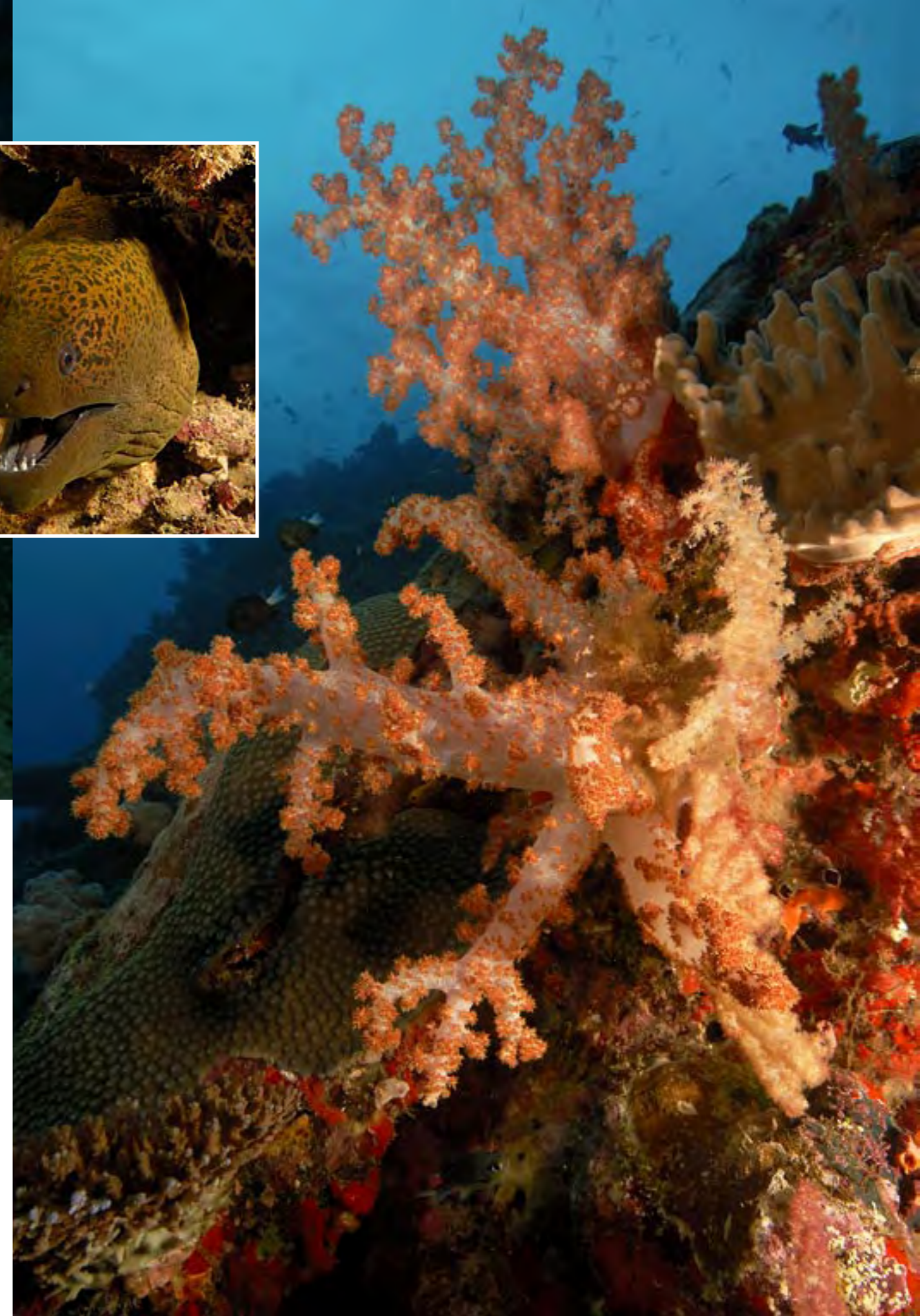




Fabulous Fiji

Shark diving & vibrant reefs in Beqa Lagoon

Text and photographs by Scott Bennett



“I’d like to introduce you to some of our friends “ enthused our guide Manasa, AKA *Papa*, as he held aloft a well-worn loose-leaf binder. The photographs within produced nervous laughter and a couple of anxious glances amongst a few of the divers. Then again, with names like Scarface, Hook and Big Mama, these were no ordinary friends. They were sharks, and we would soon be making their acquaintance.

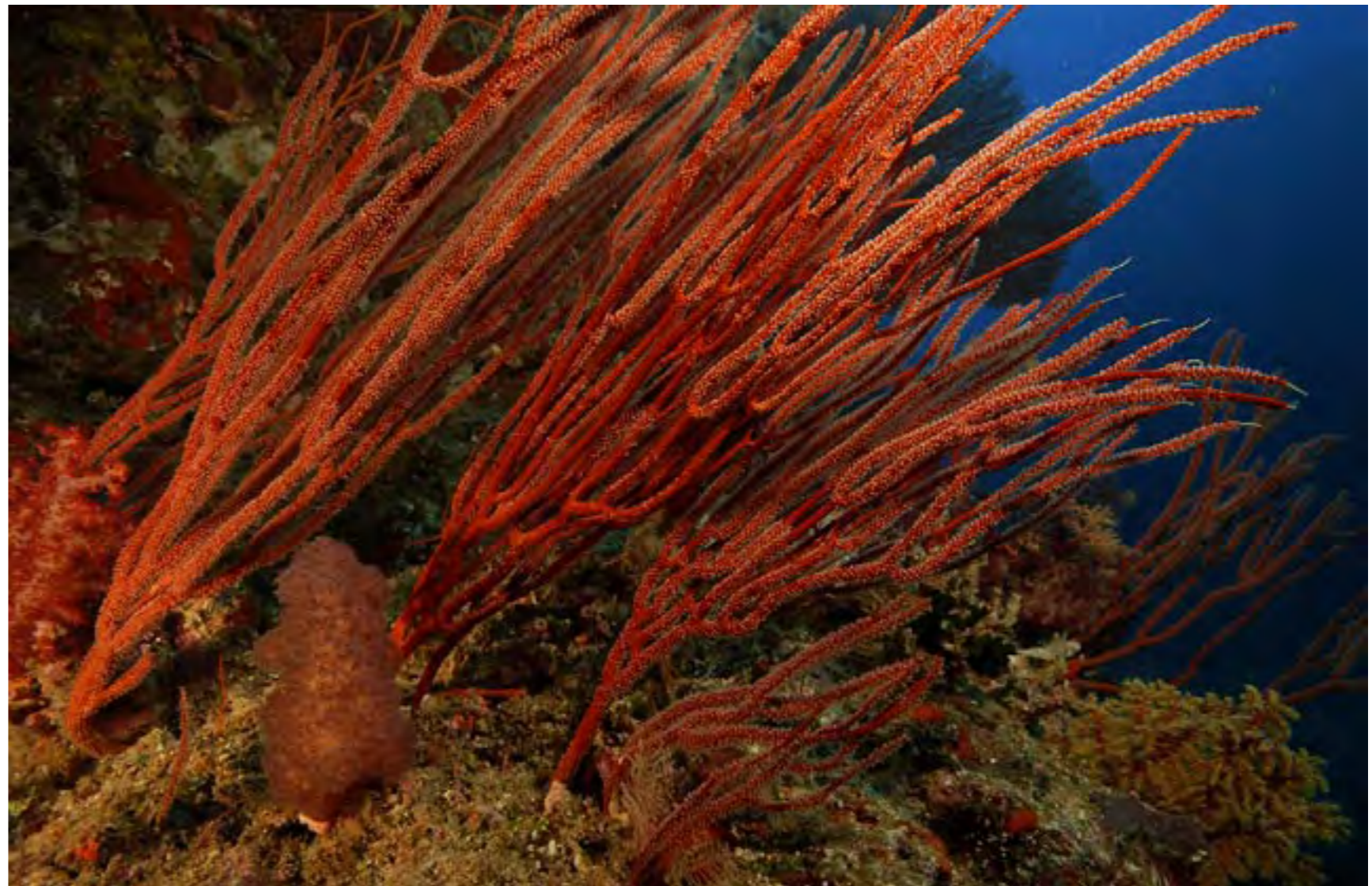
Lying at the crossroads of the South Pacific, the Fiji Islands have long been famous as an idyllic tropical paradise. While famous for its vibrant coral reefs, Fiji’s Beqa Lagoon (pronounced *Beng-a*) on the main island of Viti Levu is rapidly gaining fame as a world-class shark diving destination.

Two flights and 15 hours after leaving my home in Toronto, I arrived at Nadi’s international airport on the island of Vitu Levu. Stumbling bleary-eyed into the arrival hall, I was greeted by an energetic group of local musicians performing traditional Fijian music. Their level of enthusiasm at 5:15AM was nothing short of astonishing! It was infectious too, and soon, everyone standing in the customs queue forgot his or her

fatigue. Feeling somewhat energized, I collected my gear and stepped out into the cool morning air.

Waiting outside was my driver and after loading up the van, we set out for the journey to Pacific Harbour. Soon afterwards, the first rays of dawn bathed the landscape with golden light, revealing immense fields of sugar cane spreading to the horizon. For many years, sugar cane was the mainstay of the Fijian economy, although nowadays tourism has replaced it as the primary source of income. Sadly, that industry is now hurting, as the December 2006 coup dealt tourism a severe blow. As usual, the media exaggerated everything well out of proportion. In actuality, the entire incident was pretty low-key,

Bull shark at “The Den”; One of Shark reef’s friendly Java morays



without a trace of violence. Outside of Suva, you wouldn't have known anything had happened at all. Life carried on as usual with one notable exception; nervous tourists cancelled trips. Not THIS tourist, as it takes more than a coup to keep me away from a good diving destination!

Along the way, we passed Hindu temples and mosques, a testament to the country's large Indian population. Descendents of workers that were brought over by the British in the 19th century to work the cane fields, they now comprise a large percentage of the country's population. After an hour of driving, the never-ending fields of sugar cane were replaced with rolling hills cloaked in lush vegetation. The southern coast of Viti Levu receives abundant rainfall, resulting in a landscape so green it would

make Ireland envious. Two hours after departing the airport, we arrived in Pacific Harbour and headed straight for Beqa Adventure Divers, situated on the grounds of the Lagoon Resort aside the Qara-ni-Qio River that empties into Beqa Lagoon.

