

# Red Sea Safari

*Journey from Cairo to El Quseir*



Text and photos by Barb Roy

Octopus (left); Beduin led camel train in Dahab (above)

**In spite of Egypt's current turmoil, I feel this exceptional country is still a place of interest and worth while including in anyone's holiday itinerary. I recall enjoying the opportunity to tour many of the countries monuments, museums and being able to touch one of the huge pyramids that have surpassed the adversity of historical challenges. The beautiful**

**golden glow of desert sunsets, the fertile green fields of the Luxor valley and the enchanting Nile River scenes as breaking dawn begins another serene day still stir in my mind. But most of all, I was captivated by the beauty and diversity of the marine inhabitants that flourished within the Red Sea.**

## **My journey**

When I found out I would be travel-

ing to Egypt for three weeks in June, I immediately began making regular visits to a local sauna to prepare my body to withstand the heat for which northern Africa is famous. Coming from British Columbia, Canada, blessed with mild climate and cool temperate water, I knew this trip to Egypt would be a very different experience.

In New York, I met up with adventure videographer Gary Knapp, who creates and produces dive travel DVD's for sale, all filled with helpful tips, activities and an underwater glimpse of what







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### Sharm El Sheikh

Sharm El Sheikh is a popular dive destination on the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. From Cairo, it took around 50 minutes to fly on Egypt Air. The view from the plane showed how remote this hub, with a population of approximately 35,000, really is.

Steve arranged our first dive on a local dive boat, Abu Hara, operated by Pharaoh Divers. Since first dives are also checkout dives, travelers have the opportunity to become

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Scenes from the journey through Egypt — Russian Friendship Monument on the Nile River at Aswan; Riding camels at the Pyramids; Pyramid at Giza; Veggie stand in Hurghada; Areas of Sharm el Sheikh and nearby mountain range

explore the various dive holidays offered to entice traveling divers.

Our host for the journey was Steve Rattle, owner of Pharaoh Dive Club in El Quseir (on the Red Sea). Steve and several other industry associates have formed a group allowing them to offer a unique experience for traveling individuals and groups while in Egypt as a whole.

"From the time a diver lands in Cairo," said Steve, "We take care of everything, including airport transfers, land tours, accommodations, diving and all domestic flights, until the time they depart."

With the help of Afifi El Shimy, from Learning Through Travel, the Cairo portion was a breeze. A majority of visitors arrive in Cairo when coming from North America and many from Europe. Afifi

El Shimy arranged for Gary and I to visit the Giza Pyramids within two hours after landing! Camels were actually added into the equation for Gary, giving into the hungry faces of the younger Egyptian entrepreneurs. Needless to say, I pulled out my camera to take advantage of the opportunity while Steve laughed at us both.

Cairo is a city full of history and intrigue, but with over 16 million people, you can

imagine what traffic is like. Visitors should always try to arrange their tours before arriving, if possible, to save time, sanity and to make things hassle-free, especially if you don't speak the language or know your way around. After hearing nonstop honking in the streets and observing only a handful of stop signs and lights, I would advise the hire of a driver or taxi, no matter where you want to go.

The Cairo Museum, in Tahrir Square, was one of my favorite places because of the antiquity collection it contains, totaling over 120,000 items. Although taking pictures and video is no longer permitted, just walking among the towering statues in the exhibit halls gives a glimpse of what life might have been like when Cairo was in its infancy.

familiar with rental gear or for adjusting their buoyancy and weights to the Red Sea's higher salinity levels. With current airline restrictions on baggage, I always like to use rental gear from a reputable dive facility. Most dive operations throughout Egypt provide cylinders and weights anyway, with other items available upon request.

The water was warmer than expected, but my thin shorty wetsuit worked fine







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waved back and forth in the mild flow, creating pleasant background settings for wide-angle shots when photographing dive partners. Clusters of hard corals growing in all shapes and sizes were dispersed on the sloping reefs from nine to over 30 meters (30-100 feet) in depth. On many occasions, Steve pointed out turtles, stingrays and other large colorful fish cruising by us while diving on the walls. Like giant bouquets of flowers, orange, yellow and purple soft coral branches were at most sites, adding to their artistic picturesque surroundings.

