

Dive Travel (part one)

by Cal Kothrade

For most of North America, this past winter has been particularly brutal. One of the coldest on record. Though the steady cold extended the ice diving season, and made for some good conditions in my neck of the Midwest woods, the seemingly never ending polar vortex had another, unintended effect. It greatly intensified this cold water diver's desire to submerge someplace warm. Almost as if I had used a crystal ball to foretell the coming winter madness, nine months earlier, I opted to join my local dive shop on one of their yearly trips to warmer climes. The destination would be the southern Caribbean island country of Bonaire, where the diving is sublime, and the pace is... well, it's island time. The trip was slated for mid January, perfect, I thought. The winter will be half over by the time we leave, and I will be so ready for an escape from the snow and ice of Milwaukee by then. For years, I felt like the last diver on the planet to experience the world class diving of Bonaire. It had been on my 'must do' list for several years, I would at long last be able to see what everyone was raving about. Bonaire is touted as the shore diving capitol of the world, where the diving is easy, and as good as anywhere. In my mind, I had built up this trip, this international odyssey I was about to embark on, to such a level of greatness, I seriously doubt a trip to the moon would have lived up to my expectations.

I packed for the trip as I always do for a warm water dive getaway in the middle of winter. Everything I would need under the water would be lovingly stowed in my dive travel roller bag. Along side the dive gear, I would pack shorts, trunks, Tees, flip-flops, and a toiletry case, all expertly placed so as to add protection for my dive computer and regulators. My backpack would be stuffed to the brim with airline travel essentials like reading material, and among other things, snacks. Lots of snacks. After all, I would have to endure two separate flights, one of which would be nearly five hours, and three airports. How would I survive without trail-mix with chocolate, beef jerky, and Munchos? I try to abstain from eating in airports, that stuff isn't healthy. The second 'personal' item was my Pelican brand, model 1510, overhead bin approved, hard case, weighing in at a respectable 38 lbs. In it would be the underwater camera equipment that would allow me to brilliantly capture the stunning world beneath the waves that had put Bonaire on the scuba divers' map. Lastly, I would don my standard travel garb. Khaki colored cargo pants (great for holding documents, breath mints, wallet and phone), white button down Van Heusen, camel colored corduroy sport coat, and Florsheim slippers. I may be part of a vanishing breed, but I believe in looking presentable when I fly. It is my suspicion that one dressed in business casual attire, may enjoy somewhat better service than another in say, sweatpants, but that's just my personal opinion. Besides, I was departing from Chicago's O'Hare international (ORD), in January. I'm a firm believer in not succumbing to hypothermia prior to jetting off to someplace warm, or upon my return from said place for that matter. For this trip I decided to do something I rarely ever do, drop off the grid. I would leave the laptop and the phone at home with my wife who opted to not join me on this getaway. I wanted to really enjoy this vacation, live in the moment, and not worry about FaceBook and post processing or uploading images to the web. I decided I would not need to speak to anyone who wasn't there with me.

