

WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR A FREE HOLIDAY?



A new website pairs aspiring globetrotters with “generous” men to finance their trips. But is it too good to be true?



it's all a bit *Pretty Woman*: gorgeous but broke ladies meet eligible men dying to whisk them on champagne-fuelled, all-expenses-paid trips somewhere exotic. I'm thinking helicopters, Porsches, bellinis and misunderstood Christian Grey types, who work so hard that they still haven't found someone to share their millions and chiseled good looks with. Until I come along. Swoon.

The ads for MissTravel.com sure sell it well. "Are you attractive but don't have the money to travel?" purrs the American voiceover. "What if you could ... stay in five-star resorts, eat in top-rated restaurants, and do the fun things travellers do? All for free?"

Indeed, the dating gurus behind MissTravel claim to have a little black book overflowing with entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, bankers, athletes and millionaires willing to spend their cash on poor ill-travelled beauties. Aww.

Quick as a flash, I've signed up with dreams of St Tropez sunsets, first-class travel, and gentlemen with Ryan Gosling-esque good looks.

Ready, set... go!

I follow the instructions to make my profile stand out by uploading photos of myself at a party wearing a Kate Middleton mask, in a cocktail dress, in Venice, and rowing a dinghy.

I describe myself as "a smiley customer done good" and add details about my personality and interests. "I may have princess aspirations but you'll get no diva fits from me," I add. "Instead, I'll make you laugh, match your enthusiasm for fun and quirky adventures, and do my best to charm the locals wherever we go."

I immediately get a few winks, indicating interest from "Generous Members" (the ones who pay). Yay!

Then, bingo: a man from Ireland sends a trip suggestion. He wants me to meet him in Dublin – and we haven't even spoken! I study his photo feeling unsure. He looks a bit weird.

Can you really gauge someone's personality or intentions from a photo, or an online profile? MissTravel doesn't do background checks on its members, so there's no doubt that flying abroad to meet a man via MissTravel would mean putting myself in a highly vulnerable situation. It seems like a massive leap of faith just for a free trip. Even if the generous male in question isn't an axe murderer, the reality is if a stranger has paid hundreds or thousands for your flight and expenses he is presumably expecting something in return – ie that you'll sleep with him.

A message pops into my inbox. "Hello, gorgoona," it croons. It's from a Victorian man whose photo is hidden. I envisage a handsome hottie. Clicking on his profile I find instead a slightly patchy fifty-something.

But where there's a will there's a way, right? He could have an amazing personality, fabulous taste in holiday destinations... and a heart problem.

His reply to my cheery questions leaves me unconvinced. "What do I do?" he says. "I have two hand carwashes. My interest right now nil, why? Because I am at work seven days a week. Love to meet up one day, see if clicks, and then we can have some vacation together, if interested." I'm not.

Another message pings into my inbox. It's from an awkward-looking student in Singapore, who asks for my Skype or Facebook details. I decline, wondering how I'd ever hand over my number, let alone jump on a plane.

In no time, he's asked if I want to visit Singapore – and I have to wonder, what's in it for him? Surely unbridled generosity like this comes at a price?

STAYING SAFE

"If you choose to travel with a stranger, it's very important to have as many safety measures in place as possible," explains Spaccavento. "This can include giving your travel itinerary to trusted others at home, setting specific dates and times when you will check in with friends and family via Facebook, Skype, email or phone, or even advising the Australian embassy of the countries you'll be travelling to."



What's the catch?

Unsurprisingly, MissTravel has been criticised for being a thinly disguised escort service. But its founder Brandon Wade adamantly denies the charge: "No money is exchanged. And there's no sex discussed on the website at all."

