

Marsa Shagra

Best kept secret in Egypt

By Austen Bannister

I have been diving in Egypt for sixteen years now and must admit to being a dyed in the wool safari boatman. So it was a big change in tradition when we decided to try Marha Shagra, admittedly with slight trepidation. Marsa Shagra is a twenty-minute mini bus ride from Marsa Alam airport, a vast improvement to the two-hour plus bus trips that had to be endured to meet up with a dive boat a few years ago.

The first impression of the Red Sea Safari dive centre is one of space and quiet order, all the amenities are there but not on top of each other. There is a warm welcome at reception where you are separated from your luggage and your passport; the first is off to your accommodation and the second into the safe. You then follow your luggage.

The accommodation is in four formats, the tents, the larger royal tents, the Mandarah huts and the larger Madyafa chalets, if like us your interest is underwater photography and you bring everything and the kitchen sink, your best choice is the chalet. The facilities are simple, clean,

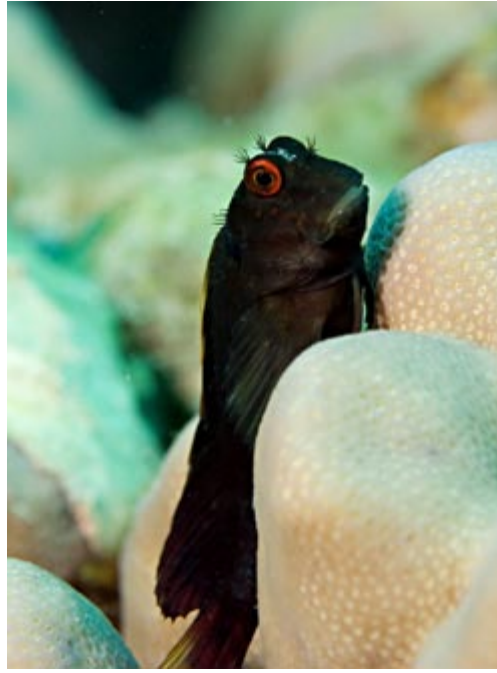
spacious and modern.

My buddy Ralph Mortimore and I arrived in the evening so were able to unpack at our leisure and then wander down to the restaurant. This is large and airy with a sizable patio facing the sea, a great place to sit and enjoy a beer at the end of your diving day. The food is good, wholesome and caters for all tastes.

Next morning once you have arranged your kit in the dive hut, you receive a detailed briefing on how the dive centre is run; this includes the layout of the surrounding reefs. There is a shallow slopping beach that runs out to the boat pontoon where the ribs are moored, the channel then runs straight out for two hundred meters to the main fringing reef. So you have six dive options, first you can rib out to the main reef and then be collected and rib back, next you can rib out to the main reef and swim back, finally you can swim out and back and of course this covers both North and South reefs.

So you have collected your weights, tank and set up your kit, you are ready for the shake down dive,





which if you are experienced enough is an unguided sixty minute dive, swimming out and back, if you wish you can have a dive guide. The last thing to do is write your name, dive plan and the time you intend to spend underwater on the big whiteboard in the dive hut. The system seems relaxed, but if you over run the dive time you put on the board by ten minutes, they will and do come looking for you.

The rest is up to you, when it says unlimited diving that is what you get, you can dive as many times as you wish and for as long as you like, lie in or start early, your choice. As photographers our dive profiles

were long and shallow, so when we announced that we were diving for two hours we got some funny looks but were left to get on with it. Absolute photographic heaven, you can stay in the same spot if you wish for two hours and if your not happy with the result go back to the same spot next day and do it again, try that on a safari boat.

There are also trips organised to different sites like Elpinstone, a twenty minute rib ride away, or you can go by truck to reefs or lagoons further north or south. We decided to try a trip to a new unknown wreck two hours south. It was a very pleasant experience, everything is arranged for





your comfort, there is shade on the beach for you to kit up in, the dive guide leads you to the wreck and then leaves you to get on with it, ours lay on his back and blew perfect bubble rings. Then it's back to the beach to change tanks and have a rest, ready for the second dive, after which a packed lunch is served before the trip back to Marsa. The wreck is a must; it is at a depth of eighteen meters, with fantastic visibility, no current and is covered in the most beautiful soft corals, a photographers dream.

Marsa Shagra caters for nearly all diving needs, whether it is training or the offshore reefs for the more adventurous, we spent most of our dives on the outside reefs that offered wall dives, hard coral gardens, caves and sandy gullies and plains. The incredible thing is you can visit the same site any number of times and it is different each time. And yes you do see sharks, we saw two, one white tip reef shark came and had a look at what we were so interested in photographing, sadly not him though, wrong lens!

At the end of the day you can sit in the beach side hut they call the Shade or on the restaurant patio over looking the sea and enjoy the view. Further down the beach is a café bar where you can sample authentic Bedouin coffee heated with ginger in an earthen wear jar on charcoal. A great taste but don't expect to sleep that night. The café also boast two little regulars, Pop and Corn, two of the smallest mice I have ever seen.

So would we go back again? Most definitely yes, the diving is very good, the accommodation is very comfortable and the Red Sea Safari team are hard working, experienced and very friendly. We

also got some good photos, well, I think so.

Land based or Live aboard? Well, what ever floats your boat, but we shall be going back, it is good to try something new once in a while and even better when the result is good.

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