



the official magazine
for diving and watersports
in Egypt
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February 2011 - Special Issue

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Welcome to our Digi Blue destination guide 2011...

A new era is upon us in Egypt. With this brings a period of transition and huge changes. Some things in this incredible country, however, will never change such as the spectacular world-class diving on tropical coral reefs and wrecks.

While many of the usual crowds of tourists have been away, a handful of lucky divers and dive guides have been out to play. Dolphins, rays, sharks, mimic octopus and new discoveries on quiet tropical coral reefs...the winter diving has been stunning this year here in the Red Sea. Just check out the reports we have received from resident dive professionals to find out why they say there has never been a better time to dive the resorts we all know and love so well (page 6).

In this special issue of BLUE, we have brought together a wealth of information on each of the main dive resorts, from Egypt's northern most Red Sea dive resort of Taba to the southern most resort of Hamata. If all of this doesn't entice you to book your holiday right away, then maybe one of the 20 special offers featured from all of these resorts will get you on the next available flight to our sunny shores.

If you've ever wondered what the diving was like here before the beach crowds arrived, then get over here and come diving with us now. It's amazing!

Best regards, Charlotte
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It's a new dawn,
it's a new dive
and we're feeling good

Dive guides throughout the Red Sea say there's never been a better time to get into the water, with incredible sightings on uncrowded reefs and wrecks over the winter months. Following the recent political revolution in Egypt, dive operations are encouraging divers to make the most of the quiet conditions. With fewer boats and bustle, they say divers are enjoying the benefits of what the Red Sea waters had to offer ten years ago – lots of life and very few people in the water or on the beaches.

'Every cloud, they say, has a silver lining,' said a spokesperson from Emperor Divers. 'Now is the time to holiday in the Red Sea and grab a taste of what diving was like before the bucket and spade brigade arrived. The waters are warm, clear and calm and the diving is uncrowded, relaxed and stunning. Emperor Divers reports that guests have continued to take their diving holidays as their Red Sea resorts are far removed from the big cities and the lure of peaceful dive sites is proving a strong one.'

Dolphins have been particularly prominent in dive logs throughout January and February, with incredible encounters with the mammals being reported from as far as Nuweiba in the north to Hamata in the south. Rays, most notably mantas and eagle rays, have been showing up in many popular dive spots, even off usually busy hotel reefs. Deep Divers Hurghada has been enjoying some underwater time with a 3m-long manta ray on its house reef of Empire Beach Resort through much of February.

Here is a just a selection of other Red Sea sightings reports sent in to BLUE in February by CDWS members:

In the biggest resorts of Sharm el Sheikh and Hurghada dive guides said they have never known conditions to be so good. 'Hurghada is empty at the moment, but for the diving it is the best time ever,' said Martina Aziz, marketing manager of Ilios Dive Club. 'After seeing four eagle rays and three turtles within half an hour at Gota Abu Ramada reef, our guests and our instructor, Tarek, came back from the boat with a huge smile on their faces. They were all very excited and talked about the big groupers leaving their hideouts and how different the dives are at the moment. One guest from Germany told us this was the best time he had ever been and had never seem so many big fish in the water.'



photo: Maria Munn

photo: www.mbc-egypt.com

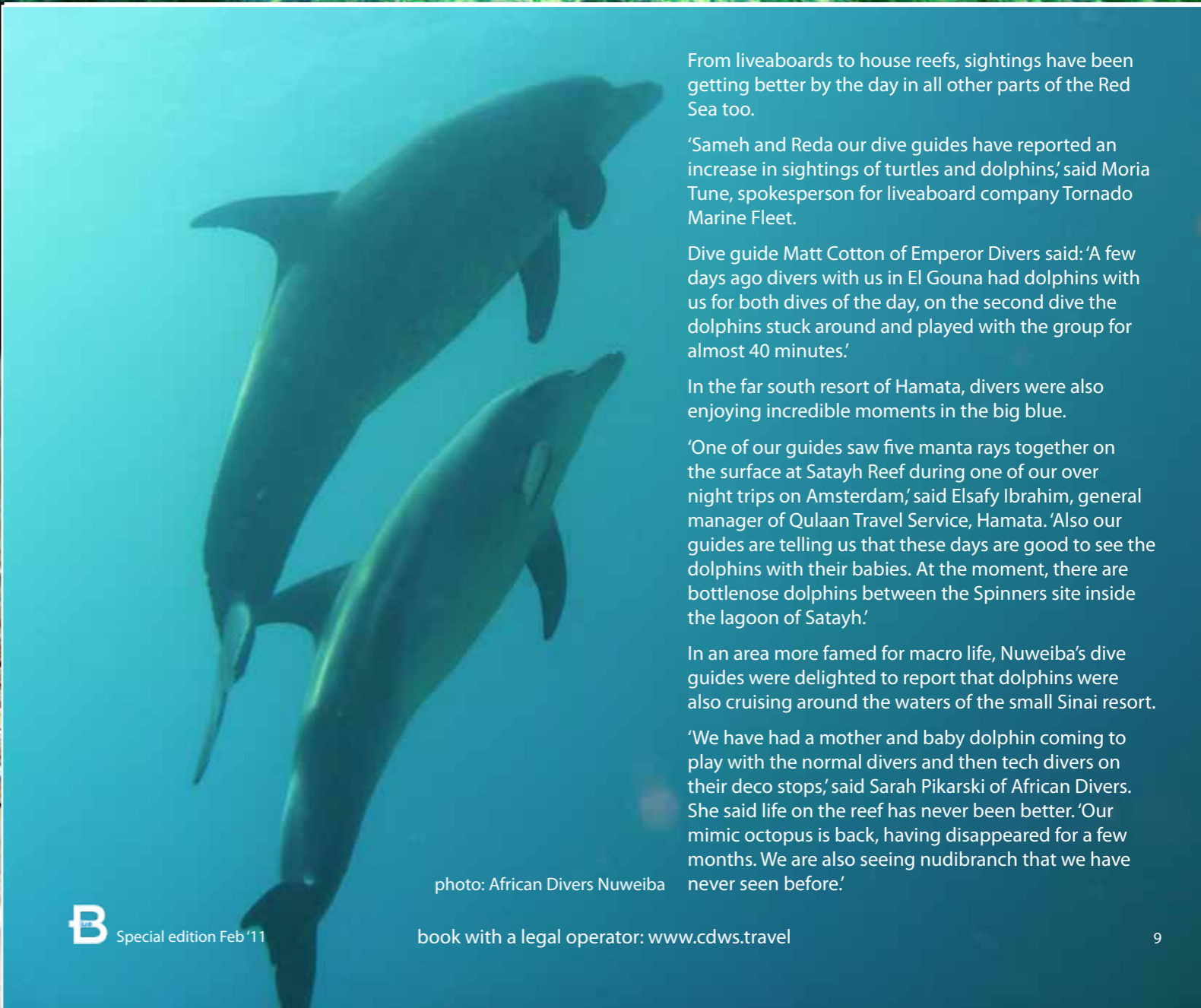


photo: Joanne Dowling



Seasoned Sharm dive guide, Jo Dowling of Ocean College (above) said she has been amazed at the amount of big stuff turning up in the water this winter and by the lack of boats in the world-class dive sites of Tiran and Ras Mohammed National Park.

'The diving is awesome at the moment,' she said. 'Today at Shark Reef, no other divers. You are never going to get quieter dive sites and it's really quiet in the water. There's more variety of life. Lots of playful dolphins and other guides have seen feathertails and sharks. If I'm not working at the moment, I'm in the water fun diving as it's so lovely. Camel Bar has even reduced the price of its beers, so that's a bonus.'