Between dives, Steve explained that he and Osama Rushdie, originally opened Pharaoh Divers



THIS PAGE: Scenes from dive sites near Dahab; Fish on reef (above); Banded anemone fish (right); Giant clam (far left)

to keep me warm in the 26°C (80°F) degree water. Like many coastal places, the Red Sea is subject to currents, which provide nutrients to an assortment of life. As a photographer, the colorful resident lionfish and odd-looking crocodilefish made perfect models because they rarely moved far. Millions of tiny orange, yellow and red fish seemed to encompass each coral head throughout the reefs, with noctur-



Sea star

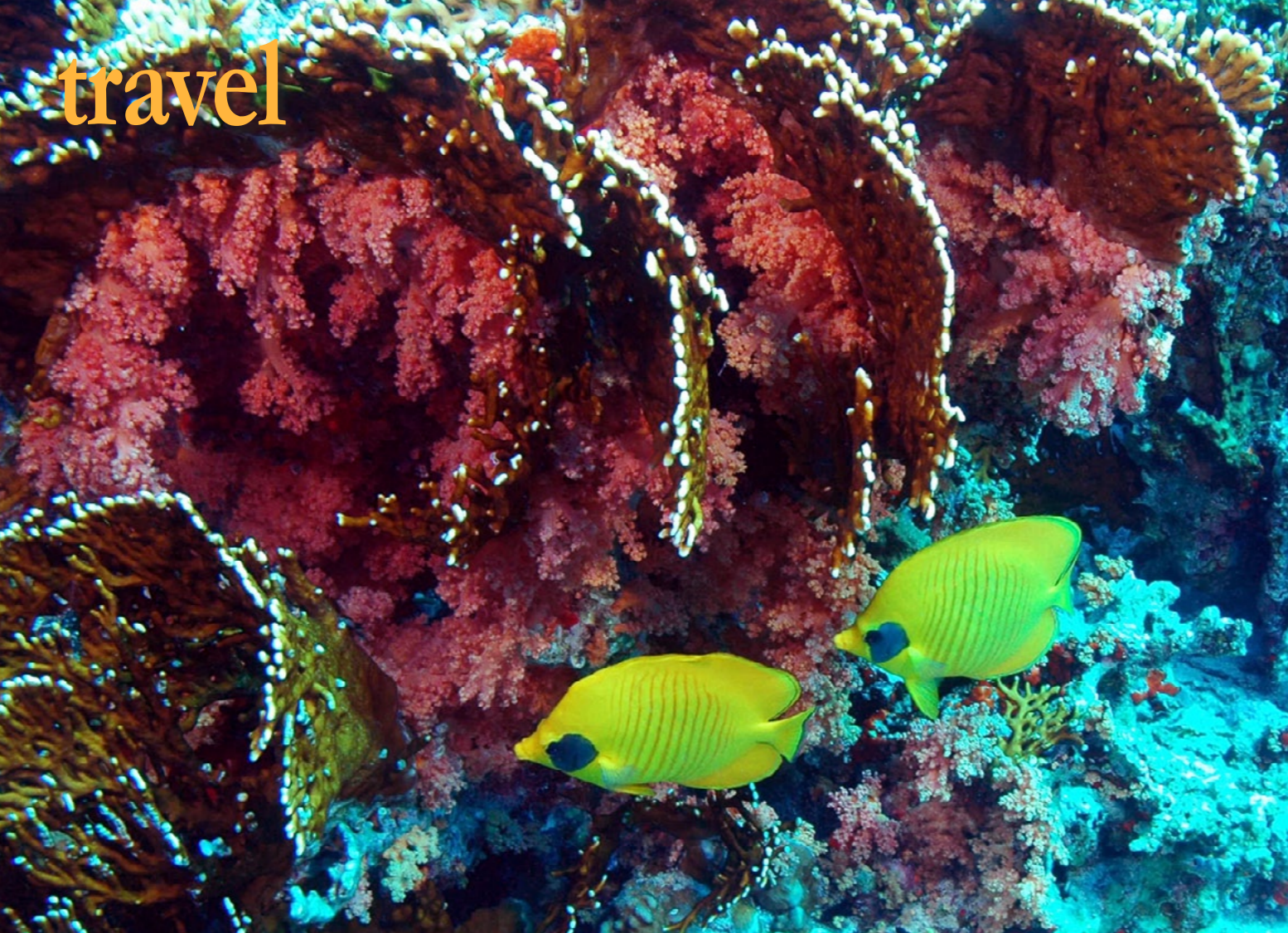
nal fish crowding for space under the overhangs.

