



A Journey Beyond the Three Seas
Israel

Text by Andrey Bizyukin and Yakov Samovarov. Photos by Andrey Bizyukin, Yakov Samovarov and EPSON Red Sea



YAKOV SAMOVAROV

On my first flight to Israel, I stretched out in a comfortable chair on EL AL Airlines, enjoyed a kosher meal and reread notes by the famous Russian traveller and pioneer explorer, Afanasiy Nikitin (circa 1466-1472). Only on the approach to Tel Aviv did I suddenly realize how small a country Israel was, and that it bordered three seas. Now, I had a unique chance (just as the great Russian explorer did) to visit these three seas—the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Dead Sea—all in one trip.

My acquaintance with the country began in Eilat—Israel's southernmost city. A line of quaint hotels stretched for several kilometers along the coast, and many dive centers were located here. One can find excellent places for diving at the northernmost end of the Gulf of Aquaba on the Red Sea.

With my dive buddy, Yakov Samovarov, I would dive the missile wreck, *Satil*. I asked Yakov to tell me about the day's dive. "Six or seven years ago, I did my first dive on *Satil*," said Yakov. "It was formally known as the Israeli Navy missile boat with the proud name of *Sufa* (Storm)."

In 1993, *Sufa* was decommissioned from the Navy and sunk in Eilat as an artificial reef. All military equipment was taken out before this procedure. Now, the ship rests on a level keel very close to shore.

The bow of the *Satil* is located at 18m,

the stern, at 21m, with a maximum depth of 24m. The ship has long been overgrown with a thick layer of algae and corals. Inside and around the vessel are darting swarms of sea bass, barracuda, lionfish and rays. Beginners can dive to the top of the wreck, and experienced divers are allowed to penetrate the interior.

We arrived at the Marina Divers club, unloaded the gear from the car, drank some water, heaved our scuba gear onto our backs and headed out to the sea via a cozy beach. The beach crowd slurped ice drinks through straws. Sunbathers lounged in deck chairs under sun umbrellas and looked with interest at the men in black wetsuits, fins in hand and scuba gear on their backs.

We were "men in black", bent under the weight of our equipment, moving in a chain, like ants, eagerly heading

Diver and anthias on coral (above) and with sergeant majors and cornetfish (right), Red Sea, Israel
PREVIOUS PAGE: Underwater photographer and lionfish



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THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *Sufa*

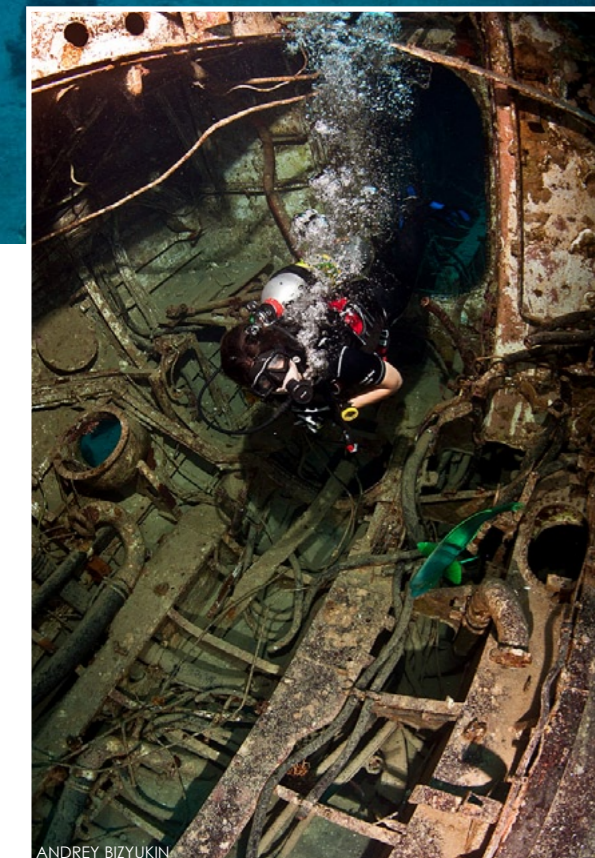
antennae protruded from deep cracks.

In the corner of my eye, I noticed a small white headed snake eel, but there was no time to consider it. I had to catch up and hang out in the wake of a couple of dozen divers kicking their fins, when a huge ship appeared suddenly out of the blue shadows.

It stood exactly on its keel,

and at this point, the deck could not be seen. For some reason, the Flying Dutchman came to mind. In some places, the vessel's rusty sides had had time to acquire hard corals—poles, shrouds and the mast were lushly overgrown with bushes of white and reddish-brown soft corals.

We got to the bow of the wreck, the upper deck, at a depth of 18m. As experience div-



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towards the water. I couldn't help but think what a shame it was that the sun worshippers we passed would not see all the beauty that could be found in the underwater world.

The wreck of the *Satil* was located 90m from shore. Diving there was easy, even for a novice. A striped, red and white buoy marked the location of the wreck. The first time you go, you should probably bring a compass for direction. Frankly speaking, finding a 45-meter ship underwater is usually easy, but here, it's

almost impossible. I say almost, because from time to time, there have been cases where divers have managed it without a compass.

We got in line with Sasha, our dive guide, as two links in the chain of divers entering the water. Sasha had warned me that the bottom was rocky, with a lot of large slippery boulders, so I had better to go slowly, especially if there were waves on the surface, and my hands were busy steadying the equipment. We submerged in the water to our

waists, donned our flippers, spit into our masks to avoid misting, placed our mouthpieces, exchanged okay signals and dived.

