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SA travellers left high and dry

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Antoinette Slabbert

Pretoria - South African travel agents on Wednesday searched in vain for news that a wholesale merchant in the outward travel industry was in financial straits.

The telephones of Top Holidays & Travel, which an industry leader says is one of the largest suppliers of travel packages to South Africans travelling to global destinations, were unanswered all day and its office doors remained tightly shut.

Now Media, which has various media channels in the tourism industry, reported on Wednesday morning that Top Holidays was in arrears with payments to the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and that its office rental was two months overdue.

Various staff members told Sake24.com they had been paid only to December 19. One said that on December 22 and 23 she had to move clients from one hotel in Thailand to another because a hotel refused them accommodation because of an outstanding Top Holiday account.

On January 5, when the business was due to open after the Christmas holiday, the staff were apparently sent home. Chief executive Brian Cunningham ostensibly said the company would apply for liquidation that day and employees should return on January 12 for further information.

According to Amanda Hardy, spokesperson for the retail travel agent Flight Centre, her group has been struggling to get hold of someone at Top Holidays for three days.

"We are worried," she says. Top Holidays is one of Flight Centre's suppliers. According to Natalia Thompson, an editor at Now Media, other travel agents are also at their wits' end.

"I have just received an e-mail from a travel agent whose clients plan leave for overseas on January 25. The travel agent paid the total amount to Top Holidays, but no one knows whether Top Holidays paid it over to the service provider at the destination."

Robyn Christie, chief executive of the Association of South African Travel Agents (Asata) reckons clients who paid Top Holidays for their reservations using Visa or MasterCard credit cards should be able to get their money back.

According to Michael Tatalias, chief executive of tourism services association Satsa, on December 21 Cunningham resigned as director of Satsa and cancelled Top Holidays's membership.

This means that the insurance cover for clients in the group's small inbound activities has lapsed. André Viljoen, chief executive of the Cullinan Group, which owns Thompsons Tours, reports that demand in the outward tourism industry fell 20 to 25% in the last quarter of 2008, but improved slightly in December.

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