

An underwater photograph of the SS Turkia wreck, showing a large, rusted metal structure covered in coral and other marine life. A school of small, silver fish is swimming in the dark water to the right of the wreck. The scene is dimly lit, highlighting the textures of the rusted metal and the vibrant colors of the coral.

SS Turkia

— *& Other Gulf of Suez Wrecks*

Text and photos by Rudolf Gonda



Fusilier, damselfish and angelfish with a tire on the wreck of the *Turkia* (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Sweepers swim past a car inside the *Turkia*

Everybody knows the legendary wrecks of the Egyptian Red Sea from the *Thistlegorm* to the *Salem Express*. But there are stories of rarely dived remains of ships that rest in the shallow waters up north in the Gulf of Suez.

When my fellow divers and I woke up, our dive boat was moored. The sea was calm, so we were able to see the silhouette of a huge wreck just below us. We clearly saw the cargo holds of the SS *Turkia*, so we did not waste our time. After a short briefing, we jumped into the water.

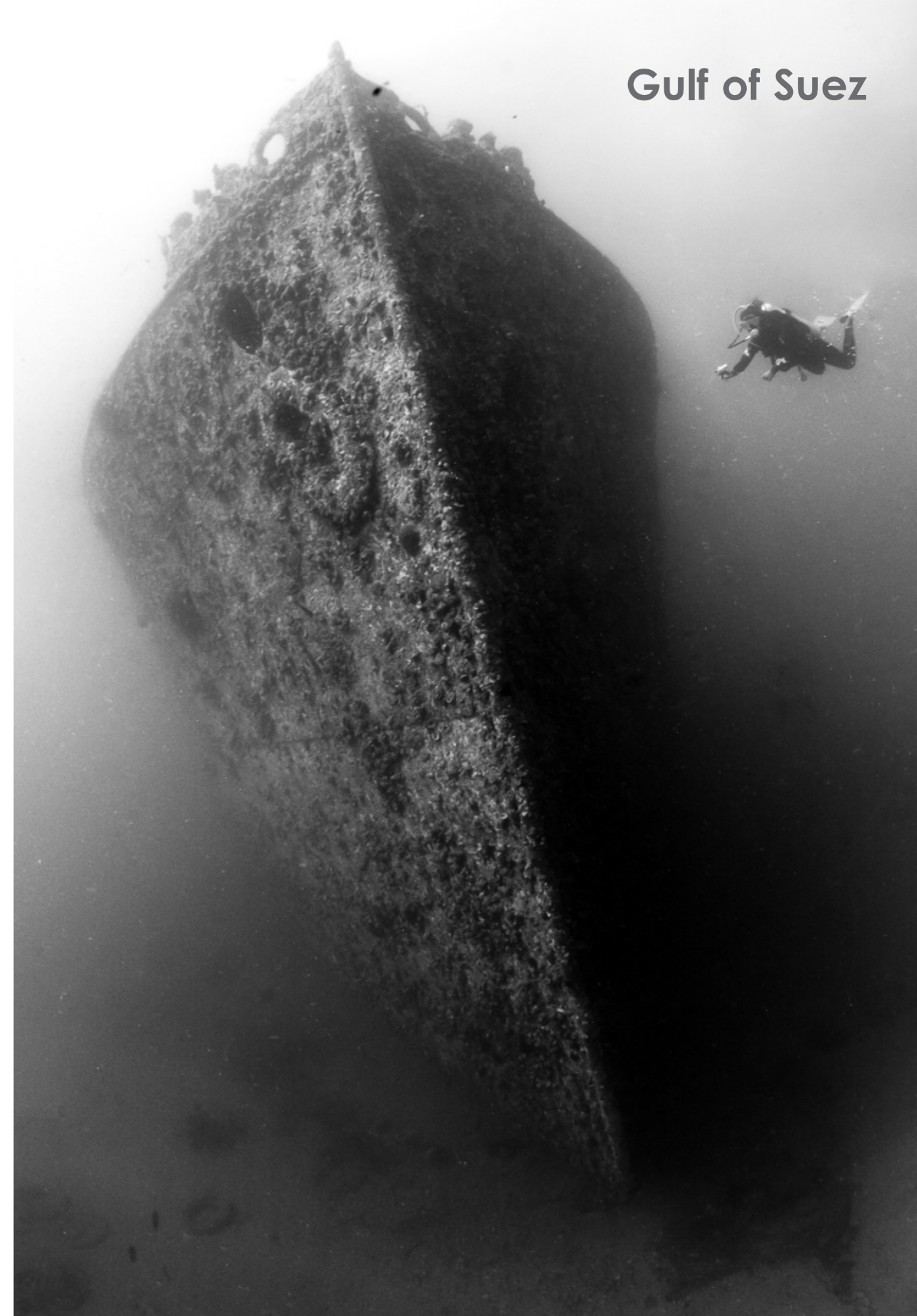
When one has been on all the typical liveaboard routes in the Egyptian Red Sea and seen the nicest reefs or the most famous wrecks, one starts looking for new spots. Although we love the *Thistlegorm*, sometimes it is crowded with divers and really disappointing to see how many of the artifacts have been stolen; there are no wheels on the cars, for example.