We started the dive from a shallow place and quickly reached a steep slope. The depth increased rapidly. At a depth of 10 meters, a small cliff rose two meters from the bottom, covered with corals and shoals of colorful fish scurrying around. White boxer shrimp with long



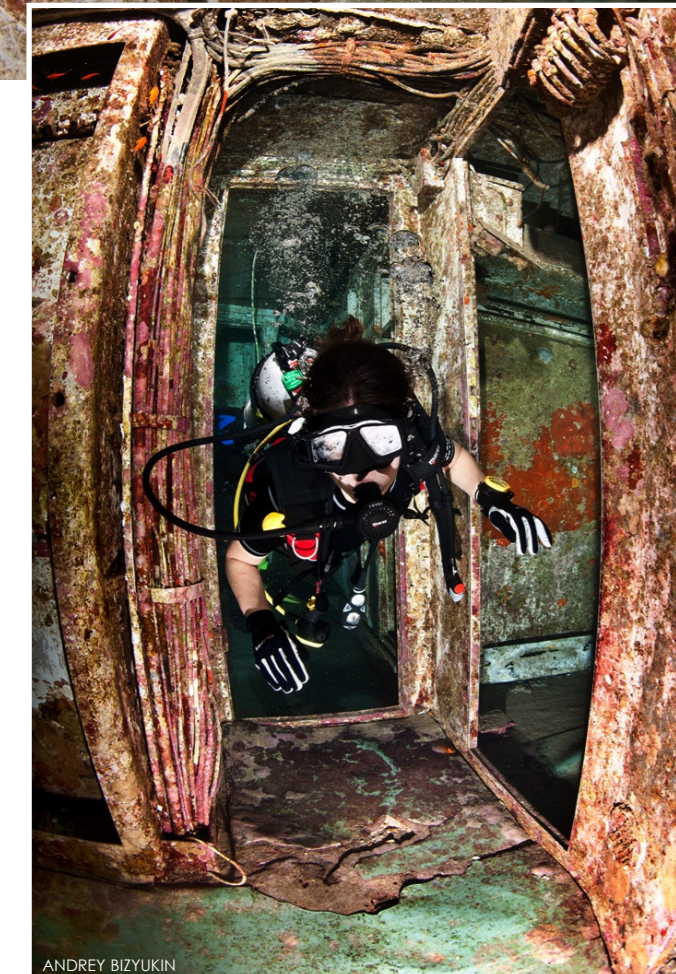
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THIS PAGE:
Scenes from
the *Sufa*
wreck

Inflated
puffer-
fish (left);
Parrotfish
(below);
Spotted
sea snake
(bottom)

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ers, we first inspected the round hole in the bow. This was the position for a 76mm cannon. On the stern, there were two large rectangular cutouts; these were the positions for the missile systems.

It was nice to see so many divers underwater. Some of them swam towards the ship, some swam back. There were divers with single cylinders and twinsets, with nitrox and trimix, with underwater scooters and rebreathers. It felt like a group of European diving elite had gathered here underwater in Eilat.

We looked at the wreck from all sides, climbed up into the hold, inspected the crew cabins and the captain's wheel cabin. We stopped to enjoy the spectacular views of soft red corals. We took pictures. It was a great wreck!

On the way back to the shore, we observed colorful tropical fishes living in coral trees, chasing a striped sea snake, swimming in a flock of curious, striped fish.

When I was on my way back to the



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back to Manta Diving center (the hosting dive center of the Epson Red Sea competition) to change my cylinders, I met a company of cheerful divers: men on a creative scouting trip with underwater photo and video cameras and made-up models dressed in brightly colored ball

