

And Now For Something Completely Different...

by Mark Webster

The title of this piece will mean something to those of us who have reached a certain vintage, particularly in the UK. The phrase comes from an early 1970's comic series 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' which enjoyed cult status and still makes an occasional comeback even overseas. If you remember this then you will also remember the early days of Red Sea diving when there were no facilities and a trip entailed Land Rovers, camping in the open on the beach and of course diving from the beach only. Obviously these were great character building days which we enjoyed (I think) until the appearance of the first live aboards which gave us greater access to the offshore sites and kept the sand off our O rings.

Diving from the beach was great fun but was quickly forgotten with the convenience of live aboard diving, but I have often wondered how the beach diving experience would compare today. Many of the big name sites on the Sinai peninsula, which were first found as beach dives, now have large hotel developments on the shore. Over

the intervening years these sites have also seen a great many divers, so their present condition does not compare to those early heady days. But further south on the Egyptian mainland coast there are still pockets of coastline where the development has not been so aggressive yet and reportedly the beach diving is still good. So in the spirit of 'something completely

(Top) The tent accommodation at Marsa Shagra comes in standard and Royal. Both have proper beds and power – the Royal is larger and has a fridge and fan. If you come in the winter bring your woolly pyjamas and it gets cool at night. Nikon D200, 10-17 FE zoom, ISO100 Programme mode. (Right) Some of the truck beach dives reveal some spectacular hard coral growth in just a few feet of water. Most of the marsas have a sandy channel between the reefs which preserves the corals from diver or snorkeler damage during entry. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, ISO100, manual WB, f11 1/125.



different' we decided to sample this, but without the hardship of camping, and selected the 'eco resort' at Marsa Shagra close to Marsa Alam which has been developed around its own house reef.

The description 'eco resort' may be a touch ambitious, although I do remember when this dive operation was first established with only tent accommodation and staying here would have been quite rustic. Now the resort has developed significantly and offers four levels of accommodation – two in tents and two in rooms and chalets. There are still parts of the resort which retain that campsite feel, and there is even a Bedouin café on the beach by the tented section to give you that Lawrence of Arabia feeling in the evening. However, the latest developments provide excellent facilities including a well appointed restaurant with seating inside and an open dining terrace overlooking the bay. As the passing years have softened me I did not object to this at all, but if you are determined to go a little more rustic then there are smaller developments at Marsa Nakari and Whadi Lahami. In order to look after the cameras properly of course.....my wife and I selected an air conditioned Madyafa chalet which offers the most spacious accommodation and in fact does have a very handy high



There are two types of truck transport dependant on the group size and the distance you are travelling. This is the larger, some may say more comfy one. Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, ISO100 Programme mode.



There is a small jetty at the entrance to the house reef where you can board the shuttle boats or the speed boat for a longer trip. Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, ISO100 Programme mode.

Anthias are of course found on every dive and, like clown fish, are a magnetic subject which encourages you to shoot them again and again. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f11 1/80.



work surface with power sockets and good lighting for camera preparation and charging. Being in a tent may be more challenging for the serious photographers with lots of kit, although I do know some who have used this accommodation.

If you cannot forget the real world for a week you will be relieved to know that your mobile phone will work here and there is WiFi for your computer. There is a small charge for the latter if you use the resort router, or you can use a free connection if you buy a drink in the Bedouin café.

The dive centre is located on

the beach and is well laid out and organised. Once you have signed up you will receive a thorough briefing on how the diving works and the various dive options open to you. The first dive is with a guide along the house reef just to check you are not likely to drown yourself and thereafter all house reef dives can be made with your buddy. Sadly solo diving is forbidden here. As the marsa is a natural bay there is a north and south option to the house reef which you can dive from the beach or use the resident RIB shuttles to take you out and pick you up if desired. Doing this

can take you a reasonable distance out along the seaward side of the reef and all you need to do is post your dive plan on the white board with planned dive time and indicate if you want to be picked up. You need to observe your predicted dive times otherwise they will come looking for you. As photographers are easily distracted I found it best to take a boat out and swim back along the reef to the beach and also add a little extra to the expected dive time.

The standard dive package here includes unlimited beach diving on the house reef, including use of the

shuttles, and also beach diving by truck at sites further afield which depart twice a day. All that is required is to decide on the destination and place your name on the list the evening before. Most of the truck dives were within 20 minutes drive of the resort.

If you fancy something a little more adventurous then you can choose a 'speedboat' dive (a larger RIB with twin engines) to an offshore reef site or a longer road trip to a beach dive at a more remote location. Both these options cost between EU10-20 and again could be booked a day before. Other offshore options are a little more expensive and include Dolphin Reef which is a full day excursion by day boat. One offshore option is Elphinstone Reef which is a 20-30 minute boat ride offshore, but as we were familiar with this site from live aboard visits we declined this opportunity. One strange thing about the Elphinstone dive was that they would not let anyone use nitrox. There was no clear explanation for this other than for reasons of 'safety', although of course the guide could be trusted with this dangerous gas mix. Pointing out that there were numerous live aboard clients diving on nitrox there every day cut no ice and this policy left me puzzled.

