

SS Thistlegorm Past & Present

by Mark Webster

The SS Thistlegorm is one of the best known and most popular wrecks in the Red Sea and is inevitably on the must do list for both live aboard and day boat divers. If you visit her for the first time today you might come to the surface feeling you have seen an impressive wreck, but in fact she is now a shadow of her former glory and is slowly being destroyed by her own popularity.

I was fortunate enough to have dived the Thistlegorm shortly after she was re-discovered at the end of 1992. The skipper of our tiny live aboard (the Sally) had heard a rumour that an Eilat based live aboard named the Sunboat had found a stunning new wreck in the gulf of Suez. His plan to find it was simple – wait for the Sunboat to come past Sharm el Sheikh and shadow her at a safe distance. Once the Sunboat was moored to the wreck he boldly rushed in and dropped us on the line and spent our dive being given a hard time by the skipper who was not pleased at all! We were oblivious to this as we approached the bow to be totally stunned by the wreck below. Diving her today it is difficult to imagine that the wreck was a spectacular artificial

reef absolutely smothered in coral growth and teeming with reef fish as well as pelagics in the open water.

But first a little history in case you are not familiar with this wreck. The Thistlegorm was built in 1939/40 by the North Eastern Marine Engineering Co. Ltd of Sunderland and launched to join the war effort on 9th of April 1940. She was a medium cargo vessel, 415 x 58 x 25ft, with a gross tonnage of 4898t and armed with a 4.7” gun and one heavy calibre machine gun both of which were surplus from the First World War. Her last voyage was from Glasgow to Alexandria in 1941 for which she was loaded with a cargo of small arms ammunition, shells, land mines, armoured vehicles, jeeps,

(Top) SS Thistlegorm launched in 1940

(Right) Thistlegorm 2011 – part of the cargo of motor cycles in #1 hold. In the background can be seen the rolling stock bowser on the port side forward deck which is beginning to sag and fail. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30



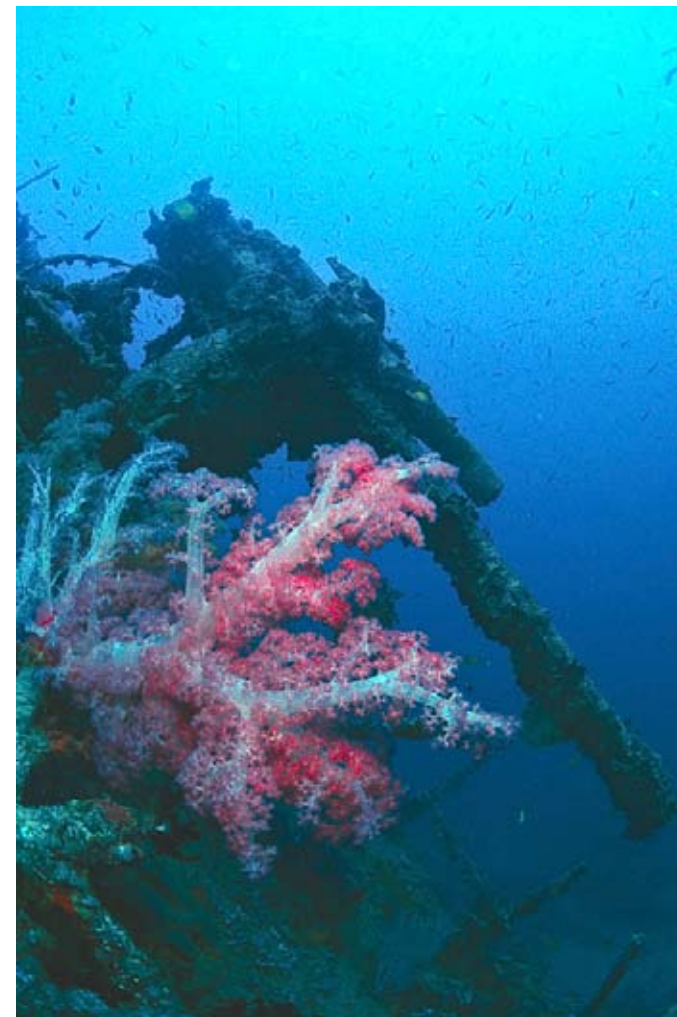
motor bikes, steam locomotives and rolling stock and, surprisingly, wellington boots. All this was destined for the allied forces in North Africa and as the Mediterranean was closed to allied shipping the routing of the convoy voyage was to be via the Cape and then up the East coast of Africa and into the Red Sea. The journey was uneventful and the log shows that she anchored safely at the end of September with other convoy ships at safe anchorage 'F' off Shadwan Island in the Straits of Jubal (now Gubal) at the southern end of the Gulf of Suez. The convoy was unable to proceed immediately to the Suez canal due to a collision between two vessels in the canal. The convoy remained peacefully at the anchorage until the silence was shattered at 2 a.m. on October 6th by the arrival of four Heinkel He 111's of flight 11/ KG26 seeking to sink the Queen Mary which was thought to be at the anchorage carrying troops. Fortunately the Queen Mary was in fact still much further south with some 2000 Australian troops on board. Finding their original target missing and running low on fuel, one of the Hienkels singled out the Thistlegorm for attack.