The Eagle has landed

On hand to greet me was Andrew Cumming, the shop's easy-going manager. No stranger to sharks, Andrew arrived in Fiji by way of the Bahamas, where he worked in Walkers Cay for shark conservationists Gary and Brenda Adkison. Unfortunately, I'd arrived a tad late to partake in the day's shark dives, so the day was spent recuperating and getting my camera gear ready.

Early the next morning, I was picked up for my first dive via the shop's

courtesy shuttle. As the shark dives are held four days a week on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, our destination was Carpet Cove, situated close to Beqa Island. To get there, we boarded the *MV Predator*, the shop's sleek and spacious hydrofoil catamaran. Along with our guide Elik, there were only two other divers on board. Most people come to Beqa just for the shark dives, but the lagoon's broad expanse boasts more than 20 dives sites.

After departing the jetty, the boat headed downriver for the lagoon. The lush tropical vegetation fringing the river soon gave way to extensive stands of mangroves. Coupled with the forest-clad hills on the horizon, the entire scene resembled the location of a jungle movie, which, I found out later, it actually was. A few years

LEFT: The lush countryside is dotted with clearings planted with cassava; ABOVE: Whip corals adorn the walls at ET



LEFT TO RIGHT: Some of the dazzling soft corals to be found at Carpet Cove; Hungry diners greet the dive guides are Shark reef ; Fan corals line the entrance to ET's subterranean passage



previously, "Anacondas: Hunt for the Blood Orchid" was filmed here, where Fiji stood in for Borneo. (Anacondas in Borneo??? Don't ask.) The dilapidated ship constructed for the film, "The Bloody Mary" now graces the grounds of the resort near the dive shop. With nary an anaconda in sight, we safely negotiated the river and reached Beqa Lagoon after a pleasant ten-minute trip. After another 15 minutes, we arrived at our destination.

Surprise

The beginning of the dive featured a somewhat unexpected surprise. Resting on the bottom at a depth of 30m was a large wreck, a Chinese trawler measuring 25m in length. Sunk in 1996 to create an artificial reef, she rests upright at depth of 30m in the middle of a large sandy area populated by legions of undulating garden eels. While the sides of the vessel were fairly devoid of growth, ascending to the upper deck revealed a myriad of coral growth. Schools of fish darted about while feather stars decorated railings like undersea floral arrangements. After a bit more exploration, we headed for shallower water. Beqa Lagoon is often dubbed "The soft coral capitol of the world", and Carpet Cove more than lives up to its name. Rising to within eight metres of the surface, a series of

pinnacles were shrouded with coral growth of unparalleled luxuriance. Innumerable basslets and coral trout swarmed amongst soft corals garbed in vivid colours of red, orange and purple so vivid it almost hurt the eyes! I was so engrossed photographing the corals, I nearly missed a trio of great barracuda swimming past. On the bottom, abundant ribbon eels twitched spasmodically in the gentle current.

"Follow me"

The second dive was also made at Carpet Cove but at a different set of pinnacles. If anything, it was even more spectacular than the first, with more corals and even more basslets. At one point, a friendly batfish approached. Then, as if saying, "Follow me", he led me over to a rocky overhang where an obliging cleaner wrasse performed a full tune-up.

My home for the week was the newly opened Uprising Beach Resort. Set back from a palm-fringed beach offering expansive views of Beqa Lagoon, twelve bures surrounded by lush tropical gardens provide an elegant blend of traditional Fijian architecture and modern sophistication. Each comes with a balcony and ocean views as well as an outdoor shower.

A newly constructed dorm at the rear of the property caters to those on a budget. Owner Rene Munch, resort manager Alfie Christoffersen and the enthusiastic staff ensure the atmosphere has the relaxed feel of a small family run resort offering a taste of real Fijian ambience. A wide selection of activities is available, from water-skiing, kayaking and snorkelling to white-water rafting, horseback riding and cultural shows at the nearby Arts Village Pacific Harbour.



Despite the empty food containers, the ever-hungry fish still hope for one last-minute tid-bit ; Trevalley feeding frenzy, Shark Reef; A short distance inland is the lush vegetation of the Serua mountains

Sitting by the pool with a cold drink was enough to inspire terminal laziness! However, there was diving to be done!

In marked contrast to my first day of diving, the Shark Dive trip was jam-packed! Something was fishy too. Literally. The three large wheeled garbage bins conspicuously parked at the stern were brimming with 600kg of fish parts, courtesy of a fish processing plant in Suva. The wafting aroma from the containers provided an appropriate backdrop for our dive briefing. On board was a crew of eight including the two senior shark feeders, Manasa and Rusi. Prior to the advent of Christianity, the residents of Beqa Island worshipped sharks and made a covenant with the Shark God. In return, they were promised that sharks would never harm them, and they could forever swim without concern. As both Rusi and Manasa hail from Beqa Island, this was a good omen indeed!

Marine Sanctuary

Established in April 2004, the Shark Reef Marine Sanctuary is the first of its kind in

Fiji. Working closely with the Fiji government and the reef's traditional owners, Beqa Adventure Divers has designated the waters of Shark Reef as a protected marine reserve. The reserve wouldn't be possible without the co-operation of the villages of Wainiyabia and Galoa, which are Shark Reef's traditional owners. Both have relinquished fishing rights in the reserve. In return, a fee of FJ\$20 is collected from each diver who participates on the Shark Dive. Each month, the money is deposited into each village's community bank account. Conservation won't work without the direct involvement of the local people, who have to see the benefits from protecting the reef as opposed to fishing. Depending on the season, up to eight shark species can be seen here, including grey reef, blacktip, whitetip, lemon, sicklefin lemon, silvertip, bull and tiger sharks.

One of the greatest challenges facing the reserve is the prevention of illegal fishing. Reef wardens trained and recruited from the local community

vigilantly patrol the area on a boat provided by the Shark Foundation in Switzerland. The crew is on call 24 hours a day to perform random checks to ensure illegal fishing doesn't occur. In addition, ongoing research studies are carried out to learn more about these majestic yet misunderstood creatures.

Diving with the sharks

After descending to 30 metres, the divers assemble behind a wall constructed of rock. Situated on a ledge next to the drop off plunging into the depths of Beqa Passage, this is The Arena, the first of three feeding sites visited during the first dive. The large wheeled garbage containers had already been sent down and placed in position and the first of the day's customers had already showed up.

Giant trevallies, some a metre in length, swirled about, eagerly joined by a multitude of fish including red bass, rainbow runners, Napoleon wrasse, spotted eagle rays and a myriad of reef fish. At last count, over 267 species have been seen observed here.





Reef scene, Carpet Cove. NEXT PAGE: Lavish coral growth earns Beqa Lagoon "The soft coral capitol of the world"

Elsewhere, trevallies are usually found in pairs or small schools, but more than a hundred can be found at Shark Reef. The sound of the boat engine brings them out en masse, excitedly encircling the shark feeders like an underwater tornado. Anywhere else, they would be an attraction on their own, but here, are but a prelude to the main event.

"...the first dim silhouettes patrolled past, coming closer with each pass. The sharks had arrived!"

While Manasa or Rusi have never been bitten by the sharks, both men bear an assortment of scars from the unrelenting trevallies. Divers are instructed to keep their hands at their sides, lest one of the over-eager trevallies mistake an errant finger as a fishy morsel!

With unbridled anticipation, everyone waited for the star attractions. We didn't have to wait for long; out in the blue, the first dim silhouettes patrolled past, coming closer with each pass. The sharks had arrived!

After a few minutes, Manasa motioned for everyone to join him down in the arena. The Shark Dive must rank as one of the easiest dives of all time; just take a seat and watch the show!

First to arrive were a few bull

sharks including one massive specimen that turned out to be "Big Mama." They were soon joined by a trio of tawny nurse sharks, with one specimen easily four metres long. They all knew the drill and were soon over to investigate the containers. Within moments, their heads were right inside, greedily gobbling the contents like big grey vacuum cleaners. The number of fish was simply overwhelming; you almost didn't know where to look!

After 17 minutes at The Arena, it was time to head to shallower water and the second feeding station called The Den. Here, the feeders were engulfed by the smaller shark species. Whitetip and blacktip reef sharks, along with the occasional grey reef, approached for a handout, completely obli-

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ous to the divers. After approximately ten minutes, everyone ascended to the reef top and the final feeding station. Yet more—in a seemingly limitless supply of sharks—appeared, along with hordes of rainbow runners, yellowback fusiliers and sergeant majors.

Camera batteries exhausted, I reluctantly surfaced after 50

enthraling minutes. And this was just the first dive!

During the surface interval, the initial unease of some divers had all but evaporated and everyone couldn't wait to get back in the water. By the time the hour was up, everyone was suited up and eager to go.

The second dive is called The Take Out. Situated at a depth of 16m, this is where the

big fish action is! Bull sharks, unmistakable with their blunt heads and stocky builds, were already circling in the blue as everyone took their positions. Photographers get a prime position at the end of the wall near the feeders.

In order to get fed, the sharks must follow a very specific procedure, approaching the feed-

travel

Fiji





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
A myriad of fish swarm amongst the soft corals at Carpet Cove; Uprising Beach Resort's expansive pool ; It's easy to overlook Beqa Lagoon's abundant macro subjects such as this colourful flatworm; Uprising Beach Resort's palm-fringed shoreline overlooks the lagoon and distant Beqa Island

The next 35 minutes were spellbinding, as an endless procession of bull sharks swooped by only metres from my camera. I watched in awe as the massive jaws opened to take the bait, often swallowing it one bite! Unfortunately, I missed out on the tiger shark. He was around though, having made an appearance a few days before my arrival. Still, with more than 20 bull sharks on one dive, I'm not complaining!

ers from left to right. Failure to do so means missing out! Even the new arrivals learn the drill very quickly and the entire operation runs like a well-oiled machine. Dive guides armed with pokers take position behind the guests, lest any of the sharks get too close.

totally different experience. On the second day, we were treated to an additional visitor. Swimming amongst the seemingly endless hordes of trevally was one of the resident giant groupers, complete with a little entourage of juvenile golden trevallies. It was only when a nurse shark swam by that the scale become apparent. This was one seriously big fish!

I found out later from Manasa that this individual hadn't been seen for some time and weighed in excess of 200 kilos. Apparently, this wasn't even the big one! That honour belongs to the aptly named "Ratu Rua". Translated as "Big Chief" in Fijian, this behemoth tips the scales at an astonishing 600kg! Despite having a mouth big enough to swallow your head, he's fortunately benign. Still, he's the chief around these parts, and the sharks will give him a wide berth.