A few years ago, I read an article about the Gulf of Suez in which some wreck spots were mentioned. The SS *Turkia* seemed especially exciting. It is often compared to the *Thistlegorm*. The 90m-long steam cargo ship was sunk during WWII, and it carried war materials too. The maximum depth is only 24m, which means it is accessible to

any diver.

When I asked friends—who had many, many Red Sea dives under their belts—I found out none of them had visited the *Turkia*. They shared only rumors, and some of them said it was a bad idea to go to the Gulf of Suez because there is too much boat traffic, the visibility is poor, and the water is much colder. I have to tell you, I usually trust those who have first-hand experiences, so I contacted some local boat operators who would take divers to the *Turkia*.

Luckily, I found one, who told me about the challenges as well. When there is a strong wind from the north, it is not possible to reach the *Turkia* from Hurghada. So, one must choose the dates of one's trip carefully. My fellow



Diver dwarfed by the majestic scale of the *Turkia*





Diver explores compartments and cargo holds of the *Turkia* (above and right)

divers and I decided to go in July when there were less windy days.

It is useful if the skipper has some idea about the exact spots to dive, as there are no buoys or markers, and you will not find any other dive boats in the area. After months of planning, we arrived at the harbor, embarked on the boat, and started our adventurous dive trip in the Northern Red Sea. On the very first day, our skipper said we would have nice weather, so we could sail to the *Turkia*!

Diving the *Turkia*

Now, you can imagine our excitement when we first saw the huge wreck after the night-long journey. As we descended, we realized the stories about the bad visibility and the cold water were

