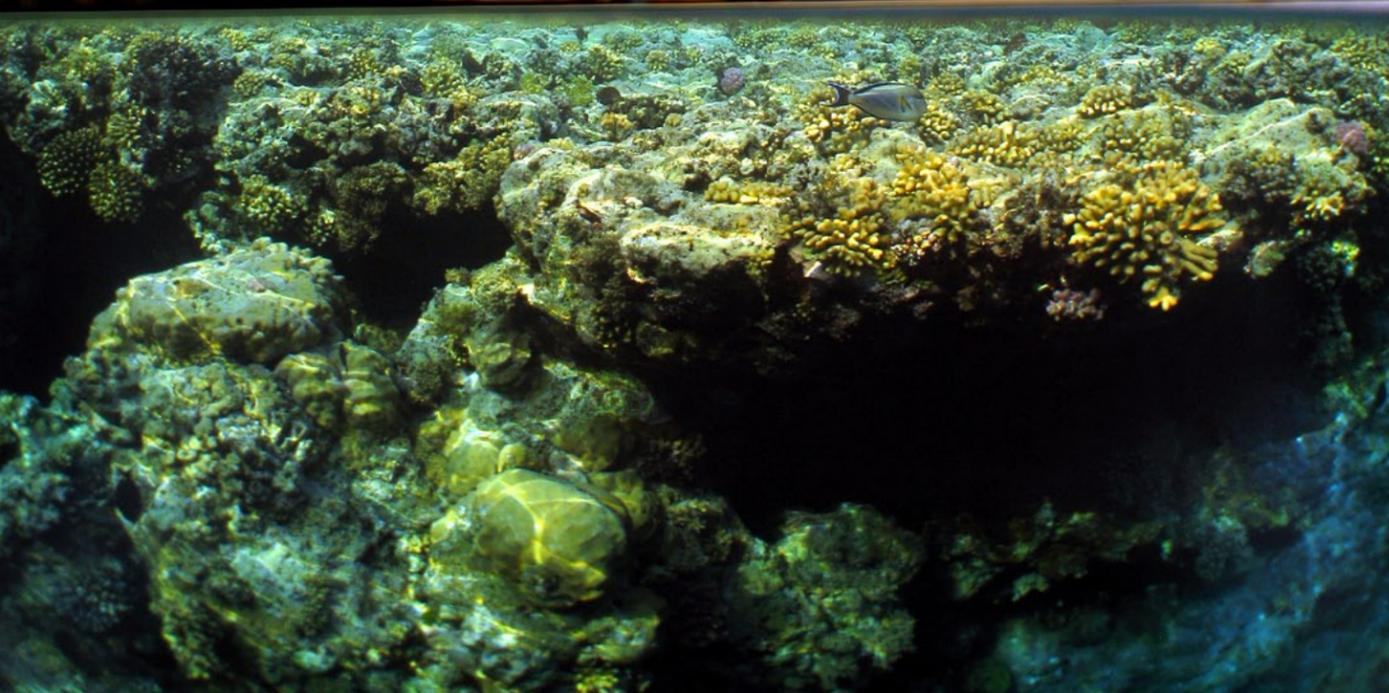




Red Sea Liveaboard
Brothers Islands

Text and photos by
Christopher Bartlett
Additional images
by Peter Symes



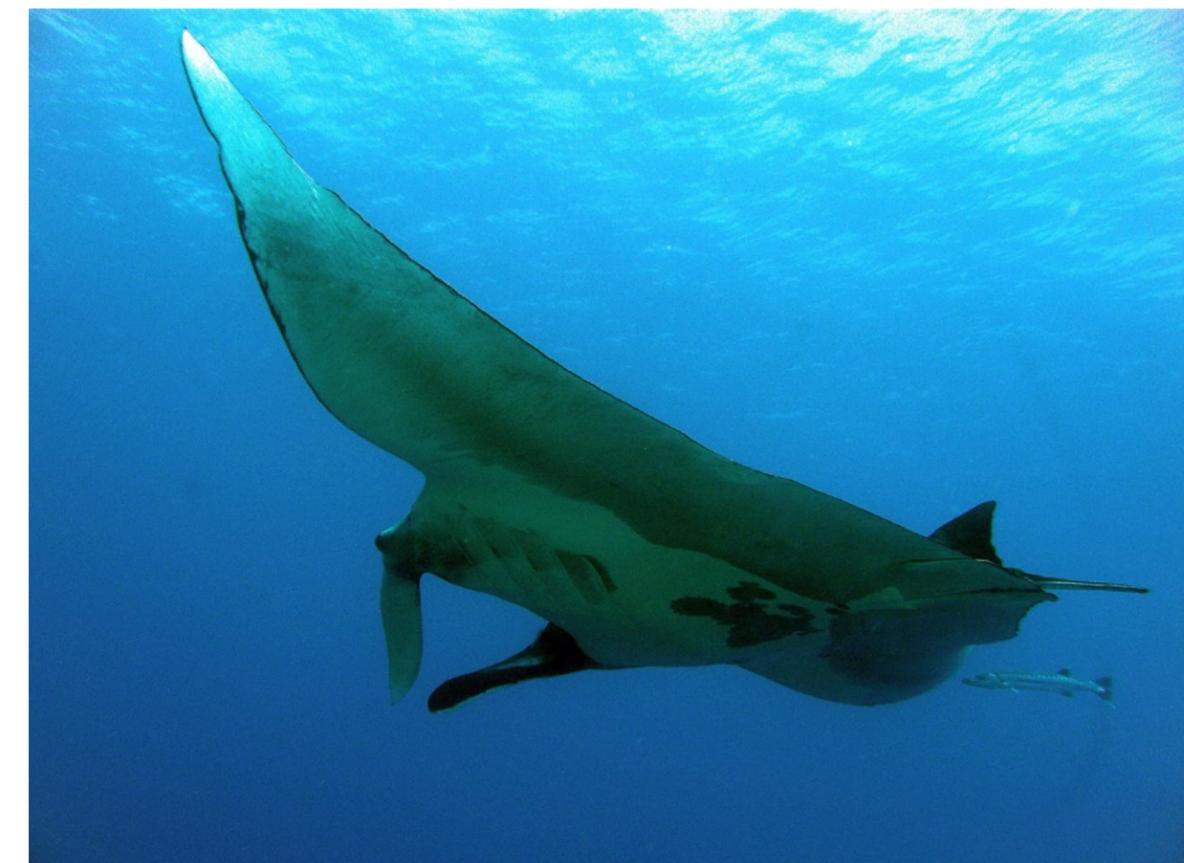
After six years of almost only diving from RIBs and spreading my clothes around my house, villa or hotel room, I decided it was time to see if I would enjoy a week on a boat with a bunch of strangers. As a frequent solo traveller, I wondered whether the close confines of a cabin with a random snorer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

