

Vacation Safety Should Include Safe Rental Cars

by Frank Whyte

How safe are rental cars?

The rental car industry can't answer this question, at least not consistently.

When asked in general terms about rental car safety, industry insiders boast that their vehicles are late model, low mileage cars that are inspected upon return from each rental.

However, the Planet Feedback consumer web site (www.planetfeedback.com) provides fascinating reading on how rental experiences go wrong. There, you'll find consumer testimonials entitled "rent-a-death-trap," "car not properly maintained," and "car rental from hell."

When rental car industry insiders are asked about one of these scenarios, they tend to wash their hands quickly. They point-out that renters occasionally fall victim to the abuse and neglect of previous renters. And with thousands of cars to maintain, rental car companies don't always find the gremlins planted by yesterday's fiendish customers. They quote from the gospel of Sergeant Schultz: "I know nothing!"

It's this "fresh-as-a-daisy" or "ridden-hard-and-put-away-wet" inconsistency that attracts the skepticism of consumer advocates.

Since the rental car industry can't consistently tell us whether their cars are consistently safe, there's no way for the public to know.

You might expect a regulator—a federal or state agency—to track consumer complaints, reported defects, and accident statistics relating to rental cars. If rental car deficiency data trended in a certain direction, regulators would react accordingly.

Nope. There's no regulatory oversight over rental car safety. Buses? Yes. Trains? You bet. Airplanes? Of course.

Rental cars remain the one part of your journey where you're absolutely on your own. Nobody's tracking them from a safety standpoint, and nobody's pushing for minimum maintenance standards.

Rental cars are the untamed wilderness of the travel industry.

Industry insiders will point to the "voluntary responsibility" of their

industry. Voluntary responsibility? Really?

The same people who routinely hard-sell usuriously expensive and largely redundant insurance policies to tourists: Those are our trusted allies in consumer protection? Really?

I'm one of those conservatives who normally demands less regulation, smaller government, and decreased bureaucracy. Yet, I'm calling for more rental car oversight. It's the responsible thing to do.

Somebody needs to step-up to the plate on rental car safety, and that means that you and I—regular citizens—need to pressure our public officials.

Specifically, you should ask your state's Attorney General what steps he or she has taken to monitor rental car safety issues. Then, you should ask your Member of Congress which federal agency they propose to oversee rental car safety standards.

These questions need to be answered, and wouldn't it be great if they were answered before you loaded your family into a vacation rental car?

Frank J. Whyte, Ph.D. is an organizational psychologist and corporate trainer. His extensive travel schedule led to his emergence as an expert in business travel. After a nightmarish experience with a rental car, Whyte became an advocate for rental car safety, which he describes as the "untamed wilderness" of the transportation industry.

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