International Standard

ISO 9468

Tourism and related services — Online travel agency (OTA) — Guidelines for online accommodation booking platform services

Tourisme et services connexes — Agences de voyages en ligne — Lignes directrices pour les services de plates-formes de réservation d'hébergement en ligne

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Foreword

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This document was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 228, *Tourism and related services*.

Any feedback or questions on this document should be directed to the user's national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found at www.iso.org/members.html.

Introduction

With the increasing penetration of the internet and growth in the number of smart handheld device users, as well as the growing demand for convenient tourism, the global online accommodation booking market has continually expanded and the number of the online accommodation booking platforms has grown during the past decade. Based on statistics, it is predicted that the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) from 2021 to 2026 will exceed 10 %.

While the online accommodation booking service industry continues to grow at an increasing rate, it is also facing many problems, resulting in failure to provide the promised services, which causes a large number of consumer disputes. Common problems include, for example, no room on arrival, impossibility to change or cancel a reservation, serious inconsistencies between the service description and the actual service, and the leaking of sensitive, private and financial data of the users.

It is necessary to create a global standard providing guidance on the online accommodation booking industry to promote the development of this industry around the world.

This document aims to:

— provide advice and guidance on online accommodation booking platform services;

— protect the rights and interests of users, providers and platform operators, by establishing a mutual trust mechanism among these stakeholders;

— promote the orderly and sustainable development of the online accommodation booking service industry;

— enrich existing standards and promote further standardized activities in the field of online travel agency.

Tourism and related services — Online travel agency (OTA) — Guidelines for online accommodation booking platform services

1 Scope

This document provides guidance on the operation of an effective online accommodation booking platform to meet the needs of accommodation service providers and users.

This document is applicable to online accommodation booking platform operators, accommodation service providers and users.

2 Normative references

The following documents are referred to in the text in such a way that some or all of their content constitutes requirements of this document. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

ISO 18513, *Tourism services — Hotels and other types of tourism accommodation — Vocabulary*

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the terms and definitions given in ISO 18513 and the following apply.

ISO and IEC maintain terminology databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

— ISO Online browsing platform: available at https://www.iso.org/obp

— IEC Electropedia: available at https://www.electropedia.org/

3.1
online travel agency
OTA
person or legal entity that operates a platform that offers online intermediary service between travel service providers and *users* (3.6), providing search, comparison and transaction services

3.2
online accommodation booking platform
platform
type of *online travel agency (OTA)* (3.1) that offers online intermediary service between the *accommodation service provider* (3.4) and the *user* (3.6)

Note 1 to entry: For further information, see Reference [2].

3.3
online accommodation booking platform operator
platform operator
person or legal entity that operates an *online accommodation booking platform* (3.2)

3.4
accommodation service provider
provider
person or legal entity that offers accommodation services to the *user* (3.6)

Note 1 to entry: This includes all kinds of tourism accommodation services such as hotels, short-term rental accommodation services, campsites, hostels and holiday homes.

3.5
online accommodation booking
transaction by which accommodation is booked using an *online accommodation booking platform* (3.2)

3.6
user
consumer who accesses accommodation booking and related services through the *online accommodation booking platform* (3.2)

Note 1 to entry: *Accommodation service providers* (3.4) usually use the term "guests" instead of "users".

4   General principles

Platform operators should follow the principles in ISO/TS 42501, ISO 42500, ISO/TS 42502 and ISO 32111 with regard to:

a)   integrity;

b)   transparency;

c)   authenticity;

d)   accountability and authorization;

e)   accessibility and inclusion;

f)   respect for the interest of others;

g)   competence;

h)   protection of intellectual property;

i)   protection of security and privacy;

j)   efficiency;

k)   continual improvement.