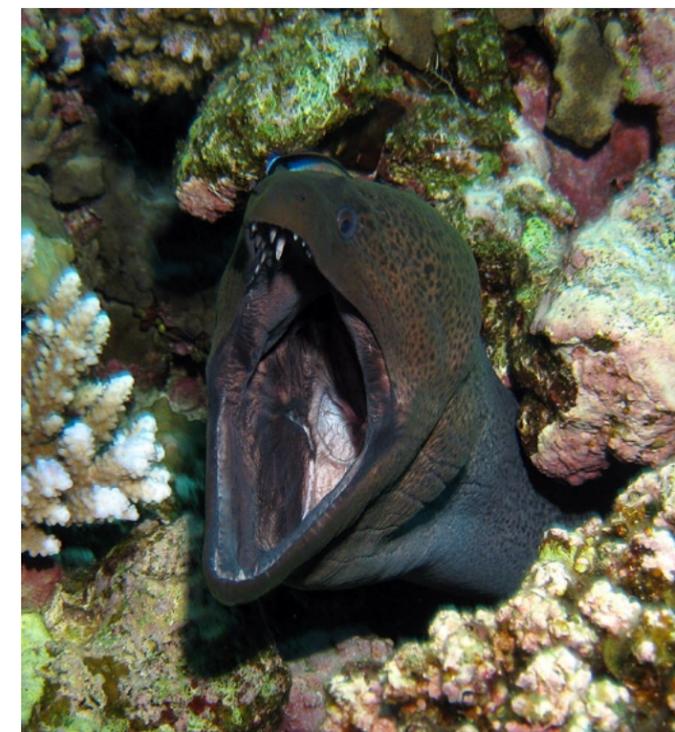
isolated Brothers Islands would be no place for faffing, and to do a night dive before heading east overnight.

An artificial shark stuck on a knife—part

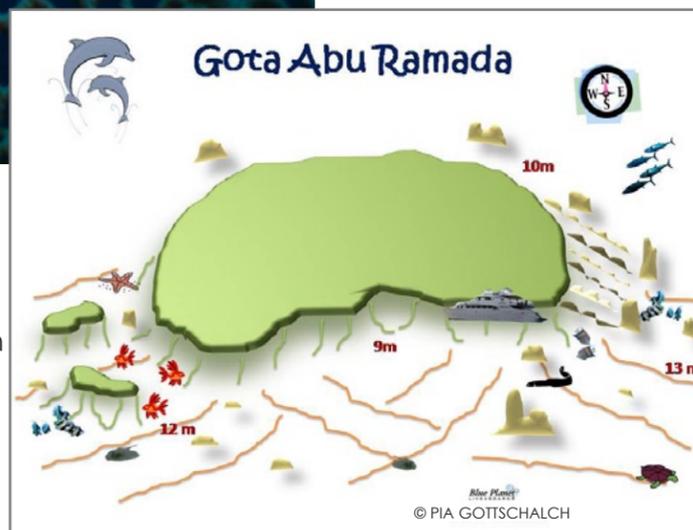
of blackspotted sweetlips and spottin squirrelfish, morays, crocodilefish and a large school of yellowtail barracuda and goatfish upon which to get reacquainted with camera settings.

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.

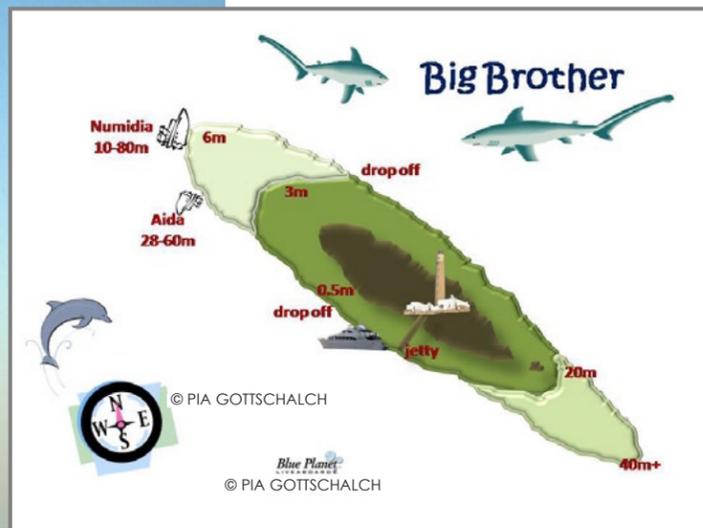
As Karim asked me how I would prefer my breakfast eggs the next morning, I took in my fellow shipmates, all liveaboard veterans and mostly return customers. We were an eclectic, if slightly Germanic, bunch—a German-Dutch couple, two German father-and-son combos, an