Ras Umm Sid, the Temple and Jackson Reef in the Straits of Tiran were our next three dives over a period of two days. Here, colorful gorgonian sea fans gently

over 17 years ago in Sharm. Since then, Steve and his wife Claire moved to El Quseir five years ago and opened Pharaoh Dive Club. Osama still runs the Sharm operation though, working with Steve to provide visiting divers with a variety of locations to explore.

When asked why El Quseir, Steve





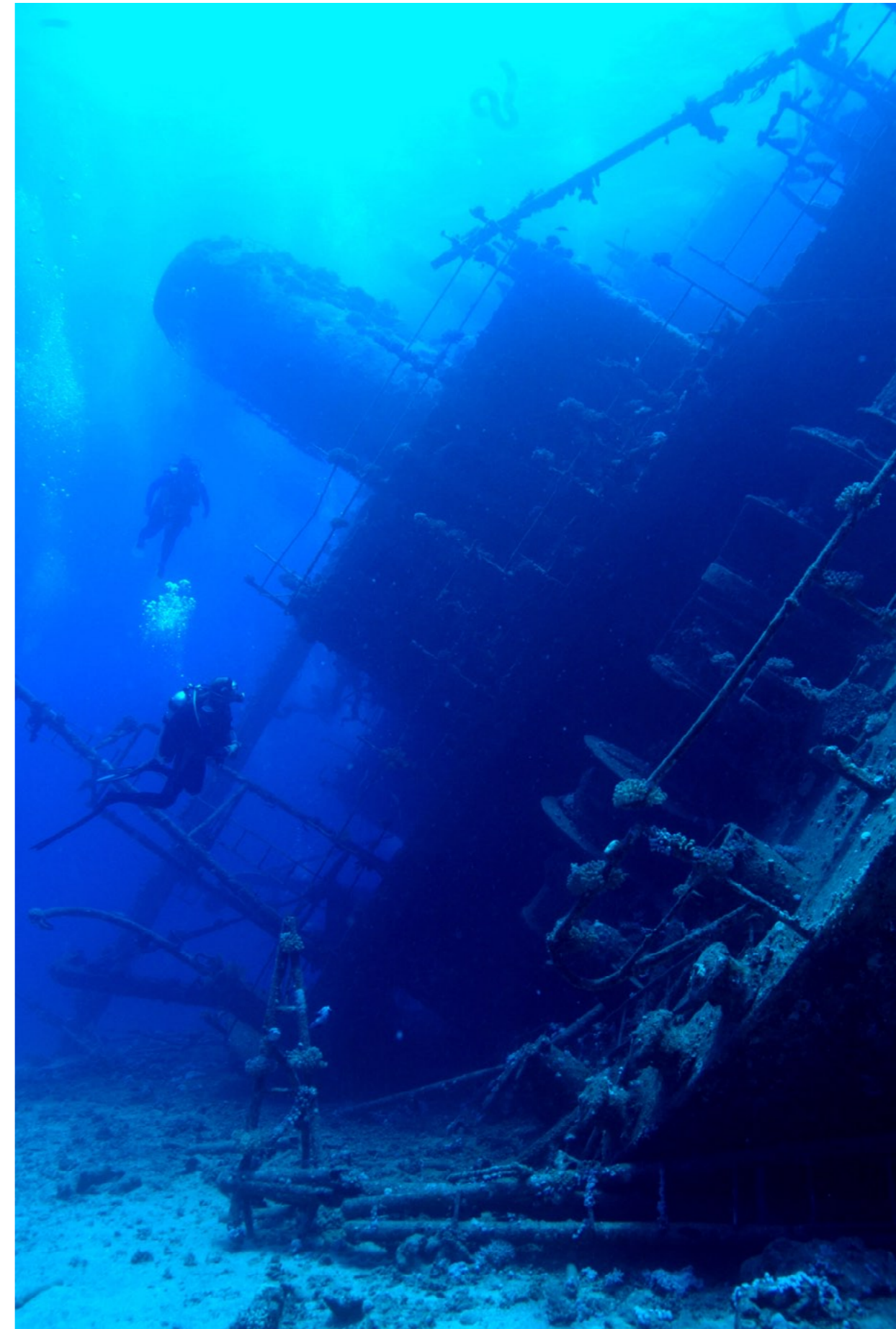
A pair of masked butterflyfish (left) on reef near Sharm el Sheikh; Diver and moray eel on reef (below)

