



# Disaster-Proof Your Dive Vacation

10 tips for trouble-free dive travel. BY TRAVIS MARSHALL

➔ **MURPHY'S LAW** states, "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong." And when you go on vacation, you're asking for it. Increasingly unreliable airline schedules, weather and the traveler's tendency to take a break from responsibility can all join forces on a dive trip, but with some savvy preparation, a good attitude and these 10 tips for smoothing out travel

disasters, you just might beat the odds. And in case Murphy does pop up en route, we've got some insiders' tips for dealing with him.

## 1 LOST/LATE LUGGAGE

If you find yourself looking forlornly at the empty luggage carousel, chances are pretty good that your bags will

show up eventually, as late luggage is far more common than luggage lost forever. But in either scenario, you can limit anxiety and the waste of valuable vacation time by planning ahead and coming prepared. Scott Mueller, author of *The Empty Carousel: A Consumer's Guide to Checked and Carry-on Luggage*, says lost or late luggage is becoming more common, and "if you can't afford to lose it, live without it or seal the deal without it, you shouldn't check it." Before your trip, he recommends having receipts for checked items, especially expensive ones like scuba gear, and taking photos of everything you plan to check. "Don't check items not covered under the airline's contract of carriage: medications, laptops, important documents and electronics," Mueller adds. Also, use the flush ID holders on the bags rather than ID tags. "If you go into a baggage processing area, you'll see hundreds, if not thousands, of those laminated tags laying on the floor," he explains. "Take a legal size sheet of paper, write your name and phone number—that's all you need—either put it in a zip top bag or laminate it, and make that the last thing you put in your bag, right on top. This will significantly expedite the process of reuniting you with your bag." (For more packing tips, see ScubaLab's "Packing List," p. 64.)

If your bag does go missing, find a baggage representative immediately, Mueller says. Do not leave the airport without reporting your bag missing. If you don't file a claim within four hours, the airline may not take responsibility. Get the names of every airline representative you talk with, and tell them exactly whose name is on the bag. Within the first 24 hours the airlines will not offer any compensation; after that they typically offer \$25 per day. Save the receipts for any money you spend out of pocket to replace missing items. If you need to buy more expensive items while you wait, let an airline representative know. Mueller says airlines will make exceptions based on the situation, but you have to ask beforehand.

**MONETARY SETTLEMENTS:** If your bag is lost forever, airline liability is up to \$3,000 per ticketed customer for domestic travel. For international travel, most airlines follow the Montreal Treaty, which requires they pay customers up to 1,000 Special Drawing Rights (SDR), an international currency valued by the International Monetary Fund. At print time 1,000 SDRs were worth about \$1,625. If your lost items are worth more than the airline will reimburse you, travel insurance will typically cover up to \$500 for baggage loss or pilferage, and homeowner's insurance will sometimes cover the difference.

## 2 LOST PASSPORT

Be prepared with photocopies of your passport and alternate forms of identification, like a driver's license. Contact the closest embassy or consulate as soon as possible: [usembassy.gov](http://usembassy.gov). If there's no embassy near your location, contact the nearest U.S. representative—the State Department switchboard can be reached at 202-647-4000. Once you make it home, go to [travel.state.gov/passport/lost/us/us\\_848.html](http://travel.state.gov/passport/lost/us/us_848.html) to download and submit form DS-64, Statement Regarding Lost or Stolen Passport, and follow the State Department's instructions for getting a replacement.

## 3 LOST MONEY/CREDIT CARDS

Make copies of all your cards, front and back, and keep them separate from your actual cards while you're away. Use the collect, international number for each bank—it's usually on the back of the card—and call as soon as you notice the items missing. Ben Woolsey of CreditCards.com says, "Card companies can often overnight a replacement card to you and arrange emergency cash through a local bank."



# 4 Medical Emergencies Abroad

Medical emergencies, diving-related or otherwise, do happen. "The first six months of this year we actually evacuated more people for motor scooter injuries than for diving injuries," says Marty McCafferty, medical information specialist at Divers Alert Network. And getting the appropriate medical care isn't always as easy as calling an ambulance. Evacuation is a costly and complicated process that can be financially overwhelming without insurance. "Get insurance, and make sure it fits your needs," McCafferty says. "And pick your destination based on an honest assessment of your physical condition. The more health problems you have, the closer you stay to places with good levels of care." Before you go, check with the resort or dive operator to find out how they deal with medical emergencies. "In the U.S., we have the Coast Guard, but in other countries, that assistance doesn't exist," McCafferty says. "If it takes you three planes, two boats and a donkey to get somewhere, an emergency isn't going to make it any easier to get out." Finally, make sure you and your providers know what the local medical resources are in the area you're visiting, and get non-toll-free contact numbers to use outside the U.S.

In an emergency, the first step is taking advantage of local resources to get immediate care. In remote areas this may require enlisting the dive boat to transport you to a larger island that has medical facilities or evacuation services. After you've received primary treatment, call your travel assistance insurance provider. "It's helpful if you know what's covered and what's not covered," McCafferty says. "For example, DAN's Basic membership does qualify for evacuation, but only to the nearest appropriate medical facility, not back to the U.S." All DAN diving insurance plans do include TravelAssist coverage for nondiving emergencies. For more information, visit [diversalertnetwork.org/insurance](http://diversalertnetwork.org/insurance).