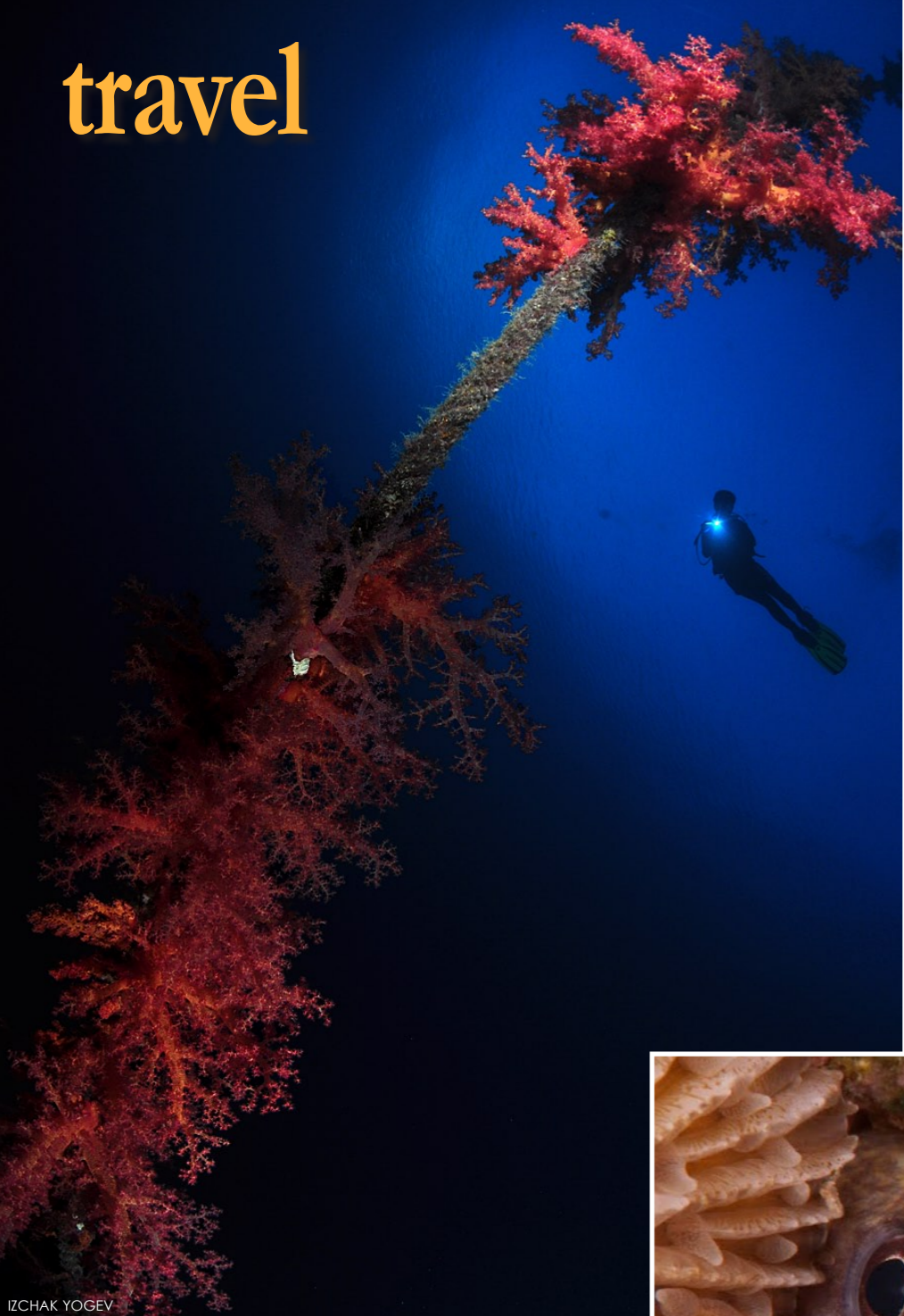
gowns and stylish, fashionable clothing. We started talking, and it turned out that the Epson Red Sea competition was going right now, here in Eilat, and all my new friends were participants in this grand event—the



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IZCHAK YOGEV



AMIR STERN



ESTEBAN TORE



AMIR STERN

Moray eels (above) and spotted boxfish (top) by Amir Stern, Israel, \$10,000 first prize winner and Corals (top left) by Izchak Yogev, Israel, second prize winner of Five Images Category; Goby (center) by Esteban Tore, Spain, first prize winner of Best Singular Image, ERS 2011



Israel

ALEX VANZETTI

Fashion shot (above) by Alex Vanzetti, Israel, second prize winner and (right) by Vitalii Sokol, Russia, third prize winner in the Fish & Fashion Five Images Category, Epson Red Sea 2011

choose the right place; the Red Sea coast near Eilat was a perfect fit. Pilosof collected the most authoritative international jury. With the credibility of Pilosof and a huge number of his friends, the event has managed to grow without too much difficulty. Upon finding sponsors and money, everything began to turn around, and when Epson Europe joined the festival as a sponsor the festival got a new name—Epson Red Sea.

Today, Epson Red Sea is the joint project of Pilosof and Epson. The next competition takes place 4-10 November 2012. They have a prize fund of US\$100,000 dollars, a large number of partners and