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

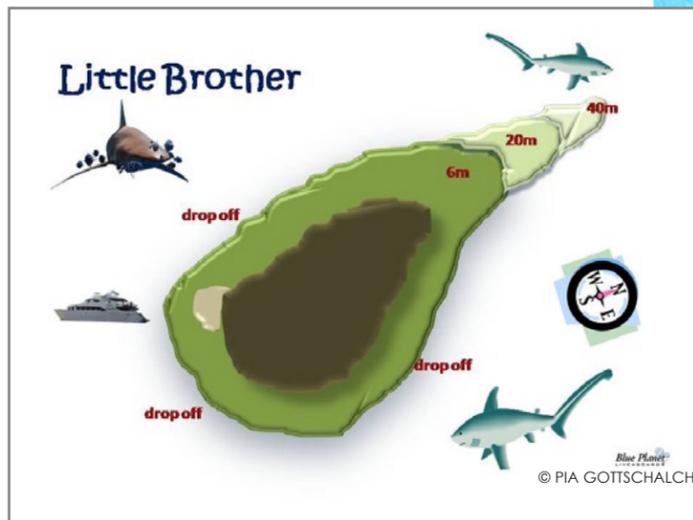
Point of Big Brother, *Blue Pearl* moored, Little Brother in distance

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

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





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

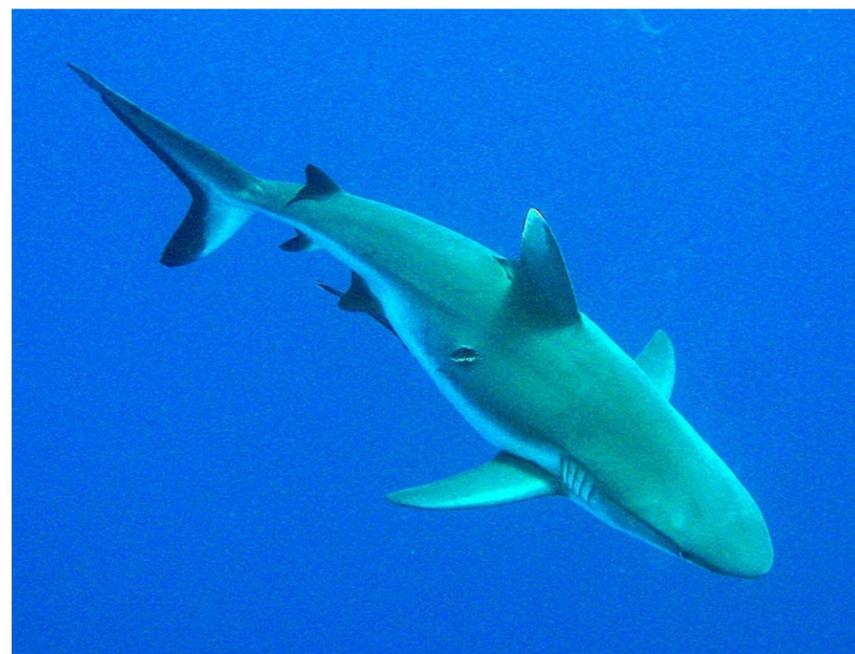
The plateau started at a depth of 20 metres and sloped down to 40 metres. It was a hot spot for thresher sharks. As we reached 25 metres, Mimo's arm shot out, finger extended

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 sweet-
lips; 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

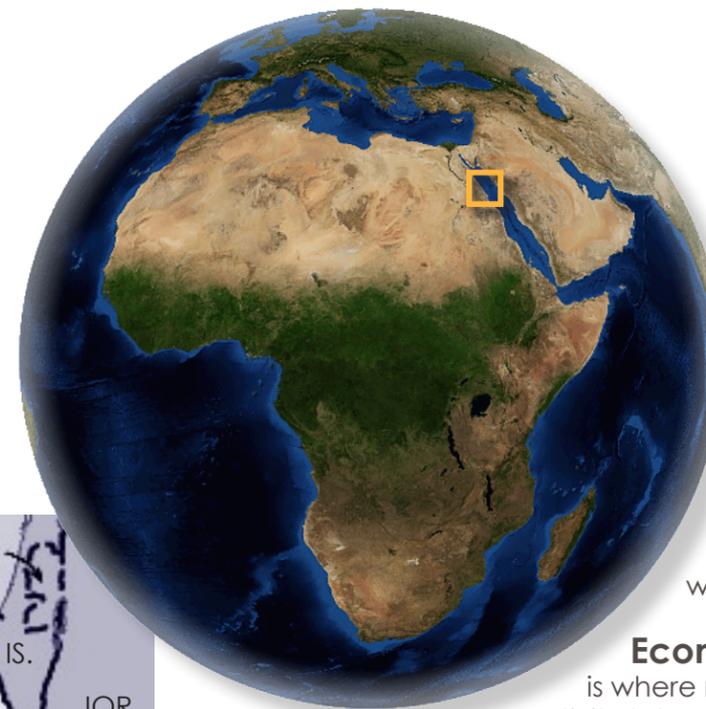
Geography Egypt is located in Northern Africa. It borders the Red Sea north of Sudan and the Medi-

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-



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

SHARM EL SHEIKH Sharm International Hospital (+20) 69 366 0318
Hyperbaric Medical Center (+20) 12 212 42 92

DAHAB Hyperbaric Medical Center (+20) 693 640 536 / 101 433 325
Dahab Deco International (+20) 12 219 0372

HURGHADA
Naval Hyperbaric Medical Center (+20) 65 3449 151 / 065 449 150
Hypermed (+2) 12 218 7550

SAFAGA Safaga General Hospital (+20) 122 190 383

MARSA ALAM Port Ghalib Hospital (+20) 122 190 383 / 653 700 122
Marsa Alam Baromedical (+20) 12 436 2222

Web sites
Egypt Tourism
www.egypt.travel ■

Red Sea Safari

Journey from Cairo to El Quseir



Text and photos by Barb Roy

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

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

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

My journey

When I found out I would be travel-

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

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





Red Sea Safari



Sharm El Sheikh

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

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

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

explore the various dive holidays offered to entice traveling divers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Red Sea Safari

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

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



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

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



Sea star

nal fish crowding for space under the overhangs.