Trainer, Leah Cunningham, from the United Kingdom, before leaving Sharm. He informed me that there were many deeper dives offered with several wrecks available as well. Apparently, most facilities offering technical diving and boat operators catering to this group can provide gear and appropriate gas blends. After hearing Leah talk about a half dozen deep wrecks, walls and pinnacles frequented by local tech divers, I yearned for my deep diving gear.

**Dahab**

Dahab was our next stop, located in north Sinai. Rather than using boats, most of the diving in this area was from shore. In some locations, camels were used to transport people and dive gear

Diver explores *Ghiannis D* wreck (right)



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(originally from the United Kingdom) replied, "I've been diving all over the world and keep coming back to the Red Sea. I just liked the feel of El Quseir, and the area has some of the best diving around. There's great diving in the Straits of Terran and in Dahab, but our area is extraordinary."

That evening, we met up with Osama for dinner. Being Egyptian, he knew the best restaurants in town. Osama selected a freshly caught snapper from a display table and told the cook how it was to be prepared. When traveling to a new country, part of the total experience should include local cuisine, spices and drink. This Egyptian seafood feast was unforgettable!

A few days later, Abu Hara

took us to Ras Mohammed, a national park with steep cliffs stretching high above azure blue waters. Although Steve warned us of possible currents, none were present during our dive. The terrain reminded me of the majestic structures found in many of Egypt's temples.

We descended down to the wall to discover more large anemones, each with their own pair of brave little anemonefish to match. Some pairs were bright orange and white, while others were tan and white. The highlight of the dive was finding an immense sea fan, at least ten feet across and six feet high!

Curious if there was any tech-



nical diving offered in the area. I had the opportunity to interview Technical Dive Instructor

for an interesting experience across a stretch of desert to reach choice beaches. Some





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CLOCKWISE  
TOP LEFT: World  
Heritage Site  
Saint Catherine's  
Monastery at  
Mount Sinai;  
Camp; Pharaoh  
Dive Club boat,  
the *Amelia*; Roots  
by Stuart

sites have tents set up to provide shaded rest areas, offering beverages for sale and restroom use for a nominal fee.

On the outer wall of the Blue Hole, Gary and I found several pairs of anemone fish, nudibranchs, young giant clams and numerous moray eels. Although the life seemed small, it was abundant in the variety of invertebrates. The tiny white and pink hydrocorals were exceptional for a 50mm macro lens.

The Canyon was a calm-water dive site, clear and full of hard smaller invertebrate residents. Like the name suggests, the reef structure forms a narrow passage where a diver can enter at around 20m (65ft) and



swim down to 30m (98ft) along the 'canyon'. For a photographer, the silhouetted shots can be incredible when using the jagged edges of the reef to frame a diver swimming above. Add in a few colorful fish and the setting is awe-inspiring.

One of my favorite dives for close-up shots was at a place called The Islands, where numerous submerged islands of hard coral covered a wide stretch of ter-

rain, providing a maze-like setting. This also provided shelter for stingrays, larger eels, fish, more anemones and nudibranchs.

Before leaving Dahab, Steve took us to Saint Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai, which is now a World Heritage site and one of the oldest Christian working monasteries in the world. Now a major tourist attraction, the place reminded me of a movie set. Even the trip to get there through the mountains was pleasing to the eye, as it revealed a colourful geology and more roadside vendors.



