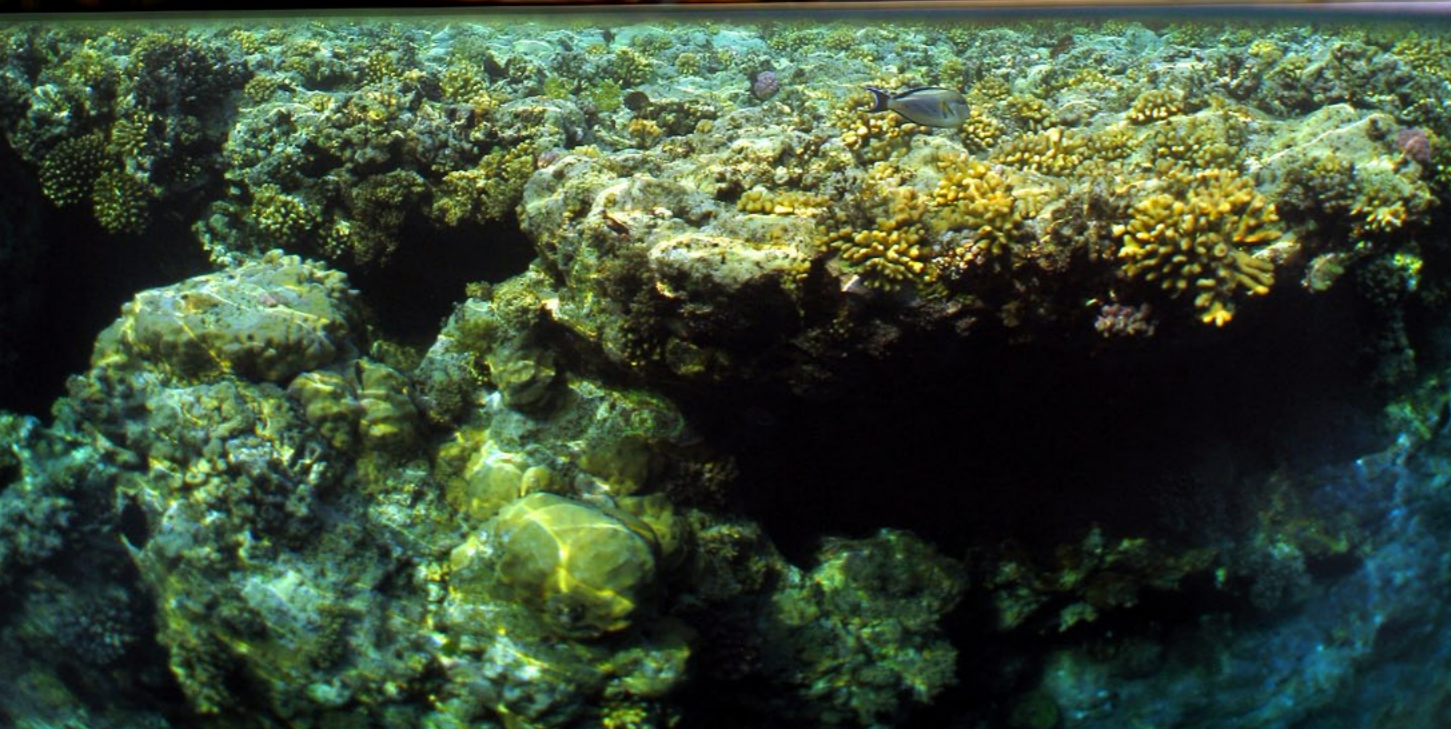




Red Sea Liveaboard
Brothers Islands

Text and photos by
Christopher Bartlett
Additional images
by Peter Symes



After six years of almost only diving from RIBs and spreading my clothes around my house, villa or hotel room, I decided it was time to see if I would enjoy a week on a boat with a bunch of strangers. As a frequent solo traveller, I wondered whether the close confines of a cabin with a random snorer would see me sleeping on the deck

