



The Independent News Service For Hunters Who Travel

And Finally: New Hunting Marketplace May Be Next "Industry Disruptor"

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By Barbara Crown, Editor-in-Chief

Online travel booking services like Trivago, Kayak and TripAdvisor have "disrupted" the whole travel industry, changing the way people plan and book their travel-but would you book hunts this way? There's a new online service that's poised to revolutionize the way outfitters market hunts and hunters book their trips. BookYourHunt.com is billed as an "online marketplace for hunting" by founder Aleksei Agafonov, who says his site brings transparency to hunt pricing and the booking process. BookYourHunt lets you review and comparison shop for hundreds of possible bookings.

When we first learned of BookYourHunt, we were somewhat skeptical, expecting some sort of online catalog. But we looked into it with the encouragement of James Reed from Sports Afield Magazine. Reed joined BookYourHunt as a partner and director of North American operations and was excited about the service, expecting it to be the next big development in how hunters book their trips. We also learned that well-respected outfitter Jim Shockey was a cofounding partner and featured in a number of video tutorials for site visitors. So we took a serious look, and a catalog of hunts is not what we found.

Agafonov, a dedicated traveling hunter, started the company in 2015. He got the idea for BookYourHunt after learning that he'd overpaid for many of the hunts he'd booked and taken through third parties. He wanted to create a transparent "marketplace" where a hunter could easily sort, compare and find the right hunt at the "real" price. He started with only three outfitters and just a handful of offers on his site. Today he has more than 280 outfitters signed up with more than 18,000 hunts offered in nearly 40 countries.

Tutorials show you how to use the site, which is designed to be transparent, telling hunters who the operator is, where the hunt takes place and how much it costs. It is organized a bit like some of the airfare and hotel booking sites but customized to hunters' needs. You can search by region, species or hunting method (such as driven hunts or bowhunts). Each of these sections prominently displays how many trips on BookYourHunt.com meet your criteria, the number of outfitters offering those trips and the starting price. You can also search by classification, such as "dangerous game" or "predators." A filter allows you to narrow your searches even more. You can select a budget (in one of several currencies) and a date range-no use looking at listings for dates you can't travel or prices you don't want to pay. More filters let you add species, select a difficulty rating (easy, medium or extreme) and even filter for hunting only unfenced areas. Search results show prices and a number of photos that illustrate the territory, lodging and recent trophies taken. Another click gets you a full description of the outfitter, where you would be hunting, what the area is like (with a map), services offered (such as rental guns), what is included in the posted price and what is not included, plus payment terms and a cancellation policy.

Agafonov stresses that BookYourHunt is not a booking agency. Instead it allows and encourages you to communicate directly with the outfitter through the site. Your contractual agreement and payments go straight to the outfitter and BookYourHunt never touches the money. The outfitter pays them directly. So why bother booking through the site? Well, BookYourHunt says it guarantees the best price (even agreeing to match any price the outfitter has marketed elsewhere) and protects you from extra charges after the fact. The outfitter cannot raise prices or include add-on charges later. BookYourHunt also offers 24/7 support from a team of experts located around the world should you have questions or need help. That team includes owner-partners Jim Shockey, James Reed and Agafonov himself.

As for the outfitters featured on BookYourHunt, Agafonov says he works with only ethical operators practicing fair chase hunting and sustainable use of wildlife. Operators must be members in good standing of their regional professional hunters' association. Agafonov says they further vet the outfitters they work with (including looking them up in *The Hunting Report* database). They also provide their own verified reviews from hunters who have booked through the BookYourHunt site.

We spoke with some of those hunters. Aaron Simser, of the taxidermy company Artistic Visions Wildlife in Pennsylvania, says that because of his business he already knows a lot about sheep outfitters and regions that produce good trophies. But he went to BookYourHunt because the prices advertised were up to 25% lower than what he found through other sources. He spoke numerous times with Agafonov at the SCI show in Las Vegas and at the Boone & Crocket Awards presentation where Book Your Hunt was an event sponsor. "I got a sense that Aleksei's dealings were honest," he says.

Simser decided to book a Kamchatka snow sheep hunt through BookYourHunt for himself and a client. "I'm very particular and I had lots of questions. Aleksei helped me sort the options based on what I wanted. The outfitter did not speak much English, but BookYourHunt has translators who got me timely answers to all of my questions." Simser reports paying about \$13,000 for his Russian sheep hunt and says he got exactly what he was expecting with no additional costs or surprises. He's so happy with his experience that he is returning to Russia through BookYourHunt and recommends the site to all his clients.

We also spoke with John Baker, who had just returned from a Marco Polo argali hunt in Tajikistan arranged through BookYourHunt. "The hunt and experience exceeded my expectations," he says. Baker had previously taken a 57-inch Marco Polo and wanted to return for a 60-plus-inch ram. He killed a 62x60 ram. He says he researched the hunt with a number of booking agents he'd previously used but wasn't happy about "significant" trophy fees they were proposing for a sheep in this size range. Baker corresponded with Alex Sharapov of BookYourHunt and arranged a hunt at what he says was a very competitive fixed price for the quality sheep he wanted. He says it was a simple process and that Sharapov kept in regular contact with him leading up to his hunt, even sending pre-scouting reports about several big sheep the outfitter had located for him. "There were no issues, none of the upselling games that you commonly hear about with Marco Polo hunts at other camps. This was a very big selling point for me," says Baker. "I like the business approach of BookYourHunt, as it's transparent and more competitively priced." He has already booked a second hunt through them for Kamchatka snow sheep in Russia.

From the outfitter side, we spoke with Sandy and Alex McDonald of McDonald Safaris, one of the original three outfitters to work with Agafonov. "BYH is a very professional and transparent

outfit; it is not a traditional booking agency," Sandy McDonald tells us. He says the system forces both outfitters and clients to work within a "commissions honor system," attracting the right clients and service providers. "Aleksei is a very thorough and ethical businessman and has spared no money in creating BYH in terms of IT development, making it a world leader. It has been a great experience working with him and an even better experience sitting around the campfire with him."

Alex McDonald echoed that, saying "Alexei's first African hunt was at our Lebombo concessions in July 2012. We have since hunted together a few times in Mozambique, South Africa and even Europe. If there is a *Hunting Report* prize for most ethical hunter, I suggest you award it to him. As a businessman, he is just as ethical and straightforward.

"The concept, as you can imagine, was new to us all with the pros and cons put on the table to see if it was in fact doable. To Alexei it had to be done, and we quickly learned when he decides on doing something there is nothing that will get in his way. He has dedicated 100% time and effort in getting the best team to create BYH.

"Apart from being an outfitter on the website, I have become a client/hunter of BYH and bought a Russia brown bear hunt for my brother and me from one of the outfitters on BookYourHunt. Being just a PH from Africa, my knowledge of Russian outfitters is limited; I was able to find the best prices and outfitters to make a comfortable decision on booking."

Is BookYourHunt right for every hunter? Probably not. If you're not comfortable researching or communicating online, you probably won't like using the site. If you have a longstanding relationship with a booking agent or PH you trust, you may not want to give that up. And if you enjoy negotiating your own deals down to the last detail, this may not be the place for you either. But we suspect it will be right for many hunters looking for another way to find the right hunt at the right price. If you use this service going forward, please file a report.

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