Originally, the flight was to leave from my hometown of Milwaukee, but in the airline's infinite wisdom, I and my 17 travel companions had been bumped to a flight out of Chicago several weeks before the trip. Fine, my roommates and I carpooled to Chicago the night before our 6 a.m. flight, and rented a hotel room for about four hours. The 80 mile drive, which normally takes 75 minutes, roughly doubled in time due to the snow/ice storm that the travel gods were bestowing upon us. Suddenly, thoughts of full scale de-icing and delayed flights, began to permeate our celebratory mood. What if we missed our connection in Atlanta? The thought was nearly unbearable, and was promptly shelved for the more attractive "we're leaving winter behind". To our amazement, the McDonnell Douglas MD-80 left the frozen concrete of ORD below and behind us, right on time before the winter sun even thought of getting out of bed. Nothing could stop us now, I would be diving in 79 degree water by the day's end. Next stop Atlanta (ATL), switch planes, and I'll be there. Apparently snow and Ice isn't the only thing that keeps planes from taking off and landing. Eighty minutes into the flight, the captain informed us that the violent thunderstorm that was sitting on top of ATL, was exhibiting wind shears, and we would continue to circle above it, until it moved on, to ruin someone else's day... or until we could no longer hang out due to low fuel. This is the part where I got to visit one of the 50 states I'd not been to yet. Hello Columbia, South Carolina. After 30 minutes circling the skies of Georgia, and a short 200 mile detour east to refuel, I was pretty sure we would not be making our connection. Some hope still lingered though, one of my friends and travel companions is a lifelong air traffic controller, pilot, and flight instructor. He felt there was a slight chance that due to the fact there were 18 in our group, the plane might be held for us. Also, it stood to reason that if we could not land, they could not take off either. Yes, the light at the end of the tunnel had dimmed, but by no means had it been extinguished. Worst case scenario... we would catch the next flight, perhaps tomorrow, and lose a day of diving. I could live with that.



Upon disembarking in Atlanta, we quickly discerned that not only had our flight left without us in some foolish bid to keep on a schedule that had already been lost, it chose to strand the group of divers from Rhode Island that were en route to Captain Don's Habitat, as were we! Thirty passengers without a plane, standing at the help desk, that's when we found out that the plane we missed was the only plane going to Bonaire from Atlanta that week! Like the rare green flash of a Caribbean sunset, I think I just saw the light go out. That little light at the end of the vacation tunnel, had just been blown out by the jet wash of my missed connection to paradise. Several of us went to eat airport pizza, I know...not healthy, and discuss options. I had dive gear, a week off work, and

a gold card. I was going to dive somewhere warm. Nearly 4 hours later, a no doubt underpaid airline representative who had stayed past quitting time, found a solution. She broke our party of 18 into three smaller groups. We would all take different flights to different airports in New York, meet up at Newark Liberty Airport in New Jersey, and leave the following morning for a place called Bonaire. What? Really? Four hours later, I was on a plane to New York's LaGuardia airport. Then, a prearranged ride in a black Town Car took me through lower Manhattan at 11PM on a Saturday night, to another state I had never been in, New Jersey. Next came the hunt for suitable chairs in a 'closed' airport to pass out in until our 9AM flight. Around 3 a.m. is when I made the mistake of choosing to go through the TSA check line, thinking it better to beat the rush that would surely be coming. Let's face it, I had nothing better to do, and the line just opened. I nearly always get pulled aside when traveling with the aforementioned pelican case full of extremely odd shaped metal and plastic, cords and batteries and whatnot. This time through the gauntlet was no exception, all though, what was different about this trip through the line was the fact that the TSA agent had just started his shift, and there was no one in line behind me. Not only did he want the case opened, and swabbed, he was going to empty it as well, one piece of odd looking equipment at a time. I was really starting to grow weary of airports, and security checks by this time. Upon satisfying his own curiosity, I politely asked if I could be the one to re-pack the roughly \$7,000 worth of contents, he obliged. Apparently pulling out is more fun than putting back.



Several sleepless hours and one very tiny tube of airport toothpaste later, as well as one hundred bucks lighter for a much deserved seat upgrade for the final leg, I found myself on a plane south. When I opened my eyes again, the Boeing 737-800 was on final approach to Flamingo International Airport (BON). The burning question in everyone's mind though, was our luggage on final approach too? The original airline representative back in ATL, who so tirelessly fought for our vacation, assured us that our bags were 'checked through' to BON. The problem was that we were put on another airline at Newark, and apparently when bags change carriers at the last minute, it causes problems. A full two-thirds of our group found themselves in paradise with nothing more than their carry on bags, and what they were wearing, including yours truly.

In part two of this article, I will explore the folly of my ways regarding packing for warm water dive trips, and extol the above water virtues of Bonaire.