VITALII SOKOL

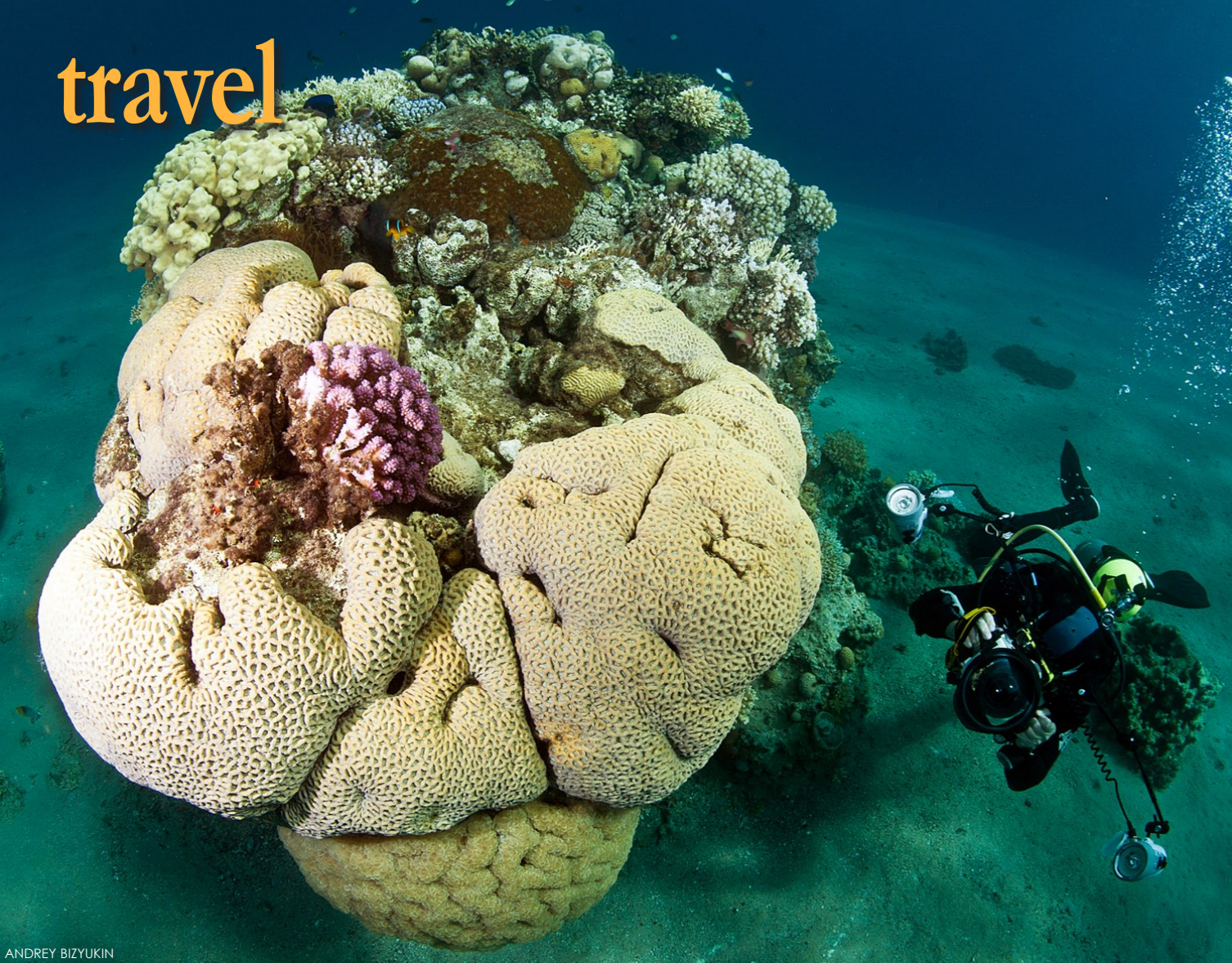
international festival of underwater photography, video and fashion held annually in Israel.

Epson Red Sea 2011

Several years ago, David Pilosof, a renown underwater photographer of Israel, decided to organize a festival of underwater photography, but in a completely new format. The festival would be interesting and attract visitors and participants—talented underwater photographers—from all over the world.

For this purpose, it was necessary to





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IZCHAK YOGEV



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Corals (top right) by Izchak Yogev, Israel, second prize winner of Five Images Category, Epson Red Sea 2011

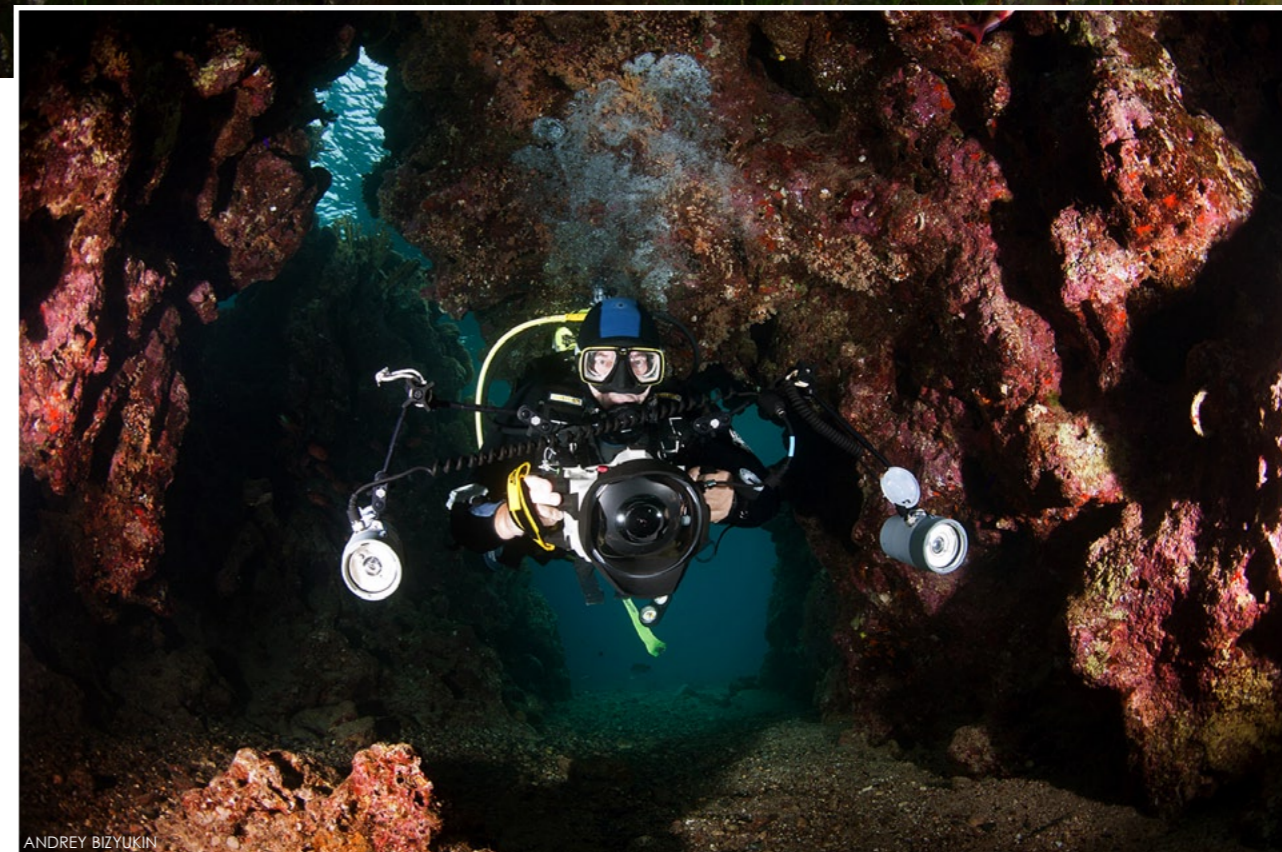
participants from around the world. In order to participate in the event, underwater photographers choose a suitable category for their project, and during the few days of the festival's shoot-out, they have to capture images of the underwater world of Eilat. The categories listed in 2011 included: Five Images (series of five photographs), Best Singular Image, Amateurs (for beginners), Children of Epson Red Sea (images by kids), Fish and Fashion, Fish of the Year, Jury's Prize, The Mayor's Prize, and Video.