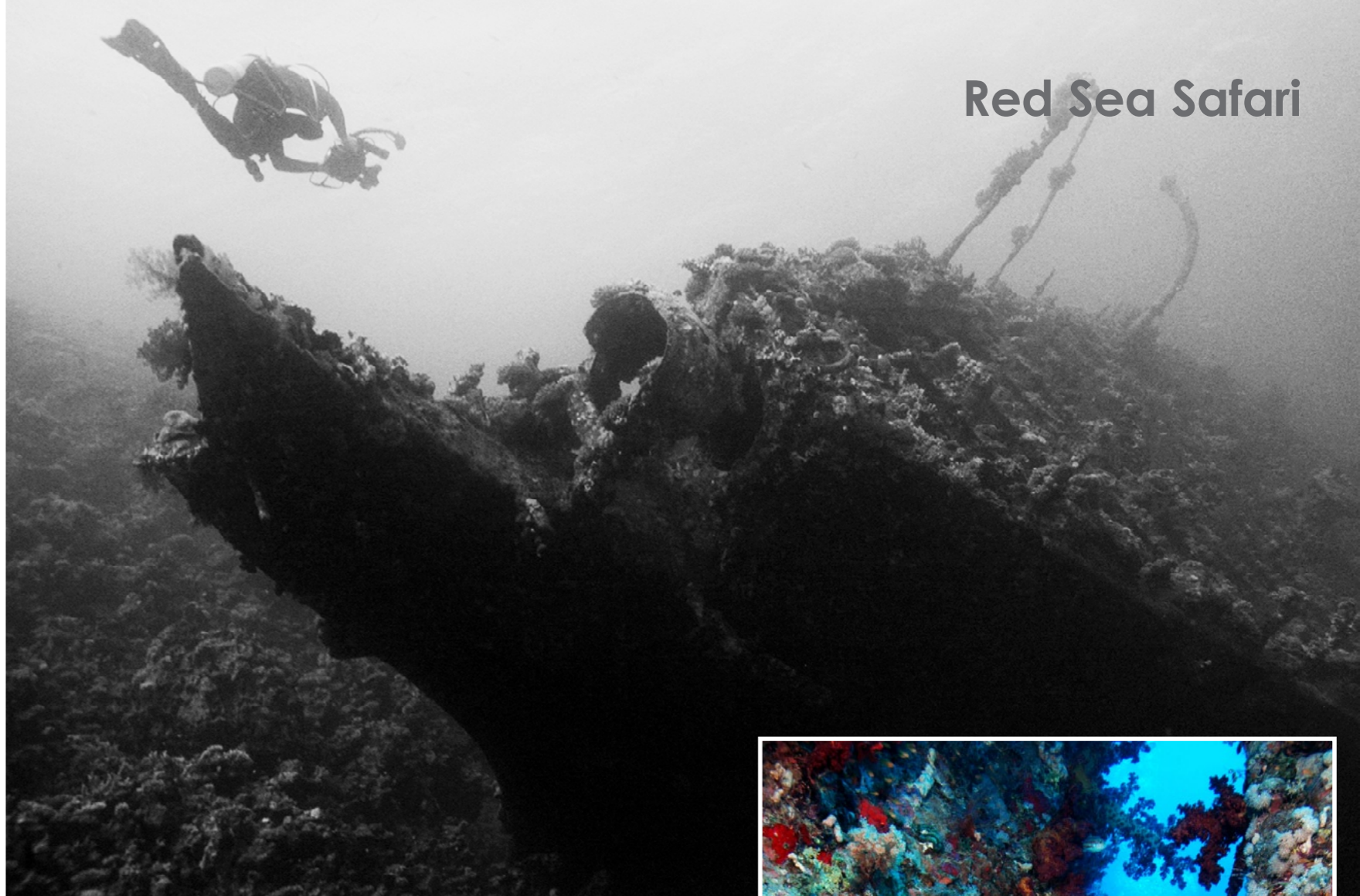


COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver on *Thistlegorm* wreck; BSA motorbikes on *Thistlegorm* wreck; *Dunraven* wreck; *Carnatic* wreck

to and from the sites.

I greatly enjoy the history of the shipwrecks, often told by the dive-masters giving the briefings, but covered more in depth by dive books like Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling the Red Sea*. Topside photography of the wildlife and coastal shoreline proved to be as rewarding as the underwater opportunities.

