

!!! Beware of scams when looking for an Apartment !!!

Fraudsters repeatedly place fake advertisements on real estate portals on the Internet and lure people with low rents in good locations in seemingly legitimate advertisements. They pretend to be estate agents or landlords. Their scam is always the same: the new tenants are asked to pay the deposit or the first rent in advance. However, the apartments do not exist or have already been rented out.

A great, fully furnished apartment at a very low price. And in a prime city location. - An offer that is too good to be true.

Real estate fraud always follows similar patterns

Fraudsters take advantage of the lack of housing and place advertisements for rental apartments at the best conditions on real estate exchanges on the Internet. People looking for an apartment should take a close look at the rental offers.

Rentals from abroad

In one variant, the criminals pretend to be English or American, for example, who have inherited the apartment to be rented out. Or they say they have worked in Germany in the past and want to rent out their old home after moving abroad for professional reasons.

After an advance payment of the first rent and the deposit by bank transfer to a domestic or foreign bank account or by cash transfer, the keys are to be sent to the new tenant via a parcel service or an agency.

However, people looking for an apartment are then left without a new home and without the money. This is because some of the apartments offered online are vacation homes or pictures of apartments from other advertisements; the apartment belongs to another owner who is unaware of the scam. In some cases, the apartment on offer does not even exist.

Caution: Advertisements appear trustworthy and reputable due to identity theft

In a current rental fraud scam, potential tenants are contacted by supposed property managers via online portals. They are given the opportunity for a "contactless individual viewing", during which they are given access to a key box using a numerical code so that they can view the apartment alone and at their leisure.

After the viewing, the victims receive confirmation of the apartment by telephone and sign the tenancy agreement online. The deposit, the first month's rent and often money for furniture supposedly to be taken over are then transferred to the alleged real estate company. But as soon as the victims arrive at their new front door, they realize that the rental agreement is fake and the apartment has long since been rented to someone else.

What makes this scam particularly perfidious is the fact that the fraudsters steal the identity of genuine real estate companies. They create fake websites and exposés using the data and logos of real companies.

Even if potential tenants become suspicious and check the company details, everything appears legitimate.

The account details provided by the companies also give little cause for suspicion: The victims transfer their money to German accounts with the names of the supposed real estate companies as account holders. However, the account holder and IBAN are not matched when transfers are processed, so the money reaches the criminals despite the false information. In some cases, unsuspecting people act as so-called financial agents who make their bank accounts available for a commission without knowing that they are involved in criminal activities.

The fraudsters operate with several apartments at the same time and act without the owners' knowledge. Even tenants who temporarily sublet their apartment become victims, as the fraudsters have their apartments inspected and sublet them while the actual tenants are abroad, for example.

These indications may point to real estate fraud

The classic core of a fraudulent real estate ad is often a very affordable apartment in top, renovated condition in a sought-after location.

A specific request for payment before the viewing is unusual. Reputable landlords and estate agents do not expect sensitive data to be handed over in advance. Personal data, such as proof of income, Schufa self-disclosure or any guarantees, are only handed over after they have met the prospective tenants in person during a viewing.

Other indications of fraud in housing advertisements may include

- Request for money transfer before actual viewing
- In particular, requests to transfer money using cash transfer services
- Service charges too low
- Rental price does not match the residential area/amenities
- Property does not match the residential area
- Photos look like from a catalog
- Unusual amount of modern furnishings
- Missing contact details
- Contact in German hardly possible
- Request to send a copy of the identity card

Recommendations for finding accommodation online

- Be suspicious of low prices or additional costs for advertised apartments and houses.
- Make sure that a landlord, property manager or estate agent is present at the viewing.
- If in doubt, check the reliability of an estate agent: In Germany, estate agents require a broker's license, and a complete legal notice and other apartment listings on the estate agent's website are also an indication of trustworthiness.
- Never pay in advance: only pay once you have seen the apartment and signed a rental contract.

What you can do if you have been cheated

Legally, it is fraud if you make payments on the basis of a fake housing advertisement. If you are looking for accommodation and have been taken in by a fraudulent advertisement, have suffered financial loss or have already passed on your details (copy of ID) to the fraudsters, you must file a criminal complaint with the police. - You can also do this online.

If you have already transferred money to a supposed landlord, ask your bank to reverse the payment immediately. Please note: If you paid by direct debit, you can request a refund within eight weeks.

You should also report the scam to the real estate portal concerned in order to protect other people looking for accommodation from the same scammers. Many internet portals with housing advertisements have a report button: Anyone who discovers a suspicious ad can report it by clicking on it. The ads are then checked. If the suspicion is confirmed, they are taken offline.