5   Responsibility

5.1   Online accommodation booking platform operator

In addition to the provisions concerning competence set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 4.7, the platform operator should:

a)   be a legal entity holding the relevant valid business-related licences;

b)   have service locations, facilities and equipment commensurate with the business and scale it engages in;

c)   have sufficient management, technical and service personnel for the platform to function;

d)   have a stable information system and security environment to ensure the provision of services;

EXAMPLE   Platform operators ensure that providers can promote and sell their accommodation and users can search for, compare and book them on the platforms.

e) establish and improve relevant mechanisms to standardize online accommodation booking services. These mechanisms should be used to guide providers to fulfil their service commitments and protect the rights and interests of users. There should also be a security mechanism for electronic transactions to maintain the operation of platform transactions;

f) in addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 4.2, 6.3.3 and 6.4.4, develop and publish the terms of use and guide users to read the terms in their entirety. The terms of use should include information reminding users of transaction risks, limitations of liability and exclusions of liability. When amending the terms of use, the platform operator should publish the changes on the platform. These terms should not unreasonably limit the platform's responsibilities, increase users' obligations and exclude users' legal rights;

g) in addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 4.3, 4.5, 6.3.2 and 6.3.4, ensure that online accommodation booking services are as accessible, understandable and usable as possible for all users, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability;

NOTE   ISO 21902 provides further information about accessible tourism.

h) keep providers' information up to date at all times;

i) not set unfair trading conditions based on extensive data analysis such as browsing records, consumption habits and travel preferences;

j) fulfil any proposed service guarantees, such as best price, change and/or cancellation guarantees;

k) in addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 6.4.6, develop and implement contingency plans for emergencies regarding platform operation, services and security management;

l) display the categories representing the different types of accommodation according to ISO 18513;

m) ensure that the final step to conclude the booking contains a prompt with only the wording "Book with a duty to pay";

n) ensure the provisions on ranking criteria set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 4.3, are followed;

o) be responsible, to the extent possible under the circumstances, for the employees and personnel of providers to which they have outsourced parts of their activities.

5.2 Accommodation service provider

Providers should:

a) be categorized according to ISO 18513;

b) present true, accurate, complete and up-to-date information, including photographs and other marketing information, and ensure correct and meaningful information descriptions, including key accessibility features (see Annex A for guidance);

c) not cancel an existing booking or a held booking without a justified reason or be unable to provide the rooms at all upon arrival; if any of these situations occur, the platform operator should communicate and coordinate with the users and providers to satisfy the needs of both parties involved at the earliest possible time and not leave it until the point of arrival at the accommodation;

d) refrain from demanding parity clauses in their contracts for antitrust and fair competition reasons.

6 Service provisions

6.1 Information service

6.1.1 General

Information provided by platform operators should be:

a) clear and concise (i.e. ideas expressed in a straightforward and easy-to-understand manner, without unnecessary words or complexity);

b) up to date and reliable;

c) available in different formats including alternative formats.

EXAMPLE Not only available in the form of text but also in audio, Braille or other formats.

The platform should also indicate the availability of additional information.

Providers should ensure:

— the availability of information about the accessibility of accommodation and services offered on their platforms;

— users can book an accessible room through their platform via an ordinary booking procedure;

— that once an accessible room has been reserved and confirmed, it is not given away.

Electronic content supplied by the OTA service provider, including web pages, billing information and emails, in applications such as marketing, bookings and reservations, should be designed according to EN 301 549.[7]

6.1.2 Information display

The accommodation information supplied by providers should be displayed accurately and completely in the relevant categories, for users to browse online conveniently (see 7.3).

In addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 5.3, the list of information may include, for example:

— overview and photos;

— price;

— room types and size;

— availability;

— accessibility;

— facilities;

— house rules;

— payment option;

— reviews;

— location;

— surroundings;

— indication of additional fees such as tourist taxes, if applicable;

— refund policy;

— sustainability initiatives.

The house rules should include, but not be limited to, rules concerning:

— check- in and check-out rules;

— cancellation policies;

— child policies;

— cot and extra bed policies;

— pets;

— assistance dogs;

— payment methods;

— age requirements.

Property highlights and frequently asked questions (FAQs) can also be displayed to show the features and benefits of the provider, as well as to provide solutions to users' common questions.

Annex A provides guidance on the information the provider should supply on key accessibility features.

In addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 6.5.1, the price policy should be displayed on the platform in a transparent manner. The displayed booking price should indicate whether it includes or excludes taxes and fees and whether there is a preferential rate for "new users". The price of the same product or service under the same trading conditions should be consistent.

If the platform operator classifies the accommodation products on its own, it should clarify the classification and matching principles and publish them. Relevant information should not be provided via mouse-over-function.

NOTE 1   It is helpful to set up easily recognizable classification signs.