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

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

When asked why El Quseir, Steve



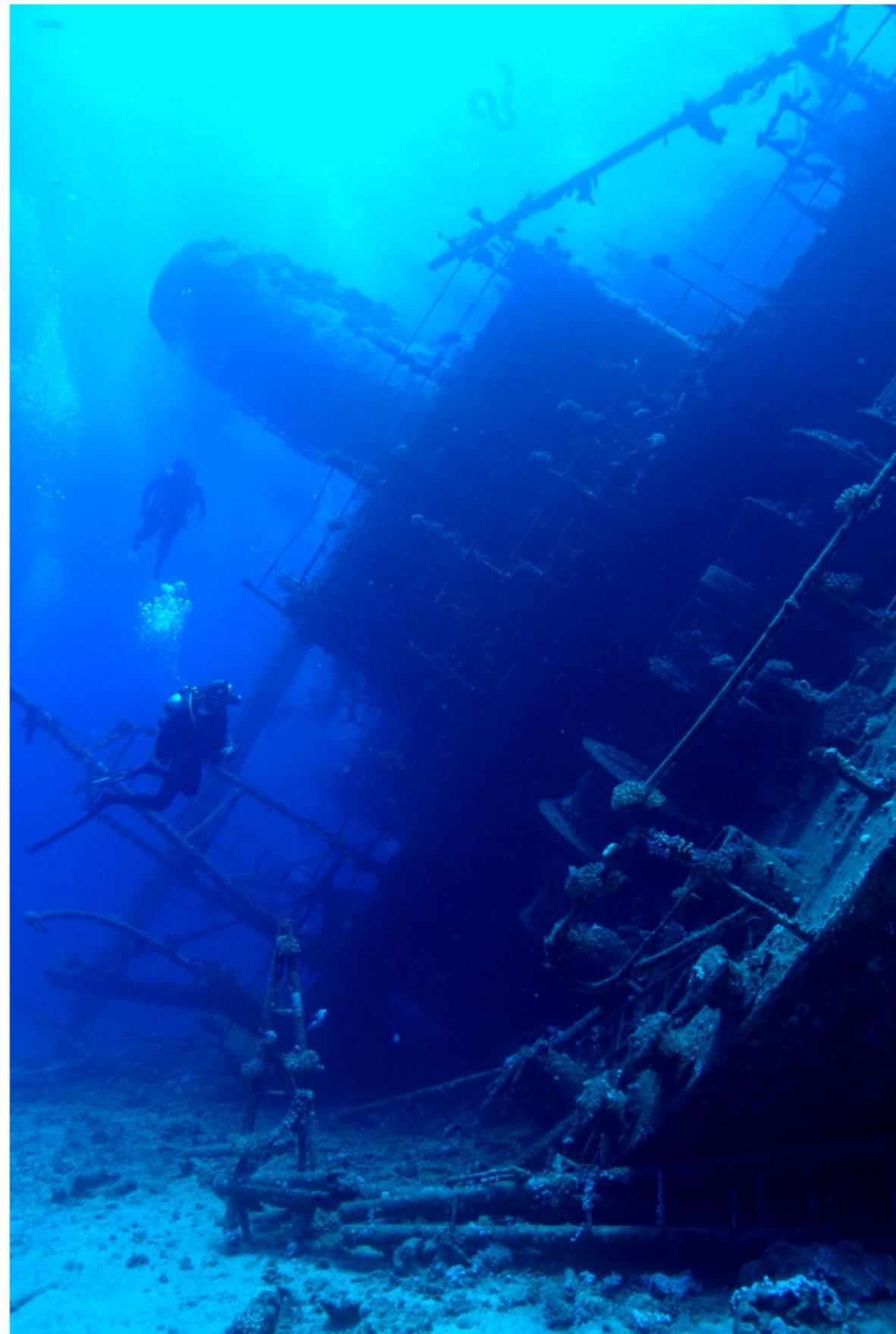
A pair of masked butterflyfish (left) on reef near Sharm el Sheikh; Diver and moray eel on reef (below)

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

Dahab

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

Diver explores *Ghiannis D* wreck (right)



Red Sea Safari

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

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

A few days later, Abu Hara

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

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

Curious if there was any tech-



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

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



Red Sea Safari



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Before leaving Dahab, Steve took us to

