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Tips and Observations

An unofficial guide to the ups and downs of SCUBA

Text by Bret Gilliam

I started diving in 1959, so I had my 50th anniversary last year. That's not as bad as it sounds since my father, a senior naval officer, indulged my fascination with scuba after watching the first episode of *Sea Hunt* with me the year before. We then moved to a distant outpost called Key West and my future career unfolded from the first day in snorkeling gear. I was only eight years old when I did my first dive in Garrison Bight under the watchful eye of an "instructor" who never left the comfort of his deck chair on the pier. As I blundered through mask clearing and other exercises I'd occasionally surface to see if I was doing things okay.

"Yeah, you're making great progress," he assured me while opening another cold beer. "Now go under the boat and scrape the barnacles off the props and rudder."

I guess that was probably the first edition of modern "specialty" courses. But I've managed to survive over 18,000 dives to date and have developed a certain perspective over the years that might be useful to other divers.

Here are a few tips:

1. You can usually learn more by watching a diver unpack and assemble his gear than from reading his logbook.
2. A diver's experience and skill is more often inversely proportionate to the number of patches on his jacket or C-cards in his bulging wallet.
3. The best insurance policy to ensure the boat captain picks you up after a drift dive is to borrow \$50 from him prior to stepping off the dive platform.
4. Never exceed the depth of your ability and training.
5. Getting in shape to look your best in a figure-hugging Lycra dive skin, forget the conventional weight loss programs. Try the Ultimate Motivational Diet: You can eat anything you want and as much of it... as long as you dine in the company of naked fat people.
6. If you get bored on long decompressions, try taking down a paperback book. Simply tear out the pages as you read them and keep the book in a bucket between dives. I've read the complete works of Ian Fleming, John Grisham, and assorted trashy fare while hanging at 10 or 20 feet (3-6m). Plus it's great to watch the other divers fight over the pages as they drift away.
7. My alarms immediately go off when any resort feels the need to advertise "world class" diving or that my room is "cooled by the trade winds". Any diving operator that uses that shopworn cliché is usually suspect and any reference to "trade winds" means no air-conditioning or they don't feel like running the generator after dinner.
8. If traveling on a foreign airline with a piece of heavy luggage, tell the ticket agent that it's your golf gear. They don't charge extra for that. For diving gear, just bend over and imagine you're in a Turkish prison.
9. If you're not in first class, always board the plane with the "need extra help" group that pre-boards. Yeah, you'll be surrounded by kids in strollers and the elderly pushing their walkers, but you'll get a space in the overhead compartment before everyone else boards with their appliance crates, which they shove into the carry-on bins.
10. Never... ever... consent to "buddy up" with someone you have not dived with before. Say you'll stick with the divemaster until you can assess the prowess of your boat-mates.

Gilliam's Custom Dive Dictionary

It's also helpful to know the real definitions of some diving terms in common use today:

World Class Diving: Anything a diving magazine wrote an article about, including Nebraska.

Unlimited Shore Diving: As long as you don't mind the three-mile (5km) swim to the barrier reef.

All-inclusive Price: They'll charge you for anything they can possibly think of.

Boyle's Law of Dive Brochures: The actual size of your room will be inversely related to its wide-angle image in the photo.

Eco-Resort: No air conditioning, no hot water, fragrant outhouses, no phones, no internet, no deodorant, lots of rice. Feel good about yourself while you sweat.

Professional Divemaster: Loads and unloads at least a thousand tanks a day and gets paid about what the second shift at Whatta-Burger makes.

Authority: A speaker from out of town.

Expert: He brings his own slides or Power Point presentation.

Underwater Photography Specialist: Knows how to set camera to TTL/auto mode.

High Performance Regulator: A TSA agent pulling on the rubber glove as you are led into the little private room at airport security.

Lifetime Warranty: Until it needs parts or service.

Open Circuit: A diver capable of rational thought process; a very rare species.