Macrofest

After several days of shooting wide-angle shooting, I was eager to indulge in some macro photography. Unfortunately, the ripping current in the lagoon prevented us from visiting the sites Manasa had in mind, so we headed for the protected waters of Shark Reef. As this was a non-feeding day,

Fiji



Giant groupers

Subsequent dives at Shark Reef were nothing short of exhilarating, with each dive providing a



I'm sure the sharks, trevallies and red bass were somewhat baffled by our presence. I could imagine them asking, "What are you doing here, it's only Thursday!" After a quick inspection, they soon realized there would be no handouts and we were left in peace.

With all of the big fish swimming around, it's very easy to overlook the little things. It was almost comical searching for nudibranchs when bull sharks could be seen patrolling the waters just off the wall!

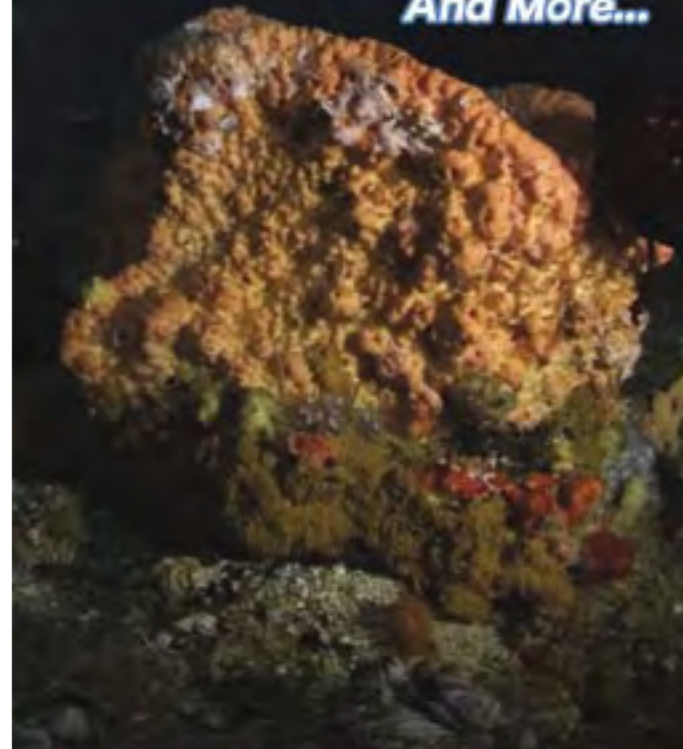
Wealth of critters

Close scrutiny of the wall revealed a wealth of critters, as a plethora of nudibranchs and

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A hungry whitetip looks for a handout, Shark Reef; Fan coral at ET; A pair of whitetips resting in the shallows at Shark Reef; A friendly tawny nurse shark with it's entourage

Pinnacle ET

In marked contrast to the full boat on the previous day's shark dive, the boat was remarkably empty for the next day's diving. With Manasa as our guide, today's dive consisted of a grand total of two: Michael, a photographer from Australia and myself. After checking our gear, we headed out under somewhat foreboding skies for the morning's first dive site. Once in the lagoon, the water got progressively rougher during the 40-minute trip. Our destination was ET, a lone pinnacle thrusting upward 25m from the seabed and bisected by a 10m long passage.

As we were gearing up, Manasa came to the unfortunate realization that his mask had been left behind. Without a spare on the boat, I

thought our dive was going to be over before it had begun! He quickly assured us that the dive was very straightforward and we could easily do it on our own.

Descending from the choppy surface, the pinnacle's huge silhouette quickly came into view. We promptly discovered the passage and decided to check it out. It is actually quite wide and will comfortably accommodate several divers at once. In the centre, a chimney ascends towards the

surface, illuminating the passage with dancing beams of light. The rocky interior is home to a variety of shrimps, crabs and nudibranchs.

Exiting the opposite side,

I surprised a small whitetip who made a hasty retreat before I could snap a photo. Every square metre was cloaked with exuberant coral growth. Lacy veils of cascading fan corals competed with vivid red and yellow whip corals. Large fans sprouted from the rocky walls, while copious overhangs provided shelter for abundant soldierfish, squirrelfish and a host of well-camouflaged scorpionfish. The ensuing hour flew by at a rapid clip and my

Fiji



flatworms crawled amongst the rocky overhangs. One of the more curious subjects was an incredibly lop-sided starfish. One disproportionately large arm was surrounded by a quartet of much smaller ones. Manasa told me later the big arm was probably the original and the others had re-grown from it.

Shortly afterwards, he motioned me over to a crevice under a large rock. Hiding underneath was one of Shark Reef's resident Java morays. It was a big one too! For the next ten minutes, he played a game of hide and seek with my camera. Moments after retreating into a crevice, curiosity would get the better of him and would cautiously peer out to check on my whereabouts.

Lovo?

Later in the day, I had a drink with Courtney, the resort's affable food and beverage manager. While perusing the dinner menu, I was intrigued by the heading Lovo that was accompanied by an enticing list of dishes. She went on to explain that a Lovo was a traditional Fijian feast. A variety of dishes are cooked over hot stones in a makeshift



underground oven. "We can put one on this week if you'd like" she offered. As a diehard foodie, my arm didn't have to be twisted!

The rocky interior is home to a variety of shrimps, crabs and nudibranchs.



TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: Feather star and coral, ET ; Dining area, Uprising Beach Resort. BOTTOM : A friendly farmer offers up some fresh-sliced watermelon



camera was exhausted by the endless photo ops. Unfortunately, the weather had worsened by the time we finished the dive, so we had to make our final dive of the morning at Shark Reef. It's a rough life diving in Fiji!

Lovo day

Back at the resort it was Lovo day. I wandered over after lunch to discover preparations were well underway with the involvement of most of the resort's kitchen staff. The light drizzle that started falling did nothing to dampen everyone's enthusiasm. "Just how many people were you expecting?" I enquired, gazing at the mountain of food that was laid out by the already blazing fire. Above it, heaped on a platform of wooden planks, was a mound of hot stones, superheated

by the intense flames.

First up, an enormous *walu* (also known as *wahoo*) had to be cleaned and prepared for cooking. Another lady was busy at work making the fresh coconut milk, squeezing and straining clumps of the grated coconut flesh from a massive bowl. Taro leaves were stuffed with the coconut milk, onion and corned beef before being folded into neat parcels. Whole chickens were marinated in garlic, ginger and soy sauce before being meticulously wrapped in palm leaves. If that wasn't enough, a couple of lobsters were added along with unlimited numbers of taro roots.

When everything was ready, a bed of shredded cassava long sticks was laid out above the hot stones and the various items added in layers. Everything

was enclosed under a layer enormous taro leaves before being covered with a heavy tarpaulin and partially buried under a layer of earth. Incredibly, everything was ready a mere 90 minutes later. By this time, the drizzle had turned to a downpour. Removing the tarpaulin, thick clouds of smoke laden with enticing aromas wafted into the rainy night, revealing tantalising glimpses of the feast.

Finally it was time to eat. As it turned out, a sizable number of people had arrived from around the area. Word had been sent out via the "Coconut Wire" (word of mouth) and by notices put up in the shopping centre in nearby Pacific Harbour.

There were enough meat dishes on the table to make any die-hard vegetarian

run for the door screaming. The centrepiece of the meal was the *walu*, still wrapped in the palm leaf and served with *miti* (onion

with coconut milk) In addition, plates were piled high with chicken, lamb shoulder and lamb neck and raw fish in coconut milk "cooked" with lime juice. Vegetable dishes included cassava, taro and *palusami* (taro leaf with corned beef.) The meal was incredible; by the end, I was so full I almost had to punch a new hole in my belt!

Country excursion

On my final day, I wanted to see some of the surrounding countryside. Joji, one of the barmen, agreed to take me out for a spin in the resort four-wheel drive. A torrential downpour started as we headed out early for the morning market in the nearby town of Navua. A wooden structure covered the major portion of the market, but a number of vendors were huddled outside under a canopy of colourful umbrellas.

Everyone was extremely friendly and posed readily for photos. I can imagine what they must have thought of this crazy foreigner taking pictures of them in the rain!

We then ventured indoors and wandered amongst the myriad of stalls.





The tables groaned under a bountiful selection of colourful produce, spices and fresh fish. On a series of tables near the back were objects resembling large brown highway pylons constructed out of gnarly roots. Pulverized into powdered form and mixed with water, they make *kava*, Fiji's national beverage. Long playing an integral role in traditional Fijian society, it is consumed in ceremonies as well as a social beverage and a cure-all for various ailments. One of the fellows I'd been diving sampled a glass during a day trip to a local village. He likened it to brown dishwater that makes your lips go numb. One of the vendors asked if I'd like to partake in a glass. The prospect didn't sound particularly appetizing, especially at 7:30 in the morning on an empty stomach, so I politely declined.

The rest of the morning was spent exploring the back roads through the

fields of cassava and taro. Stopping by one farm, we were given huge chunks of freshly cut watermelon, the perfect antidote to the humid morning.

Before I knew it, it was time to leave for the airport. I'd come for the sharks but discovered so much more. With its exhilarating blend of sharks, stunning coral reefs and superb macro, Beqa has it all! During my six dives at Shark Reef, I saw more sharks than I've seen during my entire 500+ logged dives!

Shark feeding doesn't come without a degree of controversy. Some argue that feedings promote un-natural behaviour and the sharks become dependent on it. On the other hand, the establishment of the marine reserve not only protects the sharks but the host of other fish found in the area. Sharks are more numerous now than before the reserve was established, and the local villages are earning a

district's verdant-forested hills. Interspersed throughout the greenery were cleared areas sporting patchwork



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Chinese trawler's colourful propeller; Market vendor, Navua; Red-lined flabellina; Jane, one of Uprising Beach Resort's ever-pleasant staff; Soft coral, Beqa Lagoon

good income as a result, so this is clearly a win-win situation.

After all the close proximity to the sharks, what was the worst thing that happened? A spider bite, and that occurred aboard a domestic flight from Vancouver to Toronto on the way home!

Getting there

Fiji's Nadi airport is serviced by more than 85 flights a week, with direct flights from Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Japan and the Pacific. From North America, direct flights are available from Los Angeles. Transfers to Pacific Harbour can be arranged by Beqa Adventure Divers or the Uprising Beach Resort Taxis are also available at the airport, but are more expensive than pre-booked transfers. Visitors from most countries are issued a four-month tourist free of charge visa upon arrival. All visitors must have a return ticket.