From liveaboards to house reefs, sightings have been getting better by the day in all other parts of the Red Sea too.

'Sameh and Reda our dive guides have reported an increase in sightings of turtles and dolphins,' said Moria Tune, spokesperson for liveaboard company Tornado Marine Fleet.

Dive guide Matt Cotton of Emperor Divers said: 'A few days ago divers with us in El Gouna had dolphins with us for both dives of the day, on the second dive the dolphins stuck around and played with the group for almost 40 minutes.'

In the far south resort of Hamata, divers were also enjoying incredible moments in the big blue.

'One of our guides saw five manta rays together on the surface at Satayh Reef during one of our over night trips on Amsterdam,' said Elsafy Ibrahim, general manager of Qulaan Travel Service, Hamata. 'Also our guides are telling us that these days are good to see the dolphins with their babies. At the moment, there are bottlenose dolphins between the Spinners site inside the lagoon of Satayh.'

In an area more famed for macro life, Nuweiba's dive guides were delighted to report that dolphins were also cruising around the waters of the small Sinai resort.

'We have had a mother and baby dolphin coming to play with the normal divers and then tech divers on their deco stops,' said Sarah Pikarski of African Divers. She said life on the reef has never been better. 'Our mimic octopus is back, having disappeared for a few months. We are also seeing nudibranch that we have never seen before.'

photo: African Divers Nuweiba

The rare mimic octopus has also been spotted regularly this winter by divers in Taba, just north of Nuweiba.

'There has been three mimic octopus seen on Red Sea Waterworld's shore dive site. They are tiny,' said Katie Hollamby, a spokesperson for Taba Heights resort. 'One was spotted in the confined area, just off the beach from Waterworld. This clever creature is a brown octopus that can grow up to 60cm-long. The species was discovered so recently that it still doesn't have a scientific name, but scientists are intrigued by its uncanny ability to impersonate lionfish, sole, and banded sea snakes. Octopus are thought to be one of the most intelligent invertebrates and can change the color and texture of their skin to blend in with rocks, algae, or coral to avoid predators. But until now, an octopus with the ability to actually assume the appearance of another animal had never been observed.'

In Marsa Alam, marine biologists working for Blue Heaven Holidays have been logging a plethora of rare Red Sea life. In addition to rare species its divers also saw 76 dolphins cruising around the reefs in the first week of February.

'I am biologist and scientific journalist resident in Marsa Alam and active on marine resources expeditions, special tours and courses, surveys and projects,' said Ayman Taher of Blue Heaven Holidays. 'Last interesting sightings for unusual and rare marine life in the Marsa Alam region include mantis crabfish, velvet crownfish, dugong, five sleeping white tip reef shark and three green turtles.'



photo: Taba Hiehgts



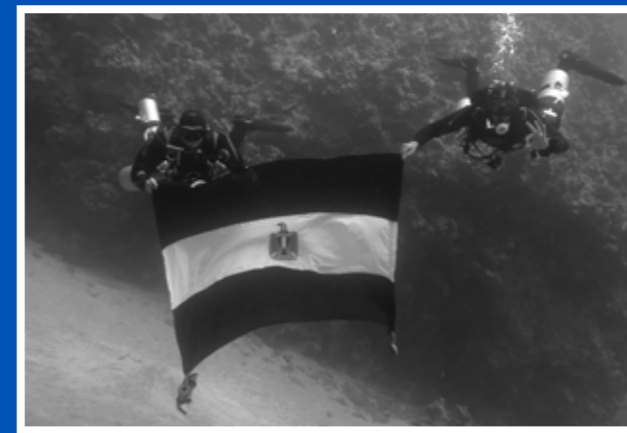
photo: Daniel Pikarski



Following news that travel restrictions were being lifted and flight routes reopened, Egypt's Chamber of Diving and Watersports (CDWS) said it was optimistic that the diving and watersports industry would come back even stronger following the difficult period for business.

'CDWS and its members is proud to see that European divers continue to show their support of the Red Sea diving industry and look forward to welcoming more divers back to their dive resorts as more and more flight routes are re-opened,' CDWS said. 'Flights from the UK have experienced no restrictions, and now both the German and Dutch foreign offices have lifted their restrictions on flights in to the Red Sea resorts.'

'The Egyptian Tourist Authority continues to show its support to the industry and will be exhibiting alongside our members at the Golden Dolphin dive exhibition in Moscow and the Big Scuba Show in London this coming weekend, allowing visitors to meet our team and our members directly.'



The CDWS board of directors also issued a statement to its members to welcome the recent political change. It said: 'CDWS would like to congratulate the Egyptian people and all members for the wonderful success of the people's peaceful revolution to freedom and democracy.'

In a celebration of freedom, dive communities throughout the Red Sea have been teaming up to organise clean ups of popular sites, including the Blue Hole in Dahab.

Well-known technical diving instructor, Tom Steiner, based in Dahab celebrated by flying the flag underwater with his colleagues from Dahab Divers.

'I just wanted to send you this picture for the celebration of the New Egypt, we wish all Egyptians a bright start for 2011,' Steiner told BLUE. 'Go Egypt and show the rest of the world how beautiful the country is.'

Divers planning to visit the Red Sea should ensure they book their diving services with a CDWS member operator. A full list of legal diving operators in Egypt can be found on our website www.cdws.travel.



photo: Erich Reboucas



Red Sea Briefing: Nuweiba

...there is a lot of variety in the diving sites accessible here and the stunning Abu Galum National Park is an underwater area not to be missed...



image: Scuba College, Nuweiba



image: Maria Munn



image: Scuba College, Nuweiba

Nuweiba

Expansive fine-sand beaches peppered with Bedouin beach tourist camps; Nuweiba offers something completely different to most other Egyptian Sinai Peninsula diving resorts. Situated just 70km south of Taba and 150km north of Sharm El Sheikh, Nuweiba is celebrated for its easy, but spectacular shore diving and quiet and laid-back approach topside with little in the way of commercial tourism.

The town is surrounded by natural beauty, with views of the Sinai mountains, the rich blues of the Red Sea reefs and the mountains of Saudi Arabia across the Gulf of Aqaba. It is also one of the best places to experience Bedouin culture. Nuweiba was built in 1971 between an area inhabited by two different Bedouin tribes: the Tarabeen in the north and the Maizena in the south.

An ideal location from which to travel to other countries fringing the northern Red Sea, Nuweiba's main port sees many thousands of people and vehicles making the short 90-minute trip across the Gulf of Aqaba to Jordan.

Top dives

The diving in Nuweiba is mostly accessed by shore by jeep or camel, although some sites are reached by small boat. Much like its neighbouring towns of Dahab and Taba, there is little in the way of current, so you are unlikely to encounter much in the way of big animals. Nevertheless, there is a lot of variety in the diving sites accessible here and the stunning Abu Galum National Park is an underwater area not-to-be-missed. Ras Mamlach is an hour jeep ride away and is the classic site in the national park.

A more unusual site is the MFO (Multi-National Force and Observers) Pipeline. Two sunken pipelines run parallel 5m apart and descend from 5m to depths of 12m and 20m.

If you prefer to stay close to your resort, enjoy diving with small critters and have a camera, then the house reefs are where you may prefer to spend most of your time.

From the Coral Hilton, you will find the fabulous Abou Lou Lou house reef, a favourite with many top underwater photographers. Swimming over the seagrass to the start of the reef, you are likely to spot ghost pipefish, morays, moray eels and crocodile snake eels.