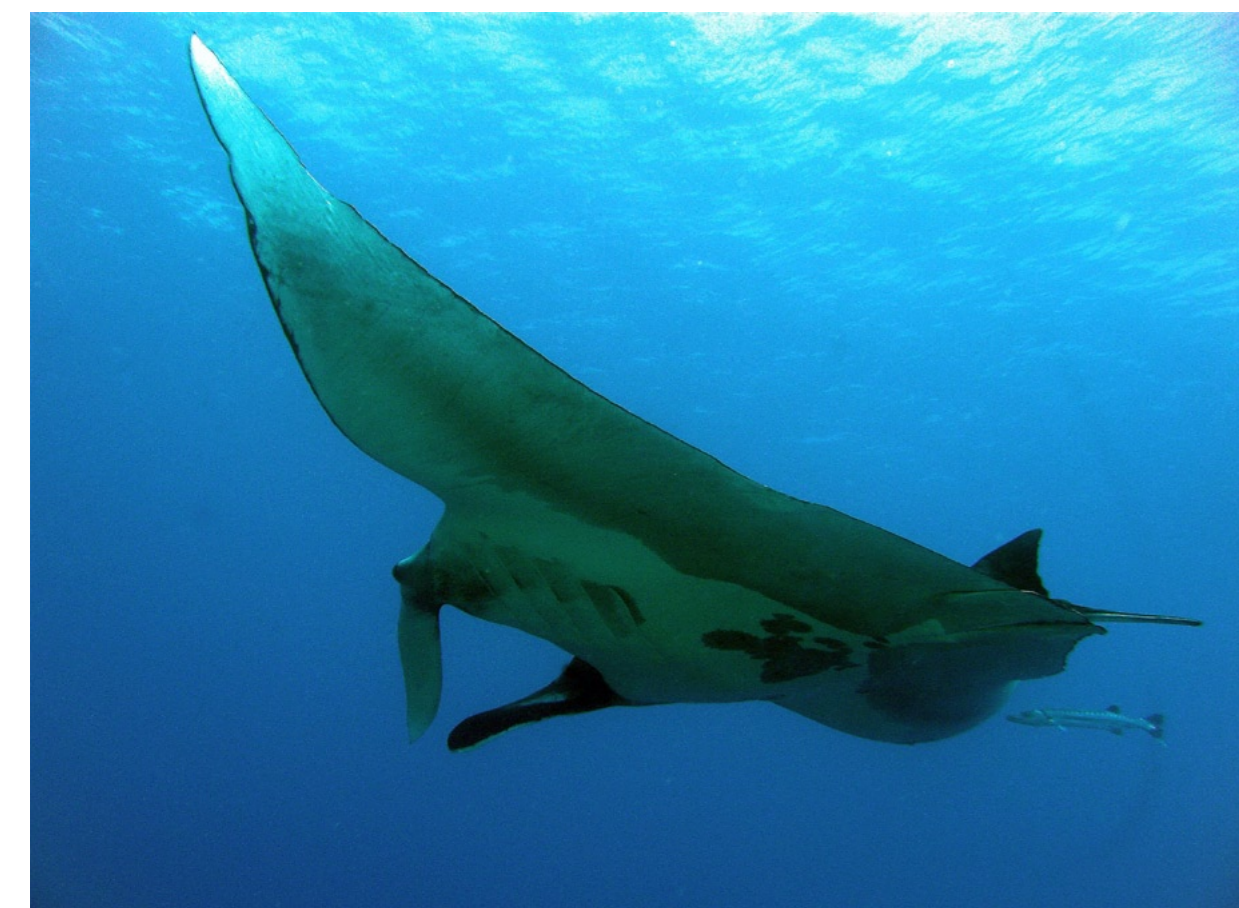
by the second night. The allure of remote dive sites, unreachable by day boat, was strong enough for me to give it a go. Forty-two miles off the Egyptian coast, the Brothers Islands rise up from the floor of the Red Sea 800 metres below, forming two small, flat tablespods surrounded by steeply sloping fringing reefs.

The Brothers Islands have the only reefs around washed by strong nutrient-rich currents. I was attracted by their reported features combining soft corals, pelagics, sharks and two wrecks in good condition.

The larger of the two sea mounts—cunningly named Big Brother—is approximately 300 metres long and one kilometre away from its sibling. It has a lighthouse and a 12-man army garrison. It would be a great location for a back-to-basics television series, such as the reality TV show of the same name.

Split image with above and below surface views of Big Brother with lighthouse and garrison; Bannerfish and grouper (top right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver hangs in the void along a wall off Brothers





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Returning to *Blue Pearl* on RIB; Buddy James over soft coral; Longnose hawkfish on gorgonian; Giant manta on Big Brother

I was the last to arrive at the harbour in Hurghada the night before the departure of the liveaboard. All the other guests had gone to their cabins already. I was greeted and briefed by one of the dive guides, Mimo, with a shining pate and wide smile.

sooner had I littered the spare bed with camera bits, books and t-shirts, when I was introduced to Karim who kindly informed me that some dinner had been kept for me and was waiting for me in the dining area. Splendid.