One worthwhile trip that we did make is to the wreck of an 'un-named'



(Left) The excursion to the wreck of the Hamada at Marsa Abu Gosoon is worth the effort as the stern section is very intact with some nice hard and soft corals slowly engulfing the steel. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, ISO100, manual WB, f11 1/60. (Right) The wreck of the Hamada is perfect for photographers being shallow and generally having good visibility. Your guide will most likely lead the rest of a group away on a full tour and penetration leaving stern to you. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f11 1/60.



freighter at Marsa Abu Gosoon which is about 75 minutes south by mini-bus from Marsa Shagra - the truck with all the diving kit goes ahead of you to set up for your arrival. Although the dive centre knew little of the history of this wreck, a quick internet search revealed a lot more detail:

The wreck is known as the Hamada (although this may be a local name) and was Cypriot freighter operated by Phemios Navigation

Company. Launched in 1965 and built by J Lewis & Sons of Aberdeen and powered by a 7 cylinder diesel engine built by British Polar Engines Ltd of Glasgow. She sank on 28 June 1993 whilst en route from Yambo in Saudi Arabia with a cargo of plastic granules. Whilst the official report apparently states she caught fire and sank in deep water, she was found hard up against the coastal fringing reef so perhaps the loss was more due

to a navigation error.

The first thing you notice here as you walk towards the beach is the glint of the sun on thousands of plastic granules in the sand which have washed up from the wreck. There is an easy entry and a short swim past a healthy reef to the wreck which is well broken at the bow and midships, but the stern with its accommodation and engine room is almost entirely intact and lies on her starboard side.

As the stern stands higher and almost reaches the surface the majority of the coral growth has concentrated here and the steel surfaces are peppered with hard and soft corals. There are some nice soft corals in the port side companionway and you can penetrate the wreck if that appeals to you where you will find the usual glass fish and hatchet fish in residence. There is also a small school of friendly bat fish on the starboard side close to the sand at a maximum depth of 15m, so there is plenty to keep you busy here for the two dives that the excursion offers. Just to the seaward side of the wreck in 21m there is an eel grass bed which our guide told us has a population of seahorses. However, I declined the search and shot wide angle for both dives. Other dive centres also come here, so look for the opportunity to dive between the groups and have the wreck to your self. We elected to make our second dive immediately to avoid the crowd. Lunch is served at a Bedouin restaurant beside a mangrove lagoon a few minutes drive from the wreck which is very good and offers the chance to sample Bedouin coffee and the hookah pipe if you are brave.

We made many of our dives on the house reef and it is this opportunity to dive the same area repeatedly which will appeal to most photographers. The north reef has very healthy hard corals with

all the usual inshore species here in abundance. The reef is very easy to navigate and we chose to be dropped off on the seaward side of the reef and swim back to shore for most dives. Although you don't expect pelagic action here, almost anything can turn up and we saw large black tip reef sharks on two occasions and there is a resident school of barracuda seen on most dives. As you come into the shallows of the marsa you will find schools of sardines feeding close to the surface and benthic species such as crocodile fish, scorpion and stone fish and rays. The south reef is equally productive but the corals are less lush in the marsa and on the seaward corner as this is the reef facing the prevailing wind direction and waves. It is worth taking the shuttle boat out on to the offshore southern end of the south reef and swim north to be picked up on the point as the corals definitely improve there.

The truck drives take you to some very nice sheltered reefs often in a neighbouring marsa. It may be best to choose the early morning trip as many of these sites are also visited by snorkelling groups from the nearby hotels and they tend to arrive later in the morning. One site that should not be missed is the now famous Marsa Abu Dabbab with its resident dugong and green turtles. On three out of four days the dugong was seen by groups



(Left) Lion fish are seen on most dives and will be found on top of the reef early in the morning and before dusk providing the opportunity to put the sun behind the subject. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f16 1/125. (Right) Another Red Sea trade mark fish is the clown fish or anemone fish. No matter how many images you have of these fish it is hard to resist just a few minutes to take one more. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100, f16 1/60.



from the dive centre, so it is a chance not to be missed, but once again choose the early morning departure to avoid the crowds. The green turtles are almost guaranteed and you will also see guitar rays briefly before they flee. The fringing reef on the south side of the bay is particularly good once you swim out to the point and there are some nice pinnacles here

with resident groups of lion fish.

So was the return to the roots of Red Sea diving worthwhile? In a word yes and a resort like this is certainly worth considering if you are trying to hone techniques or perhaps test some new kit. You can return to a location on the house reef as often as you want with a different lens or to try different lighting etc. to improve results with



Crocodile fish are common on the sand on both the north and south house reefs. They are normally very approachable so even with a wide angle lens on you can take a portrait shot. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f16 1/125.

a particular subject. Undoubtedly the sites do not have the variation in topography that you would experience from a live aboard, but that is not necessarily what underwater photography requires. How often have you felt that you would like another chance at a particular subject when you review the images? The diving is easy and relaxed and when diving on the house reef you can arrange your timetable to suit yourself. In the evenings you can dive again or watch

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the sun go down whilst sipping a beer or Bedouin coffee or review your images and plan how to improve the subject on the following day. It was great to wander into the Red Sea from the beach once again, but I don't miss those rocks under my sleeping bag from those early days!

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Muck and Macro in Lembah Strait Photo Workshop with Mark Webster 31 October to 7 November 2009



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