When to go

Due to the moderating effects of the surrounding ocean, Fiji enjoys a mild climate for most of the year with temperatures hovering around 25 degrees Celsius. Humidity is generally high. The rainy season extends between November and April. It's wise to book the shark dives well as far in advance as possible. For bull sharks, the largest congregations can be found between January and May. Be sure to book the Shark Dives before leaving home, as they are becoming extremely popular and the trips fill up very quickly. On one day, several people who showed up at the dive shop at the last minute were turned away. ■



fact file

Fiji



X-ray mag

History In 1970, Fiji became an independent nation, after being a British colony for almost a century. Two military coups in 1987 interrupted a Democratic rule. The coups were spurred by concern over a government that was thought to be dominated by the Indian community made up of descendants of contract laborers who were brought to the islands in the 19th century by the British. Heavy Indian emigration followed the coups and a 1990 constitution that cemented native Melanesian control of Fiji. The loss of population caused economic difficulties, while ensuring that Melanesians became the majority. In 1997, a new

more equitable constitution was enacted. In 1999, free and peaceful elections resulted in an Indo-Fijian government. However, in May 2000, a civilian-led coup brought with it a long, drawn out period of political turmoil. In 2001, parliamentary elections provided Fiji with a democratically elected government led by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase who was re-elected in May 2006, only to be ousted in a December 2006 military coup led by Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, who then appointed himself acting president. Bainimarama was finally appointed interim prime minister in January 2007. Government: republic. Capital: Suva (on Viti Levu)

Geography Fiji is part of Oceania. It is an island group in the South Pacific Ocean, located two-thirds of the way from Hawaii to New Zealand. Fiji includes 332 islands; about 110 are inhabited. Terrain: mostly mountains developed by volcanic activity. Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0 m. Highest point: Tomanivi 1,324 m. Coastline: 1,129 km

Climate is tropical marine with only slight seasonal temperature changes. Natural hazards: cyclonic storms may occur between November and January.

Environmental issues deforestation and soil erosion. Fiji is party to several international agreements including Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Law of the Sea, Marine Life Conservation, Ozone Layer

RIGHT: Location of Fiji on world map

FAR RIGHT: Map of Fiji and its islands



Ceva-i-Ra

Protection, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands

Economic Fiji has forest, mineral, and fish resources and is one of the most developed of the Pacific island economies, yet it still has a large subsistence sector. Major sources of foreign exchange include tourism (with 300,000-400,000 tourists annually), sugar exports, and remittances from Fijians working abroad. Fiji sugar enjoys special access to European Union markets, but will suffer from the EU's decision to cut sugar subsidies. One-third of industrial activity in Fiji is sugar processing, but it is not efficient. The 2006 coup damaged Fiji's tourism industry. The length of the industry's recovery time is uncertain. Long-term problems range from low investment and uncertain land ownership rights to the government's difficulties in managing its budget. However, increases in overseas remittances from Fijians working in Kuwait and Iraq are significant. Natural resources: timber, fish, gold, copper, offshore oil potential, hydropower. Agriculture: sugarcane, coconuts, cassava (tapioca), rice, sweet potatoes, bananas; cattle, pigs, horses, goats; fish. Industries: tourism, sugar, clothing, copra, gold, silver, lumber, small cottage industries

Currency Fijian dollar (FJD) Exchange rates: 1EUR = 2.75FJD, 1USD = 1.63FJD, 1GBP = 3.30FJD, 1AUD = 1.35FJD, 1SGD = 1.07FJD SOURCE: XE.COM

Population 918,675 (July 2007 est.) Ethnic groups: Fijian 54.8% (predominantly Melanesian with a Polynesian admixture), Indian 37.4%, other groups 7.9% (European, other Pacific Islanders, Chinese) (2005 estimate). Religions: Christian 53% (Methodist 34.5%, Roman Catholic 7.2%, Assembly of God 3.8%, Seventh Day Adventist 2.6%, other 4.9%), Hindu 34% (Sanatan 25%, Arya Samaj 1.2%, other 7.8%), Muslim 7% (Sunni 4.2%, other 2.8%), other or unspecified religions 5.6%, none 0.3% (1996 census). Internet users: 80,000 (2006)

Languages English (official), Fijian (official), Hindustani

Deco Chambers Suva Private Hospital Emergency numbers: 999 3500 Hyperbaric Doctor: Dr Ali Husnoor, Lami, Suva 999 3506 National Coordinator: Curly Carswell, Savusavu recompression@connect.com.fj

Colonial War Memorial Hospital Suva, Fiji Islands. Operated by Ministry of Health, contact: Dr. Frances A. Bingwor, fbingwor@health.gov.fj

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Siblings hug on the friendly islands of Fiji



Macro life abounds.
LEFT: Most of the rockfaces are well covered with a variety of marine life. These soft corals are quite common in nordic waters.



Wet'n wild at the Arctic circle Saltstraumen

Text by Christian Skauge
Photos by Stein Johnsen
Translated and edited by Arnold Weisz

The current grabs you as soon as you enter the water. Your first thought, this is going to be a wild one! The adrenaline is flowing as fast in your veins as the currents is flowing past kelp covered rocks. Diving the strongest malstroem on the planet is not for the faint-hearted. It is extremely fun though!

The excitement is felt already one the plane as we fly north an hour and half from Oslo, the capital of Norway. Passing over our final destination on-route, clear blue skies gives us the first glimpses of our divesites in the days to come. We can see the white waters rushing through narrow sounds as the tide drags the ocean into the deep fjords. A few minutes later we are landing in Bodø, the regional capital in northern Norway, just north of the Arctic circle. Our accomondation and the divesites are about a 30-minute drive from the airport. The scenery on

There are numerous divesites in the Saltstraumen area, most reachable only by boat, but there are also some shoredives

our drive to Saltstraumen, which basically is a bridge and a few houses, is nothing but spectacular with snow-covered mountains raising out of the fjord.

Tidal current

The difference between high tide and low tide in the area around Saltstraumen can be as much as three metres. The currents force about 400 cubicmetres of water through a sound, which is barely 150 metres wide and three kilometres long. The

force of gravity creates enormous forces, which the water transforms into one of nature's many wonders—the malstroem, or whirlpools. The current sweeping through the sound creates the malstroem, which makes the water boil. They appear as sudden as they vanish—huge sucking whirlpools, with a diameter of up to 10-12 metres, sucking in water just like a black hole sucks in surrounding stars.

A lot of stories circulate about boats that have vanished in Saltstraumen. And when you person-





ABOVE: Seen clearly from a helicopter, the current rips past the small island in the middle of Saltstraumen creating whirlpools dangerous for even ship traffic

Saltstraumen Dive Center conveniently situated just a few minutes boat ride from most dive sites

ally encounter the raw forces of this mighty natural phenomenon, it is not hard to understand and respect the awe and fascination it inspires in any person. Although flying many hundreds of metres above sea level, we could clearly observe the awesome forces in play. My dive buddy and I gave each other an awe-filled glance. This is where we were going to be diving over the next few days.

The drive east from Bodø took just about half an hour. We hardly had time enough to unpack and put our equipment together before it was announced that the dive boat was ready to depart. As the excitement had already built up a great amount of adrenalin in both of us, we were quick to respond. In no time, we were both suited up in drysuits. The dive boat always leaves on time. Not just because the dive captain is well organized, but also because you have to dive precisely between the low and high tides when there is no current, and it is safe to dive. If you miss the window of opportunity, the currents get way too strong, and you have to wait for the next chance, which will be six hours later.

In a squeeze

The boat maneuvered through the cur-

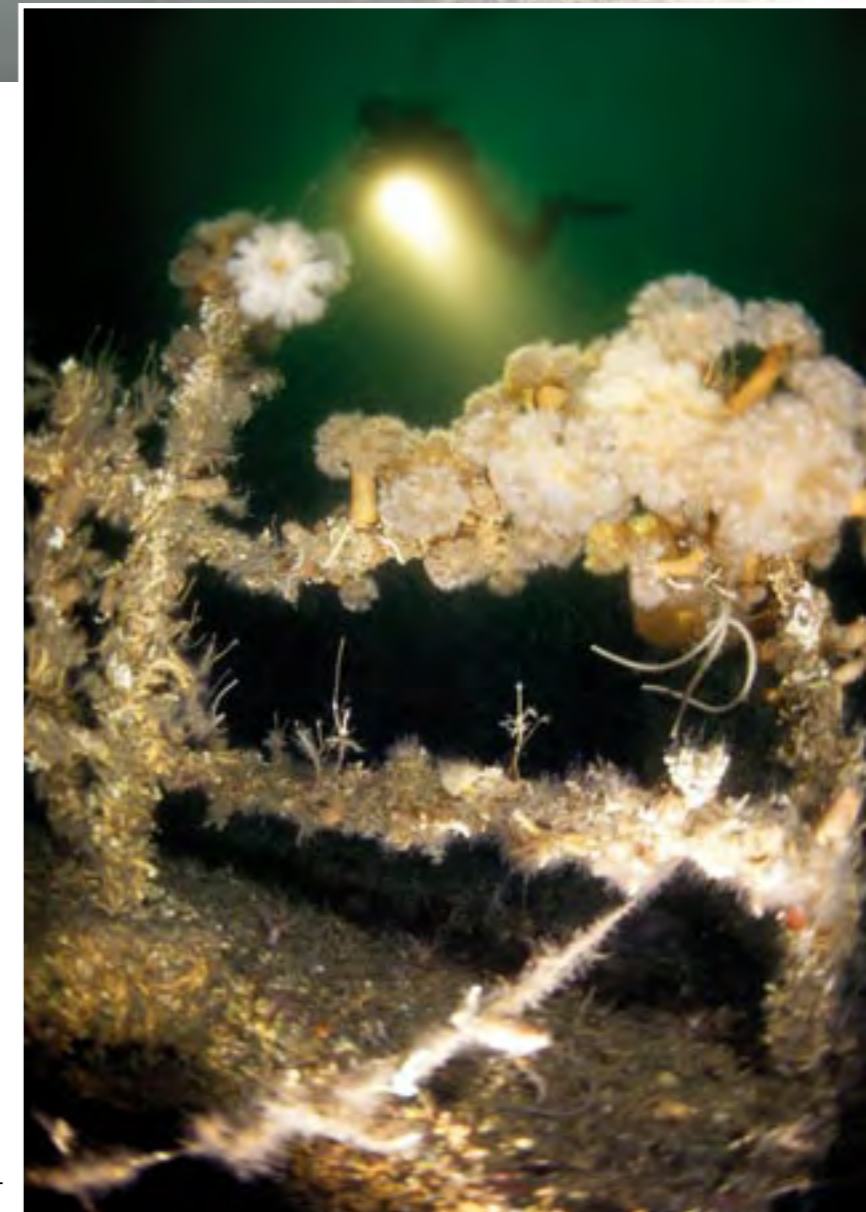


rent, which was still going strong. Not to worry, as our guides knew exactly where to go. They gave us a thorough briefing about the first dive site—the tunnel! We were told what to expect from the current, what we could expect to see and also where to shelter from the current to get good photo-ops. The casual conversation slowly died down, and we waited for the signal to role into the water. As we quickly descended to a depth of 20 metres, the visibility got better the deeper we got.