NOTE 2   Mouse-over is a feature used on websites to enable interactivity and visual effects. It refers to the user's action of hovering the mouse over a specific area or element on the web page.

6.1.3   Search and browse information

The platform operator should provide:

a)   selectable and combinable accommodation information search methods, such as destination or property name, check-in and check-out dates, rooms and guest types, and point of information;

b)   reasonable sorting and filtering functionalities of the search results. The search results should be able to be sorted by level of recommendation, price and customer rating, and to be filtered by types of accommodation, location, distance, price, reviews, cancellation policy, facilities, accessibility, brands and neighbourhood.

6.2   Order service

The platform operator should:

a)   guide users to make bookings. Techniques such as picture embedding or content expansion should be used to remind the user of key information;

b)   request that the user provides accurate and factual information in addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 6.2.1;

c) provide confirmation information before users submit orders on the order details page. This information should include but not be limited to:

1) facilities,

2) room type,

3) payment options and methods,

> NOTE 1 Payment option means the choice of payment (pay now, book now pay later, or pay at hotel) when making a booking on the platform.

> NOTE 2 Payment method means the method of payment (credit card, debit card, bank account, third-party payment, etc.) used to make a payment or transfer money.

> NOTE 3 Payment method includes the medium of exchange (USD, EUR, CAD, JPY, etc.) in various currencies being used in the transaction.

4) membership rights and benefits,

5) preferential promotions,

6) change and cancellation policies,

7) check-in and check-out time,

8) special requests;

d) provide users and the providers with necessary details of users' bookings once users have submitted their booking orders. Details should include room types, the price, check-in and check-out dates, and encrypted contact information, etc., according to the business model;

e) provide confirmation to the user in relation to the room type and, in particular, the booking of an accessible room. The platform operator should have a system in place to ensure that accessible rooms are not double-booked;

f) send booking orders, change, cancellation and refund policies to providers in real-time. The provider should process the booking order in such time that it ensures a response within 24 h;

g) ensure that users can easily follow the booking process steps and check the status of their booking once the booking order is submitted;

h) according to the business model whereby the provider confirms the order, send the user a confirmation, for example by an application (app), email or short message service (SMS) within the specified time, indicating the confirmation of the user's booking and explaining the details of the booking. The platform operator should remind users of their bookings before check-in;

i) notify the user in case of a refusal or cancellation within the specified time;

j) provide a booking management service for users to manage their booking orders, such as viewing order history, searching bookings, changing or cancelling an order.

6.3 Payment service

The platform operator should provide online transaction guidance and transaction-safety-related tips.

When the user submits an order and accesses the payment page, this page should display options such as confirmation, cancellation and continuing payment.

The platform operator should provide a variety of payment options and methods. The specific payment methods and payment schedules, the processing time of the users' payments, and cancellation and refund policy corresponding to different payment options, should be clearly stated.

The platform operator requires credit card details to guarantee the booking. For pre-paid orders, the platform operator should request authorization from the user to collect and process (including through a third party) their information. The user's information can be required by processing service providers or the financial or other institution that issues payment instrument such as a credit or debit card to verify users' identity. The setting of an authorized payment should be subject to the explicit consent of the user, with the option to modify or cancel the authorization.

The platform operator should inform users of access to invoices.

6.4   Amendment and cancellation service

The platform operator should:

a)   allow users to change or cancel their booking according to the cancellation policy at the time of their booking;

b)   explain the cancellation policy of the providers and display relevant prompts, such as "free cancellation", "cancellation fee" and "non-cancellable" or "non-changeable";

c)   if the provider allows the platform such change through online connectivity provide convenient online change and cancellation of booking channels functions. Users should be notified of the result of their changes and any refund through SMS, emails or similar means of communication. Refunds should be returned according to the original payment route and the refund status should be made available to the user.

6.5   Review service

The platform operator should:

a)   establish and publish review guidelines for users to ensure content on the platform is genuine, original, readable and respectful, in addition to the requirements set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 5.6, and ISO 20488;

b)   provide online review services and set up the evaluation categories. These categories should include but not be limited to facilities, cleanliness, comfort, staff, service and accessibility, so users can submit separate "sub scores" in crucial areas;

c)   allow users to use text, pictures and other attachments, if any, to review the accommodation products and booking services;

d)   provide an explanation to the user or provider, if the user review or the provider's reply to the user's review fails to pass the verification;

e)   record and display the user's reviews and the provider's replies completely and accurately after verification;

f)   allow the user to sort and/or filter reviews by category, such as the time of year and review score;

g)   allow users to edit a review they have already submitted within a specific and limited timeframe following the overnight stay.