Over a welcome glass of fresh fruit juice, he explained where to stow my dive gear and gave me some welcome news. The 20-guest boat only had 12 passengers, and so, I would have one of the eight below-deck twin cabins to myself. No

Covering six metres of the eight-metre width of the *MY Blue Pearl*, the mid-ship dining area was an open plan affair adjoining the lounge that led onto the outdoor dive prep area at the stern. In the wall towards the bow was a magic hatch through which Karim or his brother Karemi, the other steward, would receive platter after platter of food from Chef Wael in the kitchen. Before the bow on the 36-metre long main deck were the crew quarters and rope storage area, and a small deck used at prayer time.

After having a read the safety notices and emergency action plans pinned up



Brothers

in good condition, the briefings friendly but to the point.

Pia laid out the itinerary in her "best Bavarian English, ja?" It was simple. Today would be spent on the coast diving at Gota Abu Ramada to check our gear, buoyancy and to get to know our buddies, as habitually strong currents off the

isolated Brothers Islands would be no place for faffing, and to do a night dive before heading east overnight.

An artificial shark stuck on a knife—part

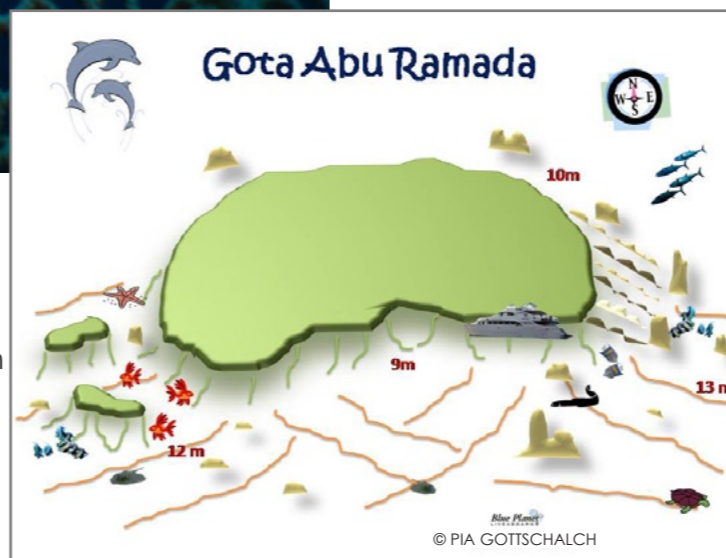
of blackspotted sweetlips and spottin squirrelfish, morays, crocodilefish and a large school of yellowtail barracuda and goatfish upon which to get reacquainted with camera settings.

Gota Abu Ramada
Gota Abu Ramada is a shallow site, no deeper

than 13 metres, with a large Australia-shaped reef with two large bommies off what would be the Perth coast (to the WSW). It was ideally suited to its purpose with no current, clear waters, small schools



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Gorgonian forests on Little Brother; *Numidia* wreck; Giant moray defends lair; Map of Gota Abu Ramada



next to the flatscreen TV in the lounge, I went outside and up the stairs to the shaded rear chill-out deck, did a circuit passing the portside double cabin, the bridge, the front sundeck, the starboard double cabin, back astern and then further up to the flybridge. Even if I had had to share, there was actually plenty of room to find some personal space.

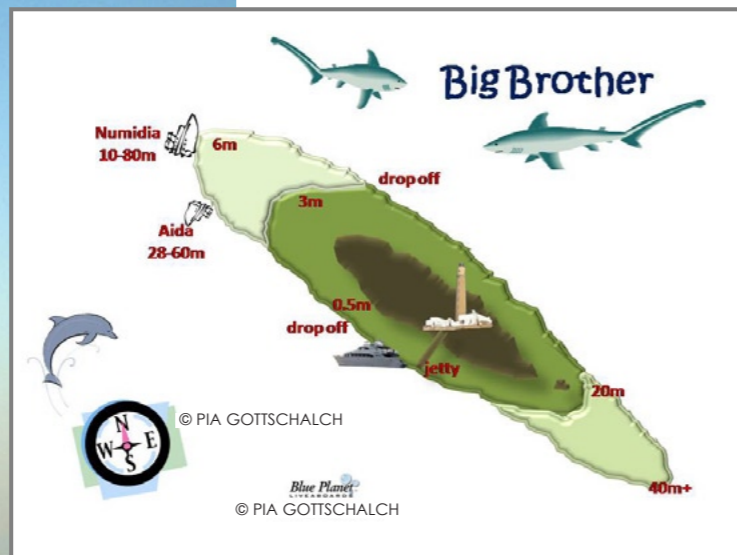
As Karim asked me how I would prefer my breakfast eggs the next morning, I took in my fellow shipmates, all liveaboard veterans and mostly return customers. We were an eclectic, if slightly Germanic, bunch—a German-Dutch couple, two German father-and-son combos, an

Austrian quartet made up of a father, his son, the son's wife and a friend. The 12th man was James, a middle-aged, Libyan-based Scottish teacher, and naturally, my buddy.