When we approached the bottom, it became very clear which direction we had to swim: *with* the current. The other direction was simply not an option. We adjusted our positions and floated along with the current and concentrated on avoiding crashing into rocks or other divers.

The marine life was incredible. We observed wolffish resting on the stony seafloor and long leaves of kelp waiving in the current. Turning our eyes to the blue water, we could see schools of coalfish turned against the current and standing so tightly together that the mass of fish looked like a massive steel object.

Sometimes, we found calm waters behind some rock formations, which ena-



Saltstraumen



a pothole. We swam through and came out a few metres deeper. The tunnel was just wide enough for a diver to squeeze through. What an experience this dive turned out to be!

Night dive in the coffee pot

bled us to take some pictures, but most of the time, we cruised along with the mighty forces of nature.

When we started the dive, just before the tides were turning, the current had become weaker. Eventually, it stopped completely. After a short break, the current started to pick up slowly in the opposite direction.

We were on our way to the rock-formation which gave name to the dive site: the Tunnel. Over thousands of years, ice and water had carved its way through the rock and made

The evening was spent reliving the past day's events in conversation and preparing our night diving equipment. A dive during the day in Saltstraumen is an unforgettable experience; we were therefore full of expectation for the upcoming night dive.

It was calm and dark since we were diving in the month of March. The summers here are dominated by the midnight sun, hence real night diving is restricted to the rest of the year.

The captain dropped us off

in a small bay by the name of *Kaffekjelen*, which is Norwegian for coffepot. As we descended, we went through several metres of red algae, which actually resembled coffee grounds! Fortunately, the visibility improved greatly, as we sank deeper into the fjord.

Sweeping our dive lights across the bottom revealed a spectacular array of marine life. An amaz-



A small hermit crab clings to a kelp leaf

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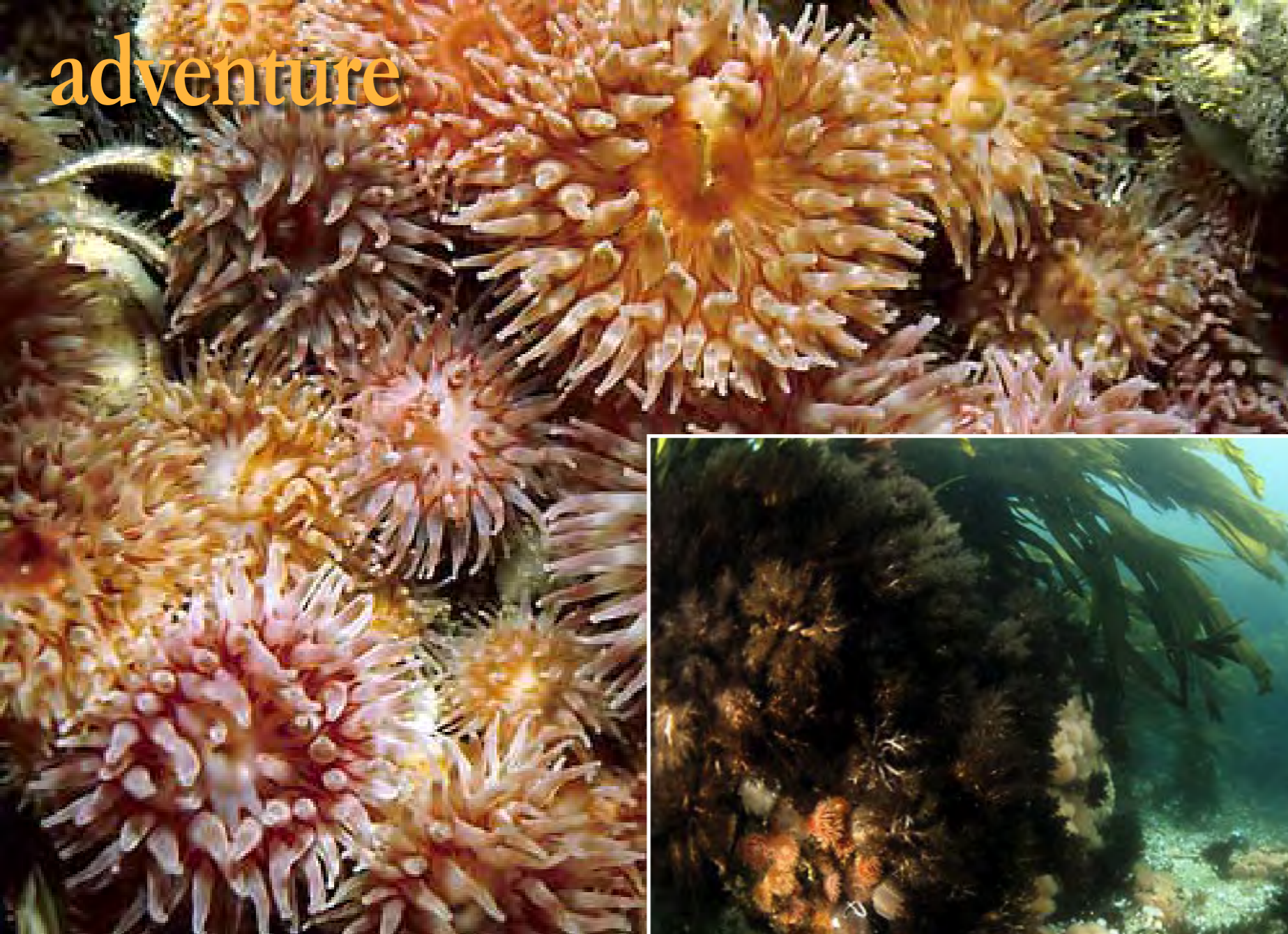
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Saltstraumen



Sundstraumen to the left, and Saltstraumen to the right. The huge exchange of water provides excellent conditions for the marine life, and especially anemones thrive here

brother, and the tidal currents are as strong, if not stronger, and make the dive site resemble a river. The diving conditions are not as unpredictable as in the Saltstraumen as the seafloor is less wild.

The boat ride there gives you a combined experience of nature and history. If you look carefully, you can see the notch made by the viking king, Olav Tryggvason, when he threw his axe into the sound in anger because the strong currents prevented him from entering the calm waters inside.

Olav Tryggvason was on his way to Christianize another viking chief-of-tribe, Raud den Rame. He was believed to control the forces of wind and weather. As Olav Tryggvason's men were not strong enough to row his ship through the sound, he summoned bishop Sigurd to break the magic of Raud den Rame. With the bishop standing at the stem wearing his chasuble, and with the help of holy water and God's strength, they forced their way through the strong current. The story further cites that the tribal chief did not allow himself to be Christianized, so Olav Tryggvason cut it short, killed the tribal chief and stole his ship.

The mighty viking chief turned out to be as self-willed and unpredictable as the currents where he resided. That is a fantastic story to accompany a fantastic dive.

High velocity diving

Sundstraumen can be dived from both ends. We started our dive as the currents were travelling into the fjord. We rolled into the fjord and descended down a steep wall, which was completely covered with colourful anemones. In the begin-



ing diversity of animals and corals of different colours past through our beams of light. Now and again, some fishes crossed our path as well. And we could sense, if not always see, that there were many more out there in the dark waters. The dive went on without any big surprises, and we took a lot of photographs to save the memories.

The land of the Vikings

The next day we headed for some new dive sites in Sundstraumen. This sound is on the south side of the Saltstraumen. Sundstraumen is more narrow than its bigger

You may stumble over Wolf fish (*Anarhichas lupus*) in Saltstraumen



Saltstraumen



The bridge gives you a great vantage point to study your divesite before the dives. Saltstraumen is situated in Northern Norway above the Polar Circle, hence dry-suits are required all year

TOP RIGHT: Saltstraumen is a fisherman's paradise, so you will find a lot of fishing hooks



ning of the dive, when the currents were rather weak, we could take our time and observe the many small creatures, which made their living amongst the anemones. At first, the current led us slowly along the wall, but after some time, it started to pick up. What started out to be a quiet drift became a much wilder ride. We just went along with it, for what turned out to be an awesome drift dive. Near the end of the dive, the marine life just swept past us in a foggy blur of colours.

We managed to find ourselves into a quiet backwater, where we did our safety stop. When we arrived at the surface, the dive boat was waiting for us. In the diveboat, we realised what a great distance we had drifted during our dive. Still, we had to go another kilometer further into the fjord to pick up the other two divers. These guys were locals and knew how to get the most out of the dive.