In 2012, for the first time, there will be the National Team category. "Each team participating in the National Team category should consist of three photographers from the same country, competing in the Eilat Shoot-Out," said Pilosof. "Photographers can team up independently. Alternatively, photographers can inquire at the competition office about other photographers from their country partic-

ipating in the Eilat Shoot-Out for the purpose of joining forces. There is no restriction on the number of teams originating from the same country." For more information, interested photographers can visit www.eilatredsea.com.

The Red Sea at Eilat

Eilat's underwater world is full of life, and it is extraordinarily diverse. There are many colonies of hard and soft corals scattered along the bottom, attracting a variety of fabulously colorful tropical fish. One can find moray eels, groupers, lionfish, parrotfish, needlefish, rays and underwater snakes, puffers, glassfish, etc.—the typical Red Sea inhabitants. There is always clear, warm water, an absence of strong currents and convenient, easily accessible shore diving, which makes Eilat a favorite place to dive for underwater photographers at any level.



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THIS PAGE: Scenes from the Red Sea at Eilat, Israel. Diver in coral encrusted swim-through (above) Diver and coral garden (top left); Striped nudibranch on red sponge (left)



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Israel



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THIS PAGE: Scenes from the desert near Eilat; Bedouin hospitality (right) tea and flat bread; Heading out to the desert on camels (left)

secrets of the professionals, as well as skills of the best masters of underwater photography from America, Europe and Asia. During break times between dives and before the official gala awards ceremony, we visited with our new friends the ancient copper mines of King Solomon located just an hour's drive from Eilat. What amazing rock formations—works of wind and water over thousands of years. In this place, there was a collection of archaeological sites, ancient rock paintings excavated in the ancient world's smelters, and traces of the thousand-year-old process of the development of humankind. In the past, it was a land full of life. Now, it is a mercilessly sun-scorched desert. There are just a few centimeters of rain for year. Today, this land is the home of the Bedouins. They provide camel rides for tourists and offer tea and cakes cooked over an open fire. This amazing archaeological park with its exotic red rock landscape was disturbing in a way, providing



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glimpses into our genetic memory and ancient civilizations. It did not leave anyone indifferent. We said our goodbyes to our new found colleagues and photographer mates. We had become good friends over these three unforgettable days of diving, and we all had fallen forever in love with the underwater world of Eilat. For me, now, it was time to head north to the Dead Sea.





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The Dead Sea

—How to become a world champion deep sea diver

The opinion exists that the Dead Sea is one of the most saline seas of the world. The salinity of the water is 310ppm, which is almost ten times more salty than ocean water. To dive here, you have to put on about ten times more weight on your weight belt. The whole set of equipment for diving in the Dead Sea will weigh from 65 to 70kg

depending on the weight and size of the diver. Despite glum thoughts about the very heavy weight, I have indeed been able to look at the Dead Sea far below the waves.

Our encyclopedic, erudite guide, Irad, told us that the water of most rivers in the region is now almost entirely used to irrigate agricultural fields in Jordan, but in times past, they filled the Dead Sea. That is why the level of the Dead Sea is falling dramatically—about one meter per year. The current level of the Dead Sea is 420 meters below sea level and the standard sea level of the Baltic Sea.

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the Dead Sea. Photographers can only take top side shots because of the high salt content of the water, which corrodes camera gear

Water is drying up, and the sea is becoming more and more salty. The huge concentration of rare minerals makes this a unique water source for rare and valuable chemicals. Here at the Dead Sea in Israel is the largest factory for the extraction and purification of chemical elements from supersaturated salt sea water. However, prolonged exposure to water of such super saturation can corrode skin and can cause severe burns to the eyes and mucous membranes. It is said that this water can corrode metal and even the rubber seals of underwater cameras. Swimming and diving in this water becomes a real extreme activity, requiring special equipment that is resistant to chemically aggressive environments.

According to the authoritative opinion of *National Geographic*, the Dead Sea was included in the list of the seven wonders of the world in 2012.

We sank, descending deeper and deeper on a comfortable sled tethered to ropes, getting closer and closer to the floor of the Dead Sea. As experienced divers, we knew we had to equalize the pressure in our ears as often as possible in order to reach a depth of 420m. To get to this incredible depth, I did this countless times. Finally, after a half an hour descent, we got to the bottom of a huge valley near the bottom of this legendary sea.