Seated in the lounge, Pia, the trip leader and diving instructor, took us through the boat and dive safety briefings. Given that we'd be at least five hours from the coast, the equipment was reassuringly plentiful and

Masked butterflyfish on Big Brother





Brothers

Two-bar anemonefish on Panorama, Safaga

absent from the surface, but we did a negative buoyancy entry and went straight down to ten metres, meeting up above the



ability to use an SMB competently.

The night dive was my first from a live-aboard and was enhanced by the deck lights on the boat, which created a full moon effect underwater, illuminating the bommies and the shark sculpture, hence providing visual markers for reference points.

After a warming shower to wash away the goose bumps from a third hour-long dive in 24°C water, we were greeted by the aromas of a giant buffet. Once dinner was over, the captain set a course eastwards, as some sat on the top deck watching the stars, and Karim and Karemi did a few card tricks in the lounge.

SS Numidia

I awoke to the sound of water lapping gently on the hull below my open cabin portholes, the early-morning light peeping in. From the deck, Big Brother and its Victorian lighthouse took on a red-brown hue as we boarded two RIBs and headed to the northern tip of the island.

The legendary currents appeared

beginning of the wreck of the SS Numidia, claimed to be one of the best wrecks in the Red Sea. She certainly looked huge and in good condition, given that she had spent more than a century exposed in her current-washed resting place.

Built in Glasgow in 1901, the 140-metre long, 6,400-ton Numidia was on her second voyage out of Liverpool bound for Calcutta with 7,000 tons of railway and general cargo. In the early hours of July 20, Big Brother's lighthouse was sighted off the port bow, and the captain ordered a slight change of course

to continue south passing alongside the island before retiring to his cabin. His orders were misinterpreted, and the ship ploughed straight into the northern tip

of the island. No lives were lost, much of the cargo was salvaged, but the ship went down, her keel digging into a rocky ledge. Now, she sits on a steep slope, her bow melded into the top of the reef, her stern some 72 metres below.

Hanging back, I let the other divers descend and incorporated them into a few shots to try to add some scale to my pictures. I captured the lifeboat davits and the remains of the foremast in the centre of the deck with a wide-angle lens, as the group inspected the remains of the bridge and the engine room. Yet, no image could convey quite how impressive this wreck was, dropping into the deep blue depths.

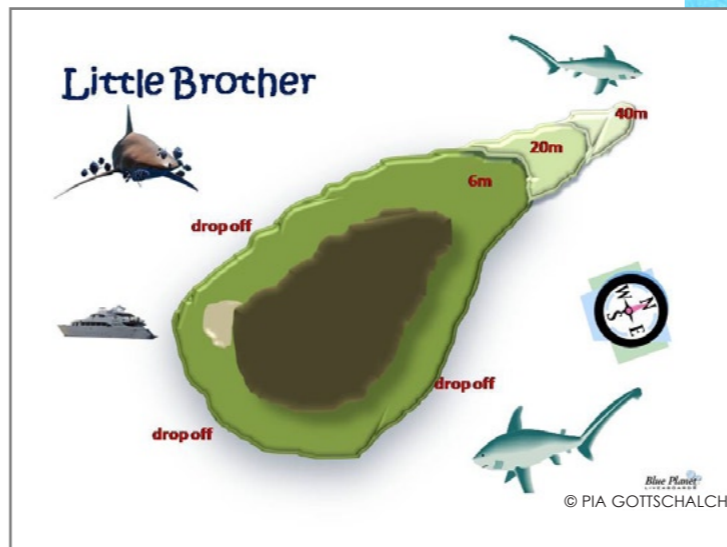
Descending to join the group and getting close to the wreck, I saw it was covered in soft corals and awash with burgundy and white striped Red Sea anthias and lionfish—accustomed to strong cur-



Thresher shark off Big Brother's southern plateau

Point of Big Brother, Blue Pearl moored, Little Brother in distance

of HEPCA's (Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association) shark protection awareness campaign—five metres below the surface also amused the divers, who took turns sitting on the sculpture's back during the safety stop once we had all demonstrated our



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Aida* wreck; Little Brother map; Male Napoleon wrasse and divers; Pregnant grey reef shark and oceanic whitetip with pilotfish at Little Brother