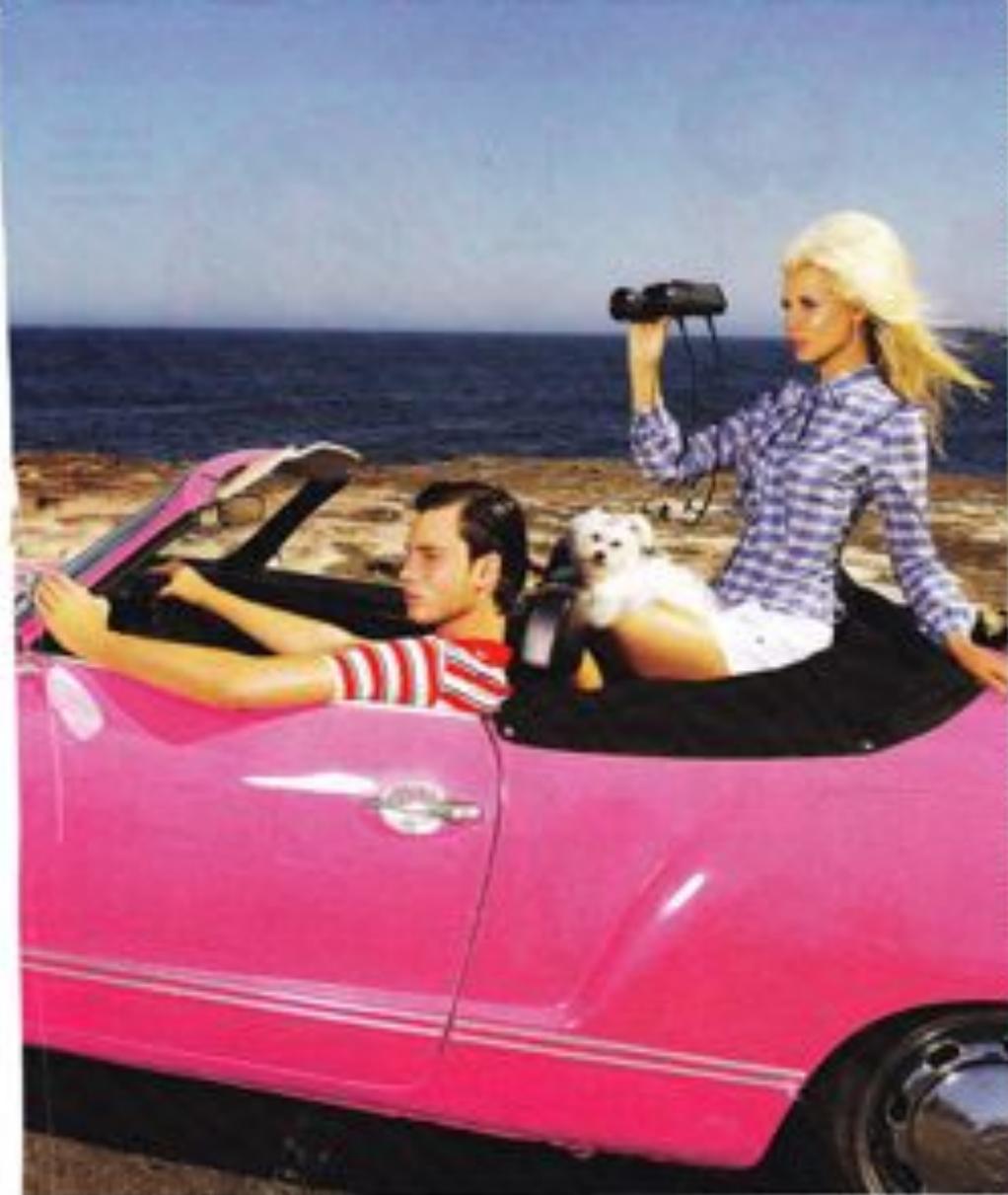
Yet it's clear MissTravel is not like most "dating" websites. I've had a decent response on other matchmaking forums, yet my "normal" snaps aren't garnering interest on MissTravel.

A glance through a few female profiles suggests the site is not about personality, per se. There are hordes of girls in bikinis, or showing cleavage. "I'm flexible in so many ways," these semi-clad stammers boast. I'm not sure I can (or want to) compete with that.

My suspicions that MissTravel is more about international hook-ups than

MissTravel.com says:

"If you are a beautiful person who wants to travel for free, just sign up as an 'Attractive Traveller'. Attractive Travellers are adventurous and open-minded people who love to travel, but lack the budget to do so. As such, you are looking to meet Generous Members who are willing to pay for you to travel or gift you frequent flyer miles, which may be redeemed for free flights."



free globe-trotting are confirmed when I message a US banker. His curt reply comes: "Send more pics." I think I know the type of photo he'd like, but he won't be getting them from me. *Delet.*

Next, I message a good-looking pilot from Paris, who's offering first-class flights and an all-expenses trip to Africa. He quickly checks my profile - then ignores me. *Charming.*

Next up is a Californian surgeon, who's looking for a "beautiful woman to travel to exotic locations with". "Soooo, any chance of taking a try-hard funny woman to an exotic location?" I message him cheekily. No amount of "refreshing" can transform my inbox message count from a big fat zero.

With my five-star Caribbean dreams abiding, I reluctantly click on the trip suggestion from my visitor in Dublin. I'm greeted with a deleted

profile: evidently my offer of a trip to the Emerald Isle has evaporated faster than a pint of Guinness.

I later discover that sending a trip proposal is the cheapskate way of gauging a woman's interest: it's free, while sending a message is 10 credits (equivalent to 85). It seems unlikely that a man who wouldn't cough up the price of a coffee to send me a message would fund a trip around the world.

Not my style

While I can certainly see the attraction of *MisTravel*, ultimately I decide it's not for me. I know I would never feel comfortable accepting such a large gift from a complete stranger, regardless of whether he expected something from me in return. So I guess it's back to camping trips after all. And really, I'm OK with that. *Charlotte Ward* 

What the experts say:



CHRISTINA SPACCAVENTO
Sex therapist and relationship counsellor (sydneysextherapists.com.au)

"What does the 'attractive female' have to do in exchange for her free trip? Does she provide company? Will she be providing sexual favours? What are the expectations of a young woman who's travelling on an all-expenses paid trip with a male companion? When we look more closely at the suggested arrangement, it becomes quite clear that this type of travel is most unlikely going to be free at all! Travelling with strangers with whom you have entered into an agreement can be fun and rewarding, but it can also be fraught with danger. There's the potential for young women to get caught up in situations that are mentally, physically or emotionally risky."



DR NIKKI GOLDSTEIN
Sexologist and relationship expert (drnikkig.com.au)

"In my opinion, this looks like a glorified version of prostitution - but it is honest. There are wealthy men who want a travel partner, and there are women willing to go that extra length to be their companion. At least this way both parties hopefully know where they stand."