

Traveling weather or not

WBAL meteorologist Tony Pann doesn't let forecast dictate his vacate plans

By Stephanie Citron

Winter skiing, springtime on the links, summer sailing and autumn leaf-peeping — the weather forecast is the driving force behind the planning of many vacations.

But when it comes to predicting the weather, WBAL meteorologist Tony Pann takes it all in stride.

Pann grew up in the blustery, changeable climate of Chicago, and has since delivered the weather report for television stations in New York and Washington, as well as Baltimore.

"I've seen it all," he says good-naturedly.

With forecasters facing a torrent of criticism about a recent never-transpiring snowstorm, Pann reminds us that Mother Nature remains in control.



"Even in this day and age, with the most sophisticated technology, the smallest, subtle change in the atmosphere can alter the entire model of a storm," he says. "In this case, an [unexpected] piece of energy dropped down from New England into the Mid-Atlantic and pushed the storm 100 miles in another direction."

Despite the occasional miscalculation, most of us still remain shameless devotees of the daily forecast to either make or break our day's planned events. So, we got to wondering: Where does a self-proclaimed "weather geek" go to get away.

As a meteorologist, how much does the weather influence the destination you choose?

I don't really look at long-range weather before I plan something. I'll make the plans and hope, just like everyone else, that it turns out OK.

Where is your current favorite place to travel?

For the last 30 years or so, my family has had a time-share condo in Longboat Key, Florida. I bought one [for] myself about 15 years ago, so every year my family from Chicago gets together and meets there. I was in high school the first time I visited. Even though I go there every year, it's still my favorite spot. The beaches are beautiful, it's quiet most of the time, they've got great golf courses and good restaurants.

Where is Longboat Key, exactly?

It's actually off the [Florida Gulf] coast of Sarasota. It's a little strip island, and you have to take a bridge [from Sarasota] to get across to it. You can see the water from almost any spot on the island because it's really only about a mile or two across. Sarasota's also a great city with a lot to do: good restaurants, nightlife and a really great art scene — a lot of museums, exhibits and shows come in from around the world.

How do you get there?

I fly into Sarasota; it's a really small airport. They used to have nonstop flights out of BWI but now the only direct flight [from this area] is out of Reagan National. But you can also fly direct from BWI into Tampa — it's just about an hour-and-a-half drive from there.

What time of year do you like to visit?

I go in January because that's when we have our timeshare. I like that it's right after the holiday rush; that was timed on purpose. It's really crowded there during the holidays but then everyone goes home and January is a lot quieter. The golf courses and restaurants aren't crowded.

Who comes with you?

My wife, and my brothers and parents, aunts and uncles all come in from Chicago. Some years there can be as many as 15 or 20 of us.

What kinds of things do you like to do there?

The island is pretty small. There's just one road that goes down the middle of the island. You can take a trolley down to either end. There's a big high-end shopping area called St. Armand's Circle; but actually it's a square. It's an outdoor mall, kind of like Hunt Valley, but with really high-end stores, a lot of great restaurants where you can sit outside and eat. I love Cha Cha Coconuts — a great spot to stop for a drink. So that's the hot spot for Longboat Key. [Though technically it's down the road on Lido Key.]

Do you have any regular rituals?

We love to just play golf and eat. The courses on Longboat Key are mostly private, but I know some people, so we can often get on there. But most of the time we play on the public courses around Sarasota. We usually rent a car so we can go inland and also go out to dinner. Of course, any place you go in the state of Florida you're going to find fantastic golf courses. Really, just a 15- or 20-minute drive in any direction are great courses.

Beach or pool?

My family prefers to sit by the pool but I'd rather be on the beach. It's very Zen to walk on the beach, very relaxing. I grew up on Lake Michigan but never got into sailing or fishing like my friends and family did. The only thing I do on the beach is walk and meditate. I like to find a quiet spot, put my headphones on and get some Zen music going. I try to meditate at least twice a week when I'm home, but down there if I can get on the beach and meditate, there's something different about it.

Where do you like to eat?

You know, there is a big Amish community in Sarasota, just like in Lancaster, Pa. They have these restaurants with homemade food that's just out of this world. We like to go to this restaurant called Yoder's. It's famous, been featured on **The Food Network**; the "Man vs. Food" guy was there, and "Diners, Drives-Ins and Dives." They have the best homemade breakfast dishes and dinners. That's someplace I always, always go at least once or twice during the trip. There are several Amish restaurants and grocery stores in that area. We also eat in Sarasota — mostly seafood restaurants. I also like the Chart House on Longboat Key; the food's OK, but it has the most fantastic views. You sit and have a drink and watch the sun set.