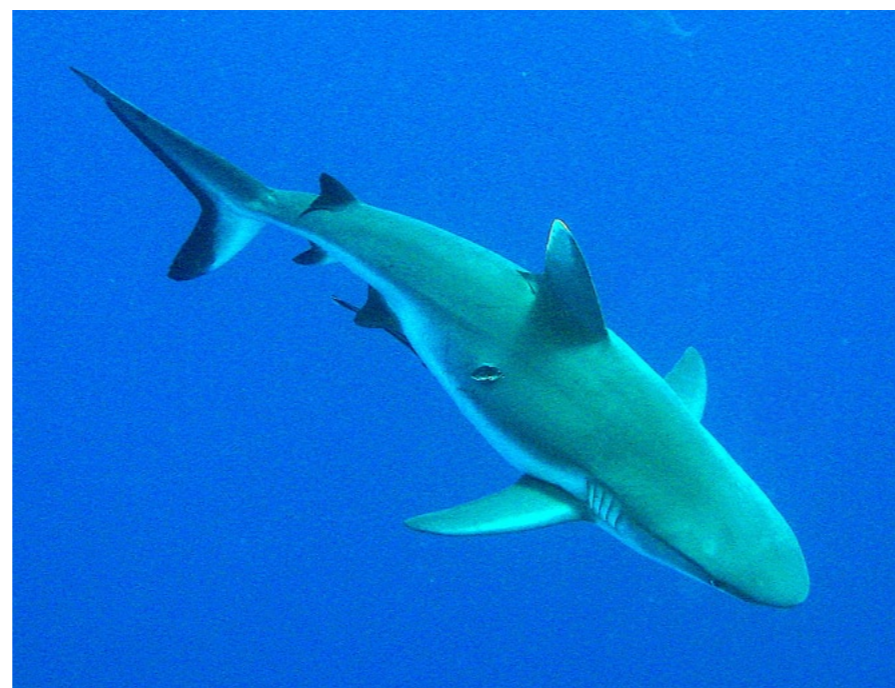
The plateau started at a depth of 20 metres and sloped down to 40 metres. It was a hot spot for thresher sharks. As we reached 25 metres, Mimo's arm shot out, finger extended

times before ascending to the top of the reef where we chilled out with the sohail surgeonfish before being invited to stuff ourselves again on board.

The next five days followed the same pattern: dive – breakfast – relax – dive – lunch – relax – dive – dinner – relax.

Due to the normally strong currents, the isolated nature of the location and the considerable presence of sharks, there was no night diving on the Brothers. In fact, on most nights we didn't need to get in the water to see them anyway.

Whether you agree or not, it is accepted practice on liveaboards to throw organic waste overboard in the evening, and the sharks seemed to be in on it, especially at Little Brother. Leaning over the side rails with the crew after dinner, we often saw oceanic whitetip and silky sharks patrolling around the boat.



rents—sheltered inside. On this day, there was no need. With no current and good viz, conditions were ideal, and we spent the whole dive there, ascending past some coral-encrusted rolling stock bogies at ten metres, before being picked up by the RIBs and taken back for breakfast.

After catching a few rays on the sun-deck, Pia and Mimo said it was time for a shark hunt on the southern plateau. As we were moored off the southern tip where there was no current, we would giant stride off the rear deck and return to the boat at the end.

towards the unmistakable scythe-like tail of a thresher shark swimming through a school of fusiliers. It stayed within view for a couple of minutes before we lost it.