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



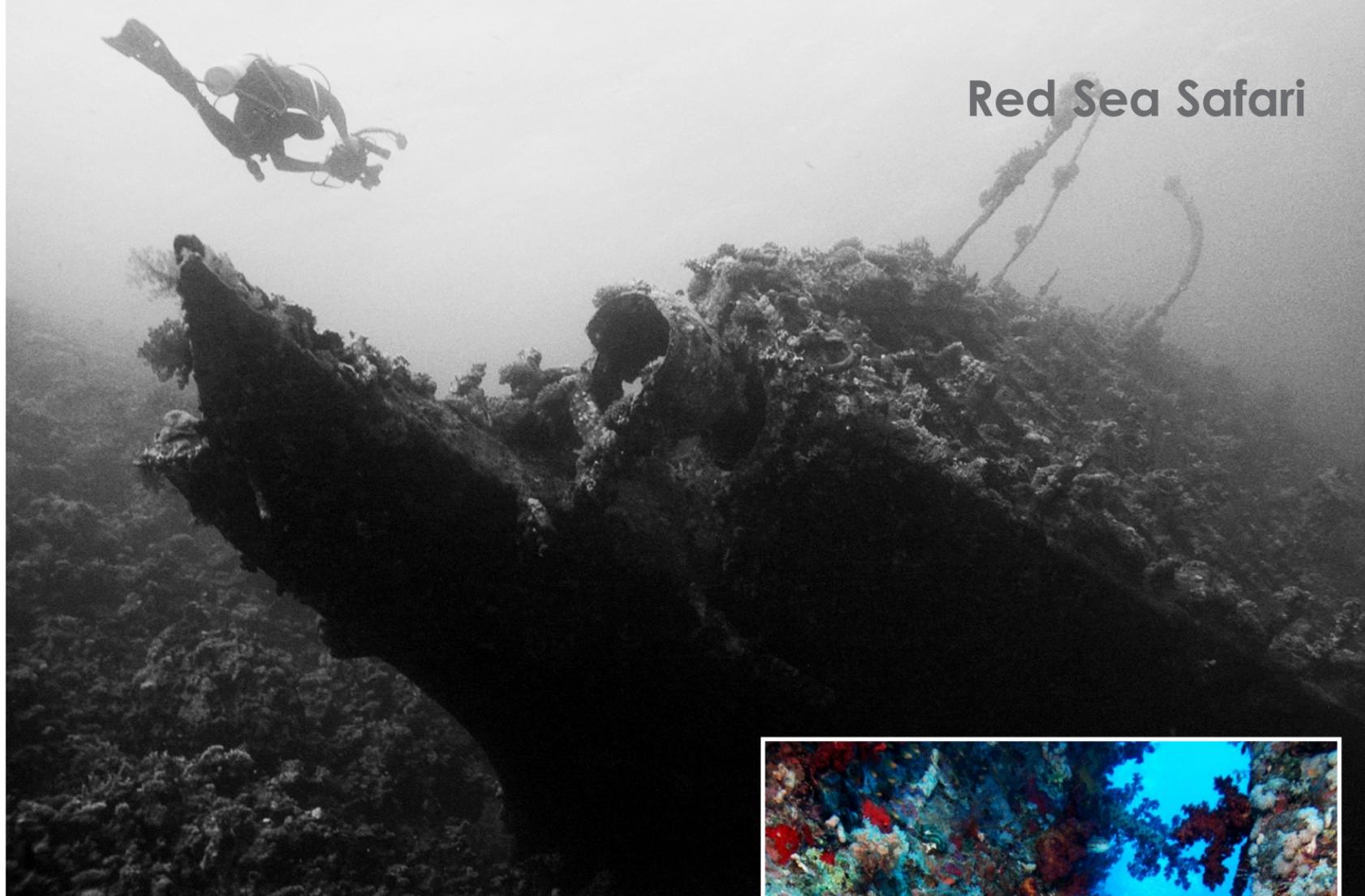


COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver on *Thistlegorm* wreck; BSA motorbikes on *Thistlegorm* wreck; *Dunraven* wreck; *Carnatic* wreck

to and from the sites.

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

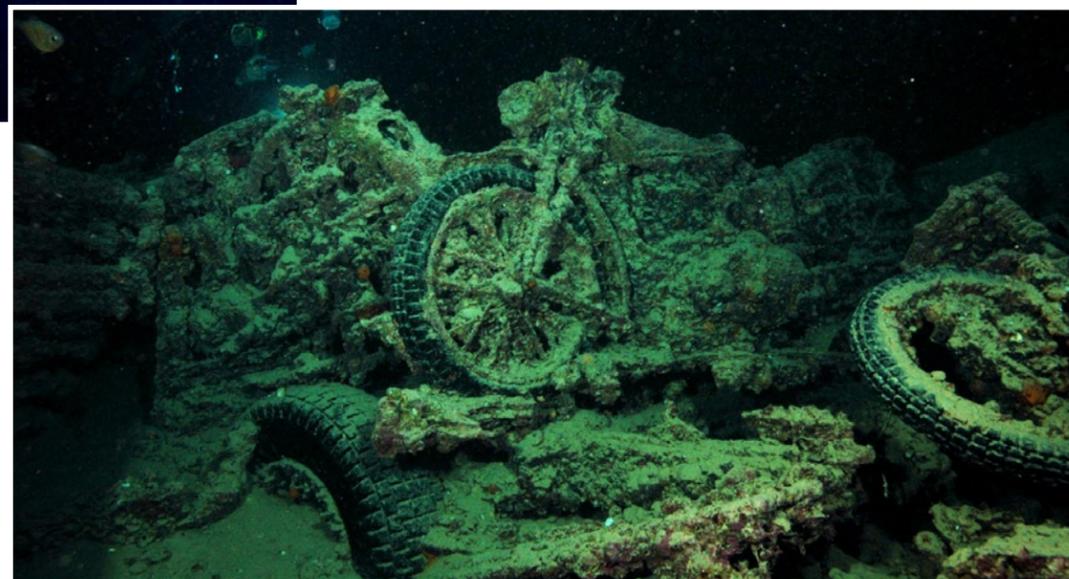
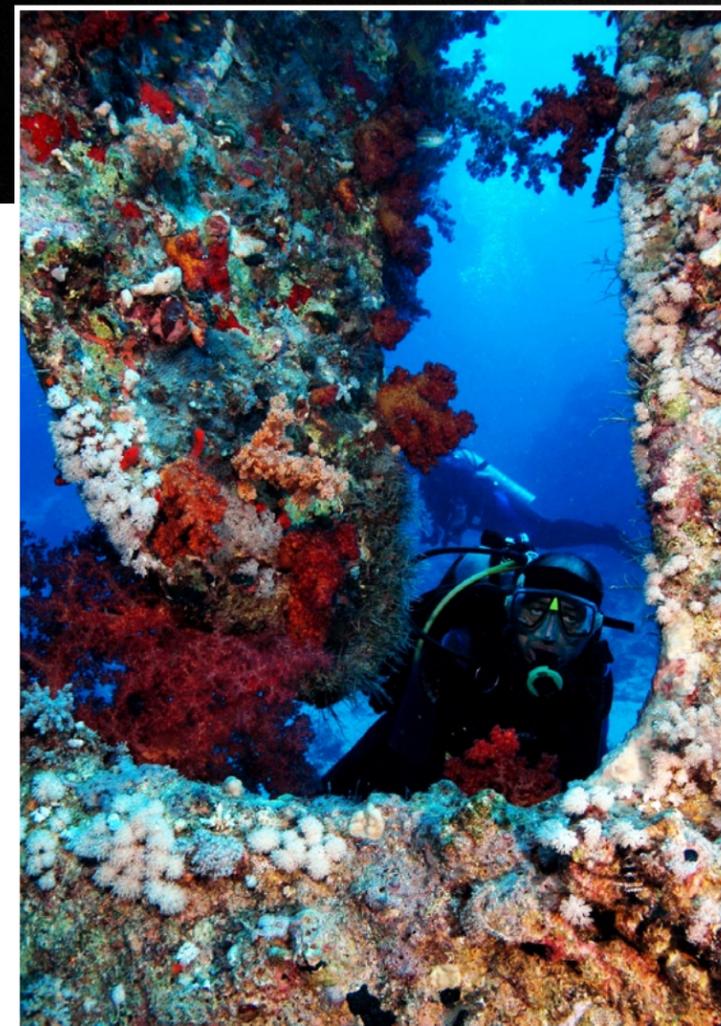
At one of the larger wrecks, I remember sitting on the sand with my camera in about 80 or 90 feet of water, looking up in awe at this massive ship lying on its side before me. Visibility was good enough to allow a full view of the wreck. Tiny divers hovered about at varying depths checking it out. I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