Safe & fun diving

It might seem a bit fool-hardy to dive currents like Saltstraumen and Sundstraumen. On the other hand, it can be made safely. The dive operators in the area have a long history of experience and know where and when to dive safely. These are amongst some of the best dive sites in Norway, and possibly in the world. As always in dealing with strong currents, dive with people who know the area and have a reputa-

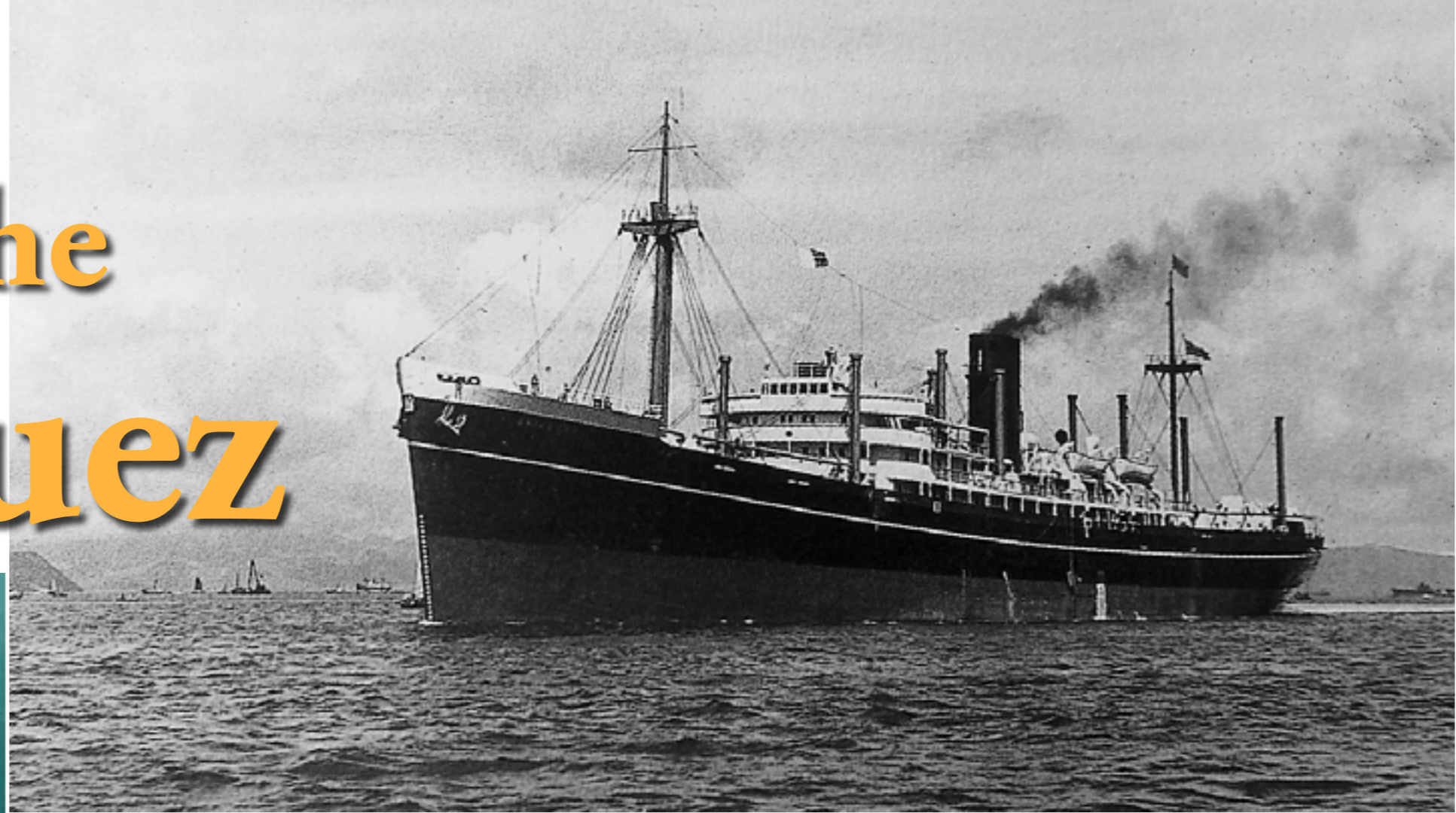
tion for good safety. A safe dive in Saltstraumen and Sundstraumen comes down to knowing the tide table, safe entry- and exit points both for shore- and boata diving. This will ensure you a lifetime experience, submerged as well as onshore.



Text and photos by
Peter Collings

The wreck of the *Shillong* lies at 223m
just north of the July Oilfield, and at the
time of writing has not been dived

Shipwrecks of the Gulf of Suez



As the Red Sea narrows at its northern extreme, a long thin arm of water stretches north towards the Mediterranean. It is the Gulf of Suez. Squeezed between the Sinai Peninsula and the Egyptian mainland, the entrance to the Gulf is marked by a treacherous finger of reef known as Sha'ab Ali. A busy, narrow and important seaway dating back beyond the opening of the Suez Canal, it is a vital and important trade route linking east and west. It is also a hive of industry, with oilfields dotted along its length, and refineries along its banks. Here, we have located a series of new wrecks.

Not much diving takes place here. The coral reefs die away as the water becomes shallower and indeed less clear due to the presence of sand and silt. Water temperature, too, plays a part in the ecology, with temperatures plummeting to 16°C in winter. While it is not a viable tourist area, it is a haven for new unexplored shipwrecks—with the added bonus of some unusual marine life.

Heading north past Sha'ab Ali the first headland, Ras Dib, heralds an area rich in shipwrecks. First, are the *Attiki* and the *Muhansia*—both visible from the surface, well salvaged and well "dispersed". Lying in only a dozen meters of water, they are home to many shoaling fish and very large examples of the endemic species of nudibranchs found elsewhere in the Red Sea but in greater numbers and larger than text books would suggest.

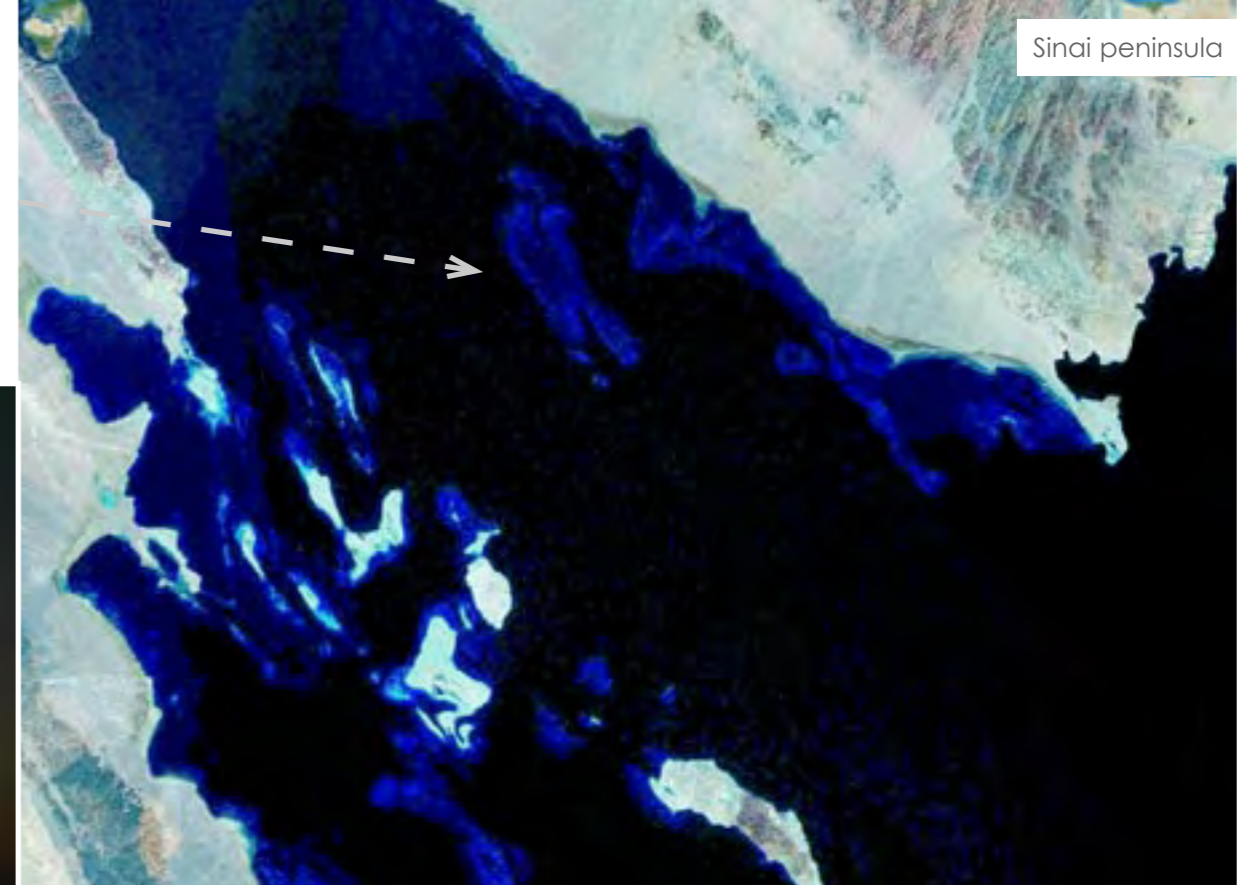
Once more, there is a captain
on the bridge of the *Birchwood*





Wreck of *Lara Security* near Ras Shukier

Satellite photo of the southern entrance to the Gulf of Suez. The shallow reef structure in the middle is the infamous Sha'ab Alo where so many ships have foundered



Sinai peninsula

Rounding the headland, we find the *Elliot*, her superstructure above water is well embedded into the reef, her head-long grounding evident from the attitude of her rudder. Divers can enter the hull, swim through and into the engine room and take a walk around. Half a mile offshore where the water is deeper and clearer, lie three modern merchant ships—as yet unidentified—in less than 50 meters of water. Discovered during the 2004 Geoserve/SSS Expedition, their secrets are yet to be unlocked and their stories yet untold.

It is hard to stop even when the day comes to an end. Zodiac searching for a wreck in the very last rays of sun



At Ras Shukier, the hustle and bustle of the oil industry becomes very evident. Close to shore are two shallow wrecks, while again offshore there are several deeper wrecks.

Birchwood 11 (Plastics Wreck)

Lying to the north of the port in a large bay with three other wrecks there is a small 50 meter motor cargo ship lying on its starboard side in 12m of water. Totally intact, light streams into the holds and bathes the entire wreck. A shoal of juvenile barracuda circles her mast, which is

complete with radar array and aerials.

Just forward of the superstructure itself at the aft of the vessel is an intact crane, obviously used to service the hold. The criss-cross framework of the jib is covered with encrusting life. Superb swim-throughs from the weather deck into the holds are easily accomplished, her cargo bags of polythene granules float hard against the port hull. The fo'c's'le is easy to access and explore, and her winch gear, like many parts of the wreck is covered in

The wrecks in the northern Red Sea still remain virtually untouched.

There may well be less coral in the Gulf of Suez, but there is still plenty to explore



Scalaria, a 5683 ton steam tanker, was built in 1922



Gulf of Suez Trivia

The Gulf of Suez is the arm of the Red Sea, 300 km long and 50 km wide, that extends between the Arabian Desert and the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt. Along the mid-line of the Gulf lies the border between the continents of Africa and Asia.

The Gulf of Suez is a relatively young rift basin, dating back 40 million years. It is a shallow flat bed basin with depths ranging between 50 and 75m with depths increasing in the southerly direction but stays under the 100m mark at the confluence of the Red Sea.