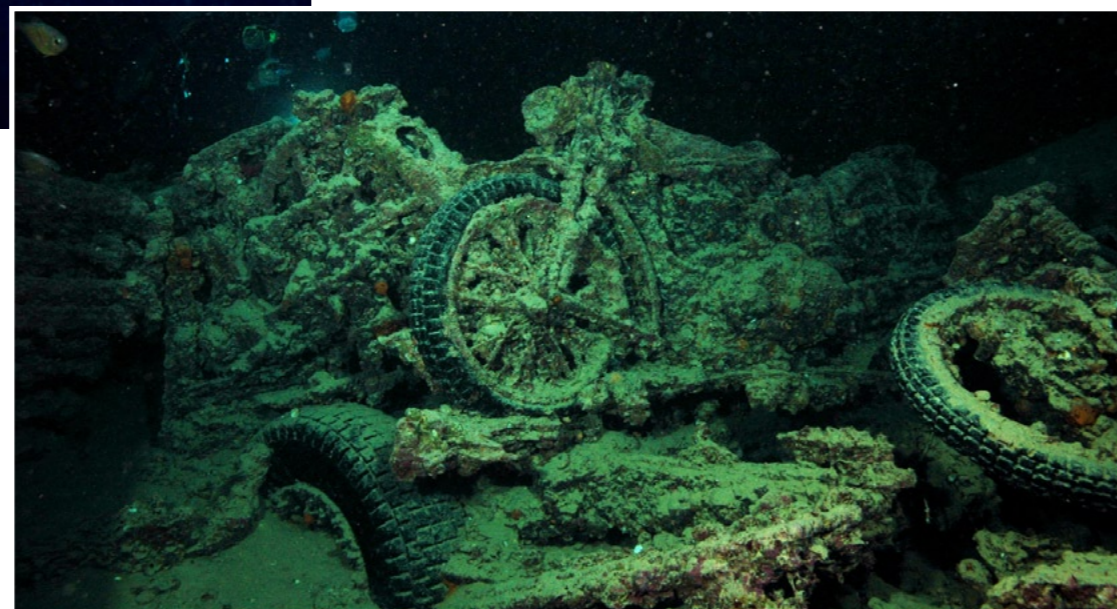
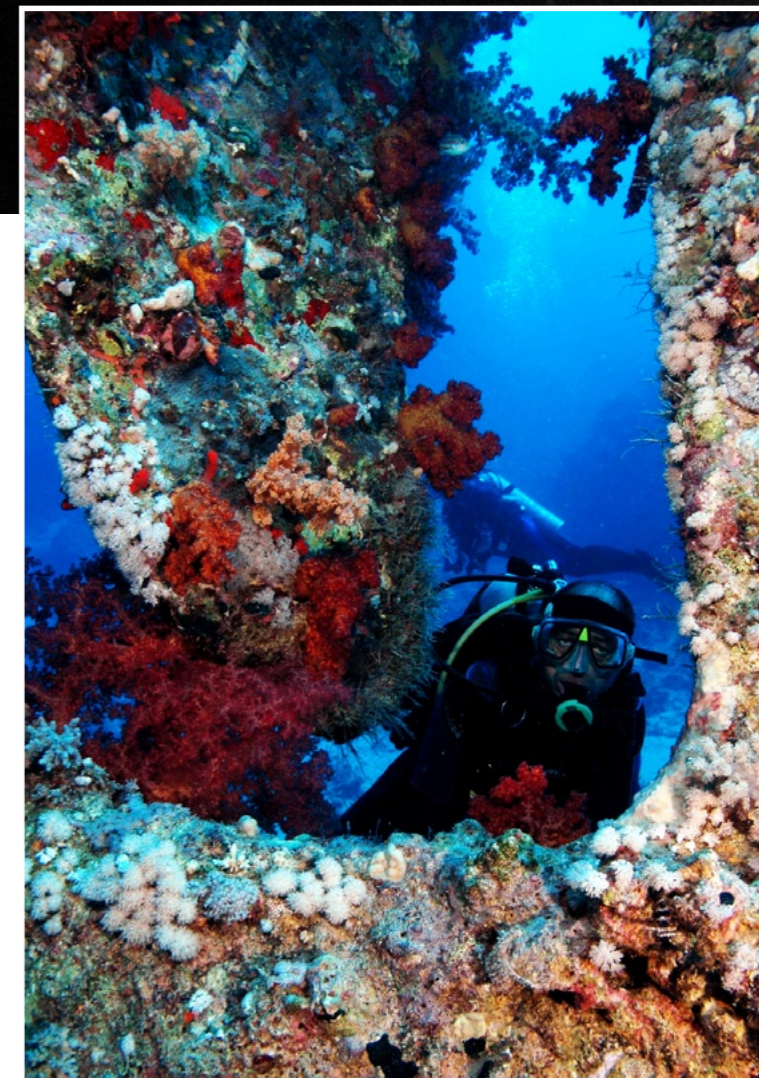
At one of the larger wrecks, I remember sitting on the sand with my camera in about 80 or 90 feet of water, looking up in awe at this massive ship lying on its side before me. Visibility was good enough to allow a full view of the wreck. Tiny divers hovered about at varying depths checking it out. I turned my strobes off and changed the settings on my camera to accommodate natural light. It was truly a tranquil feeling.



