

Sit Down. Shut Up. And Buckle Up.

By Joe Brancatelli

SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 2023 -- Today we should talk about many things: cabbages and kings, the government's attempt to block the JetBlue-Spirit deal, Hilton's new bottom-fishing brand for low-end motel conversions, United appointing Oscar the Grouch as the airline's [chief trash officer](#) and maybe even who'll got bitch-slapped at this year's Oscars.

But just between you, me and the cabin walls of our next flight, let me ask: Do you want to die? Is your frequent flying really an elaborate, expensive ruse to disguise a death wish?

Or is it a comprehension problem? Tell me: What part of "Buckle your seat belt" don't you understand?

You'll forgive me if I'm angrier than usual this week. The news that at least seven fellow travelers were hospitalized earlier this month when a Lufthansa jet hit vicious turbulence on a flight from Austin to Frankfurt makes me crazy. The thought that the A330 needed to divert to Washington/Dulles to care for the injured infuriates me.

There is no debate here. No shades of gray. No moral imperatives or civil rights issues to balance. There is nothing subtle to comprehend. This is not about us against the airlines.

When you're flying, sit down, shut up and keep that seat belt buckled low and tight across your waist. Always. Full stop.

I cling tenaciously to the belief that frequent flyers are smarter than the average bear. You are people of influence in the business world. You travel around the world and experience things Joe Six Pack and Linda Lunch Pail will never experience. You are people of wealth and taste.

So why is it so hard for you to understand that traveling five or six hundred miles an hour in a metal tube cruising five or six or seven miles above the earth is risky business? Why can't you just accept that in-flight turbulence is dangerous and potentially fatal and that the simple act of keeping your seat belt fastened could keep you alive?

Why is it that people who wouldn't back their car out of their garage without fastening their seat belt suddenly feel invulnerable on an airplane? What possible message are you sending to the airlines by indignantly unbuckling your safety belt just for the sake of saying it is unbuckled?

I won't waste your time or mine by recapping what you may have already heard or read about the Lufthansa incident. I won't bother massaging the facts about how many people have died in recent years due to turbulence; how many have been seriously injured; how many incidents there have been; and how many travelers suffer minor injuries each year. These are things you can google for yourself if you insist on stupidly defending your right to unbuckle and be unsafe at any speed. And I will not make a big deal of the statistics that say one in five airline injuries are related to in-flight turbulence.

All I will say is this: The Lufthansa jet that departed from Austin was flying in clear skies until it encountered what the pilot called an "unanticipated" storm in the skies over Tennessee. "I seriously thought we were going to die," one passenger said. Videos and photos posted to social media show food and service items--it was the tail end of the dinner service--scattered in the aisles. There was no warning, no fasten-seat belt alerts and unbuckled passengers were tossed around like proverbial rag dolls.

This particular incident isn't even the worst we've endured in recent months. Dozens of passengers were injured in December when a Hawaiian Airlines flight from Phoenix hit unexpected turbulence about 30 minutes before landing in Honolulu. Two days after the Lufthansa incident, a Southwest Airlines flight from Baltimore to Raleigh diverted to Myrtle Beach when surprise bad weather caused some passengers to vomit and others to pass out. And last week a former White House official in the Clinton and Obama Administrations died when a private jet hit turbulence over New England.

So I will say it again: Sit down. Shut up. Buckle your seat belt. Always. Full stop.

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