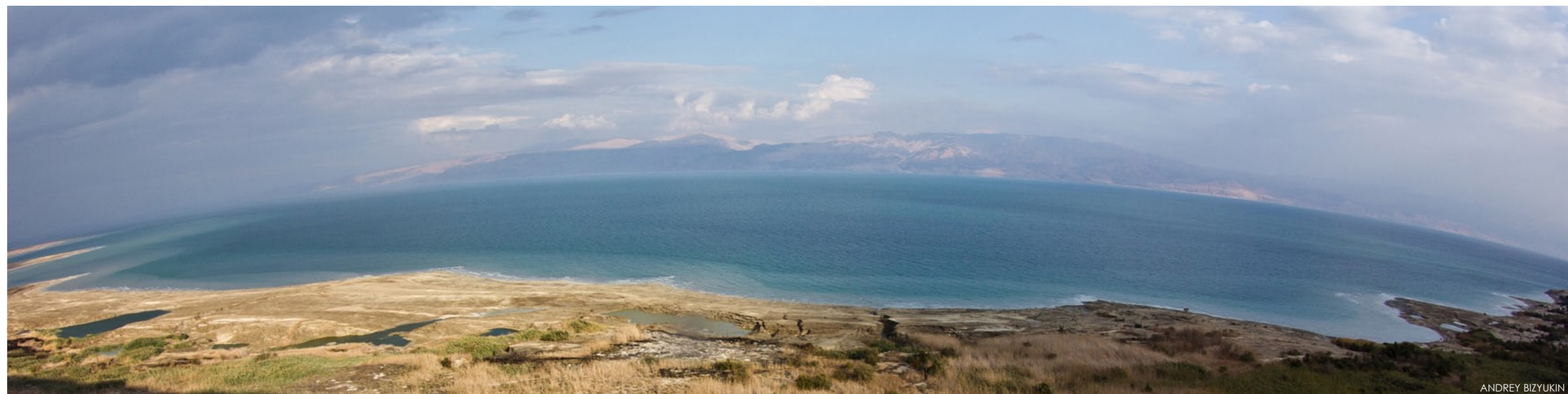
The sea was stormy, even at a depth of 420m. The entire coast line and the slopes into the sea, visible from the shore and disappearing into the depths, were covered with a thick layer of large



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THIS PAGE: Scenes from Jerusalem. View from Mount of Olives (left). Inside the prayer hall of the Western Wall (right); Wailing Wall (below); Prayer room in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (below left)

dense that one did not even need to move one's arms or legs to stay afloat. Like an unsinkable boat, a person could easily, effortlessly float on the surface of this super saturated salt brine.

We had to be very careful not to splash water and avoid getting water in our eyes and on our lips. A total dive time of only 15 minutes was considered safe and recommended by doctors. Then, we had to come back



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to the shore very carefully, trying not to injure our arms and legs on the sharp salt crystals along the sea's edge. Freshwater showers were highly recommended after the dive in order to save our skin from dehydration and becoming hypertensive to the chemically aggressive solution of the sea.

Finally, the long awaited sweet moment of glory came. The dive record was set: the deepest dive—420 meters—carried out on a sled. It was worth it to take the calculated risks for this very heroic moment.

Jerusalem

We continued our trip to the north end of the country and made a stop at the

watershed area between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. We stayed for a day in Jerusalem, one of the oldest cities in the world. It's the city of three major world religions and the capital of the Israeli state.

Making our way through the narrow streets of Old Town, between lots of souvenir shops and high-profile promotional offers, we got to the holy places.

The Wailing Wall—the western wall of the temple of King Solomon—was built over 3,000 years ago. It is sacred to all Jewish people, a place where people prayed in the days of King David. Today, the faithful here, as they did many hundreds of years ago, asked for their deepest wishes, putting little notes in the



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salt crystals sparkling in the sunlight.

But despite the frightening stories told by our guide, it was impossible for us to miss out on the incredible opportunity here. The vain desire to feel like pioneer-

ing deep-sea divers pushed us to take a desperate risk, and so, we dove in.

One by one, we tried to dive into this magical sea. The water was so



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THIS PAGE:
Ruins of
Caesarea,
the ancient
port of King
Herod, not far
from Tel Aviv

north to Tel Aviv—the
second capital of the
Israeli state. Here, the
famous restaurant and
bar, Nanuchka, gave us
the happy opportunity to
experience the night life of
Tel Aviv—an unforgettable
experience for each guest.
With original music, danc-
ing, decorations, food,



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cracks between the stones of the ancient walls. The feeling of holiness in this place was almost palpable. Prayer did not stop here; it went on all day and all night.

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the site that has attracted Christian pilgrims from around the world for centuries. It is believed to be the location of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as well as the place of Christ's burial and resurrection—both the hill upon which Christ was crucified (Golgotha, or Calvary) and the ancient cave where

Jesus' body was laid after removal from the cross. Another sacred place is the Mount of Olives—believed by early Christians to be the site from which Jesus ascended into heaven. Over the centuries, its slopes have been covered with countless tombs—some of the world's most expensive. Today, it is one of the most prestigious cemeteries on Earth.

The Mediterranean Sea at Caesaria

After Jerusalem, our way led farther



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THIS PAGE: Divers explore remnants of ancient ship wrecks in Mediterranean Sea. Jordan River (right) and friendly otter on shore

drinks, and joyful communion in such a friendly atmosphere of good will, it would be difficult to find a similarly creative organization of night entertainment anywhere else in Europe or Asia.