Topside

For tourists, there are two main areas from which to choose to stay. Between the main town and port there is a strip along the beachfront where you will find modern hotel complexes, such as the Hilton Nuweiba Coral Resort and the Swisscare Nuweiba Resort Hotel. Further north towards Taba, there are many Bedouin-styled and owned camps along the vast beaches where guests can stay at a very cheap rate in beach huts and basic rooms. Most of these are comfortable and have air conditioning.

Destination desert

Nuweiba is the perfect location for popular desert excursions including Mount Sinai and St Katherine's Monastery, Coloured Canyon, White Canyon and Ein Khudra Oasis, as well as traditional Bedouin dinners in the desert.

On the water

There are many water sports on offer, including waterskiing, banana boating, canoeing, as well as snorkelling trips by boat and car.

Bedouin life

Nuweiba is home to two of Sinai's most influential Bedouin tribes and offers an excellent insight into the local way of life with Bedouin cooking, camel rides and races, and other aspects of their culture.



image: African Divers, Nuweiba

Eating out

In Nuweiba Town there is a choice of two Chinese / Korean restaurants and a handful of local restaurants offering Egyptian and seafood cuisine. At the Bedouin village of Tarabeen to the north of Nuweiba Town there are a few more local restaurants serving traditional dishes at a very low price.

The local

Located along the beach between Nuweiba Town and the Port, Swisscare Friend's Pub has a wide selection of drinks and snacks with a pool table, darts, and live English and German soccer on the wide screen TV.

Special Offers - Nuweiba

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Terms & Conditions: See details under Emperor Divers Nuweiba on page 13





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Special offers for March: "Horeya Rates"

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Boat: Sea Queen 1

Route: Shark Safari to Brothers Island

20 places available, from/to Hurghada, € 714 per person (incl. Nitrox, airport transfers, all dives, dive guide/tanks/weights, soft drinks, excluding MARINE PARK fees + Reef Tax)

Sat 05 March - Sat 12 March 2011

Boat: South Moon

Route: Classic Sinai

16 places available, from/to Sharm el Sheikh, € 650 per person (incl. Nitrox, airport transfers, all dives, dive guide/tanks/weights, soft drinks, excluding NATIONAL PARK fees Ras Mohamed)

Thu 17 March - Thu 24 March 2011

Boat: South Moon

Route: Classic Sinai

16 places available, from/to Sharm el Sheikh, € 650 per person (incl. Nitrox, airport transfers, all dives, dive guide/tanks/weights, soft drinks, excluding NATIONAL PARK fees Ras Mohamed)

Mon 14 March - Wed 16 March 2011

Boat: South Moon

Route: 3 day Mini Safari

16 free places available out of Sharm el Sheikh € 333 per person (incl. Nitrox, airport transfers, all dives, dive guide/tanks/weights, soft drinks, excluding NATIONAL PARK fees Ras Mohamed)

For contact details and more information visit www.seaqueens.com and quote BLUE special



Red Sea Briefing: Taba

Situated to the far north of the Egyptian Red Sea, the relaxed diving resort of Taba is a popular location for those looking to get away from the crowds and explore the vibrant reefs that fringe the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba. This Sinai Peninsular town is famed for its macro life and is one of the best places in the Red Sea to encounter frogfish in virtually current-free conditions, as well as a plethora of small critters such as octopus, morays, nudibranchs, pipefish, stonefish, and sea moths.

Good visibility and lack of current means Taba's waters offer an excellent environment in which to learn to dive and also provide hassle-free conditions for underwater photographers. There are few dive boats operating in the area, so there will only ever be a few divers on each dive.

Overlooked by the neighbouring countries of Israel, Saudi Arabia and Jordan around the Gulf of Aqaba, another advantage of a stay here is the day trips available to some of the region's best topside attractions, such as the stunning rock-carved city of Petra, the Wadi Rum desert, the Dead Sea, Jerusalem and Cairo.

There are more than 25 dive sites around Taba, with more still being discovered. Most of the diving available is by a short boat journey. To tune in with the relaxed approach to holiday time here, centres offer flexibility on the number of dives visitors wish to do each day with full day, half day and single dive trips available by boat. One of the best dives around Taba is the Canyon, where you are likely to see a colourful collection of frogfish at a coral bommie around 5m. Moving across the sandy bottom, which is peppered with tiny critters and stonefish, you reach a split in the reef that descends to 30m. The reef wall here is encrusted with life, including octopus, ghost pipefish and more frogfish. The Black Coral dive site, also accessible by shore, is where you will find a cleaning station for coral groupers as well as a huge collection of moray eels and hunting lionfish.

The Aquarium is another top site, as it offers a very gentle drift dive past life-filled coral bommies and a mass of fish swimming around the cleaning stations.

The standard of house reef diving here is excellent, with a chance to see life such as turtles, beautiful red anemones and good soft and hard coral cover.

The town of Taba itself can be split into three areas: Taba Village, which is located close to the Israeli border; Taba Heights approximately 20 minutes drive south where there is a complex of hotels; and also the Taba Coast area where there are yet another two large hotels.

Getting there: By far the easiest way to get to Taba is to fly direct into Taba International airport. Alternatively visitors can fly to the southern Sinai resort of Sharm El Sheikh and be transferred by road 180km through the desert mountains and coastal roads. The transfer takes between two and three hours. Taxis can be arranged through the dive centre at a cost of approximately 400LE (Egyptian Pounds) each way. Alternatively the transfers can be arranged by the tour operator if you opt for a holiday package with accommodation, flights and diving included.



image: Red Sea Waterworld



image: Red Sea Waterworld



Map: ©Etudes et Cartographie, Lille



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Diving Equipments, Spare Parts and Accessories



Red Sea Briefing: Dahab



Image courtesy of Gunnar Palm GPKite



Photo: Gosia Sladkowska

...the hippy-styled resort of Dahab is a popular destination for divers, windsurfers and those looking for a mellow place to relax in year-round sun.



Dahab

Nesting between the golden mountains of the Sinai desert and vibrant Red Sea reefs, the hippy-styled resort of Dahab is a popular destination for divers, windsurfers and those looking for a mellow place to relax in year-round sun. The former Bedouin fishing village tends to attract three different diving characters: technical divers and freedivers in search of the really deep blue, particularly at sites of the Blue Hole and the Canyon. The remaining crowd are generally recreational divers attracted by hassle-free shore diving in calm waters.

Top dives

The Blue Hole and Canyon are the signature dives of Dahab. World-famous, the 50m-wide Blue Hole offers little in the way of life in the shallow waters, so often acts as an entry and exit point for recreational divers wishing to explore the life-encrusted sloping reef outside. The classic dive to get the most from the Blue Hole starts at The Bells, 100m north, where you descend a small crack in the reef table. From here you descend 18m down a long chimney, which ends at a small cavern that slopes out at around 28m to the blue. The life on the outside of the Blue Hole is stunning and often provides encounters with larger fish, such as barracuda. The dive ends inside the Blue Hole, which is accessed by crossing the stunning coral encrusted saddle at a depth of around 6m.

The Canyon is accessed through a crack in the coral table. The site takes its

name from the long, narrow canyon, which runs north to south from the reef to depths of around 50m.

For more current action and the chance to see more of the big animals typically found in sites around Sharm el Sheikh, Gabr El Bint can be reached by boat or camel.