The Red Sea lies between arid land, desert and semi-desert, and is unique among the seas of the world as no river flows into it. Since there is absence of rivers and permanent streams, terrigenous (derived from the erosion of rocks on land—ed.) material is only supplied to the Red Sea by rain-torrent. The scarcity of rainfall and no major source of fresh water to the Red Sea result in the excess evaporation as high as 205 cm per year and high salinity with minimal seasonal varia-

tion.

The main reasons for the better development of reef systems along the Red Sea is because of its greater depths and an efficient water circulation pattern. The Red Sea water mass exchanges its water with the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean via the Gulf of Aden. These physical factors reduce the effect of high salinity caused by evaporation and cold water in the north and relatively hot water in the south.

Strong currents and atmospheric pressure gradients control the influx of less saline and colder water from the Gulf of Aden through the Street of Bab al Mandab during winter. The north-heading current mixes with a south-heading wind-driven surface current from the northern Red Sea.

A thermocline at a water depth of about 200-400m separates the mixing water zone from Red Sea Deep Water at relatively stable temperature and salinity conditions. The maximum turbulent mixing zone is probably in the central Red Sea.

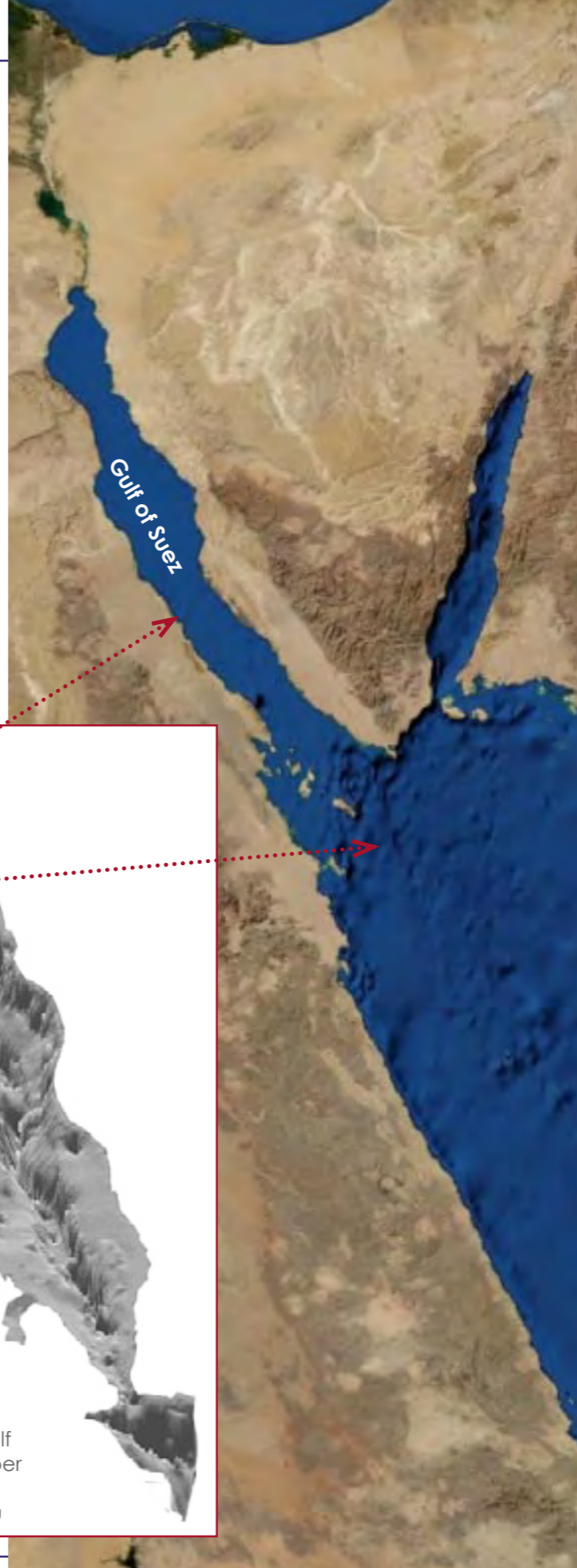
Suez

Both the Suez Gulf and the Suez Canal get their names from the city of Suez, which is situated on the shores of the Gulf of Suez to the west of the Suez Canal in Egypt.

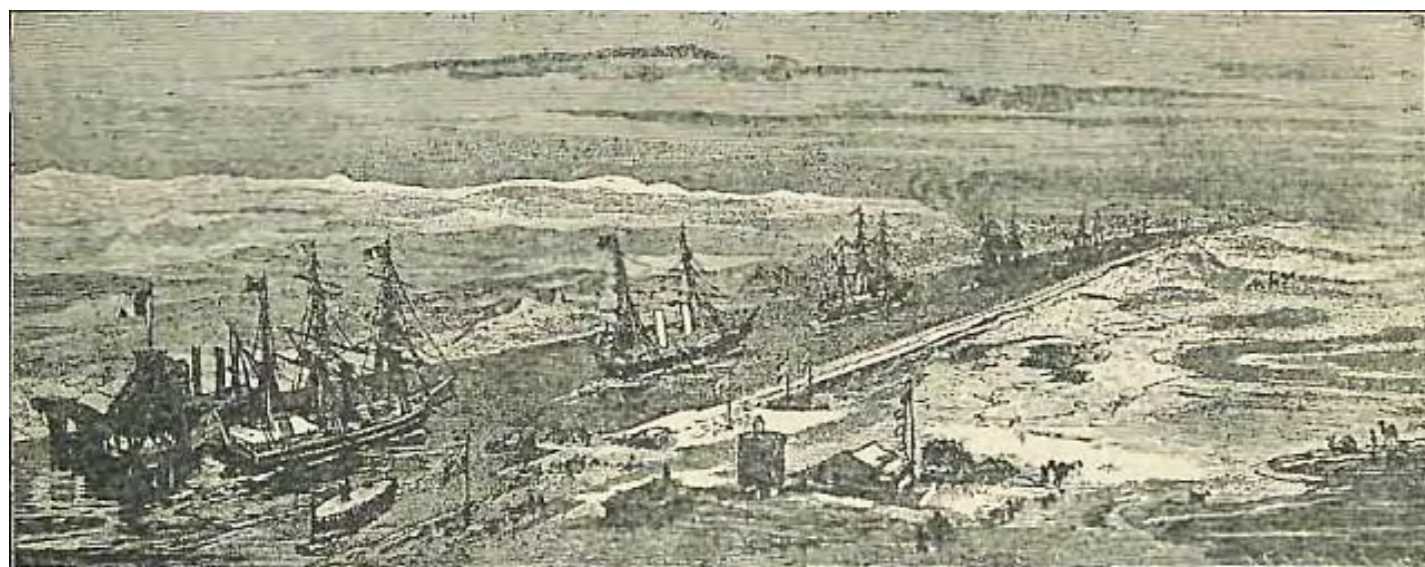
The Suez Canal offers a significantly shorter passage for ships than passing round the Cape of Good Hope. Today, the canal is a vital link in world trade, and contributes significantly to the Egyptian economy. There was a canal from the Nile delta to the Gulf of Suez in ancient times, when the gulf extended further north than it does today. This fell into disuse, and the present canal was built in the nineteenth century.

The construction of the canal was proposed by the engineer and French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps, who acquired from Said Pasha the rights of constructing and operating the canal for a period of 99 years. Construction took 11 years, and the canal opened on the 17th of November, 1869. ■

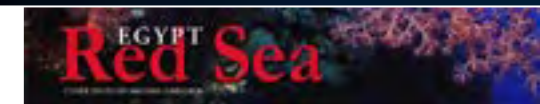
Gulf of Suez lies between the Sinai peninsula and the African continent on the left. The gulf itself is relatively shallow as compared to the rest of the Red Sea



Depth profile of the Red Sea. On this map, one can see that the Gulf of Suez sits (upper left corner) in a shallow plateau



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X-RAY MAG Expands Harald Apelt joins the team

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Former editor-in-chief of Tauchen, Europe's biggest monthly dive magazine, Harald Apelt has joined X-RAY MAG as an associate publisher. In this capacity Harald will work with both editorial matters and oversee sales and marketing.



In 2008, X-RAY MAG will be published eight times a year





The *Scalaria* was sunk in 1942 as a result of an enemy aerial attack; eleven lives were lost. She lies in shallow water, with only the lower hull remaining having been dismantled below the waterline

About the author

Peter Collings has been escorting wreck safaris in Egypt since 1993. He is the author of no less than nine dive-related books including *Shipwrecks of the Egyptian Red Sea*. His work has been published internationally since 1983. Peter and his team, the Red Wreck Academy, have been responsible for locating and identifying over 30 wrecks in Egyptian waters the latest being the Greek steamer *TURKIA*.

sponge and encrusting corals. Her bow appears intact and a deep scour ran along her keel, becoming circular by her prop and rudder. Her starboard running light lies protruding from the sand.

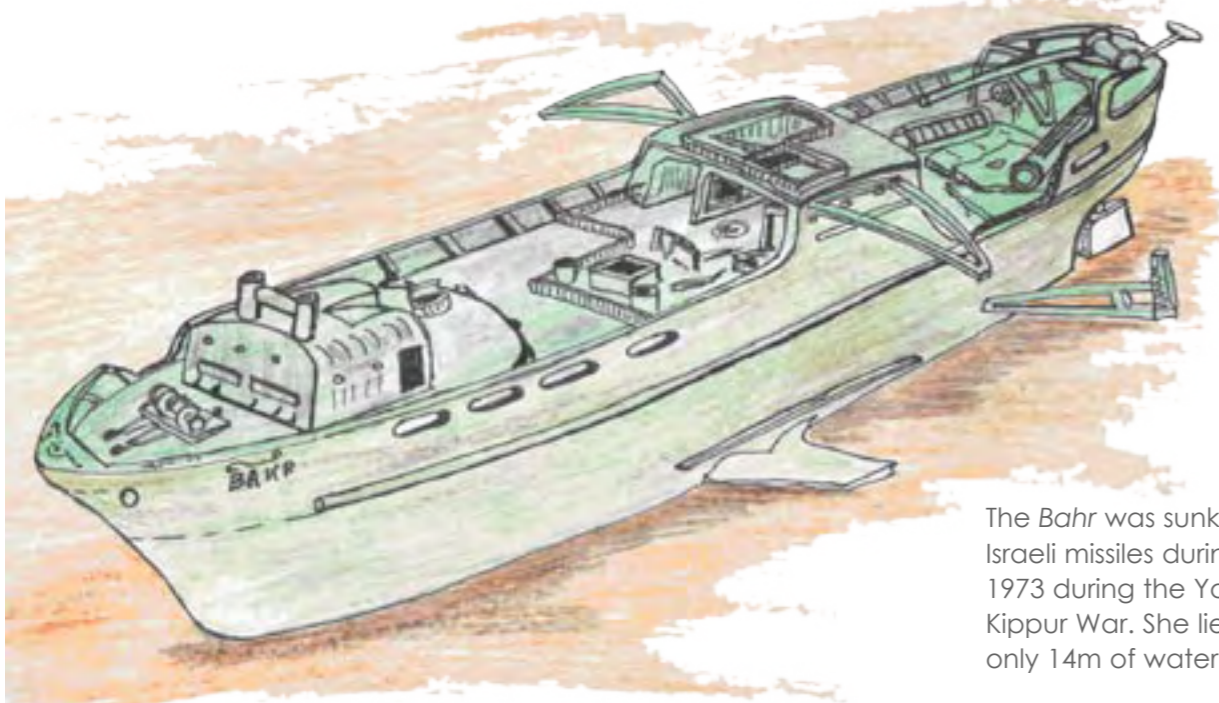
Hundreds of nudibranchs smother the red sponge fingers found throughout the wreck. Shoals of rabbit fish huddled together everywhere. Snowflake morays, again a rare occurrence on a coral reef, are common place here. Almost every surface of the wreck is alive with anemo-

nes, sponges and small crustaceans. The brilliant reds, oranges and greens highlighted by torch beams.