Two bombs struck the Thistlegorm just aft of the bridge which immediately started a blazing fire. The crew began to abandon ship without delay as it was obvious that there was imminent risk of explosion from the cargo of munitions. All but nine of the crew survived and the survivors were picked up by HMS Carlisle which was anchored nearby. Ten minutes after the attack there was a huge explosion and the Thistlegorm quickly sank from sight.

The wreck was then forgotten until the early 1950's when Jaques Cousteau and the Calypso were guided to the wreck by Bedouin fishermen and were



Thistlegorm starboard side walkway aft of bridge 1995 – healthy colonies of soft corals covered the wreck during this period. Nikon 801, Subal housing, 16mm FE, Subatec S100, Ektachrome 100, f8 1/60



Thistlegorm 4.7" stern gun 1995 – the sern of the wreck was populated with healthy colonies of soft corals and the gun itself was covered in invertebrate growth. Today it is used as a convenient mooring point. Nikon 801, Subal housing, 16mm FE, Subatec S100, Ektachrome 100, f8 1/60



Thistlegorm 2011 – on the port side adjacent to the collapsed mid section of the wreck lies the remains of one of the locomotives. This is one of the deepest areas of the wreck to visit, but worth a few minutes to capture some images. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30

able to identify her having recovered the bell. The wreck was then featured in the February 1956 edition of National Geographic Magazine and Cousteau's exploration was documented in the film 'The Silent World'.

Now of course many of the dive boats operating from Sharm El Shiek, Eilat and Hurghada regularly visit the wreck on a daily basis and

it is not uncommon to find up to twenty boats on location, all of them wanting to moor into the wreck or at least have a down line attached as the currents can be strong here. This has inevitably taken its toll and there are virtually no hand rails left and sections of the wreck have been torn away by thoughtless mooring. On my most recent visit there was even a boat moored to the stern gun,



Thistlegorm forward port walkway 1993 – this was the first year that dive boats began to visit the wreck regularly, although the numbers were very small. Coral growth remained healthy although there are already large amounts of expired air trapped. Nikon 801, Subal housing, 16mm FE, Subatec S100, Ektachrome 100, f8 1/60.



Thistlegorm forward port walkway 2011 – the same location this year has very little coral growth left and stanchions have been torn away on the port gunwale by mooring lines. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/80



Thistlegorm 2011 – crocodile fish are common on the wreck and are often consumed by escaping bubbles from groups of divers swimming below. This one occasionally achieved lift off from the volume of bubbles, but seemed oblivious to it all. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/30

so it is only a matter of time before that feature disappears as well. The huge volume of divers exploring the internal sections of the wreck has also accelerated corrosion due to the trapped air and nitrox which has led to the collapse of deck heads throughout the vessel. Couple this with the poaching of artefacts by trinket obsessed divers over the years means the continued destruction of the wreck

seems inevitable,

There was an attempt in December 2007 by the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA) to install moorings around the wreck and it was temporarily closed to divers during this period. However, this was not a success as the moorings were inadequate and failed and they were too far from the wreck for divers to

use the connecting swim lines when strong currents prevailed.