Less talked about sites of Dahab not-to-be missed include The Islands, which is like entering a secret garden of colourful hard and soft corals and macro life. Other more secluded sites, which offer surface intervals on the mellow and spacious beaches in the south, are Three Pools, Moray Gardens and Umm Sid.

The variety of dive sites can usually be dived at any time of the day depending on wind conditions, so offer a freedom and flexibility for those looking to include more topside activities in their holiday.

Topside

There's a lot going on above the water in Dahab, from windsurfing to energy healing. The main hub of activity is along the beachfront strip in the centre of the town, starting from Assalah. Hotels range from 5-star luxury around the lagoon to basic backpacking lodgings. Accommodation is generally excellent value for money and there are lots of fantastic restaurants and bars to spend your evenings.

Top Travel Tips

Eating Out

Two Italian restaurants Dia Pescatori and El Dorado are based on the beachfront in the quiet area of Assalah offering a mix of palate-pleasing dishes. For meat lovers, the 'best steak in town' can be found at Nesima. For fish lovers, the elaborately decorated Lakhbatita restaurant is a good choice. And for the vegetarians, it's hard to beat the veggie platter at the Carm Inn.

Desert

Being a Bedouin town, visitors can experience culturally authentic desert trips by jeep or camel. Camel diving treks are also hugely popular in Dahab, particularly to Ras Abu Galum.

Sports

Dahab experiences on average 300 days a year of wind perfect for wind and kitesurfing. There are lots of excellent schools offering lessons and equipment hire.

Soul Searching

Yoga, energy healing, massage and meditation, Dahab's community has definitely got the alternative lifestyle covered. It is estimated around 3,000 people arrived here on yoga holidays last year.

Nights Out

Dahab is not a typical all-night party place, but the open air Rush club has live bands and DJ's twice a week. Wednesday and Friday night parties often don't end until well into the following morning. For a few beers and post-dive banter or live sports, Blue Beach Bar is a popular hang out.

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Dahab

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Red Sea Briefing: Safaga & Soma Bay

..Located in a wide sandy bay, the beach resorts cater mainly to divers, windsurfers and families with children. The resort is also famous for its black sand dunes and mineral springs, which are thought to have specific characteristics for the remedy of rheumatoid arthritis and psoriasis.



Safaga

A former commercial harbour, Safaga has become an increasingly popular choice for visiting divers because of its close proximity to excellent wreck and high-energy reef wall dives. Situated 53km south of Hurghada, it offers shallow and sheltered dives ideal for beginners, as well as sheer reef wall drop-offs and wrecks for more experienced scuba enthusiasts.

Located in a wide sandy bay, the beach resorts cater mainly to divers, windsurfers and families with children. The resort is also famous for its black sand dunes and mineral springs, which are thought to have specific characteristics for the remedy of rheumatoid arthritis and psoriasis.

Many liveaboard trips running out of Hurghada visit the best of Safaga's dive sites, particularly the wrecks. The busy commercial port has seen a number of ferry sinkings over the years, creating wrecks for divers to explore. This includes the Al Kafhain car ferry that capsized in 2005 close to Safaga's shore.

The wreck of the Salem Express also lies near to the port of Safaga. This vessel ran aground and capsized in 1991 with the tragic loss of hundreds of lives. A controversial wreck to dive because of the number of lives lost, nevertheless, it continues to be visited by many underwater explorers.

The marine life here is vibrant and varied. The centre of the bay is where you will find a beautiful, shallow coral garden perfectly suited for beginners. In other areas, more experienced divers can explore many reef wall systems, where large pelagic creatures are often seen cruising by.

A protected marine area, Safaga's dive centres must comply with strict environmentally friendly procedures. Since 1995, local authorities, non-government conservation organisations and international bodies such as USAID have worked together to preserve and protect the underwater environment here. Regular monitoring ensures the presence of mooring buoys on all its main dive sites.

Topside: Discover Soma Bay

A long sandy peninsula fringed with coral reef, Soma Bay is located on the northernmost point of the bay of Safaga around 40km south of Hurghada.

Entering the area through a single controlled entry gate, the resort contains luxury hotels; an 18-hole championship golf course; one of the largest spas and thalassotherapy (sea-based body treatments) centres in the region; a range of watersports facilities; and access to excellent shore and boat diving. Family-friendly and stylish self-contained resort accommodation situated on a large shallow, sheltered sandy surrounding, Soma Bay is an ideal destination for those with non-diving partners and children.

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Red Sea Briefing: Liveboards



Photo: Erich Reboucas



Photo: www.royalevolution.com



Photo: www.emperordivers.com

Liveboards are the ultimate way to experience the best of the Egyptian Red Sea. Exploring wrecks and reef areas not accessible by day boats, logging up to four dives a day and enjoying the serenity of sleeping at sea, liveboards are a great choice for those who want to get the most diving out of their holiday time.

There is a huge range of boats in the Red Sea to choose, from high-tech modern luxury to more basic small vessels, but all share high standards of safety. Following the completion of rigorous audits of all dive centres and liveboards by Egypt's Chamber of Diving and Watersports (CDWS) in 2009, visitors are assured the highest safety and operational standards on their liveboard holidays. A full list of legally operating liveboards can be found on the CDWS website www.cdws.travel.

With so many different liveboards and underwater sites to choose from, booking a liveboard for the first time can be a little daunting. The first step is to pick the area you want to dive and what itinerary suits your diving interests and experience. Liveboard cruises depart throughout the year from Sharm el Sheikh, Hurghada, Safaga, and Marsa Alam's Port Ghaleb, as well as some other minor ports.

Sinai

From the celebrated diving gems of Tiran and Ras Mohammed to the wrecks such as the Thistlegorm and the Abu Nuhas wrecks of the Carnatic, Giannis D and the Chrisola K, Northern Red Sea liveboard holidays cover the best of the sites accessible from the Sinai. Most operators offer the choice of two week-long excursions: best of the wrecks and reefs or simply wreck-focused trips.

Sharm el Sheikh is the preferred point of departure for Northern Egyptian Red Sea liveboard excursions. The majority of boats leave from Travco Jetty, a 30 minute journey by road from the international airport. Others depart from the International Port, a few minutes east of Travco by road.

Usually arriving in the evening, on all liveboards your luggage will be taken with you straight to the port where you will board the vessel. Following a short briefing, you will soon be heading out ready for your early morning start underwater the following day.

Red Sea Coast

The marine parks of the South offer some of the best sites for marine life in the Red Sea. Most popular liveboard trips include the south marine park including life filled reefs such as Elphinstone, Samadai, Shaab Makhsour, Shaab Claude, Staya and St Johns. Deep south trips head towards the stunning sites of Rocky and Zabargad Islands.

At the central part of the Red Sea you will find the northern marine park and the famous pelagic haunt of the Brother Islands. These sites are often exposed to strong currents and may require a minimum qualification of advanced open water or equivalent, plus 50 logged dives.

Southern trips usually depart from Hurghada and Marsa Alam, both destinations with international airports. The new marina in Hurghada is a short 20 minute drive from the airport and offers a cosmopolitan feel, with top quality restaurants and bars to choose from. The liveboard mooring area of the marina is very quiet as it is far enough away from the hustle of the busiest marina bars.

Port Ghaleb marina is only five minutes drive from the Marsa Alam international airport and offers much closer access to the deep south sites as far as the Sudanese border.

Specialist trips

Specially tailored trips are available to groups, such as technical divers, underwater photographers and those wishing to venture to the waters of the Suez in search of little-dived wrecks. Check with your Red Sea operator on what they offer.