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Another immense wreck was the *SS Thistlegorm*, sitting upright in 30 meters of water. The 126-meter-long (415-foot) ship was hit by a German bomber in 1941, with a hold full of military supplies. Some areas of the ship have been damaged, but most are still intact, complete with old cars and motorbikes stored below deck. While exploring the outer decks, Gary and I found a crate of ammunition, large metal bowls and more fish than we could count. Even a truck fuel tanker trailer was sitting on the outer deck.

Of all the wrecks though, I really enjoyed a shallow un-named wreck towards the end of the boat adventure. Most of the wreck had collapsed in on itself leaving the hull and some railing left. But what was left was literally covered in colorful marine life. On the outside of the wreckage, we found a small brown octopus that stayed



### Liveaboard dive boats

Part of our journey was to experience what a liveaboard dive vessel on the Red Sea was like. Steve arranged for Gary and me to try a week aboard the *Bella* while on a shipwreck tour.

We both found the food onboard to be outstanding and the boat crew very helpful, friendly and fluent in English. The cabins each had toilets, showers and two beds. The dive area was adequate for preparing gear, with nitrox available upon request for an additional fee. A small inflatable boat was used for transporting divers



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Hurghada, where the airport is. Seeing all the street vendors with their wagons, carts and donkeys brought a humble smile to us, as we headed down the road.

Located south of Hurghada and east of Luxor on the Red Sea, El Quseir is a quaint laid-back area offering visitors reasonable prices, good local food and friendly people.

Our first dive yielded a small



with us for as long as we wanted to film or photograph it.

On the top of the hull and inside the wreck were three scorpionfish! Although dangerous if you land on one due to faulty buoyancy on the part of the diver, they are actually easy subjects to photograph. They are large enough to use a wide-angle lens and place a diver behind for a different effect. You can also do this with moray eels, lionfish and any other large critter hovering or resting on the edge of a wreck.