Red Sea Safari

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

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



Liveaboard dive boats

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

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



Red Sea Safari

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

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

Our first dive yielded a small



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

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

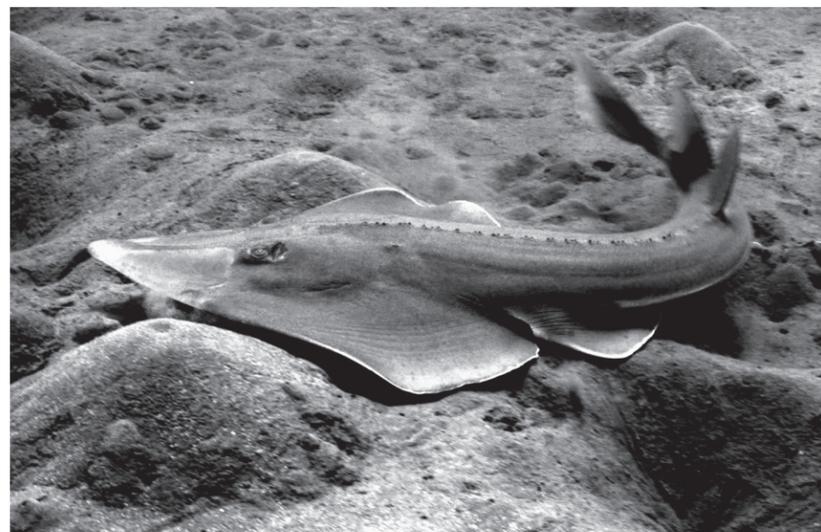
One last note I will add about my liveboard experience and some trouble I had with the two divemasters/guides. Quite often, they did not stick to the briefing plan or would change things in-water. As a photographer, this proved hard to adapt to. They would also become upset when I chose not to enter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



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

El Quseir

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During the boat dives, we were introduced to both deep