Top Tips

- Make sure you have a suitable level of experience for the itinerary you choose.
- Always take a surface marker buoy (SMB) and whistle.
- While many boats take spares, it is good to carry your own back-ups, including torch, fin straps and mask.
- Pre-booking nitrox is often cheaper, check before departure. Some boats may include nitrox free.
- Don't forget the sunscreen and a hat.
- It is customary to tip the crew at the end of your liveboard trip. Some will advise on what to tip, but this is at your discretion.
- Remember some boat crossings are rough. Most boats will carry dive-safe seasickness tablets.
- You will be diving up to four dives a day and will need a suitably warm and comfortable wetsuit. Even if you plan to hire kit, it may still be worth bringing your own wetsuit.
- If you are in a big enough group, you may be entitled to one person's place for free. Check with your operator.
- Have fun!

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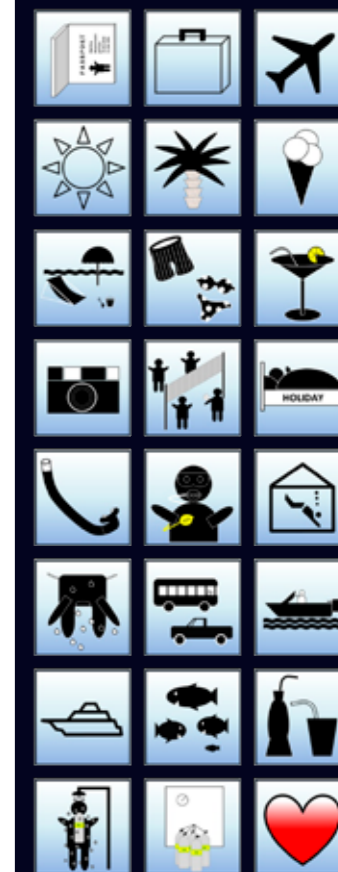
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Red Sea Briefing: Sharm el Sheikh

Photos: Andrew Slater

...Voted time over as one of the best wreck dives, the Thistlegorm alone attracts scuba visitors from all over the world to the northern Egyptian Red Sea resort.



Naama Bay by Marco Giocaninni

Topside Travel Tips

Eating Out: Sharm has a fantastic mix of eateries welcomed by most taste buds, from local to top-class international cuisine. Seafood fans should head to Old Sharm for fresh catches of the day served at reasonable prices, which includes Faros and Sinai Star. For sushi treats, Naama Bay's Little Buddha is a popular choice. If you fancy a good Indian curry, check out the authentically cooked dishes at the Tandoori Indian Restaurant at the Camel Dive Club. For Thai food cooked by Thai chefs, check out The Siam at the Maritim Hotel near the International Conference Centre and the Sala Thai restaurant at the Hyatt. If you want to experience what is slowly becoming known among Sharmers as the best pizza place in town, check out Maria's beach cliff restaurant near the Ritz Carlton area in Hadaba.

Desert: The desert is a must-see for any trip to the Sinai. As well as treks by foot, camel, jeep and quad bike, you can experience a traditional Bedouin dinner or try your hand at astrology with a bit of desert star gazing.

Cairo and Luxor: There are flights running regularly throughout the day from Sharm's international airport to Cairo and Luxor. The flight time between the destinations is less than an hour each way.

Ras Mohammed by land: Ras Mohammed National Marine Park is a draw for divers by boat, but few experience the magic of its reef fringing desert area by land. Well worth a full or half-day visit.

On the town: For evening entertainment, Sharm has more than got it covered. From all-night party havens of Pacha and Little Buddha nightclubs in Naama Bay, to the more chilled out tunes and vibes of the Camel rooftop and terrace bars, you get the full range here.

Sharm el Sheikh

The Red Sea resort of Sharm el Sheikh situated at the southern point of the Sinai has some of the world's most celebrated diving attractions around its shores. The world famous Ras Mohammed National Park is located at the very tip of the Sinai Peninsula where deep water upwellings generate incredible coral growth, particularly on the signature sites of Shark and Yolanda Reefs. During the summer months this area is also a hotspot for schooling snapper, barracuda, batfish and unicornfish. Marine encounters recorded by divers on these life-filled sites also include whale sharks, manta rays and dolphins.

Head north from Ras Mohammed to the Strait of Tiran and you will find a coral garden described by scuba diving pioneer Jacques Cousteau as one of the most spectacular reefs he had ever seen. The steep-sided walls of Jackson Reef are where you will find some of the most beautiful coral cover in the Sinai region, including the famous rare red anemone. Strong currents, most profuse at the edge of Jackson reef, attract an abundance of pelagic fish

particularly during the summer months. In the less wind-swept and calm days of summer, boats are able to dive the north side of the reef. Although far from guaranteed, the chance to see the resident school of scalloped hammerhead sharks is well worth a dive in the blue water.

Wrecks are also a major pull for visitors, with one of the most famous sunken diving attractions located just a few hours boat ride from Sharm. Voted time over as one of the best wreck dives, the Thistlegorm alone attracts scuba visitors from all over the world to the northern Egyptian Red Sea resort.

If you don't want to travel far to a dive site, or like the idea of half-day trips, you can opt to 'go local'. Sharm's local reefs are excellent for training and photography, and at the right time of year throw up their own spectacular surprises. From the months of May to September it is not unusual to spot the odd manta ray or whale shark passing by as they follow the plankton.

There are numerous accommodation options on offer to suit every kind of budget in Sharm. Divers can usually opt for a diving and accommodation package for a discount; however, most dive centres will pick you up from any hotel in the Sharm area – five star or budget.

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Red Sea Briefing: Hurghada

...The town's new marina has added another level of luxury for liveaboard travellers with a wealth of shops, cafes, restaurants and bars to chill out on the last day of trips - just a short walk from the dive deck.



image: www.iliosdiveclub.com



Hurghada

As well as the classic wreck and reef dives of the north Hurghada is a gateway to some of the best sites in the Southern Red Sea. From beginner scuba experiences to deep and cave technical diving exploration, it is a diving destination of variety in underwater topography, marine life and wrecks. The area is also famed for having impressive local reefs, particularly within the protected marine park of Giftun Island.

Most of the dive sites around Hurghada can be reached within 40 minutes from a boat, offering an excellent mix of options for full day and half-day trips. Unlike Egypt's other major dive resort of Sharm el Sheikh, boats leave from private jetties belonging to the many beachside resorts where centres are generally based.

A huge number of divers also depart Hurghada for some of the Red Seas most celebrated sites to the south. The town's new marina has added another level of luxury for liveaboard travellers with a wealth of shops, cafes, restaurants and bars to chill out on the last day of trips - just a short walk from the dive deck.

Topside Travel Tips

Eating Out: There are a number of restaurants and bars scattered around the town, but the main focus of evening entertainment is at the new cosmopolitan marina. The White Elephant Thai and the Masala Indian restaurants are excellent. Italian, Spanish, Japanese or a hearty meal at the steak restaurant, there's a huge variety of eateries to choose. For fish-lovers, don't miss a trip to Sardinia.

Venturing into town, Drifters bistro and steakhouse on Mashribiva Street is a popular spot for locals. Cliffside on Sheraton Road you will find Felfela restaurant, which offers traditional Egyptian food and stunning views. One of the best Italian restaurants in town is Da Nanni next to La Perla Hotel.

Social Scene: Papas at the marina is the most popular bar for divers. Hurghada's first bar, Peanuts, in El Dahar in the old town is also a popular hangout for residents and tourists. For pumping tunes and late nights, Ministry of Sound and Hed Kandi at the marina are popular choices.