So what is left today and should we make the effort to dive the wreck as photographers? There is certainly very little coral or marine growth left on outer surfaces of the wreck, with only one or two isolated soft corals that have somehow survived. You can find more healthy colonies of soft corals by swimming off the wreck on the debris field in the centre, an area that divers do not routinely visit, and capture some colour with the wreck as a backdrop. During the day when the day boat fleet is on location the number of divers on the wreck can reach epic proportions. If you are on a live aboard then diving late in the day and staying overnight to dive early in the morning will ensure that you have the minimum number of divers on the wreck. Timing your dive to avoid the dive schedule of the other boats will also help.

If the current is not too strong and the visibility is reasonable then you can go for the big picture of the stern or bow using natural light. On the wreck itself there are still some features that may go well with a diver in the image and of course there is still fish life on the wreck many of which are so accustomed to divers that they are happy to pose. On my last dive a I spent a happy few minutes with a small octopus and a jealous goat fish

on the bow that were competing for a cover shot. Look out into open water as well during your dive as there are often schools of pelagic fish and a resident school of bat fish which are also keen models for the camera.

Inside the wreck there is of course the cargo for which the Thistlegorm is famous which comprises trucks, motor bikes, munitions, aircraft wings and engines and those wellington boots. This is probably where you will find most photographers heading for, but with numerous other divers exploring the holds it can be a challenge to get a clear shot and the visibility will suffer, so timing is everything.

Outside on the forward decks there are items of rolling stock which are also bereft of marine life now. The deck under the bowser adjacent to No.1 hold on the port side is now sagging and it may not be long before this falls into the hold. Crossing over the collapsed section of the wreck on the way to the stern you will find more of the cargo including the armoured tracked vehicles which are again a feature for a diver image. At the mid section it is worth swimming off the wreck on the port side to visit the steam locomotive which remains mostly untouched. When you reach the stern the main attraction is the 4.7 inch gun, which hopefully will not continue to be used as a convenient



Thistlegorm 2011 – despite the lack of corals there is still a lot of small reef fish life with fusiliers, sergeant majors and anthias common with fly bys from larger species like jacks and tuna. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/30

mooring. Swim off the stern if the current allows and capture the stern and its mezzanine deck with the propeller below.

The depth range and configuration of the ship makes for easy and reasonably safe diving (computer recommended), although you should be wary about penetrating too deep as there is some silt about and there is no telling how unstable the cargo is. Being at the entrance to the Gulf of Suez the Thistlegorm is

exposed to strong currents, so you should ensure that you always return to your own down line (which is sometimes difficult to spot amongst all the others!) and carry a flag or SMB as open water decompression could take you quite a way up or down the Gulf!

So as a hulk with an interesting cargo the wreck still has its attractions, but it is difficult not to feel sad if you have seen this wreck following the first few years of

rediscovery. It may be too late already to save the wreck from continued attrition, but it seems that the local dive operators fail to see that they are destroying a very valuable asset for short term gain. Perhaps the answer is to restrict the numbers of divers and boats visiting with a permit and fee system similar to the one introduced in Sipadan to reduce numbers and also establish a usable and adequate mooring system to protect the structure of the wreck. There are many divers and photographers who will not agree with this view, but for me most wrecks only really become a part of

the sea when they are colonised by marine life and the Thistlegorm may now never return to this condition.

To illustrate this article I have included some scanned images from my early dives to compare with images taken in 2011. Although the quality of the images now pales against the resolution of current digital cameras, hopefully they will highlight a little how the wreck has changed over the intervening years.

Mark Webster
www.photec.co.uk

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