



SPECIAL REPORT

Don't Book a Bad Hunt!

12 Essential
Tips from
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Every year, *The Hunting Report* receives scores of complaints from hunters who are unhappy with the way a hunt was handled for them. Invariably, a number of these hunts were booked at one of the hunting shows, where the hunter liked an outfitter or agent's presentation, marketing materials and apparent sincerity. Yet when the hunts took place, things were either not as they were represented or as the hunter expected. So, what can you do to minimize your chances of booking a bad hunt, or simply a hunt that's not right for you? Here are some tips:

1) First of all never book a hunt based solely on what an outfitter/guide or booking agent tells you.

If you have an established relationship with an agent or operator, that's one thing. But to plunk down thousands of dollars based on a brochure and how sincere someone looks when you meet them is not a wise way to commit your limited time and hunting dollars. Save yourself the grief of a bad experience by investing a little more time and effort on research before booking a hunt.

2) Decide up-front what kind of hunt you are interested in and capable of doing.

Be honest with yourself! If you're not in good physical shape, a backpack mountain goat hunt or a spot-and-stalk brown bear hunt in muskeg probably isn't a good idea. Look at boat-based hunts instead. Learn as much as possible about the hunt you're interested in before trying to book; that way you'll know the right questions to ask.

3) As part of your research, check The Hunting Report's database of articles and hunt reports on our website (www.huntingreport.com).

These will help you understand the different hunting opportunities out there

and shed some insight on the ups and downs of the hunt you are considering. For example, if you've hunted only whitetails and Rocky Mountain mule deer but are interested in desert mule deer hunting, it helps to understand that you will not see large quantities of these deer because they require much larger territories just to survive in the kind of habitat where they live. Hunting techniques may also be very different from what you are accustomed. Unrealistic expectations can ruin a hunt, so make sure you understand exactly what you are getting into, how the hunt will be conducted, what the conditions are, etc. Never assume any aspect of a hunt.

4) Check out operators ahead of time.

Many of the shows will list their exhibitors on their web site or in their literature. Look over the list and spend some time online looking up the operators that interest you, or contact them. If there's enough time, ask them to send you some information. That way you can narrow down your search before the show, and you'll already be familiar with the operators you visit.

5) Also, check The Hunting Report web site for hunt reports on operators.

You can search by specific operator and see what other hunters had to say about their experiences with them. Most reports list some kind of contact information for the hunter, so you can usually contact them with more specific questions. Don't discount an operator because one hunter complained about a hunt, and don't assume that a rave review from another hunter means a particular operator is right for you. One person's hunt-of-a-lifetime is another's hunt from hell. Your goal when talking to other hunters is to figure out if the experience they are describing is one you would enjoy.

6) Always ask operators for references and always call all of them.

Get references for the last three to five years, including the last hunting season. This will give you a picture of the operator's performance over a long period. The last two years will give you the most recent snapshot on

what to expect. Ask for references who were successful on their hunts and some who were not. If an unsuccessful hunter still recommends an operator, that's a good sign. Also, never assume that the photos of huge trophies you see in a brochure or web site are typical results. When an operator gives you an average or a range in success or trophy scores, remember that the results of your hunt could just as likely fall on the low end of the scale as on the high end.

7) Ask specific questions and do not accept general or ambiguous responses.

If a reference tells you the guides are great, ask what makes them great. Excellence, like beauty, is very much in the eye of the beholder. Make references tell you about guides' personalities at the campfire, their ability to spot and put you on game, their understanding of a bowhunter's special needs, their ability to adapt a hunt to a client's capabilities, etc. When they say there's "plenty" of game, ask about overall numbers, various species, trophy quality animals, accessibility, shot distances, how spooky the animals are. Remember that some hunters are happy only if they see numbers of game, while others only want to see "trophy" quality game. If someone says the terrain in an area is easy, do they mean rolling hills, walking, climbing, driving most of the time, sparse cover? Is it easy for a fit 30-something or easy for a 70-year-old with two knee replacements? Get specifics and watch with care for conflicting information from references or the outfitter.

8) Make sure you understand the fair chase standards of your hunt.

This is important in many destinations. For example, much of the hunting in South Africa is on fenced ranches. Some are very large. Others are not. Some hunts are for a specific animal on one ranch. Other hunts allow you to look over a number of trophy quality animals on more than one property. Some properties are enclosed by only a perimeter fence. Others are subdivided within. So, while a property may encompass 50,000 acres, the hunting areas within it may be much smaller. Many operations in New Zealand,

Argentina and Saskatchewan are behind a wire as well. Some New Zealand operators use a helicopter to hunt tahr and chamois. Others offer foot hunts for the same species. Never assume the specifics of a hunt. Always ask for details.

9) Ask for a complete breakdown of charges.

Some countries charge an ammo tax or area fee. In Zambia, for example, you must pay a fee to transfer to another Game Management Area. Also, ask about charter fees. In many cases, the cost of these could double if other hunters are not on the same flight with you and you are the only passenger. Also be sure you understand any sliding scales for trophy fees. And make sure you understand what charges are included in the hunt package and what is not. Extra fees to watch for include the cost of firearm imports, meet-and-greet services, hotel stays before or after the hunt, transfers, CITES permit fees, etc.

10) Check to make sure your guide/outfitter is legal.

Every year hunters learn they were guided by someone who is not legally allowed to guide. For example, only a Zimbabwean registered PH or safari operator can conduct hunts in Zimbabwe – no freelancers from outside are allowed to guide or outfit. Contact the wildlife department in the state or province you plan to hunt and ask how to check on your guide/outfitter's status. Some states require formal licensing. Others require registration or membership in an association. While you are doing this, ask, too, if there are any complaints on file against your operator.

11) Seriously consider an operator who is a member of the local professional hunters association.

All of these groups have stated codes of ethics and conduct by which their members must abide. They also check to make sure an operator is legally able to hunt where he is operating. While these groups may not be able to take legal action against violators, they can sometimes provide you with some recourse should something go wrong. Also, an expulsion from one

of these groups should be a red flag. If you use a booking agent, there is also an association called the American Association of Professional Hunting and Fishing Consultants (AAIPHFC).

12) Finally, many hunting operators provide a contract that you must sign.

Some destinations, such as the state of Alaska, require this. Be sure to read the contract in its entirety. Contracts should contain the terms and conditions under which you will be granted a refund should you have to cancel or if something goes wrong. It should also spell out what the operator is responsible for providing and what the hunter is responsible for doing. Make certain that you are in agreement with all the terms and conditions. Knowing what's in there will help you avoid a situation where the contract you signed comes back to bite you!

Bonus tip: While not a tip for avoiding a bad hunt, we strongly recommend purchasing travel insurance.

And, if you are going more than a few hundred miles from home, a Global Rescue medical and/or emergency evacuation membership. In the event that something beyond yours or the operator's control goes very wrong, you'll have a backup in place.

Not every hunt is right for every hunter. Be certain the hunt you book is the right one for you by using all of The Hunting Report's resources! A monthly subscription with our E-mail Extra upgrade is a powerful hunt research tool providing problem solving advice and unbiased, critical reviews on hunting opportunities around the world. Unlimited access to our database of past articles, hunt reports and trophy photos with the name of the hunt facilitator allows you to research the history of our assessments on particular hunting opportunities and operators. It also gives you access to other hunters that you can contact directly for more information on their experiences. No one else provides hunters with this depth of unbiased, independent information and advice on world hunting. Contact us at 800-272-5656 or see our web site at www.huntingreport.com. One bad hunt will cost you more than a lifetime of subscriptions to The Hunting Report. ■