The morning after our evening city tour, we traveled not far from Tel Aviv to the town of Caesarea—the ancient port of King Herod. There were a lot of rare historical artifacts at the bottom of a shallow enclosed bay built here in Roman times. All these objects were being studied by underwater archeologists.

We dived with an experienced guide. The water temperature was cool—21-22°C. Visibility was about three meters. In order not to get lost in such troubled waters, we had to stick



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with the group. We found an ancient marble column not so

far from the royal palace. It had fallen into the sea from aboard a Roman galley over 2,000 years ago. Now, only curious divers and fish were visitors of this exotic underwater museum. We had a great opportunity to admire its grandiose size and excellent quality of marble.

Despite the relaxed feeling of being in a museum, the muddy and cold water made diving here quite extreme. Lagging behind a couple of minutes to take pictures, I got distracted, lost track of our dive guide and immediately got lost in the muddy water. I had a long swim alone among the piles of ancient stones, old anchors and remnants of sunken ships. Only in open sea, in a strong sea swell, did I finally catch up with my friends, finally. They were busy—enthusiastically involved in taking shots among numerous underwater rock ridges.

Jordan River

Continuing on our trip north, we spotted the Golan Heights



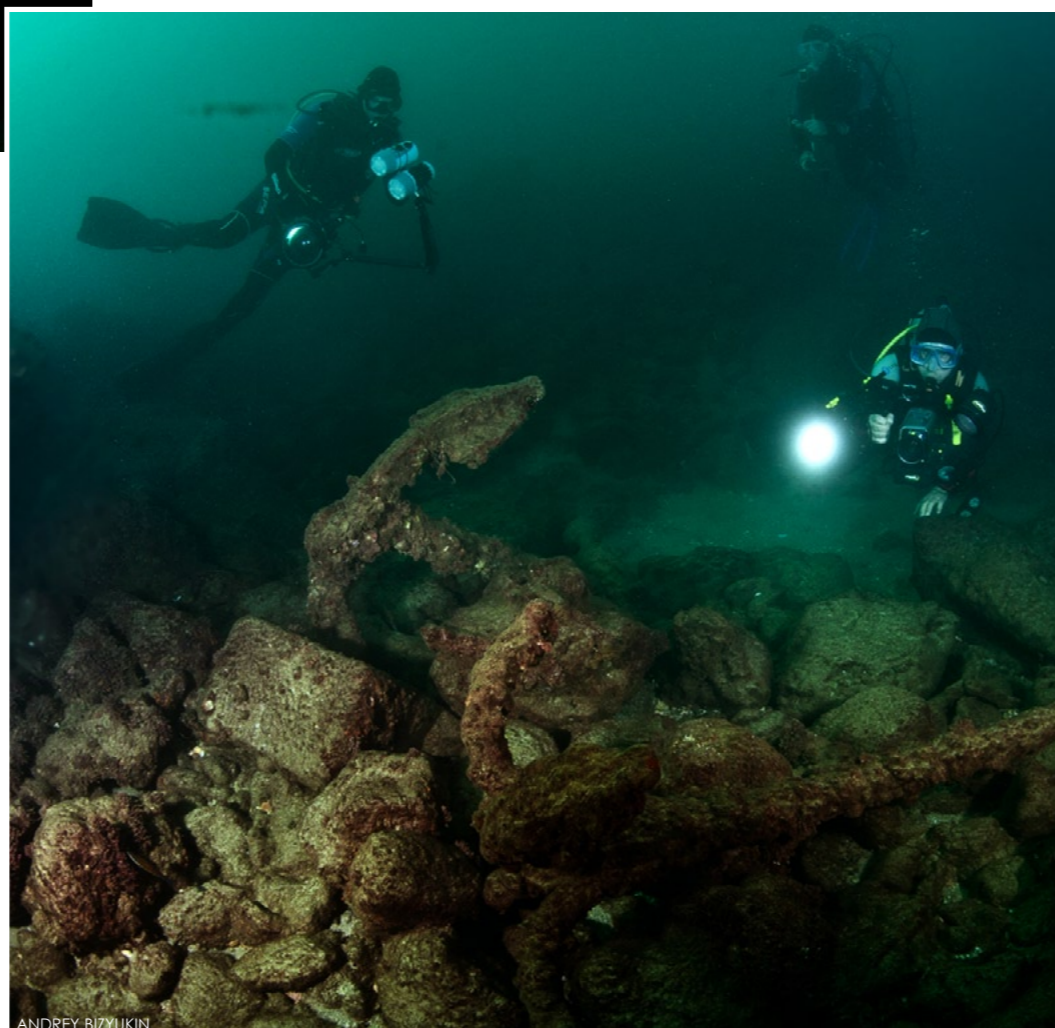
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in the distance near to where we would find the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River—two Christian holy places. These sites were considered holy because of the water. So, we thought there should be a lot of people who would want to immerse themselves in the holy water, underwater.