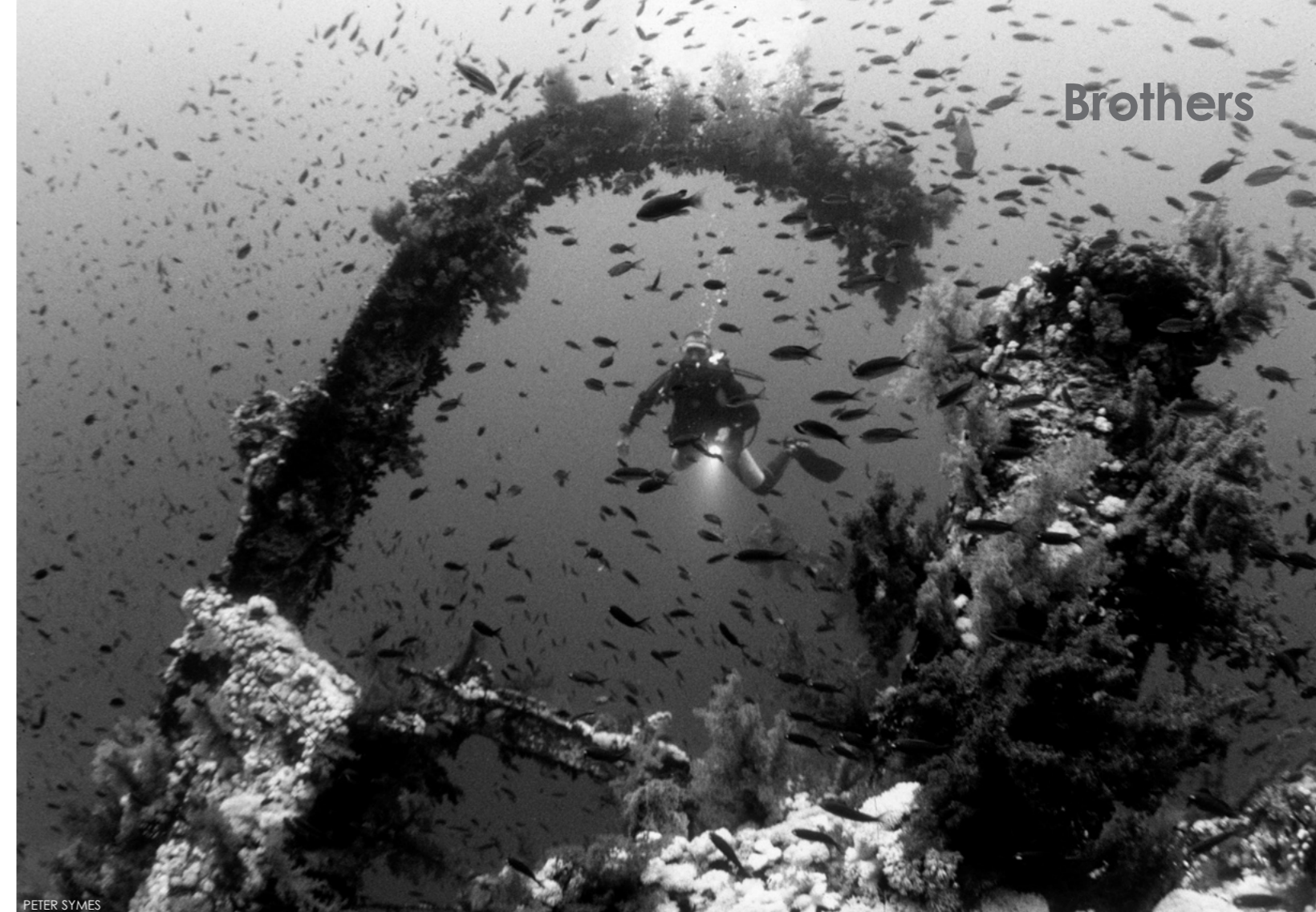
We hung around 28 metres as long as our 30 percent nitrox mix would allow us, spotting a distant Thresher two more

Aida

Big Brother's other iconic dive site is the wreck of the *Aida*, a 75-metre supply vessel built in France in 1911, which sank on 15 September 1957 when resupplying the lighthouse and Egyptian army garrison stationed there. Approaching the jetty in heavy seas, she was slammed onto the rocks and abandoned immediately. After drifting north slightly, she went down south of the *Numidia*, just past the end of the island. Her bows no longer exist, but from her midships at 25 metres to her stern at 60, she is excellent condition,



PETER SYMES



PETER SYMES

THIS PAGE: Scenes from *Aida* wreck

adorned with purple soft corals and hard corals, anthias, morays and the usual reef dwellers.

The *Aida* was the last dive of the second day, and the first dive the next morning when a gentle current helped us onto the *Numidia* and then along the wall past a large school of black snapper hanging on the corner of the reef.

The walls of Big Brother were also home to a friendly, 90-centimetre female Napoleon wrasse called Mousie. After another successful Thresher-spotting trip over the southern plateau, Mousie and I flirted for a few minutes, as if eyeing each other across a bar, until she sidled up, posing, tilting onto one side like she wanted to be petted. Our 15-minute infatuation was sadly cut short by my dive computer and my

buddy's air consumption dwindling.

On our last Big Brother dive, we had a slightly stronger south to north current. No sooner had we dropped in when we were greeted by a juvenile giant manta, approximately four metres across, riding the current and flanked by a barracuda, closely followed by three grey reef sharks. But the action wasn't over yet.

As we loitered expectantly, a 1.2-metre male Napoleon came amongst the divers creating a scene akin to a publicity-starved celebrity (quite appropriate given the location) willingly posing for the paparazzi. He left abruptly, diving fast to chase off a small grey reef shark sniffing around his patch.

As we slowly moved north, corner fish hugged our tanks, using us for streamlining and cover, as they

WHEN TO GO

September and October are the busiest months of the year with warm seas. Even remote reefs can have several boats on them. May and June are the next busiest months, for the same reasons.