Red Sea Safari



What to bring

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

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



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

Elphinstone

Text and photos by JP Bresser

Grand Canyon of Southern Egypt

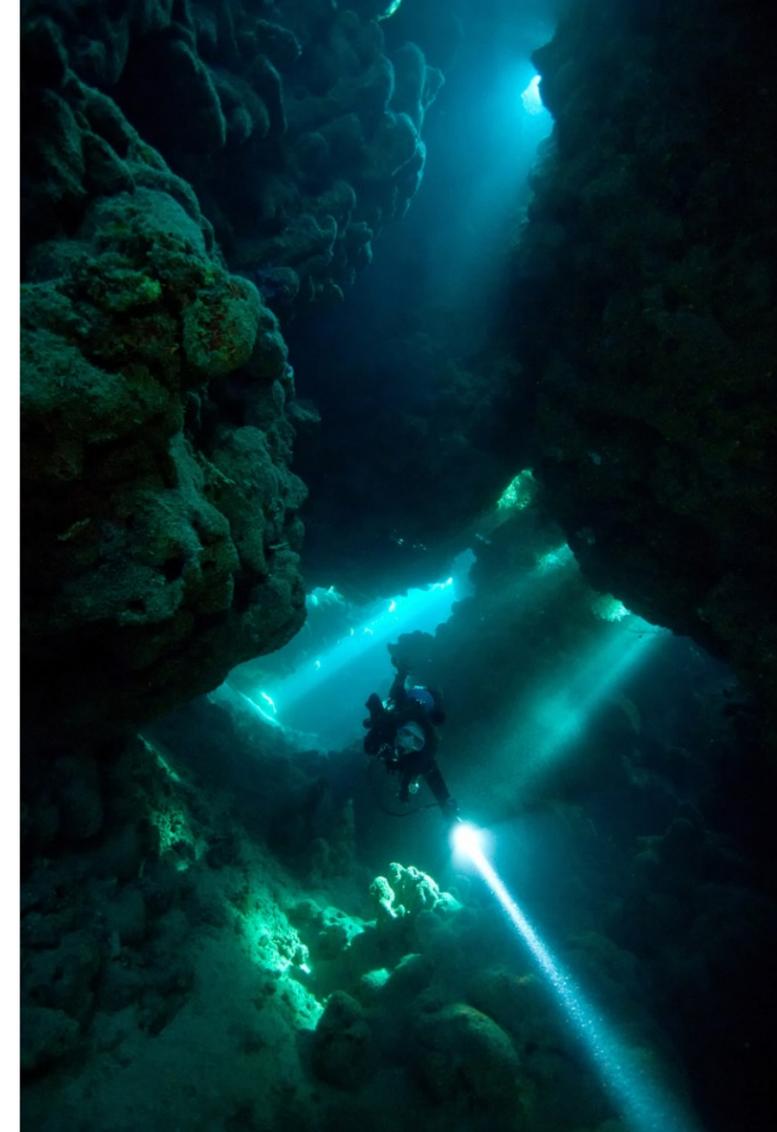
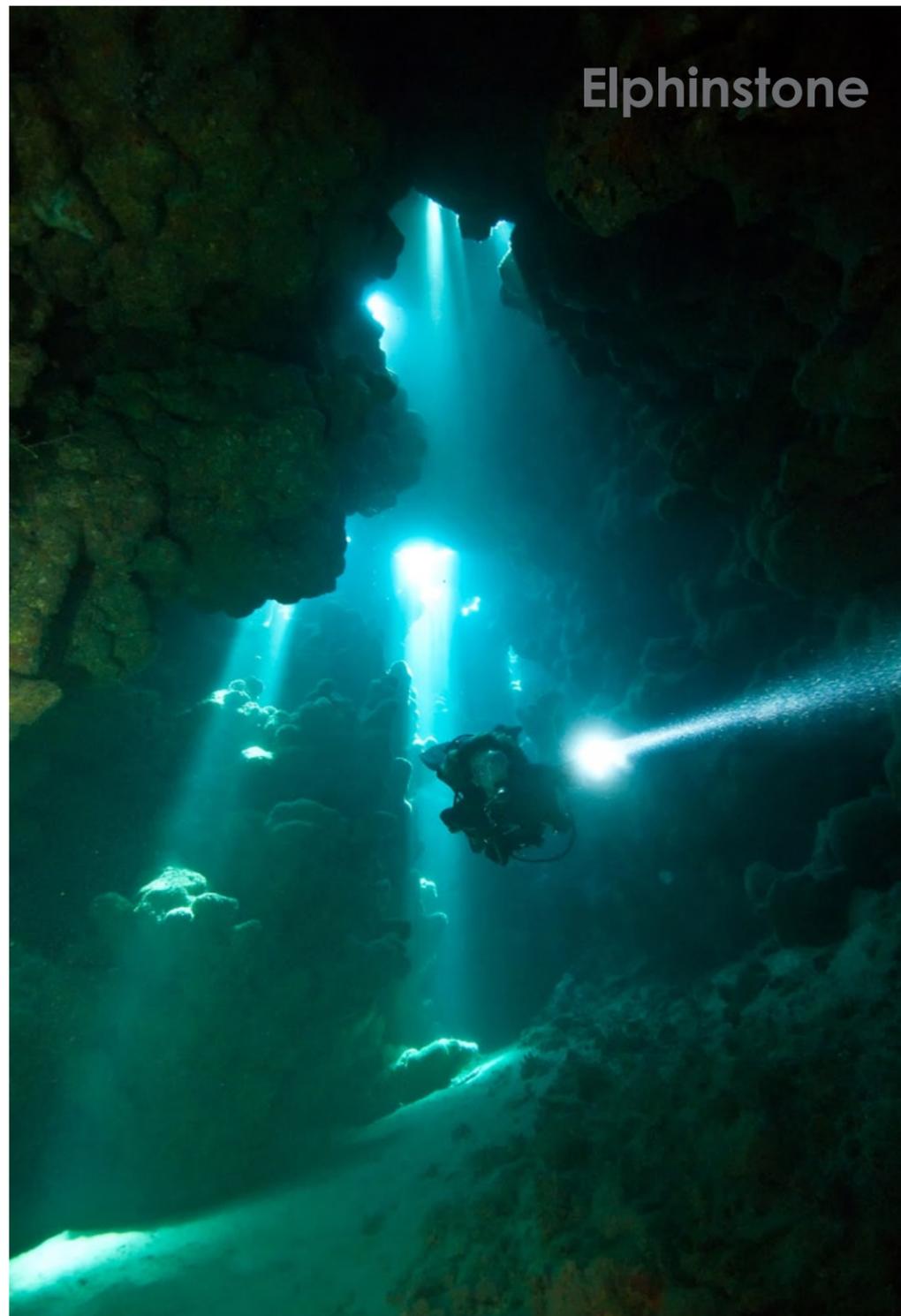


THIS PAGE: Diver entering the secret cave chambers and exploring its "canyons"

We started talking about technical diving and cave diving, and I showed him some of my photographs on the display of my dripping underwater housing. "So, you like caves, eh?" he asked, obviously unaware about my regular sub-terra activities. I decided to keep a low profile and just tell him that I did. He started looking around, moved a little closer while lowering his tone and whispered, "Are you interested in a very special dive?" I almost felt like I was being



It was 6:30 in the morning, and my dive buddy and I were hauling our gear back from the big zodiac speedboat after a thrilling midnight dive on the famous Elphinstone reef in the Red Sea near Marsa Alam, Egypt. While rinsing my gear, Ahmed—the local dive guide—started talking to me because I was diving a back plate, wing and long hose just like him, and he probably felt some kind of connection.



regularly when he was working for another dive center. He told us that he had been keeping it kind of private because it was an easy place to damage and stir up. On rare

of light streaming through, but we decided that this secret site would probably be another silty and sandy cavern area somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

At 8:30 the next morning, we were at the jetty. We got our briefing. The reef was six miles away and two miles out from the coast. It consisted of several connected pool areas. The connections between those pools were sort of like canyons, which could differ in size from really small to ballroom dimensions. Ahmed told us that the tour through the canyons would last at least 45 minutes. My buddy and I looked at each other, imagining what swimming for almost an hour

offered an indecent proposal, but I responded that as an editor for several dive magazines I was always interested in very special dives.

