card information – and to scan and email it to the agent. Think also of how, in order to provide you with efficient and personal service, these agents typically carry mobile devices such as laptops, smartphones, and tablets with them, with the data stored locally on these devices or with easy access to it if needed. Additionally, they'll usually keep local copies of documents and scans pertaining to your booking on external hard drives and USB sticks as a backup or for portable access.

Unfortunately, if any of these devices were to be lost or stolen – and if that sensitive data is not properly protected and falls into the wrong hands – it's the traveller who could suddenly be at risk of identity theft or other misuses of their information, including becoming a target for house burglary whilst away. It's important for travellers to know the level of precaution and seriousness with which their travel operator regard their personal information and travel plans; otherwise, an agent's misfortune in losing devices holding this data could ultimately become the traveler's mess.

Here are some probing questions to ask your travel operator in order to gauge their level of protection (and, subsequently, your own):

### **1. Where does the personal information which I shared with you get stored?**

Your agent should have a clear and precise answer to this, showing that they do indeed have procedures for how your data is handled.

### **2. Are you able to access my personal information remotely if I need you to update or amend it? From which devices can you access it?**

It's perfectly fine for your agent to embrace mobility and have convenient remote access to your data, so long as any device that stores or can access your information is properly protected.

### **3. Do you encrypt your devices?**

The answer you want to hear for this question is a resounding "yes" – especially if your data is accessible on said mobile devices.

### **4. Do you have a backup of the data? Is that backup encrypted and properly secured too?**

You want confirmation that all instances of your data are secure.

### **5. Can you exercise remote data wiping or remote network shutoff if any of your devices are lost or stolen?**

If your travel operator encrypts your data and can answer yes to this question, then your personal information should be safe, even if the worst should happen and a device is lost or taken. This is the kind of travel operator you want to do business with because they will provide you not only with the festive holiday you're looking for but also with the peace of mind to enjoy it knowing your information is kept safe and secured.

## **ABOUT AMIT PARBHUCARAN**

Country Manager at Beachhead Solutions, Inc.

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