What is one thing you won't travel without?

My golf clubs. My ideal vacation is a hotel on a beach near fantastic golf courses, and if you can throw in a casino too, I'd be all set. If I can't golf, I usually don't go there. Sometimes in the winter if we go to the mountains, that's fine too. I don't ski but I love snow, because, you know, I'm a weather geek. But I prefer to be golfing.

Where do you want to go next?

I haven't been to Maine in a long time. For a golfer, it's the Pebble Beach of the East Coast; you've got the mountains to the west and the ocean to the east. There are a lot of great resorts up there; the one I like is called Samoset [overlooking the Penobscot Bay, between the towns of Rockland and Rockport]. I think it's named after one of the Native Americans who met the Pilgrims.

Suggestions for guaranteed best-weather destination?

San Diego. You can't beat it. You know the song "It Never Rains In Southern California"? If you want a guarantee that you're going to have a fantastic sunny time, San Diego would be your best odds. And it's a great city.

Worst-weather destination, but worth it?

Maine! You go up there in June and July, and if the wind is coming off the water, it's going to be in the 50s. The North Atlantic doesn't get warm [in the summertime] like the waters in **Ocean City**, Maryland. Going up there, you're really rolling the dice [weather-wise] no matter what time of year it is.



If you go

Longboat Key

Straddling Florida's central Gulf Coast counties of Sarasota and Manatee, Longboat Key is part of a cluster of tiny barrier islands, accessible by a series of scenic bridges. This quiet island with expansive, uninhabited white sand beaches has racked up numerous travel destination awards, including being named Best Island Vacation Destination by **Condé Nast** Traveler's Reader's Choice Survey. For more information, go to longboatkeychamber.com/visitor/

Getting there

Tony Pann prefers to fly **US Airways** directly into Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport from Washington's Reagan National Airport. From there, it's about a 15-mile drive to the island. Airfares start at around \$120 one-way. From BWI-Marshall Airport, both Southwest and **AirTran** fly nonstop into Tampa, about 60 miles from Long Boat Key. Airfares start around \$85 each way.

Lodging

There are scores of lodging options on this tiny island, in the form of hotels, inns and condominiums; practically everything is directly on the beach, or within easy walking distance. If you prefer a full-service resort, try the Longboat Key Club and Resort (220 Sands Point Road, 941-383-8821, longboatkeyclub.com.) Accommodations include access to its two award-winning championship golf courses, six restaurants, waterfront pool, spa, and kid's clubs. Standard room rates begin at \$220 per night and vary seasonally.

For a more intimate experience, check out the one- and two-bedroom suites at The Wicker Inn (5581 **Gulf of Mexico** Drive, 800-285-3481, wickerinn.com), where weekly rentals begin at about \$1,200.

Dining

The Chart House, 201 Gulf of Mexico Drive 941-383-5593, chart-house.com. Tony Pann loves to toast the setting sun at this waterfront restaurant.

Yoder's, 3434 Bahia Vista St., Sarasota, 941-955-7771, yodersrestaurant.com. Pann's family always makes a trip inland to chow down on traditional Amish dishes here.

Ephemia Hay, 5540 Gulf Of Mexico Drive, 941-383-3633 ephemiahaye.com. Arguably, Longboat Key's most romantic dining spot, is the Zagat-rated Ephemia Hay, in a historically wooden cottage within a tropical jungle setting. Its not-to-be-missed dishes include pistachio-crusteD snapper and flambéed prime peppered steak with sweet-hot orange brandy butter sauce.

Don't miss

The Orioles. Exhibit your Bird Pride by catching an Orioles **spring training** game at Ed Smith Stadium (2700 12th St., Sarasota, 941-893-6300) in Sarasota. The season runs through March 30. For schedule, go to baltimore.orioles.mlb.com

Beaches: Be certain to check out the Longboat Key's neighboring scenic beaches, including Lido Beach, with its protected wild bird sanctuaries; Anna Maria Island's lively Coquina Beach; and Manatee and Bradenton Beach.

Shopping: Meander through Tony Pann's favorite regional shopping destination, St. Armand's Circle (starmandscircleassoc.com).

Golfing: For great views, hit the links at the spectacularly scenic Legacy Golf Club (8255 Legacy Blvd., Bradenton, 941-907-7920, legacygolfclub.com), a top-ranked Florida course where every hole is framed with sand and water. Tee fees from \$99.