

Way Down South

with Mark Webster

You have only to open a diving magazine to see that the Red Sea is the most popular diving destination for divers in both the UK and Europe. Until quite recently a trip here meant starting your holiday from either Sharm El Sheik or Hurghada or perhaps as far afield as Safaga, El Gouna or Dahab if you were adventurous. These areas are still incredibly popular but now regular visitors are beginning to explore the developing areas around El Quesir and Marsa Alam whilst those really in the know are all talking about the diving still further south and the virgin sites to be found there. Is this true or just travel brochure hype?

If you made your first visit to the Red Sea in the 1970's or even in the early 1980's then you will have experienced the absence of commercial development and some solitude on the now popular sites in the north and also appreciate what effects the growth in popularity has had on the reefs in many areas. There are still many fantastic dives to be found in the north but to be sure of finding undamaged reefs you need to search for that solitude once more. The development along the Egyptian Red Sea coast is constantly pushing further south and the opening of another airport at Marsa Alam in 2001 will be the catalyst for another surge towards the border with Sudan. However, this is still in the future and whilst the diving closer to the border at Fury Shoal and St. John's reef is now an open secret, there are still very few boats operating here and that elusive solitude is attainable for a while.

To reach this area and Rocky and Zarbaghad islands to the east



A turtle swims overhead in the early morning. Nikon F90X, Subal Housing, 20mm, YS120/YS30, f11 1/60, 100 ASA.



The hard coral reefs throughout this area are particularly healthy and are populated by scores of reef fish and schooling anthias. Nikon F90X, Subal Housing, 16mm fish eye, YS120/YS30, f11 1/60, 100 ASA.



The bumphead parrot fish can be found on reefs on the south side of St. John's. Nikon F90X, Subal Housing, 20mm, YS120/YS30, f11 1/60, 100 ASA.



MY Coral Queen

Soft corals are abundant particularly on the offshore ergs and habilis. Nikon F90X, Subal Housing, 16mm fish eye, YS120/YS30, f11 1/60, 100 ASA.



you must select a live aboard, although there is a safari style camp at Marsa Wadi Lahami which accesses Fury Shoal by RIB's. Most of the available live aboards sail from Marsa Alam and will reach as far south as Fury Shoal on a one week charter and St. John's on a two week excursion. There are also two boats currently based in Marsa Wadi Lahami (MY Coral Queen and MY Salma) which will take you to St. John's on a one week charter. Either option involves a longer road transfer from Hurghada which will not appeal to everyone but is a worthwhile hardship.

So what can you expect once you arrive there? In the inshore regions the big difference here is the dominance of the hard corals which form intricate reef patterns and numerous ergs and habillis - erg is the Arabic word for a pinnacle or pillar of coral and a habilli is a submerged reef or, as the locals would say, 'unborn' as it has not yet reached the surface. The formations of the 'massive' hard corals (brains, mountains etc.) are stunning in many areas, but often to see the best of them you will need an experienced guide to lead you through the maze into the heart of the reef areas. These central areas of the reefs are sheltered from the rough winter seas

and offer pristine constructions populated by all the familiar Red Sea fish species. Those divers so familiar with the northern reefs will take one or two dives to adjust to the appearance of these reefs but you soon begin to appreciate the seemingly infinite shapes and arrangements and the mixture of delicate and striking colours.

As you progress further offshore the reef structures begin to change to a more familiar northern pattern of massive buttresses rising from

deep water, some reaching to the surface (ergs) and some just 3-6m below (habillis). These reefs are more exposed to the stronger currents which support the colonies of colourful soft corals and sea fans which are so much the trade mark of the Red Sea. The reefs also have a stunning selection of hard corals and the familiar image of swathes of anthias crowding the reef edge. The deeper water also attracts the pelagics from the open sea and it is common to see large schools of barracuda, jacks, red snapper and several species of shark. The larger ergs to the east of Fury Shoal are home to schools of scalloped hammerhead sharks which will be found cruising in cooler waters just below the thermocline. The depth of this varies with the time of year, but perhaps the best time is in late spring and early summer when the thermocline will be found at around 25-30m and surface conditions are calm. The best time to observe these magnificent creatures is early in the morning just after dawn when you should enter the water quietly and descend until you feel the cooler waters. A patient wait will often be rewarded by an inspection from these shy denizens but capturing them on film is very difficult due to the low light levels and the often fleeting visit. However, the remainder of the dive can be spent exploring the reef's treasures on your ascent.

Clown fish are the trade mark of the Red Sea and are abundant on all the reefs in this area. Nikon F90X, Subal Housing, 16mm fish eye, YS120/YS30, f11 1/60, 100 ASA.

Moving still further south to St. John's Reef, which is positioned right on the border with neighbouring Sudan, provides another opportunity for an unusual encounter. The collection of reefs at St. John's covers a wide area and those on its southern fringe are home to the strange looking bumphead parrot fish. This fish is more common much further south in the Red Sea and this area marks the northern limit of its habitat. The famous bump is used to break off pieces of coral that are too large to bite and give the fish a very dim-witted looking appearance. They prefer to graze on top of the reef table at high water early in the morning and late in the evening and between these times will most often be found resting in caves and overhangs on the reef edge. These fish are quite shy and need a slow approach to capture a good image on film. This challenge has been recognised by the owner of the Coral Queen which



runs and annual competition for the best picture of a bumphead which wins a free trip on the live aboard.

There are also a number of wrecks in the area, some discovered and some still yet to be found. The majority of these are in the Fury Shoal area and the most popular of these with photographers are the tug boat 'Tiensten' and the wreck of a small unnamed yacht. The tug has been on the reef since the early 1950's and has a remarkable covering of hard corals whilst the yacht is more recent but is already being engulfed by the reef. There is also the mostly intact remains of an oil tanker on the north side of Ras Banas (only the bows are missing) which makes a marvellous dive but weather conditions need to be good and the visibility is often poorer than on the reefs offshore. Nevertheless, this wreck has a wide range of marine life on it much of which will suit the macro photographer, including the largest population of pixie hawk fish I have



Soldier fish shelter under coral overhangs during day light hours. Nikon F90X, Subal Housing, 20mm, YS120/YS30, f11 1/60, 100 ASA.



Clown fish are the trade mark of the Red Sea and are abundant on all the reefs in this area. Nikon F90X, Subal Housing, 16mm fish eye, YS120/YS30, f11 1/60, 100 ASA.

come across.

There is no doubt that the number of boats visiting this area will slowly increase, but at present the facilities to bring large numbers of divers this far south do not exist. So the message for Red Sea connoisseurs is to sample this whilst you can still enjoy the relative solitude as you will not be dissatisfied.

Mark Webster



Mark hosts underwater photography workshops aboard the MY Coral Queen. See Mark's website for further details: www.photec.co.uk

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