## 5 CANCELED FLIGHT

"If your flight gets canceled, it's the airline's responsibility, and it's up to them to get you where you need to go," says Debbie Lanham, dive travel specialist at Maduro Dive Fanta-Seas. "The only instance in which they're not required to help is when it's weather-related or an 'act of god'—they try to cite 'acts of god' a lot." When you hear your flight has been canceled, go immediately to the counter at the gate or the airline's service desk. "If the airline can't get you to your destination on one of its flights, they should put you on a different carrier," Lanham says. Be firm, and always negotiate with a smile. If you come in with an attitude, you're going to get an attitude right back. Frequent flyers should get on the phone immediately to "elite" services, for special treatment and faster service.

## 6 MISSED FLIGHT

There's a big difference between your flight getting canceled and missing your flight. "If you get stuck in traffic, get a flat tire, whatever, hope you've got trip cancellation insurance, because you're basically at the mercy of the airlines," Lanham says. Go immediately to the airline service desk with a smile and explain the situation. "If you're not yelling at them, they'll usually try to put you on a later flight," Lanham says. "If you come in with a chip on your shoulder, they're going to say 'I'm sorry, you're going to have to buy a brand-new ticket'—and they can do that." Most travel agents offer cancellation insurance, which will cover a missed flight. "It'll pay for your overnight and for a new ticket," Lanham says. Also see [diversalertnetwork.org/trip](http://diversalertnetwork.org/trip) or [inusremytrip.com](http://inusremytrip.com).

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## 7 LOST HOTEL ROOM

Like airlines, hotels do overbook, and it's not uncommon for late arrivals to get moved to a different part of the hotel or lose their room completely. "If you're going to be late, always call ahead and tell them—even if you've given a credit card to guarantee the room," Lanham says. Make sure you have a confirmation number, something in print from the hotel or your travel agent, and the hotel will likely make arrangements with a nearby hotel for the night if your original accommodations are full.



# 8 Trying to Reason with Hurricane Season

"Some people don't like to travel during hurricane season," says Christi Courtney, owner of Blue XT Sea Diving in Cozumel. "But it's actually one of the best times to dive down here. It's low season so the crowds are very light, and the weather is good as long as there's not a storm headed toward us. The seas are calm, visibility is good and there aren't 5,000 people on the reefs." Courtney knows just how damaging these storms can be, however, as her adopted home off Mexico's Yucatan peninsula has been hit by a number of recent storms, including hurricane Wilma, which landed a direct hit on Cozumel in October 2005. "I always recommend people traveling to the Caribbean between June and November have travel insurance," she says. Make sure you check the fine print of your trip cancellation plan. Some plans won't pay out unless your flight or hotel is physically closed or canceled. "And monitor the weather closely before you come down," Courtney adds. She recommends Weather Underground, [wunderground.com](http://wunderground.com), or the NOAA hurricane center, [nhc.noaa.gov](http://nhc.noaa.gov). "If there's a named storm headed toward where you're going, stay in touch with your dive operator. They'll tell you if you should cancel or not." If you're on location when a storm crops up, pay attention to the advice of your hotel and dive operator. On Cozumel, the hotels send out notices to all the rooms about shelters and the storm's status, and they provide tracking maps. "In big storms, like Wilma for example, I get all my divers on the phone early and meet them at the airport to help them get out of here," Courtney says. "If they can't fly out, we try to get them on a ferry to the mainland." But don't wait until the last minute. In many locations, flights and ferryboats will stop running as much as 24 hours before the storm is predicted to hit. "If you miss the ride out, you're stuck here," Courtney says.



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It's a crass reality, but many divers are concerned about their wasted trip in times of natural disasters. "We go into survival mode, and the cash reserves we have are needed to keep our staff paid and make repairs," Courtney says. "So cash refunds are practically impossible. I give everyone who has a deposit on file, or who has prepaid dives, a credit in writing for that amount to come back and dive within three years."

## 9 AIRPLANE SEATING

OK, so getting an uncomfortable seat on your flight isn't a disaster, but getting one with extra legroom that reclines and is located a fair distance away from the whooshing noises and wafting chemical odors of the lavatory can mean the difference between getting off at your destination ready to dive or needing a post-flight nap. Before your next trip, visit [seatguru.com](http://seatguru.com) and search your airline and specific model of airplane to find out which of the exit row seats have "shorter-than-normal window-side armrests." Then, check in for your flight online up to 24 hours in advance to get the jump on your preferred in-flight location, but be aware, some airlines, including Northwest, AirTran and U.S. Airways, now charge extra for primo, prearranged seating.

## 10 GEAR MALFUNCTIONS

If it can go wrong on a dive boat, chances are that it will, and equipment failures can run the gamut from a broken fin strap to a free-flowing regulator. Luckily, the most common are of the broken strap variety. Here's a list of items, some or all of which you should bring along in your save-a-dive kit:

- O-rings of various sizes
- Small crescent wrench
- Scuba tool with allen wrenches
- Silicone grease
- Extra mask
- Duct tape and electrical tape
- Spare bulbs for flashlights
- Spare batteries for flashlights
- Spare batteries for computer and camera
- Double-ended brass clip
- Extra wrist lanyards
- Spare high-pressure and low-pressure plugs for regulator first stage
- Extra regulator mouthpiece
- Ear plugs
- Ear cleansing solution, like Swimmer's Ear
- Nylon cable ties (zip ties), various sizes
- Spare bulbs for lights
- Spare weight belt buckle