We investigated these loca-



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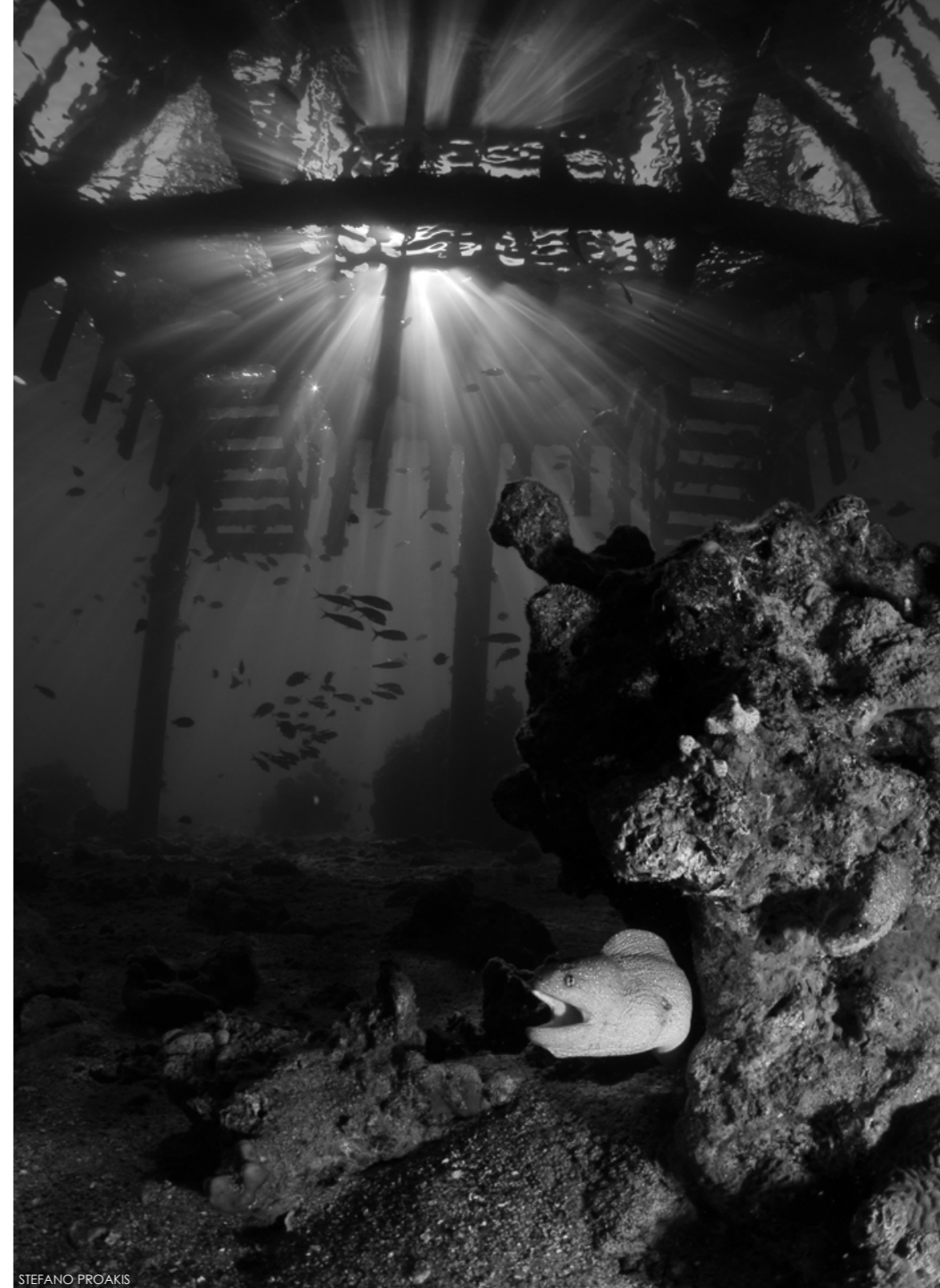
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MARK FULLER



JOHANNE FELTEN



STEFANO PROAKIS

Diver and backlit corals (above) by Mark Fuller, Israel, third prize winner in Five Images Category, Epson Red Sea 2011; Fashion shot (above) by Johannes Felten, Israel, winner of \$2,000 Mayor's Prize and the \$2,000 first prize winner of the Fish & Fashion Five Images Category; Fish under pier (right) by Stefano Proakis, Italy, winner of \$5,000 Jury's Prize

tions for the presence of a diving infrastructure. But we were unsuccessful, and found the water of the Jordan River to be incredibly muddy. It was home to a lot of curious otters and catfish, totally unafraid of people. But diving here with scuba would only be possible through touch, as visibility was low to nil.

The house of St. Peter and the ruins of one of the oldest synagogues were

located right on the Sea of Galilee. The water here seemed much more transparent. We had an uncontrollable urge to dive here at least, but we couldn't find a dive center that would help us do so. After making an unsuccessful first reconnaissance trip, we had to just be satisfied with examining approaches to the water and making future plans to come back here again better prepared.

Afterthoughts

On the flight home, I stretched out my legs in a comfortable armchair on EL AL Airlines, enjoyed a kosher meal and flipped again through the travel notes of Afanasiy Nikitin. What else could the renowned explorer have written about this small intriguing country? Israel has absorbed centuries-old cultures, experience, knowledge and traditions of countless peoples

of the world. It has become an historical site, often over the centuries, a center for the suppression of cultural integration of world civilizations. What insights can one reach after a tour here beyond the three seas in these contemporary times? ■

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special thanks to Irad Fenichel (irad1@netvision.net.il)—a most encyclopedic, erudite guide who helped us to understand and appreciate the culture and traditions of Israel. Yakov Samovarov and associate editor Andrey Bizyukin are underwater photographers from Moscow, Russia.