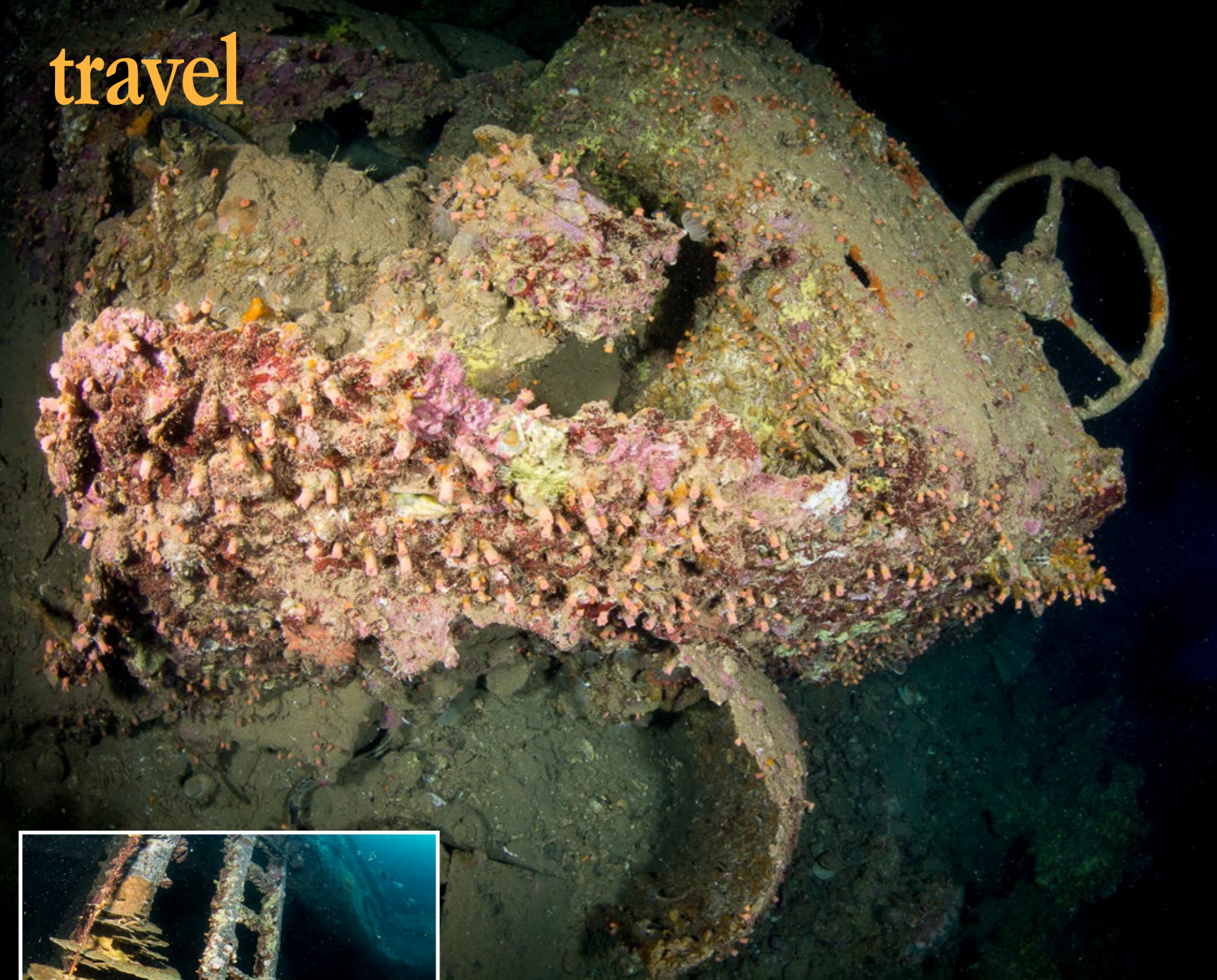
not true. We had fairly typical Red Sea conditions, so it was easy to swim around the hull of the *Turkia*. We saw the propeller and took some photos of the bow. After that, we started exploring the cargo holds. The entrance was huge, and there were more decks, but it was easy to navigate inside the wreck.

After the first dive, we shared what we had seen: Where we saw the car or the bathtub, who swam into the room in the stern, and was it possible to descend to the steam engines? Everything was new and exciting. When we prepared for the second and third dives, my buddy and I discussed what we had seen already and where we should go next.

I have to tell you, the *Turkia* is not the *Thistlegorm*. The latter has dozens



Diver by a ladder connecting the decks inside the *Turkia*



Car (above) and tires and coils by a ladder (left) in a cargo hold of the *Turkia*

of motorcycles, cars and engines that are far more spectacular than the tires and coils inside the *Turkia*. Although we found cars in the *Turkia* too, one cannot expect the same dives. On the other hand, there were many rooms and easy-to-penetrate halls in the *Turkia*, which meant we enjoyed all four dives there.

