

DIVING THE SUDAN

with Len Deeley

The Sudanese Red Sea has a reputation for some of the greatest dive sites in the world and I was keen to see them for myself. Having dived many times in the Egyptian Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba my next trip had to be south into Sudan. I knew that Diving World offered such trips, so organised through them for a two-week photographic expedition and gathered together a group, including such well-known underwater photographers as Charles Hood and Pat Morrissey.

Firstly, I had to ensure that the skipper and crew appreciated the style of diving needed for a specialised photographic trip, namely the ability for divers not to be hamstrung by regimented diving but left to concentrate on their photography. Yassin Hussain of Diving World ensured that the message got through and we were ready to go.

To dive Sudan you need to accept that getting there can be a trial. However, the logistics were well prepared and in the event our journey went extremely well. The first leg was from Heathrow to Cairo, where we arrived after midnight on Saturday 9th June, only slightly behind schedule. Being a scheduled flight meant there was plenty of room on the Egyptair Airbus, even for my 6'4" frame.

We were met at the airport by Ahmed the Diving World agent, who whisked us through the formalities and the purchase of our Egyptian visa (\$15) in a matter of minutes. We then sped by coach to the Novotel Hotel, which is near the airport and agreed with Ahmed to kill time by taking a tour of Cairo later that day. This meant that our luggage got stored in the coach the next morning and we were able to



SY Ishtar



Nikon F90X, Aquatica housing, 16mm lens. Nikon SB26 and SB28 in Kevin Cullimore Housings. Fuji Velvia. Exposure Mode Manual

enjoy the day without worrying about its security.

In the event the trip was an absolute delight, enabling us to take in the Step Pyramid at Saqqara, the

Giza plateau, which includes the Kafra pyramid, the only one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World that still exists, and, of course, the Sphinx. We also viewed



Nikon F90X, Aquatica housing, 60mm lens, Nikon SB26 and SB28 in Kevin Cullimore Housings. Fuji Provia. Exposure Mode:Manual (aperture and shutter speed not recorded).

a recently excavated tomb and did a tour of a carpet and papyrus factory.

We hadn't even started diving yet and we were already exposing a fair number of films. I made a mental note that another holiday on the Nile was overdue. That evening we then arrived at Cairo airport for the next leg of the trip. Sudan airlines are not a byword for efficiency. However, the plane did arrive only 2 hours late and we were on our way across the tarmac to the plane, a rather old Boeing 737. Not fazed by the engineer in his oily overalls working on the port engine surrounded by oil cans, we got on board a plane that was, shall we say, mature.

Luggage that could not fit into the overhead lockers was stacked on the back seats, including mine. As I was sitting right in front of these seats I had visions of meeting my maker covered in yoghurt and goats cheese and an assortment of other items being taken to Sudan by the passengers, should the plane give up the ghost on the way to Sudan.

Of my own hand luggage I had no concerns about it becoming a missile if the plane did go down. Packed as it was with an assortment of my 'heavies' I would lay odds that, if the plane broke up, it would

be the second item to hit the ground, beaten only by my hold luggage, which was packed to a consistency of readymix. But I digress.

In the event the flight went OK, with passable food and allowing for the questionable condition of the toilets. Our agent in Port Sudan was Tico, who was there, ready and waiting, to again whisk us through the assortment of officials ready to make our life difficult. Customs were ready to check our luggage in minute detail, which we obviously could not bypass. However, after taking one look inside my hand luggage and case, I was waved quickly through. I reckon that, having seen all the batteries, gadgets and wires, he considered that, if it was going to go off, he didn't want to be in the vicinity.

We were through! A 1 hr drive to the harbour and we were then ferried out to SY Ishtar, our home for the next two weeks.

Oh what a delight to see a dive boat that looked like a real boat and not a fibre glass cork!