July and August are quiet due to hotter ambient temperatures. However, this is also when the water is warmest, and there is often a cooling breeze on deck. Boats are fully equipped with air-conditioning throughout.

March and April are also quiet, and with water temperatures in the mid-20s at the Brothers, it is a good time to go.

During the quiet months of March, April, July, and August, solo travellers and unromantically involved pairs have a good chance of being given a cabin to themselves on arrival. ■



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pipefish; Blackspotted sweetlips; Scribbled filefish; Foster's hawkfish on reef at Little Brother; Spottfin squirrelfish

gorgonian forest, home to a longnosed hawkfish, round the corner from a section of wall festooned with broccoli-like soft corals. In the normally washing machine-like shallows, we off-gassed with black-tongue unicornfish having parasites removed by cleaner wrasse, pufferfish, moray eels, orangespine unicornfish, barracudas and an octopus, thanks to the remarkably still waters. The icing on the considerable cake was provided by an oceanic whitetip and its accompanying

pilot fish that came by to say hello.

It would've been unfair to expect the final day's diving in Safaga to compare, but Panorama reef had interesting seven-metre high, mountain-like dome coral

Brothers

formations, anemonefish and two turtles. The snorkelling boats at Tobia Arba'a (a.k.a. The Seven Pillars) also provided much amusement from above and below the surface, and the shallow waters of the goldie-covered coral bommies were also home to blue spotted stingrays and lionfish. Rather than being a let-down, these two sites, two of the best in the area, served as a reminder of how spoilt we had been.

The whole experience had been excellent. There was plenty of room on the boat and I spent so little time in my cabin awake that sharing would have been no problem. The constant sound of the ocean was soothing and we never had to share a dive site with another group. In fact each buddy team often went at its own pace and James and I were frequently alone at the end of a dive, hanging out with the fish. In short, I can safely say that I am a liveaboard



convert and would thoroughly recommend a trip to the Brothers.

Christopher Barlett travelled with Oonas Divers. www.oonasdivers.com

it did not disappoint. After an uneventful 15 minutes deep in the blue looking for sharks, we moved closer to the wall. A quarter of an hour later, we had seen a male grey reef shark, two threshers, a curiously unshy silky shark, and an obviously pregnant grey reef shark, and had been entertained by an even bigger male Napoleon wrasse.

The last four dives were just as impressive. The

male napoleon wrasse was often under the boat waiting to tag along on a dive, the pregnant reef shark (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*) seemed to live near the mooring site, threshers milled around to the south below a magnificent

looked for prey to ambush amongst the schools of anthias while we found pipefish amongst the gorgonians. As we moved closer to the surface, a manta cruised along below to bid us farewell. Big Brother had been excellent—could Little Brother follow suit?

Little Brother

It had two days to outdo its sibling, and



fact file

Brothers Island



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, SCUBADOC.COM, E-MED.CO.UK

History One of the world's great civilizations developed in Egypt fostered by fertile lands and regularity of the annual Nile River flood, as well as the relative isolation found between the deserts to the east and west. Around 3200 B.C., a unified kingdom evolved, followed by ruling dynasties reigning in Egypt for the next 3,000 years. In 341 B.C., the Persians conquered the last native dynasty. Then came the Greeks, Romans and Byzantines. It was the Arabs who, in the 7th century, introduced Islam and the Arabic language. They reigned over Egypt for the next 600 years. Then, around 1250, the Mamluks, a local military caste, took control and continued to govern after the Ottoman Turks conquered Egypt in 1517. In 1869, Egypt became an important world transportation hub after the Suez Canal was completed, but also accrued a lot of debt. In order to protect its investments, Britain took control of Egypt's government in 1882. However, allegiance to the Ottoman Empire continued, in name only, until 1914. Egypt was partially independent from the United Kingdom by 1922, and in 1952 the country got full sovereignty after the overthrow of the British-backed monarchy. In 1971, the completion of the Aswan High Dam and the creation of Lake Nasser altered the long-held role

of the Nile River in the ecology and agriculture of the country. Resources were overtaxed and society stressed as the population experienced rapid growth. In addition, there was limited arable land and continued dependence on the Nile. In order to face these challenges, the government implemented economic reform and major increases in investment in physical and communications infrastructure. Events in Tunisia leading to overthrow of the government there, inspired the Egyptian youth and opposition groups to protest. They organized a "Day of Rage" campaign on 25 January 2011 (Police Day) involving non-violent demonstrations and marches, as well as labor strikes in Cairo and other cities across the country signalling what is now known as the Arab Spring. Government: republic. Capital: Cairo