Desert: with the highest mountains of the Eastern Desert in view, daytrips to see nature in Hurghada topside are a must-do. Explore the Wadis (valleys) and mountains by foot, camel, jeep or quad bike. Most desert trips include a visit to a Bedouin settlement.

Relax: A white sandy beach, surrounded by coral reefs, Mahmeya Beach is a great chill-out day trip by boat. The island has a small beach club, which serves up fabulous lunches.

Windsurfing and kitesurfing: Egypt's windy city is a popular spot for kite and windsurfers, with lots of excellent centres offering lessons and kit hire. It is also possible to join a kitesurfing boat safari.



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Red Sea Briefing: Marsa Alam



photo: Gary Ball

..Healthy reefs, large pelagic visitors, life encrusted pinnacles, high-energy drop offs, an interesting networks of caves and coral blanketed wrecks, Marsa Alam's 100km-long stretch of coast offers incredible variety and promise for underwater visitors of all levels.



photo: Emperor Divers



photo: Karin Von Arx (Emperor Divers)

Marsa Alam

The once barren desertscape of Marsa Alam has emerged as one of the Red Sea's main diving destinations, following a mass investment in tourist development. The new international airport and billion-dollar development of Port Ghalib has created a highly attractive option for divers in search of uncrowded and virtually untouched stretches of Red Sea reefs but with all the comforts available on land.

Marsa Alam lies approximately 260km to the south of the major destination of Hurghada and close the Tropic of Cancer.

While many divers flock here to board liveaboards to visit the remote reefs of the south, this area is also a much celebrated land-based dive spot. Healthy reefs, large pelagic visitors, life encrusted pinnacles, high-energy drop offs, an interesting networks of caves and coral blanketed wrecks, Marsa Alam's 100km-long stretch of coast offers incredible variety and promise for underwater visitors of all levels. This is also where the Red Sea dugong is also more likely than anywhere else to be encountered. It is also possible for divers to enjoy some of the Red Sea's best reefs, which were traditionally only available to those making the journey by liveaboard. The famous Elphinstone Reef is easily accessible by dayboat. Strong currents ever-present in this exposed offshore area demand a good skill level of divers. To dive Elphinstone, dive centres generally require proof of a minimum of 50 logged dives. Packed with all types of marine life, its sheer, coral encrusted walls are famed for attracting sharks, particularly oceanic whitetips. Divers here also commonly spot hammerhead, grey reef and silky sharks around the deep drop offs. The eastern and western walls of Elphinstone reef are blanketed in soft coral.

On shore accommodation options are diverse. Divers can still opt to stay within the traditional desert camps a signature of early adventure dives of the Egyptian Red Sea. Those not so keen on the 'old school' experience have the choice of a range and budget of hotels and resorts, with the most plush and modern situated within the mini-Venice styled town of Port Ghalib. Here a series of restaurants, shops and resorts are interlinked by a network of small bridges and accessed by water taxis.

Topside attraction

Port Ghalib is the main focus of activities topside, from a selection of cafes, restaurants and bars to enjoy during the evening, to a massive selection of sports and excursions to keep you busy when not diving in the day.

Like many Red Sea resorts there's a range of watersports, such as kayaking, waterskiing and windsurfing and a series of different desert excursion available by jeep, camel and quad bike. However, unlike most other Red Sea resorts, clay pigeon shooting and even paint ball have entered its long list of adventure experiences.

Despite all the activities on land, however, Port Ghalib has still maintained a relaxed and restful holiday atmosphere. And catching a water taxi to go for dinner is not something you can experience in many parts of the world.

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We are asking budding writers out there to share their tales about their best ever dive in the Red Sea (see below for competition rules). The best three articles will be printed in BLUE and the overall winner will be presented with a Canon Digital Ixus 105 IS camera with a WP-DC36 40m rated housing and a 2GB memory card, all supplied by Cameras Underwater. The system is ideal for taking underwater photographs in Red Sea conditions.

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- » Creative shooting modes
- » VGA movies

For the full specifications, see the Cameras Underwater website: www.camerasunderwater.co.uk.

To enter My Best Red Sea Dive:

Photo: Maria Munn



1. Email an attached Microsoft Word document with 'My Best Red Sea Dive' in the subject heading to: charlotte.boan@cdws.travel.
2. Entries must be between 400 and 600 words. Three shortlisted articles will be published in BLUE. Copy may be edited for reasons of clarity, space and magazine style.

3. The dive must be about somewhere in the Egyptian Red Sea
4. Please include details of your full name, where you are from, where you live and relevant contact information.
5. The competition is open to all readers of BLUE, however, excludes entries from professional diving journalists.
6. If you include photographs with your entry, only send a maximum of five images.



Photo: Erich Reboucas



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Red Sea Briefing: Hamata and Berenice

..This is a remote part of the Red Sea to visit. Divers who opt to stay here swap nightlife and shopping for silence and wilderness...



photo: www.qulaan.com



photo: Karin Brusgaard



photo: www.qulaan.com

The furthest south of all Egypt's Red Sea holiday destinations, Hamata and Berenice, often dubbed the 'gateway to Africa' are situated around 400km from Hurgada on the mainland. Marsa Alam, approximately 230km north of Hamata and Berenice, is the closest airport. The journey by road from the small international airport takes around three hours.

Hamata is a favoured harbour for liveaboards heading to the most remote diving sites in the area, such as the famous Daedalus, Rocky and Zabargad islands, and the outer reef systems of Fury Shoal and St John's Reef. The nearby town of Berenice is surrounded with remnants of ancient times.

This is a remote part of the Red Sea to visit. Divers who opt to stay here swap nightlife and shopping for silence and wilderness. The resorts are experiencing a steady and healthy growth in tourist development, however, so there is excellent hotel accommodation of offer as well as a raft of activities in and out of the water. Most of the coastal area, however, belongs to the Wadi el Gemal National Park, where only eco-lodges are permitted to be constructed.

Wadi el Gemal is one of the most celebrated and thriving national marine parks in Egypt and lies just to the north of Hamata and Berenice. It is well protected by a series of strict environmental laws and conservation organisations. The dive sites, once the realm of liveboard divers only, are now easily reached by day boat divers from Hamata. These include the underwater gems of Qulan Islands, Sha'ab Makhsour, Sha'ab Ossama, Sattaya and Sha'ab Claude.

Some of the blue chip dive sites in the area include:

Sattaya: sometimes referred to as the 'second Dolphin House of the south', the first being the Samadai offshore reef near Marsa Alam. Here the crescent-shaped large reef is home to a huge pod of spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*).

Sha'ab Makhsour: where the largest number of shark species in the Red Sea have been regularly spotted, this reef is high energy dive site, only for experienced divers. A large tower which plummets to extreme depth is a popular pass for pelagic life.

Sha'ab Claude: One of the better known sites in this area to divers, this reef ranges from depths of 5m to 25m and attracts a mass of marine life. Its labyrinth of coral canyons, crevices and overhangs create stunning natural light shows. Venture to a large cluster of fan and brush corals which grow out of a cave in 15m and you are likely to spot a member or two of the estimated five resident long nosed hawkfish. Frequent marine life spots on this vibrant reef include Napoleon fish, stonefish, nudibranchs, crocodilefish, and turtles among others. Schools of bannerfish, goatfish and snapper are also regularly seen here.

Topside: Ancient history and fascinating nature sum up what's available topside to visitors of this area.