The SY Ishtar was built in 1992 along traditional lines with teak deck, iroko hull and oak keel. Twin masted, she provides a good spread of canvas as well as 300hp

engine. She is 22m in length with a beam of 5.6m and 70-ton displacement (for the nautical minded readers). The ten divers were accommodated in 5 en-suite cabins, offering relatively spacious conditions. Cabins are not air-conditioned but have natural ventilation and supplementary fans (although my fan broke down and could not be repaired during the trip). Even with fans a large number of the group slept on deck as the two weeks were in the high 30s C, with warm nights and little wind. The upside was that we had practically flat calm conditions for the whole trip.

Although fitted with a desalination plant, this was in repair in Sudan and, like anything else in Sudan, that takes time. There was plenty of bottled drinking water, although fresh washing water had to be conserved, meaning showers were a dribble.

Tico collected the 'Departure Tax' of \$200 a head, which is an annoying supplement that the Sudanese authorities has imposed on tourists. Hardly the attitude to encourage tourism.

Bright and early on Sunday we were off and made our first dives on the wreck of the Umbria, which is only about half-hour sail from Port Sudan, lying on Wingate Reef. A German built freighter, she was scuttled by the Italians in 1940 to stop her falling into the hands of the British at the time Italy entered the war. She lies on her port side with her stern at a few metres and the bows down at about 40m. Access is easy, offering plenty of opportunities to explore the interior of the wreck. She is well encrusted with coral growth and there are lots of fish around, including Yellowbar Angelfish, parrot, pipe, anemone and puffer fish. Some colourful nudibranches and clams can be found.

The skipper on the trip was a young Adonis by the name of Mattia Dzaja. Mattia alternates trips with his father, Josko, a Croatian

who used to be skipper to Tito of Yugoslavia. A charming character, Mattia soon loosened up to our style of diving, when he realised that, no matter what directions we were given, we would find our own photography space underwater. Diving was limited to about 40min if we wanted to get in three dives a day, or an hour with two dives. Not something we are used to but understandable when considering the distance of any form of decompression chamber and the difficulties a serious incident would have for a foreign skipper in the Sudan. As all of the tanks were 15 litre, this meant divers were coming back with plenty of air. I appreciated the additional flexibility given with these tanks, especially when working hard photographing such things as shoals of barracuda in fairly strong currents.

The Italian influence was noticeable with the food. Breakfast was continental e.g. bread and jam, and lunch invariably included pasta in all its shapes and forms. Cake and refreshments were served each afternoon and dinner would be meat dishes, or fish as the trip progressed and Osman, the seaman, would disappear in the rib to catch some fresh fish for the table.

By-passing Sanganeb, our next stop was Sha'ab Rumi, where we did several dives at the south point. This was our first encounter with sharks, which was to be a regular feature of many dives on the trip. White tips (*Triaenodon obesus*) and grey shark (*Carcharhinus wheeleri*) are common here and, if you are lucky Hammerheads. There are also large shoals of barracuda and a wide variety of reef fishes as well as soft corals. Smaller than the soft corals in the north, they are much more varied in their colours, reminding me of the soft corals in the Maldives.

There is also the opportunity to dive the remains of Precontinent II at Sha'ab Rumi. This is the underwater 'village' that in 1963 divers, led by Cousteau, stayed in for a month carrying out research into the effects of long stays underwater. Although the main accommodation block was removed after the expedition, the circular 'garage' for the research submarine and storage 'shed' are among the structures that still remain, offering great opportunities for wide-angle photography. Off the ledge where most of the remains are found the coral reef has many fish, including emperor angelfish, grouper, blue spotted rays and morays. Soft corals give colour to the reef and there are plenty of macro opportunities, including blennies, on and around the 'garage', and nudibranches.

Heading north the next stop was Sha'ab Su'adi, where lies the wreck of the Blue Bell, a large cargo ship that sank in the late seventies. She lies upside down on the reef with the bow in shallow water and the stern at 80m. Carrying an assortment of Toyota vehicles, including pick-up trucks and four door



Nikon F90X, Aquatica housing, 105mm lens. Nikon SB26 and SB28 in Kevin Cullimore Housings. Fuji Velvia. Exposure Mode Aperture Priority (F22).

saloons, these are now scattered all over the reef and are teeming with life, including sweepers and glass fish, and encrusted with coral and soft corals.