Closed Circuit: The average DIR zealot or most blondes with Botox... including men.

Second Stage: The "falling down" phase of too much Tequila.

Manifold: When a male diver's belly laps over his Speedo.

Safety Sausage: the use of a condom for post-dive hook-ups.

Wet Suit: When you see your first great white shark up close... while still on the boat dive platform.

Dry Suit: What you wear to a meaningless job in an office.

Flow-Through Piston: Sweet relief in your wet suit after four cups of coffee.

Yoke: The yellow part of an egg. How stupid are you?

O-Ring: Perfectly symmetrical belly button

Exhaust Valve: The orifice right below your nose where dive tales are emitted.

Dive Tables: What you set your drink on at Carlos & Charlie's bar in Cozumel.

Dive Bag or Camera Bag: Usually made from snappy colourful fabric or stainless steel. Optional tags should include "steal me!"

Advanced Diver: All that's needed from one agency is a total of nine dives. I don't know about you, but advanced in other sports or activities usually means that you have more experience at something than you can get in a long weekend.

Emblemism: The phenomenon of sewing innumerable specialty diving patches on to your windbreaker.

Safety Stop: What you should plan for after Indonesian curry for breakfast... and before you get on the dive launch.

Out-Gassing: See above.

Buddy Check: Nailing your partner with the dinner bill in Grand Cayman.

Bantin Syndrome: Passing yourself off as rock drummer Mick Fleetwood.

Nassau Groper: The patented move that a Bahamian divemaster makes to the chest area when patting down the female divers in his "gear check".

Technicolour Yawn: Full-on projectile vomiting 400 miles (650km) offshore en route to Cocos Island.

Rebreather: The clown who drives around in his car passing gas with the windows rolled up after a Mexican meal in Cozumel.

Rescue Breathing: Finally putting the windows down.

Critters: What you find in your underwear after a night loose in Costa Rica's San Jose bar scene. Those aren't waitresses or lady schoolteachers on holiday, genius. And you don't really look like Brad Pitt...

Body Glove: What you'd better be wearing if you decide to make an acquaintance in a Thailand bar.

Feeding Frenzy: Finding out that dinner was served while you were underwater on the night dive.

Certified: Technical term for the level of dysfunctional delusional psychosis you suffer from, based on what you'll believe as the truth in the diving tales of adventure shared while consuming (large amounts of) alcohol.

Redundancy: See "redundancy".

Waiver: What you'll be doing madly with your safety sausage, drifting in the water a couple hours after the dive boat hasn't picked you up.

Recompression Chamber: The "drunk tank" during Pirate's Week in Cayman.

Absolute Pressure: The effects of a particular brand of vodka the next

morning on the rough boat ride out to the dive site.

Algorithm: The phenomenon that makes white people think they can dance after five blender drinks.

Gas Switch: changing your menu from burritos one day to spicy meatballs the next.

Sonic Orifice: Are you kidding me? You know the answer after reading this far.

Saturation: The end result of spending the entire day at the swim-up pool bar.

Narced: When the custom's agent finds your stash hidden in your BC hose.

Reverse Profile: The desired effect of a good nose job.

Bounce Dive: When you ricochet off the side of the dive vessel on your blundered giant-stride entry.

Progressive Penetration: How your love life evolved back in the days of movie drive-ins, e.g. the move from the front seat of the car to the back seat.

Tender: How everything feels after slamming your way to the dive site in rough seas.

Travel Mix: What you carry in a plastic cup to get you down the road to the next Tiki Bar in the Florida Keys.

Trimix: Yeah, you got it... any drink with three primary liquors blended in frozen fruit juice.

Valsalva Maneuver: When the pretty Italian girl shows you she can put both heels behind her ears after a little "trimix".

60 Minutes Syndrome: When Bret Gilliam assumes the persona of curmudgeon commentator Andy Rooney and writes drivel like this. 🍁



■ Gilliam hooks-up with seal following too much «trimix» circa 1982

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