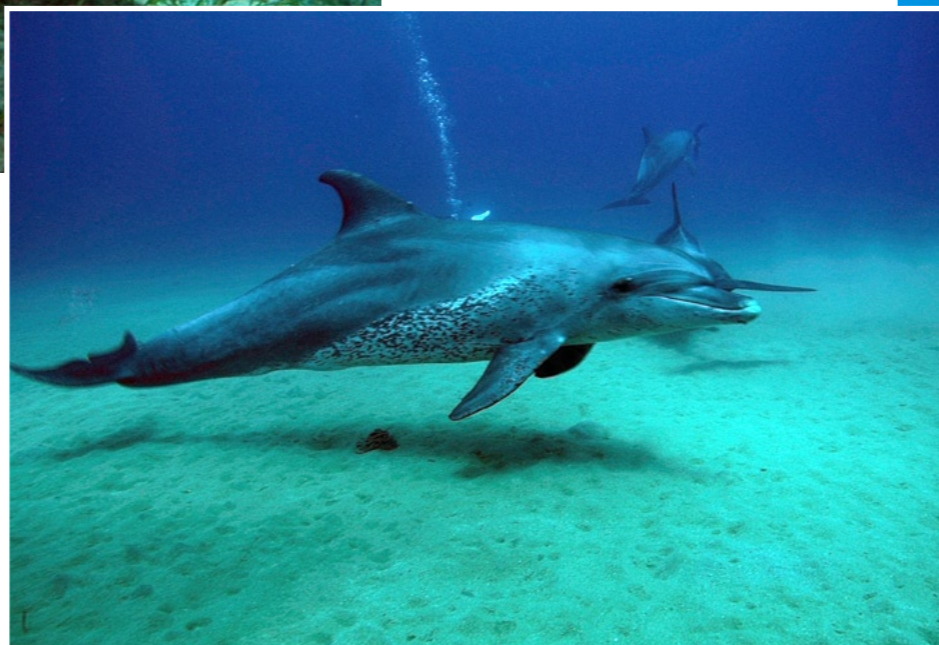


One last note I will add about my liveboard experience and some trouble I had with the two divemasters/guides. Quite often, they did not stick to the briefing plan or would change things in-water. As a photographer, this proved hard to adapt to. They would also become upset when I chose not to enter the wrecks,

feeling many of them were unsuitable without proper gear. Later, Steve informed us for future trips visiting divers can request European divemasters. Other than that, the trip was worth seeing all of the wrecks.

### El Quseir

The last part of our journey was spent in El Quseir, where Steve and Claire treated us to an array of boat and shore diving after a short stint touring



group of dolphins who spent over 20 minutes playing with us. They must have been

THIS PAGE: Scenes from El Quseir COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Hawksbill turtle; Scorpionfish; Dolphin play; Shovelnose shark; Diver enjoys colorful reef near El Quseir





Gary Knapp filming dolphins (left); Coral gardens from Dahab (right top and bottom); Little egret on the Nile River (bottom left)

and shallow pinnacles with a healthy variety of colorful soft and hard corals. Claire was gracious enough to act as my model at most of the sites. Although a close-up lens would have worked, I found the wide-angle lens to be the most versatile. Visibility was excellent in most places, and the water temperature was always in the low 80's.

When asked about expanding his business, Steve told us that they have. "Yes," he said,

"We are now embedded in Roots Luxury Camp just north of El Quseir. The diving is the same as El Quseir, as we use the same boat, zodiac and shore sites, but it offers an easy, unlimited access to a house reef for guests.

"The *camp* is not really a camp. We have two types of accommodations—modern Hill Side Chalets with views of the sea and Eco Huts, which have mountain views. The camp has been in operation for five years, but we have taken it over completely and have made many changes including doubling the staff, improving the food quality by bringing in an excellent chef. By doing this, we are about to expand from 24 to 40 rooms."

El Quseir was our last dive destination before returning inland for a brief stop in Luxor, then onto Cairo to return home. Overall, I would say this was an enjoyable journey around the northern part of Egypt. During my return visit, I hope to see more of the southern part of the country with even more diving and topside exploration.

"I hope you don't expect every dive to be like that," Steve told us. "We have some pretty good diving here, but seeing dolphins was a special treat."

Indeed it was special, but I thought the other shore dives were just as nice, especially the dive in front of their shop. Claire found scorpionfish, stonefish, crocodilefish, blue-spotted sting-rays and several pairs of angelfish for me to photograph and Gary to videotape.

At another shore dive, we were able to dive with five different turtles, as they grazed upon patches of lush green eelgrass on a sandy bottom in six meters (20ft) of warm water. While checking out a small stretch of reef, a guitarfish swam over to see what we were. Since it was my first, I followed it to observe what it was up to and, of course, get a few shots. A long silver fish joined it, and the pair went off feeling for things in the sand. Every now and then, it would scare up a fish or two to eat.

During the boat dives, we were introduced to both deep

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### What to bring

If you are comfortable with a particular dive mask, bring it, especially if it has prescription lenses. Memory cards can be expensive and selections limited, so bring two to three times what you think you will need. Check the tourism website for electrical hook-up and current exchange rates. They will also list what travel documents and which airlines fly into Egypt. Bring plenty of sun block and don't drink the water. Most of the hotels offer bottled water, and if you do come down with 'Pharaoh's Revenge', just pop into a pharmacy and explain your symptoms for some quick acting relief. Stay safe and good diving. ■

REFERENCES  
 • DIVE TRAVEL DVD'S BY GARY KNAPP  
 • LONELY PLANET'S BOOK DIVING & SNORKELING RED SEA



fascinated with my camera and Gary's video system, because they seemed to be looking at their reflections in the housing ports. Swimming alongside of them, I never knew they could be so big! They left as quickly as they arrived leaving us with a very delightful first dive.