Geography Egypt is located in Northern Africa. It borders the Red Sea north of Sudan and the Medi-

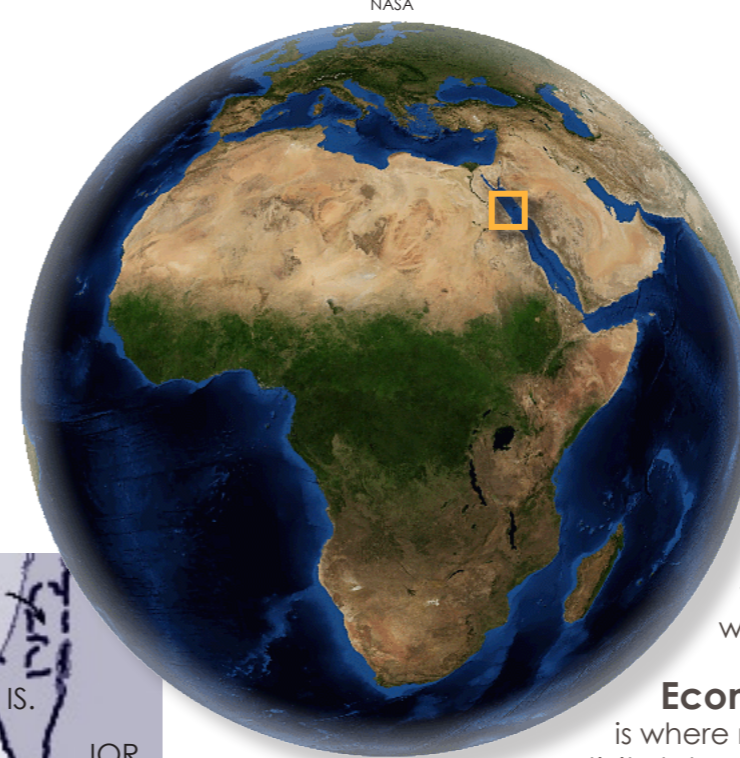
terranean Sea, between Libya and the Gaza Strip. It also includes the Asian Sinai Peninsula. Coastline: 2,450km. Terrain: Cut in half by the Nile valley and delta, Egypt is primarily a vast desert plateau. Lowest point: Qattara Depression -133m. Highest point: Mount Catherine 2,629m. Note: Egypt controls the Suez Canal—a sea link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea—as well as the Sinai Peninsula, which is the

RIGHT: Location of Brothers Islands on global map
BELOW: Location of Brothers Islands on map of Egypt



only land bridge between Africa and the edge of Eastern Hemisphere. Natural hazards: droughts; earthquakes; flash floods; landslides; dust and sand storms; and *khamsin*—a hot, driving windstorm that occurs in spring. Environmental issues: urbanization and windblown sands decreasing agricultural lands; soil salination increasing below Aswan High Dam; desertification; coral reefs, beach-

es, marine and aquatic habitats threatened by oil pollution, agricultural pesticides, raw sewage, and industrial run-off. Egypt is party to the following international agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Environmental Modification, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropi-



cal Timber 94, Wetlands.

Climate Egypt has a desert climate—hot, dry summers with moderate winters

Economy Nile valley is where most economic activity takes place. Highly centralized during the rule of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's economy opened up significantly under former Presidents Anwar El-Sadat and Mohamed Hosni Mubarak. From 2004 to 2008, Cairo pursued economic reforms aggressively in order to attract foreign investment and foster GDP growth. However, living conditions for the average Egyptian stayed poor and exacerbated public discontent despite the increase of economic growth in recent years. Unrest took place in January 2011 and the Egyptian Government dramatically increased social spending to ease public dissatisfaction. However, economic growth slowed significantly due to political uncertainty, which reduced government revenues. The hardest hit sectors were tourism, manufacturing, and construction. Economic growth is most likely to stay slow through 2012. Foreign exchange reserves are being used by the government to support the Egyptian pound.

Population 83,688,164 (July 2012 est.) Ethnic groups: Egyptian 99.6%. Religions: Muslim (mostly Sunni) 90%, Coptic 9%, other Chris-

tians 1%. Internet users: 20.136 million (2009)

Currency Egyptian pounds (EGP)

Language Arabic (official), English and French

Health There is an intermediate degree of risk for food or water-borne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever; vectorborne disease such as Rift Valley fever; and water contact disease such as schistosomiasis. H5N1 avian influenza has been identified in the country but poses low risk to tourists.

Decompression Chambers

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Web sites
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