Laura Security (The Eagle Wreck)

Close by, this 40m long vessel sits upright with its bridge out of the water. It is named after the eagle, which made its roost on top of the wreck. Many of the hull plates have fallen to the seabed allowing sunlight to stream through its vertical supports highlighting shoals of fish.

The strong sunlight, afforded by the shallow depths, provides endless photo opportunities. With the hull intact, the bow and stern are very photogenic, and the supporting fish life is quite amazing. Due to its location, the wreck is blessed by the afternoon sun and the long beams of light shine through many holes in the wreck. Those who are not put off



The *Bahr* was sunk by Israeli missiles during 1973 during the Yom Kippur War. She lies in only 14m of water

Exploring the remains of the *Scalaria* on a good day with great visibility can be a rewarding experience. Image is from the bow section



by the lack of depth are well rewarded.

The "Pd" Wreck.

(D.b. Gemini)

The target area of the SSS survey revealed some strange wreckage on the seabed, including a large circular depression. No wreck was ever found but winches, ladders mooring cleats, ventilation cowls covering a vast area—all attracting a reef's population of fish—was all that could be seen.

The aforementioned depression is completely

round some two meters deep. It seems man-made and full of snapper and jacks so perhaps this is the answer.

The American jack-up drilling barge *Gemini* was damaged while drilling off Ras Shukier. The sea bed collapsed under one of the legs on October 8th, 1974. Eighteen people died. During salvage operations, it rolled over almost capsizing, bending all its legs. It was written off as a total loss at a cost of £4.1 million, removed and broken up.

Hitting pay dirt. Just look at those happy grins. The name plate from the *Scalaria*—depicted in a cleaned condition on page 37—is brought to the surface

Crane or boom on the survey vessel *Bahr*



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Reversing wheel in the engine room of the *Scalaria*

Wreck of the *Shillong*

Built at Vickers Armstrong, Walker Mar 1949, for the P&O LINE, the *Shillong* was 8934 tons and 522 ft long. She was captained by E.J. Spurling and on a journey from London over Hamburg to Tsingtao with 87 crew and six passengers and carrying general cargo, when she collided with the *Purfinia Congo*.

She now rests in 223m, just north of the *July Oilfield*, in the separation channel, and at the time of writing, has not been dived. Hopefully, our forthcoming expeditions will locate her.

Ras Gharib

This headland again is a terminal for the oil industry and marks the limit of diving exploration. To the best of my knowledge, no one else has ever been diving this far north. But there is evidence to suggest at least another 20 wrecks are lying in these waters. Again,



there are several very interesting wrecks in shallow water with more lying in deeper water.

Aboudy

A small aluminum hulled, 400ton cargo ship 76m long, sank May 7th, 1988. She was carrying a

Thousands of bottles of cough medicine lie around the *Aboudy*



cargo of cattle, aluminum extrusion and thousands of 300ml bottles of cough medicine! Laying on her side totally intact, her masts running horizontal towards the shore, her stays still in place, she is slowly succumbing to the invasion of marine life. The entire wreck can be explored, sheltered from any swell from the exposed open sea. Remnants of the cargo lie in

Lost in 1988, the *Aboudy* is still virtually intact. The entire wreck, which is teeming with life, can be explored

the holds spilling out onto the seabed, and a diver can swim from the fo'c's'le through her holds to the bridge section at the stern, where the engine room can also be found.

Marine life includes shoaling barracuda and fusiliers, emperor angle fish, crocodile fish, torpedo rays and encrusting corals and sponges. Visibility is subject to swell, as the seabed consists of sand.

Bahr

The motor survey vessel belonged to the United Arab Republic General Petroleum Co was sunk at Ras Gharib by Israeli missiles on October 14th, 1973, during the Yom Kippur War. Russian built, she was 416 tons, 147 ft long. She lies in only 14m of water.

Scalaria

Built in 1922 for the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co at Swan Hunters, this 5683 ton steam tanker was attacked by enemy aircraft using aerial torpedoes and bombs while off *Ras Gharib* with a cargo of dirty oil. She was sunk on October 19th, 1942, with the loss of 11 lives. Her captain, J.Waring survived.

One of the ships officers, Mr Armatage, was awarded the George cross and the Lloyds medal for his actions in saving the lives of his fellow crewmen as they clung to her anchor chain, surrounded by burning oils. She was 411 ft long, 55 ft beam and 30 ft draught, capable of ten knots and fitted with triple expansion engines. She lies in shallow water, with only the lower hull remaining having been dismantled below the waterline. ■





SOURCE: WWW.CIA.GOV

fact file

Red Sea, Egypt



History One of the world's great civilizations was born on the banks of the Nile. Due to the richness and regularity of the annual flooding of the Nile River as well as the semi-isolation of the valley created by the surrounding deserts, the rise of a unified kingdom around 3200 B.C. brought a series of dynasties into power in Egypt for the next three millennia. In 341 B.C., the last native dynasty fell to invading Persians who in turn were replaced by the Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines. It was the Arabs in the 7th century who introduced Islam and spread the Arabic language and religion throughout the region over the next six centuries. Around the year 1250, a local military caste, the Mamluks, took control. They continued to govern the country after the Ottoman Turks conquered Egypt in 1517. In 1869, the Suez Canal was completed and Egypt became an important center for world trade. However, it also fell heavily into debt. In order to protect its investments, Great Britain seized control of Egyptian government in 1882. However, some allegiance to the Ottoman Empire maintained influence in Egypt until 1914. Egypt gained partial independence from the UK in 1922 and acquired full sovereignty following World War II. The time-honored place of the Nile River in the agriculture and ecology of Egypt was altered by the completion of the Aswan High

Dam in 1971 and the resultant Lake Nasser. Even so, dependence on the Nile continues, and with a rapidly growing population—the Arab world's largest—and limited arable land, resources and society continue to be stressed. The government has initiated economic reforms and massive investments in communications and physical infrastructure in an effort to ready the economy for the new millennium. Government: Republic. Legal system: Based on English common law, Islamic law and Napoleonic codes. Capital: Cairo

Geography Egypt occupies the northeast corner of the African continent. It borders the Mediterranean Sea—between Libya and the Gaza Strip—and the Red Sea north of Sudan, and includes the Asian Sinai Peninsula. Coastline: 2,450 km. Terrain: Vast desert plateau is interrupted by the Nile River valley and delta. Lowest point: Qattara Depression, 133 m. Highest point: Mount Catherine, 2,629 m. Egypt controls the Sinai Peninsula—the only land bridge between Africa and the remaining Eastern Hemisphere. Egypt also controls the Suez Canal—a sea link and major trade route between the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. Because of its size and juxtaposition to Israel, Egypt plays a major role in Middle Eastern geopolitics. However, Egypt does continue to depend on upstream neighbors and deal with



World map and map of Egypt

the dominance of Nile basin issues. The country is also prone to influxes of refugees.

Climate Desert—hot, dry summers with moderate winters. Natural hazards: periodic droughts; a hot, driving windstorm called *kham-sin* occurs in springtime; dust storms, sandstorms; frequent earthquakes, flash floods, landslides

Environmental issues Desertification—agricultural land is being lost to windblown sands and urbanization. Soil salination below the Aswan High Dam is increasing. Oil pollution is threatening coral reefs, beaches and marine habitats. Additional water pollution comes from agricultural pesticides, raw sewage and industrial effluents. There are very limited natural fresh water resources away from the Nile River, which provides the only perennial water source. Rapid population growth is overstraining the Nile River and other natural resources.

Economic In the last three decades, the Egyptian government has reformed the highly centralized economy handed down from President Nasser. Energy subsidies, and personal and corporate tax rates were reduced, and several enterprises were privatized in 2005 by Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif. There was a stock market boom, and GDP grew by about 5 percent for the next two years. Unfortunately,



living standards remain the same for the average Egyptian despite these achievements, compelling the government to continue to provide subsidies for basic necessities. These subsidies have helped increase a growing budget deficit continue to be a significant drain on the economy and foreign direct investment continue to be low, however, export sectors—especially natural gas—show positive prospects. Agriculture: cotton, rice, corn, wheat, beans, fruits, vegetables, goats, sheep, cattle, water buffalo. Industries: textiles, food processing, tourism, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, hydrocarbons, construction, cement, metals, light manufactures. Natural resources: petroleum, natural gas, iron ore, phosphates, manganese, limestone, gypsum, talc, asbestos, lead, zinc.

Currency Egyptian pound (EGP). Exchange rate: 1EUR=7.69EGP, 1USD=5.69EGP, 1GBP=11.25EGP, 1AUD=4.69EGP, 1SGD=3.73SGD

Population 80,335,036 (July 2007 est.). Ethnic groups: Egyptian 98%; Berber, Nubian, Bedouin and Beja 1%, Greek; Armenian and other European (primarily Italian and French) 1%. Religions: Muslim (mostly Sunni) 90%, Coptic 9%, other Christian religions 1%. Internet users: 5 million (2005)

Languages Arabic (official), English and French is understood by educated classes

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