Swim down the side of the wreck to about 40m and you can swim beneath it where it lies on a hollow in the reef. This forms a cave with the wreck as the roof and is full of jacks and hanging soft corals.

We moored at a reef called Gurna and were delighted by a shoal of dolphins that joined us and some of us quickly joined them in the water for a swim. Dolphins would often join us as we were travelling and frolic around the bows of the Ishtar and, sometimes, the rib as we were making for a dive.

We did a night dive at Gurna, which, although there is much dead coral, still provided opportunities for some more carefully considered macro photography, including various anemones, hawkfish, feather stars, tiny shrimp, fan worms and clams.

Next stop was Quita el Banna, another reef with a wide variety of fish life, including reef sharks, clown fish resident in their anemones, grouper and striped surgeonfish. Careful inspection of the whip corals identified tiny gobies, which blended well with the red of the coral itself. Soft corals added colour to the reef.

The northern limit of our trip was to an area which offered three top class sites: Angarosh, Abington Reef



Nikon F90X, Aquatica housing, 16mm lens. Nikon SB26 and SB28 in Kevin Cullimore Housings. Fuji Velvia. Exposure Mode Manual

and Mello. We spent 5 days diving these sites and would have been happy to stay longer.

Angarosh is a small island and here we saw shark and manta rays as well as large shoals of barracuda and jacks and a reef teeming with life. Most dives were in currents but using these, you eventually arrive at the lee of the reef, affording an area free of current to complete the dive.

A steel tower identifies Abington Reef. Here we were able to photograph hammerheads as well as shoals of barracuda and sweepers in caves and again enjoy the wealth of photographic opportunity on the reef.

Mello has a rusting hulk on the top of the reef and the dive was excellent with hammerheads and a shoal of humphead parrotfish, clownfish in beautiful red anemones, squirrelfish, red hind, and plenty of macro opportunities, including flat worms that were white, black and gold.

On the journey back to the south we took the opportunity to dive again the sites we dived on the way up. In addition we spent four days diving the north, south and wall of Sanganeb. Hammerheads, reef sharks,

large grouper, jacks, humphead parrotfish, and a rich array of reef fishes and soft corals made these very memorable dives.

We also took the opportunity to visit the lighthouse and keeper at Sanganeb, who welcomed us and allowed us to go to the top of the lighthouse to take panoramic shots of the reef and YS Ishtar.

Our final dive of the trip was again the Umbria and then it was time to prepare for the return journey. As it was an evening flight to Cairo, we again took a trip, this time to the old port south of Port Sudan called Suakin. This took us across an arid landscape, to a dusty, ramshackle village and, through that, to the ruins of this once bustling port before it silted up. One is very aware that this is one of the poorest countries on earth and this is no tourist hotspot. However, it did afford opportunities for some photographs in the ruins and around the village, including camels resting at the waters edge.

The departure from Sudan was fairly uneventful and, thanks to Tico, we avoided paying a surcharge of \$100 for being jointly 'overweight'. Probably a normal attempt to squeeze more dollars out of visitors. This highlighted the importance of ensuring that trips to Sudan are via a company like Diving World, which has the experience and local agents to smooth the path.

We arrived in Cairo where we again had to pay an airport tax of \$15 as the last one only lasted 14 days and this was day 15! However we were in time for a welcome shower, a delightful meal in an open-air restaurant at Novotel and then a night in a large bed with air-conditioning in the room.

The flight back to UK was on what was obviously a recent addition to the Egyptair Airbus fleet, with all mod cons but, sadly, no alcohol. However, that is a small price to pay for what was a diving expedition that I feel included some of the best diving I had ever done. I will be returning to Sudan without a doubt.

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