History: The town of Berenice is an historian's dream. The ancient city was named by Ptolemy II after his mother and became a trading port in 275BC. A ruined Temple of Semiramis built by Trajan and Tiberius is near the modern centre and, inland, there are the remains of the emerald mines of Wadi Sakait, which were worked from the Pharaoh through to Roman times.

Nature: A fascinating landscape, where the vast desert here touches the ocean you will find mangrove swamps and palm trees lining the coast. Bird watching is among many of excursions on offer, with many species attracted to the mangrove areas. Desert trips are available by both jeep and camel and well worth joining.

Getting there: Marsa Alam is the closest airport to the resorts of Hamata and Berenice, approximately 230km north. There are a number of international flights landing here, as well as regular flights from Cairo. The journey by road from the airport takes around three hours.



Have Your Say:

This is your Red Sea watersports community magazine and we want to hear from you. Share your views with others in the industry, email: blue@cdws.travel. Letters should be no more than 200 words and may be edited for reasons of space or clarity. We will not print letters where only an email address is given. Full name and contact details must be provided (only name and location will be printed).

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Red Sea Briefing: Makadi Bay

...there are a number of excursions easily arranged to interesting places such as the Giftun Island National Park, Luxor and the famous ancient monasteries of St Anthony and St Paul...

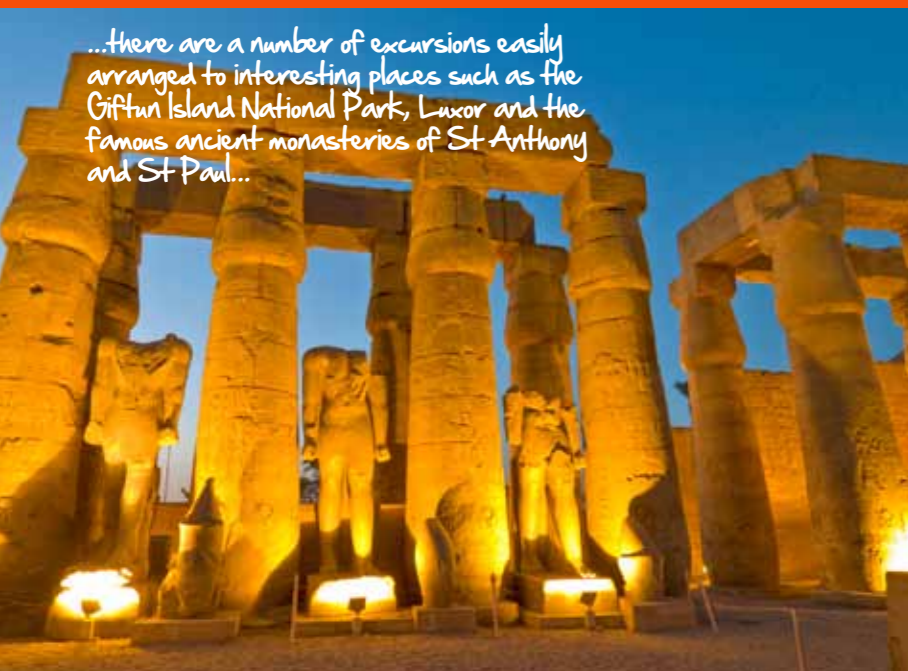


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Makadi Bay

Nestled between the well-known Red Sea diving destinations of Hurghada and Safaga, Makadi Bay is made up of just a few small dive centres and hotels peppered along a protected sandy bay. The small resort is just 20km south of Hurghada and has access to most of the same classic dive sites, nonetheless, offers a completely different holiday experience from that of its bustling neighbour.

Although a small area, Makadi Bay offers a good variety of dive sites suited to a range of experience levels. There are shallow, deep, drift and wreck dives all just a short trip on felucca-style boats (traditional Egyptian wooden sailing vessels). For the furthest sites, divers can join half and full day dayboat excursions. Between 8am and 5pm, divers also have the option to stick to shore diving on the marine protected house reef, which offers a great option for beginners and underwater photographers in search of coral life shots.

In 1995, the coral system around Makadi Bay was classified as a protected area, requiring dive centres to adhere to strict environmentally friendly procedures. As well as the protection by local authorities, non-government bodies and USAID (United States Agency for International Development), the Hurghada Environmental Protection Association (HEPCA) continues to ensure the continued presence of mooring buoys on all dives sites.

Some of the best dive sites in the area include the sea grass area of Abu Hashish, the coral gardens of Gota Abu Ramada and sheer reef wall drop offs of Ras Abu Soma.

Visitors to the resort of Makadi Bay fly to the International airport of Hurghada and travel 20km south. The drive takes around 30 to 40 minutes. Resorts will arrange transfers, but taxis are easily available.

Topside

Makadi itself offers little in the way of tourist entertainment as it is all about relaxation here, however, there are a number of excursions that can be easily arranged to interesting places such as the Giftun Island National Park, Luxor and the famous ancient monasteries of St Anthony and St Paul. Non-diving entertainment within the bay includes:

Sail, windsurf, canoe: The range of non-diving watersports is growing in Makadi Bay, check with the tour operator or your hotel for more information.

Family fun: Makadi Bay is well suited for family entertainment, with children's clubs at most of the main hotels. Covering most ages, children can do all sorts of holiday activities, including learning to swim, play tennis and snorkel. Included in the all-family entertainment on offer in the bay is a mini-golf course.

Nightlife: Enjoy a boogie to international DJ tunes at the Boiler Disco at Le Meridien. For a more chilled out affair, you can sink a post-dive drink at the Dockers Pub, an English-style bar, while looking out on sea and desert mountain views.



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Red Sea Briefing: El Quseir



photo: Karin Brussaard



photo: Karin Brussaard

..If history is not your thing, there are always the sandy beaches, desert and resort hotels to explore and relax. Windsurfing, kayaking and small catamaran sailing are also on offer to those wishing to try out other water-based sports.