6.6   Customer service

The platform operator should:

a)   offer effective customer service, in addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 6.2.2, to ensure users can easily contact the customer service team and receive support when required;

b)   provide a variety of information consulting services. Service channels should include but not be limited to telephone, email, online chat (instant messaging), and FAQ. The platform operator should build a 24 h online service hotline;

c)   establish an online post-sale service system, which should include an effective after-sales service process.

6.7   Dispute resolution

6.7.1   General situation

The platform operator should:

a)   develop and implement an online complaints resolution system, to handle user complaints in a timely manner, in addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 6.4. This system should include effective channels for submitting and processing user complaints and providing timely feedback on the result of the complaint handling;

b)   coordinate directly with the provider to try and find a mutually agreeable solution to any user complaints about the accommodation, whenever possible in view of the particular circumstances of each case;

c)   assist the user and intercede on their behalf with the provider if they allege a violation of their rights during the provision of the services.

6.7.2   Special situation

In cases where there are no rooms on arrival or valid booking is changed after confirmation, the provider or the platform operator, or both, should offer alternate availability accommodation needs respecting the category of the hotel selected, the services and regime contracted and the geographic area.

In cases where the product does not match the description or there is obvious inconsistency and a solution cannot be provided, the platform operator should assist users to replace the accommodation product or make a refund.

NOTE 1   The sentence "The product does not match the description" refers to a situation in which the accommodation product information displayed on the platform is inconsistent with the actual situation through visual and other senses.

NOTE 2   "Obvious inconsistencies" refer to an insufficient number of accommodation products, lack of service content, etc.

If the platform operator offers the best price guarantee, users can claim a refund for the difference if they find the same booking cheaper on another website.

In the event of harm to the personal safety or property of the user, or the user requesting compensation for losses exceeding the transaction amount, and if the negotiation fails, the platform operator can introduce relevant organizations to mediate or assist the user to resolve disputes through arbitration, judicial and other public institutions.

6.8   Promotion service

The platform operator:

a)   can offer promotional rates, vouchers, promotional codes, discounts, and special offers from time to time in accordance with the provider;

b)   should design and promote promotional activities, such as setting up a promotion page or column, and marking or highlighting promotional products;

c)   should ensure that information such as promotion time, usage rules and the discount rate is accurate, effective and available in different formats, including alternative formats. Important information such as the booking of promotional products that cannot be cancelled should be indicated.

6.9   Member services

The platform operator:

a)   should provide member service descriptions and any modifications to the contents should be announced;

b)   can set up different levels for membership services and should define the conditions and characteristics of each level; the platform operator should adjust the membership level based on the number of completed orders within a given time;

c)   can provide paid member services; the rights and interests of paid members should be announced;

d)   can provide reward points services, such as points deduction, gift exchange, and notification of overdue points.

6.10 Emergency service

The platform operator should:

a)   provide, to the extent possible under the circumstances, warning services to remind users of relevant risks in case of natural disasters, epidemics, political turmoil and emergencies;

b)   in case of "force majeure", notify the providers and users the first time, and try its best to avoid losses caused by force majeure;

c)   establish a safeguard mechanism in case of emergency, to ensure that effective measures can be taken in time to reduce the losses that can be caused to providers and users.

6.11 Other ancillary services

The platform operator can recommend other ancillary services for users but should not set services such as pick-up and drop-off service, taxi or car rental coupons, scenic spot tickets and insurance as default options in the booking process.

7   Service guarantees

7.1   Information and financial security

7.1.1   Information security

The platform operator should establish a management framework to control information security according to ISO/TS 42501:2022, 6.6.1 to 6.6.18.

7.1.2   Financial security

The platform operator should use electronic payment services provided by banks or non-financial payment institutions with legal qualifications.

At least one means of payment should be barrier-free.

The platform operator should use reliable security technology to safeguard and encrypt users' payment instrument information when in transit to them.

