Diving etiquette – Boats and zodiacs

Most diving on planet Earth begins with a diving boat… The average diver, unlike the VIP diver, will have to adapt to limited spaces, swinging ladders, and unstable crews and equipment, once on board. This treacherous environment is conducive to rash moves, embarrassment and long faces. The purpose of this article is to examine the areas where embarrassments can develop, and suggest how to prevent this. Harmony and order on board ensure comfort, the foundation of safety.

Shoes

Shoes on board are one of the main causes of tension between crews and divers. You normally go around barefoot on a boat, as it's not nice to spread on a wet surface what inevitably sticks to the soles. In addition, some shoes risk to damage expensive teak decks, delicate paints, ugly non-slip mats and, last but not least, other people's precious feet. Every boat has its own rules on where shoes can be put off and stored. If your crew doesn't indicate this clearly, they will probably do it by shouting, so it's good to ask before. Scuba diving shoes are of course allowed within the entire wet area, i.e. the area that takes in water. On some boats, entering with diving shoes below deck can trigger sudden thunderstorms…

Taking a seat

Boats fill up like buses and planes: the seats at the back are filled first, then the ones closest to them. The seats closest to the point of entry and exit from the water are left to less experienced, physically less able and to divemasters. What about zodiacs? If they have a ladder, the person who is struggling most should sit there. The bow of the zodiac is an area reserved for divers who are not yet suffering from herniated discs.

Equipment

Every diver knows the laws that govern lines and ropes: 'If it can get entangled, it will get entangled'. Equipment has the opposite tendency: it tends to get untangled. Weights and cylinders tend to get caught on the fifth finger, computers and other expensive equipment. The event almost always triggers screams, tears and sometimes injuries. At best, the mood on board is disrupted. It is therefore a good idea to secure these blessed cylinders and store the weight belts on the lowest shelf. Belts have a nasty habit of being very similar and love to change owners. There is never a good reason to leave equipment lying around in a treacherous environment. Keeping one's belongings in order intensifies the good mood on board and defuses atrocious suspicions. Leaving a computer lying around increases the likelihood that someone else will dive according to your residual nitrogen.



Changing swimwear

Swimwear that has been worn for the entire day can get uncomfortable, but changing it in public can generate sharp reactions. Only selected ethnic groups will probably remain indifferent: Scandinavians, Germans, Swiss, Dutch, Spanish, Japanese and Papuans. With all others it would be appropriate to hide operations with the help of sarongs, bathrobes and towels.

Dry zone vs Wet zone

The entire below-deck area, and in many cases even the sun-deck or upper deck, are almost always considered dry areas, where you should not enter wet. There are, of course, exceptions, depending on the climate and the type of boat. Even where it is allowed to enter with the costume still wet, it is always good to spread a towel to protect precious plastic cushions from unsightly spots and ripples.

Drinking water and rinsing water

History teaches us that avoiding to share bottles and glasses is an act of politeness that has sound scientific basis. Remember where you left your glass. If you tear off the bottle label to recognise it, know that 90% of divers do the same. Better write your name on it. Fresh water while in the sea is as precious as in the desert. At best, it costs a lot of energy to produce. No matter how much you paid the dive, avoiding long showers after each dive is a sign of respect for the environment and for others on board. Fact: divers' skin is resistant to salt!



Sunscreens

Avoiding them altogether is an act of kindness for your equipment – especially your mask – to those divers who will not slip on the handholds, and above all to the corals. It is always talked about too little, but sunscreens can be real coral killers, capable of causing more damage than global warming. A conscious diver should only use certified coral-friendly sunscreens. The most popular solution among many divers, in case there is no shade, is to cover up with hats and filtering clothes.

Meals

A classy diver can be recognised by how much he does NOT fill his plate.

Objects with a passion for flying

Wind and movement incite lighter objects to take flight and reach the water. Empty plastic cups and bottles also tend to take off from the bottom of the basket. You will still find them, unfortunately, onboard some daily or safari boats, on dives where your good personal water bottle (you certainly have one) cannot provide the right amount of water for proper hydration. If this is the case, before throwing away a plastic bottle, crush it by pressing down on the neck. If you immediately screw the cap back on, it will shrivel up. Wetsuits, if hung up, perform better with the zip closed. The wind, whether at sea or on a lake, can be very strong and without warning.



Passages and manoeuvres

On a boat, never stop at a waypoint. If you do, make sure you leave enough room for a crew member rushing to go through. Manoeuvres, such as anchor housing, cleats, lines and, in sailing boats, masts and winches, should be kept clear of wetsuits, towels, and people. It is best to ask the crew to show you where you can stay without getting in the way and where you can hang your things up to dry. During manoeuvres, do not help the crew on your own initiative. Ask before acting.

Doors and portholes

The most typical – and boring – noise on a boat is that of something slamming rhythmically. Doors, hatches and portholes should be left closed, or secured with hooks and clips. It is not just a question of relaxation: cases of crushing and even amputation due to one of the mentioned objects closing with force are not uncommon.

Marine toilets

Coming to the most troublesome subject on board: the toilet. In 99% of cases it will look similar to the one at home except for a couple of strange tools: a handle and a lever. Many divers have difficulty using these two devices properly. The handle is used like a bicycle pump, pushing and pulling, but the key function belongs to the mysterious lever. Depending on how it is positioned, it will drain or pump with sea water. In such toilets both functions cannot take place at the same time. Marine toilets are intolerant of toilet paper. The “allergic reaction” manifests itself as rapid suffocation. You get the picture. Look carefully, there is always a basket with a lid next to the toilet bowl. It may not be elegant, but you have to put the paper in there. Some boats have tanks that hold the waste, others don’t. It is always wise not to use toilets when the boat is stationary.

Moving around

Many divers, especially the more experienced ones, develop such a symbiosis with their equipment that they tend to forget they are wearing it. Well, when cylinders in motion meet a human body, they just hurt. Check where you sit with your tank on, and avoid turning quickly, or leaning forward with a long aluminium foil on your shoulders. When entering the water, it is nice to hurry up and get out of the way. Back on board it is polite not to stop on the ladder if there is still someone to come up. Walking around with liquids in your hand, especially hot ones, when the boat is moving is never a good idea.



Experienced divers will think these tips are obvious, and will surely have something to add. Any other suggestions are welcome. The aim is to help less experienced divers improve their Gross Onboard Happiness index. But the best advice is the last one. As Douglas Adams, author of famous Hitchhiker's Guide and avid diver, once wrote: "Don't forget your towel".