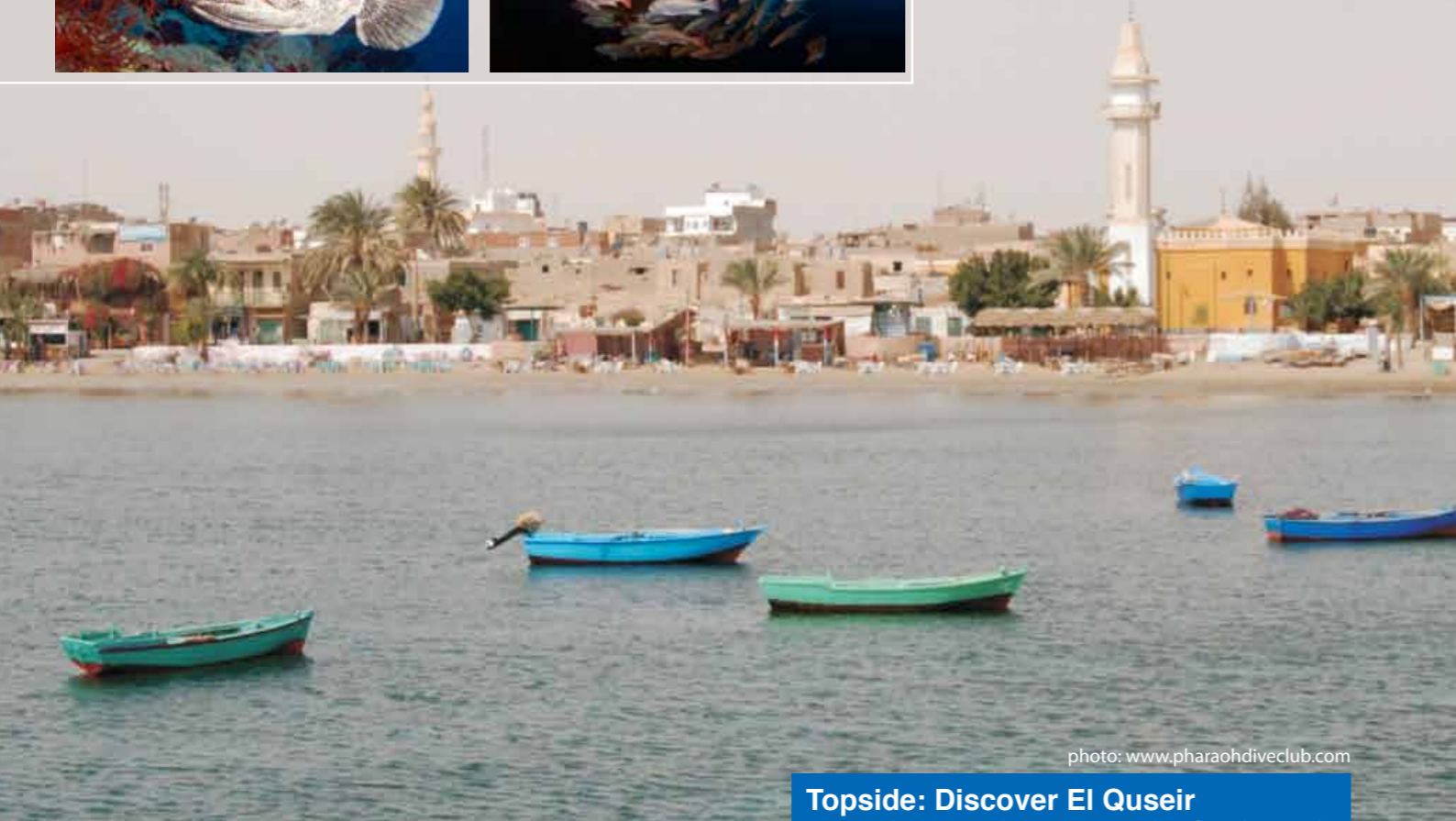


photo: www.pharaohdiveclub.com

El Quseir

A Red Sea diving resort dripping in history, El Quseir's story dates back to around 4,000 years ago. Its port was an essential trading route through the Ptolemaic and Roman period, the Middle Ages and many other civilisations over thousands of years right up until the Suez Canal opened in 1869.

Today Quseir is more commonly identified as a laidback holiday beach resort offering access to some of the south coast's best dive sites. As well as excellent shore diving on little explored reefs, it is a popular port for liveboards heading to the Red Sea's most celebrated southern offshore sites.

The central part of Quseir is situated 85km south of the town of Safaga, with the nearest international airport being Marsa Alam. Transfers to the southern Egyptian Red Sea airport take around 40 minutes by road.

As is the case in many of the neighbouring resorts, the area is protected under strict environmentally friendly rules. Since 1995, the area has been operating under these rules, supported and created by local authorities, NGOs and international organisations such as USAID. Regular monitoring and upkeep of mooring buoys has helped to preserve this celebrated underwater environment that also provides a haven for nesting turtles.

Purpose-built jetties have created easy access for underwater visitors. The more isolated diving areas can be reached by jeep trips organised by local dive centres. The relatively untouched coral reefs are teeming with life thanks to the nourishing currents travelling through these waters.

Some of Quseir's best dive sites include the beautiful drop off of El Qadim, the coral wall of Beit Goha and the networks of walls, caves, canyons and tunnels of El Kaf.

Topside: Discover El Quseir

Quseir has a story that spans more than four thousand years and wherever you visit, you are never far from an ancient building or artefact. It was here that Queen Hatshepsut is thought to have launched her expedition to the Land of Punt, as is suggested in the reliefs in Deir el-Bahari temple at Luxor.

From the modern bazaars, to the ancient caravan trail towards the Nile Valley which takes in several Pharonic and Roman sites, there is much to keep you occupied when out of the water.

The buildings throughout the town's old quarter stand as a reminder of Quseir's strategic shipping importance, particularly the fortress of Sultan Selim which dates back to the 16th century. The Ottomans felt that it was a necessity to protect the city against invaders and built the fort as a military stronghold. In more recent years, the fortress was restored and became a main departure point for pilgrims bound for Mecca.

The wadi (valley) which links Quseir with Qift on the Nile River contains more historical remains. Intersected by a series of other wadis, the most famous site along here is Wadi Hammamat, where there are around 200 hieroglyphic tablets along its cliffs and a series of inscriptions dating as far back as 4,000 years.

If history is not your thing, there are always the sandy beaches, desert and resort hotels to explore and relax. Windsurfing, kayaking and small catamaran sailing are also on offer to those wishing to try out other water-based sports.



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Red Sea Briefing: El Gouna

There are dives to suit all levels of experience, from beginners to experienced and technical-qualified divers. All the dive sites are within a 30-minute to two-hour boat journey.

photo: www.elgouna.com



photo: www.elgouna.com

photo: www.orca-diveclubs.com



El Gouna

An hour away by boat from the Red Sea's famous wreck haven of Abu Nuhas and a world away from the bustle of Egypt's major underwater tourist hotspots, El Gouna offers an excellent mix of a mellow atmosphere with serious diving. Situated 25km north of Hurghada on the mainland Egyptian Red Sea coast, El Gouna is a self-contained tourist town built on 10km of coastline with access to more than 40 excellent dive sites.

Although El Gouna does not fall under the remit of any national marine park authority, the area has a strong underwater conservation philosophy. Installed and maintained with the help of the Hurghada Environmental Protection Association (HEPCA).

There are dives to suit all levels of experience, from beginners to experienced and technical-qualified divers. All the dive sites are within a 30-minute to two-hour boat journey.

Abu Nuhas is the greatest draw for shore-based divers in El Gouna. One of the greatest concentrations of wrecks in the Red Sea, the sunken vessels of the 19th century Carnatic, the impressive Chrisoula K, photofriendly Giannis D and the 100m-long Kimon M wrecks are all scattered here in ideal recreational depths.

Another nearby wreck to El Gouna shores is the 115m-long Rosalie Muller, the sister ship of the world-famous Red Sea Iain structure of the Thistlegorm. The Rosalie Muller lies between 20m and 46m, so a popular excursion for extended range/technical divers.

Lying to the east of El Gouna is a site often described as an aquarium, where divers frequently encounter dolphins. Dolphin House is part of the huge Shaab el Erg reef system and accessible in all weather conditions. The reef acts as a shelter to a resident pod of bottlenose dolphins. However, these are wild dolphins, so playful diving encounters with them are common but far from guaranteed.

Topside

The town is created on a canal-like network of islands among fine sand beaches and shallow lagoons where visitors can experience a whole raft of other watersports, from kite-surfing to canoeing. There are also many activities on offer on land, with an 18 hole USPGA championship golf course, tennis, horse riding, beach volley ball and yoga on the beach.

Little bridges link the different sections of the resort and tourists commute by rickshaw (tuk tuk) between the hotels, the old town and the marina as well as attractions such as a large open-air cinema. The standards of restaurants here are excellent and there is a huge variety of international cuisine to choose from. If you are on half or full board within El Gouna's many hotels, it is worth taking part in the area's unique Dine Around scheme. You are given vouchers which can be used and exchanged in most of the top restaurants within the resort.

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