Every time we dive a new wreck, we learn about its story and think about the sailors who lived and worked on it. When you swim into a room where you find the bed frames or a bathroom, you realize that it

once was a proud ship, with men aboard, which sailed the seas in peace and war until its final voyage to the Gulf of Suez.

Maybe you cannot compare this wreck to the *Thistlegorm*, but there is still much more to see here than in the typical Red Sea wrecks. Not only is the *Turkia* itself worth the visit, but the marine life is worth seeing too. There were a lot of smaller and bigger species of fish, hunting trevallies and soft corals. We also found nudibranchs, crabs and shrimps during night dives. Sometimes, schools

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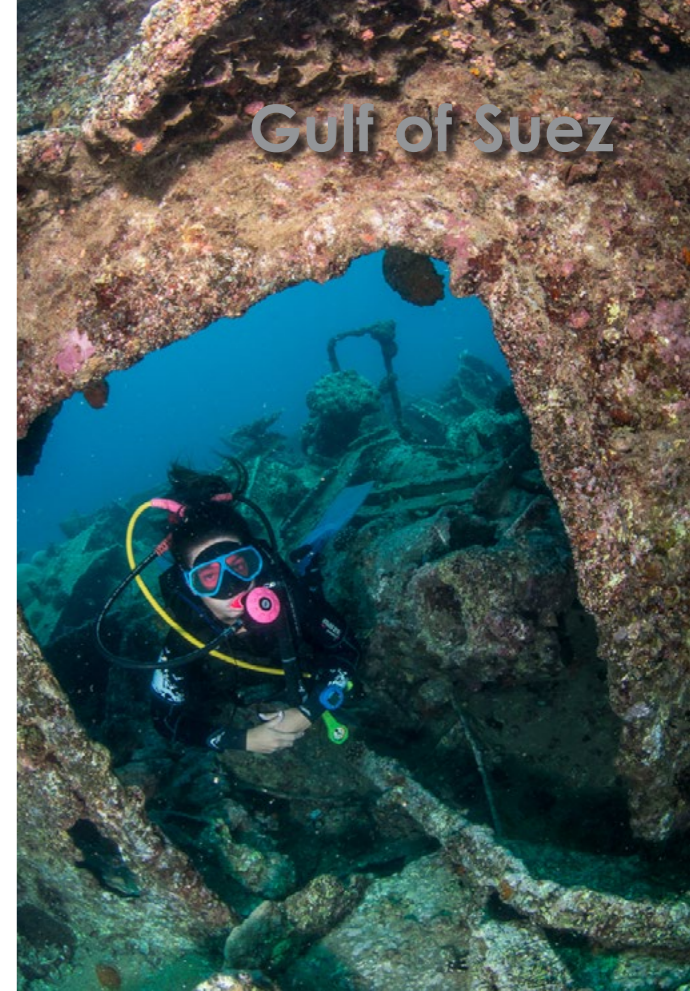
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THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the SS *Scalaria*, a 125m-long oil tanker that sank in the Ras Gharib area in 1942

Ras Gharib

After a day of great diving, we sailed a bit south to find some smaller wrecks in the Ras Gharib area. When we woke up the next morning, we moored near one. No one knew which wreck it was. But it was not our first dive spot. We continued to look for other wrecks in the area.

Scalaria. At last, we found another one. When we descended, we realized it was the SS *Scalaria*—a 125m-long oil tanker that sank in October 1942.

Nowadays, the scattered hull does not look very spectacular. We found the stern without the propeller and the bow was quite intact too. One could see the huge boilers of the steam engine. There were some other parts of the wreck visible, but basically, one could not really visualize how the ship used to look like. It was an easy, shallow dive, but since it lay close to the shore, the visibility was not so good.



of thousands of small fish would cover parts of the ship! Inside the wreck, the engine room, the bow and the cars are favorite subjects for photographers, but I was sure after a few more dives that I would find other points of interest.