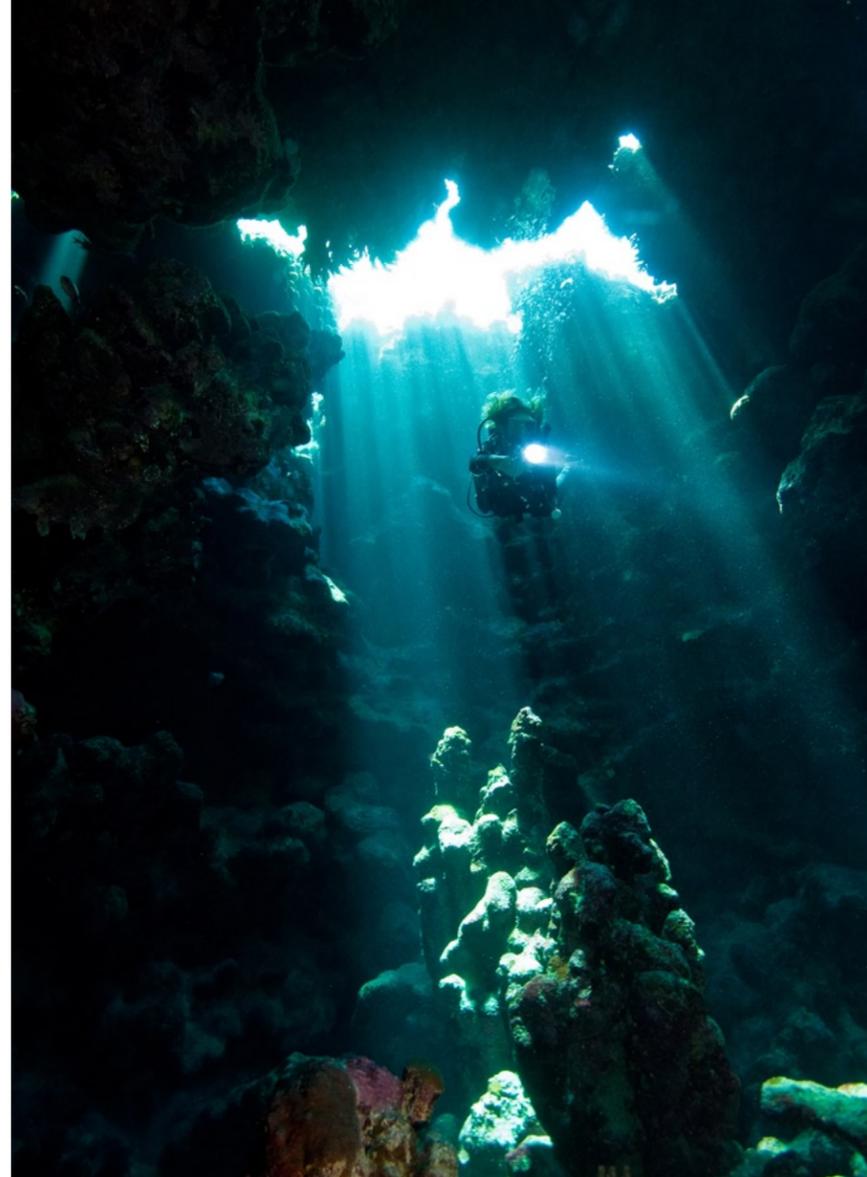
"I will talk to the management and see what I can arrange," whispered Ahmed and walked away in the direction of the dive

manager's office leaving me and my buddy behind with about a 100 questions unanswered.

Later that evening, Ahmed sneaked up to us during our dinner and told us to be at the jetty at 8:30AM the next morning with all our gear assembled. He would take us to an unknown reef he used to dive

occasions, he said he took some very skilled divers out there to amaze and impress them with his secret location, and we were the lucky ones.

As we retired to our lodgings that night, my partner and I talked and fantasized about the dive to come. I already had images of big underwater canyons with radiating beams



through coral canyons would be like.

The very bumpy, high-speed zodiac ride lasted for about 30 minutes when we reached a shallow reef in the middle of the sea. The water was crystal clear, and the submerged reef sparkled with an array of colors. After our checks, we rolled backwards into the warm water of the Red Sea and followed Ahmed through a small entrance into the reef.

The beginning of our little journey was quite restricted, and we took our time working through the small tunnels trying not to touch any part of the environment. Occasionally, Ahmed stopped us and pointed to a corridor, or room, which was of exceptional beauty. I looked for a good position and directed my partner to where I wanted her to position herself as a

model in the next shot.

The light, entering from all sides, was spectacular and a real challenge for me to capture on the CCD (image sensor) of my digital SLR camera. A huge room led into another one, and the light effects were starting to have an almost hallucinating affect upon us. I had flashbacks from my cave dives in Mexico where some of the cenotes offered a similar sensation.

After about an hour of playing hide and seek in the hidden labyrinth, we exited the canyons and swam with our eyes half closed to protect them from the sudden sunlight. We were drifting over a very healthy and pristine coral reef covered with huge shoals of tropical fish. It was the icing on the cake of a magical dive.

Back on board the zodiac, we

thanked Ahmed from the bottom of our hearts for this amazing experience and promised him that we would keep this location a secret.

On one hand, it's a shame that I can't share this location with others. On the other hand, imagine the excitement you will feel if one day you are approached by a dive guide who starts whispering in your ear about a special secret dive. ■

Read the whole story of JP Bresser's trip to southern Egypt in an upcoming edition of X-RAY MAG. Bresser is a Dutch cave diver and member of EKPP—a European cave exploration team. He is also a Technical Course Director for NAUI Netherlands and active as an Instructor for GUE. Find more photographs at: www.jpbbresser.tv

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the secret cave chambers and canyons