The platform operator can use a third-party payment method to provide online payment to ensure the safety of funds. If the third-party payment method is not connected, other payment or supervision methods that are conducive to funding security should be adopted. Plug-ins with unsafe factors and links to bad information should not be bundled.

7.2 Privacy protection

The platform operator should establish and publish the personal privacy protection policy and ensure that user information is not disclosed, edited or revealed without the permission of the user.

In addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 4.4 and 6.6.2, and only with the consent of users, the platform operator may collect the following information:

— personal information of the user: including but not limited to name, email address, telephone number, age;

— order information: information formed by creating or booking related services through the platform;

— payment information: information of financial accounts or credit cards provided when trading on the platform;

— communication content: text messages, chat records and other information generated by users communicating through the platform.

The platform operator should allow users to access and modify personal information, inquire about their transaction information within the preservation period, and deactivate their accounts. The platform operator should delete or anonymize the personal information of users after users deactivate their accounts.

7.3 Information verification

The platform operator should:

a) formulate rules for providers and users to submit information and provide guidance for providers to list their property on the platform;

b) provide tools for providers to easily set up and manage listings/experiences, and supervise and help providers to update their information if the information changes;

c) in addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 6.2.1, 6.2.3 and 6.3.7, verify the information submitted by providers, such as the name, address, opening time, number of rooms, room type, facilities, house rules, surroundings, and other information submitted to the operator;

d) feed back the verification results to the providers in a timely manner. If the verification fails, the reasons and modification suggestions should be communicated to the provider.

8 Service quality improvement

8.1 Quality control

The platform should:

a) be accessible and usable for users with a diverse range of capabilities and characteristics;

b) track the service process, maintain good communication with providers on the platform, and provide users with accommodation and related tourism products that are consistent with the content of the order;

c) follow the provisions of EN 301 549;[7]

d) have stringent fraud detection and prevention mechanisms in place.

The platform operator:

— should continuously improve the platform, including but not limited to, registration, platform transaction, information disclosure and verification, user rights protection, information security, dispute resolution, harmful information, payments and refund methods, and spam reporting and handling:

— should handle and manage complaints from users in relation to the services or actions of providers that fall within the providers' management scope in a coordinated manner and adopt corresponding

supervision mechanisms to prevent situations such as there being no rooms on arrival or random price increases from occurring due to the fault of the provider;

— should provide access to anyone who identifies a suspicious activity to report it to their customer service team, so their fraud team can investigate the activity;

— can encourage users to report vulnerabilities discovered on any associated internet sites to keep platforms safe and secure.

8.2 Review management

In addition to the provisions set out in ISO/TS 42501:2022, 5.6, the platform operator should employ strict guidelines and quality control, such as taking restraint measures against false reviews and malicious reviews, to ensure that all reviews on the platform are relevant, accurate, helpful and genuine.

The platform should have people and automated systems specialized in detecting fake reviews submitted to the platform. If the platform operator finds any, they can delete them and, if necessary, take action against those responsible.

The platform operator should report and inform about the reviews received by the users to the accommodation service provider, so that the provider can consider them in its continuous improvement.

The platform operator should have measures in place to deal with the following behaviours of providers:

— publication of user reviews on their own or by a third party;

— use of false accounts or evaluation of fake orders;

— inducement of users to make positive comments or negative comments on competitors in exchange for benefits such as cash, gifts from members and room upgrades;

— use of coercion, account theft, operation of user terminal equipment to make favourable comments that are not intended by users, or to delete negative reviews.

The platform operator can publish every user's review they receive, whether positive or negative. However, the platform operator should not display any review that includes or refers to, among others:

— politically sensitive comments;

— promotional content;

— illegal activities;

— personal or sensitive information (e.g. emails, phone numbers, credit card information or name of the persons);

— swear words, sexual references, hate speech, discriminatory remarks, threats, or references to violence;

— spam and fake content;

— animal cruelty;

— impersonation (e.g. if the writer is claiming to be someone else);

— any violation of platforms' review guidelines.

8.3 Continuous improvement

The platform operator should carry out the service quality evaluation or opinion survey periodically. Improvement measures should be proposed to enhance the favourable rate and service satisfaction.

The platform operator should improve accessibility information services to meet the online access and booking needs of the elderly, people with disabilities, and other special groups.