And the best thing was that it was highly unlikely we would meet any

other dive groups here. No one is there to interrupt you when you try to take a good shot of the cargo or while you explore the rooms. We even found the wheel of a car too! We left it there and I hope nobody will steal it from the *Turkia* as a souvenir.





THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *Aboudy* in the Ras Gharib area. School of sweepers and damselfish shelter in the shadow of the remains of the *Aboudy's* hull (top left)



Aboudy. Our next dive was at the *Aboudy*, which was considered the best wreck of the area. Sadly, we found a salvaging platform there, and divers had already taken the majority of the wreck out of the water. The *Aboudy* had carried aluminum and medicines, but now, one can only find small bottles where the boat lies.

Finally, we found the wreck itself. To be honest, there was only a small fraction of the hull to see. When we swam into one of

the rooms, my buddy signaled to me because she saw something strange; it was the light of the underwater cutter. There were still some shoals of fish and an electric ray to see, but they will soon disappear when their home, the remains of the wreck, perishes.

We saw the remains of the bow only, and I think in a few weeks, the *Aboudy* will completely disappear. Maybe we were the very last recreational divers to dive the site. It was a really disappointing experience. Although dive tourism is not that popular yet in this part of the Red Sea, I am sure those who come here will miss the *Aboudy*.



Bakr. Afterwards, we went back to the first wreck of the day. We did not have any idea about the ship's identity until we found its name in the stern: *Bakr*. This Soviet-built survey vessel was 49m long and was sunk by Israeli fighters in 1973. Now, it lies in fairly shallow water, but at least it is intact. We tried to swim inside, but there were tight places with sharp metal pieces, so one had to be careful, especially when there was a swell. The depth of the deck is less than five meters, so we felt the moving waves there.

It was good for a fun easy dive, and I confess it was a special experience when we looked for clues about what kind of ship it was. It was easy when we found the name, but I am sure in the future, many more wrecks will be found in the Northern Red Sea and the identification will not be that easy. All of the wrecks we dived were discovered a few years ago, so they were only new to us, but since none of us had dived them before, we felt like wreck explorers. Where in the world can you find a popular and affordable dive destination

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *Bakr*, whose name was discovered on the stern; School of sweepers inside the *Bakr* (top left)



where you have the chance to dive on wrecks that none of your friends have ever seen?

Thistlegorm

Our next dive spot was the mighty *Thistlegorm*, so it was easy to make it a fine conclusion to our trip. We swam into the cargo holds, took the typical photos of the motorbikes and trucks, and had an awesome time there. There were not too many divers, and we were lucky with the

weather. The dives on the *Thistlegorm* were as good as ever. Certainly, we compared it to our experiences diving the wrecks in the Northern Red Sea, and I can tell you, we all felt it was a good decision to choose the challenging route.

Afterthoughts

The wrecks of the Gulf of Suez are definitely worth a visit, especially the *SS Turkia*. This ship, by itself, easily justifies the long boat ride. The smaller wrecks

are good for a stop on the way back to the south. If you cannot go to the north because of strong winds, you still have plenty of wreck sites to choose from; the *Thistlegorm*, the *Rosalie Möller*, the *Ulysses*, the *Dunraven*, the *Giannis D*, or the *Carnatic* are all good choices for a dive. Or you can visit some of these wrecks after spending the first few days of your trip in the north, like we did.

The Egyptian Red Sea is still one of the best destinations for wreck fanat-

ics. Because there are other wrecks to discover in the area, I am sure we will plan another trip to the Gulf of Suez to dive them all. Maybe, in the near future, it will become the new hot spot of Red Sea diving. ■

Travel journalist and blogger Rudolf Gonda is an avid diver and underwater photographer based in Budapest, Hungary. For more information, please visit: [instagram.com/el.che.74](https://www.instagram.com/el.che.74)

The dive safari to the deep north Red Sea wrecks was taken on the *Liberty* liveaboard (above); Hawksbill sea turtle (center right); Diver explores the remains of the wreck of the *Bakr* (top right and top left)

