

Red Sea

Been There, Done That?

by Mark Webster

For divers based in Europe the Red Sea offers the closest true coral reef diving at what is often an incredibly low price. If you are a mature diver, such as me, then you will be able to recall the mid 1970's when diving first began to open up on the Sinai Peninsula (then occupied by Israel) and this destination was considered exotic and involved some hardship to visit and dive. Those were the days of the do it yourself safari - hiring land rovers from Eilat and camping in the open on beaches on the way south to the ultimate dive at Ras Mohammed. Those visiting the Sinai now could not imagine how much this once barren landscape has now changed. The story is much the same on the coast of the Egyptian mainland - Hurghada was once a sleepy fishing port but is now unrecognisable and the resort development is steadily marching south towards the Sudan border.

If you take up diving now you may well have completed your basic training in the Red Sea, but if not you will no doubt soon be diving there. Diving is now a huge tourist industry and many of the well known sites have obviously suffered due to the coastal development or sheer volume of semi proficient divers (and some would say careless photographers!). There is perhaps a growing perception that the Red Sea is no longer a destination for the serious or enthusiastic photographer - you will end up joining huge numbers of divers in the water and many of the sites are past their best now. Real photographers



Top right. Anthias over reef - Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 12-24mm, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/125

Right. Diver on reef wall - Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 12-24mm, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/60

now go to the Far East, Galapagos or Cocos to seek out the exotic macro life or chase encounters with big marine life - sharks, whale sharks and mantas. Certainly these locations offer fantastic photographic opportunities and often rare marine life, but at a significantly higher price and more arduous travel. So should we reject the Red Sea on this basis? My answer would be an emphatic no, the reefs here still have amazing life on offer and if you plan your trip carefully then you can avoid the crowds and still find those elusive pristine sites.

In beginning the planning process you must first accept that a shore based location is unlikely to provide the productive environment you seek. The big hotel complexes and smaller resorts are tempting in many ways, but staying onshore almost inevitably means joining large numbers of day boat



divers and limiting the sites that you visit to the daily excursion range. There is also the hassle of carting your gear back and forth from the room, and most likely forgetting something important in the process. Day boat diving tends also to be run to a strict schedule limiting you to two dives a day, possibly three if you are lucky.

The most successful trips will be live aboard based and there is now a large fleet of well equipped and comfortable boats to choose from at increasingly competitive prices. By choosing a live aboard you will be limiting the size of your group, increasing the range of your excursion over a one or more week period and maximising the number of dives each day - normally four or five. Once you arrive and unpack, that's it for the week and if you have forgotten any thing then it will be at home.

Just choosing to dive from a live aboard is only part of the solution though. Photographers are a breed apart from normal divers, although our numbers are swelling with the digital revolution, which is attracting divers who would never have picked up a camera in the past. To be productive we need to be amongst like minded souls who all have a common interest - making images under the water and not just ticking off dive sites from a list. Generally we do not need to cover a lot of ground and



Banner angel fish - Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 12-24mm, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/125

once a good site is discovered we may even want to dive it for a day or more - strange but true. So to get the best from your trip you must either collect your own group and charter a boat or look for a group to join that will offer the environment you are seeking.

North or South?

There is no doubt that the northern half of the Egyptian Red



Yawning moray eel - Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 12-24mm, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/60

Sea is now incredibly popular and hundreds of divers are out on the water each day on day boats and live aboards. Sadly this is an inevitable consequence of the growth in the popularity of sport diving in general and the fact that this coastline was ripe for development in a country that relies heavily on tourism. We cannot turn the clock back to those seemingly halcyon days of waking on the beach at Ras Mohammed and being only



Chromodoris geminus nudibranch - Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f22 @ 1/125

one of eight or ten divers wading out over the reef table to the region's most stunning dive.

But this does not mean that we should now reject the northern area. With careful planning you can still avoid the crowds, particularly if you have filled your 'own' live aboard with keen photographers. Most of the live aboards have a set schedule for each week which results in many boats occupying the same sights



Tug Tien Sien - Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm, Magic Filter, f11 @ 1/60

each day - great for inter boat crew camaraderie but no good if you are trying to avoid the diving crowds. Try planning with your skipper to go to the farthest point of the cruise first and work back to base - get your dive guide to select sites which are not 'big names' and often you will find that you have the reef to yourself. There are many reef areas that have everything that we need and want as photographers but don't have the name or the crowds.

South of Marsa Alam on the mainland coast is also developing quickly although the number of

divers is still a fraction of that seen in Hurghada and Sharm El Sheikh. Day boats now get as far as Fury Shoal, but St. John's Reef, Zarbagad and Rocky Island are still only accessible by live aboard, although the size of the fleet has increased. The busiest sites here tend to be the small offshore 'habili's' where many of the divers are hoping to see schooling sharks. It is easy to plan to avoid these sites, or dive them at a different time to the big groups (shark dives are early morning), or stay shallow whilst the groups disappear deep into the blue to look for hammer heads. We have often



Lion fish - - Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/60

gazed from our solo boat moored at one of the less popular shallow sites watching several boats on one small reef offshore. Do you really need a shark picture and what are the chances of seeing them with numerous noisy boats and dozens of divers in the water? What we need is time, light and a good selection of subjects and these can be found at many locations which your dive guide will be only too keen to explore.

There will be times when you cannot avoid the crowds, perhaps when the weather is bad and site

selection is limited as a result, or if your group is desperate to dive a big name site. On these occasions either decide to shoot divers or make an equipment selection which allows you to exclude and ignore the activity around you. This means macro of course, and the Red Sea abounds with suitable small subjects and larger ones that produce wonderful abstract detail images. This allows you to concentrate on your own small patch of reef and remain productive.

One other consideration in selecting your boat must be a flexible



Jelly fish - Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 12-24mm, Magic Filter, f11 @ 1/60

dive guide. Many non photographer divers want to be led on a dive and shown interesting features on a circuit back to the boat and they may also need the apparent security of the buddy system and proximity of their dive guide. Most photographers do not need or desire this, so it is an essential part of the booking process to ensure that the agent or boat owner appreciates your requirements and that the guide will be flexible and also accept that great taboo of scuba - solo diving. For most of us solo diving does not necessarily mean swimming miles off into the blue but merely

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ignoring everyone else in the water and concentrating purely on your camera and subject. Most guides will happily accept this once they have seen it in action and will appreciate that it will make their lives easier as well. You may like to dive as a buddy pair of course, but it is important that you make these requirements clear in case the boat or guide has a less flexible approach to life - it can ruin a good week of diving before it starts!

The advent of digital imaging has changed the way we take photographs - the joy of instant feedback and a huge number of exposures available

on each dive means we are much more willing to experiment with new techniques and subjects. Previously we were tied to the fear of wasting any of those valuable 36 frames, which tempted us to stick with tried and tested methods. You now have an immediate indication of success or failure and can investigate what went right or wrong on your laptop immediately after the dive - no longer do you have that agonising wait for processing on the boat, or worse still a week or more after you return home. Perhaps you can correct a mistake digitally or if not delete it and get back in the water to try again. Subjects you previously thought of as 'common' can now be recorded

in new ways which will fire your enthusiasm.

The Red Sea still offers you an amazing underwater studio, brim full of subjects only a short hop from Europe and at a price that won't bust the bank. Choose your boat, group and location carefully and you will come back with stunning images. Enjoy the company of other photographers and exchange tips and experiences which will improve your results. Go for it!

Mark Webster

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