

Red Sea- Past & Present

by Howard Rosenstein

The first anniversary of the events at Cairo's Tahrir square and the political and security Tsunami it unleashed raises concerns and questions about the future of Red Sea Diving tourism. How will a fundamentalist regime in Egypt look at a water sports and tourism industry so clearly generated and influenced by western culture and sense of freedom. At the same time no less relevant is the significant upsurge of lawlessness and terror acts in Egypt in general and the Sinai in particular, especially in the eastern regions along the Israeli border but also along the eastern shoreline running from Taba to Sharm where the tourism industry and resorts are located. Equally troubling is the apparent inability of the Egyptian government and security apparatus to quell or control the situation.

The Sinai Red Sea shore we know and enjoy as one of the world's favorite dive travel destinations is a relatively recent phenomena and a very different from the Sinai's role from time immemorial. Indeed The Sinai throughout history, has been a battle ground rather than a diver's playground. As recent as 45 years ago

the closure of the Tiran Straits (one of today's most popular dive sites) in June 1967 was the cause of the outbreak of the 6 day war!

6 years later in 1973 saw the horrendous Yom Kippur war was fought along the entire western Sinai, the Suez (where the Thistlegorm is) and even Sharm el Sheikh was attacked. Only after 1973 when the guns were finally silenced did Diving Tourism to the area could really begin.

In the early 1970's Diving Tourism began in the Red Sea with a few small diving operations along the then Israeli administered Sinai shore and interestingly this spring marks 30 years since the Sinai was returned to Egypt as a result Camp David Peace process between Israel and Egypt (April 1982).

These 3 events, the recent one a year ago in Cairo (as well as other parts of Egypt), and those of 45 and 30 years ago cannot and should not be ignored by the Red Sea diving community, tourists and residents alike. For history can and may well repeat itself when it comes to this magnificent area.

Today's tourists to the Red Sea are spoiled and pampered to



Naama Bay - Then and now





Ras Mohamed



Sinai Shore between Naama and Ras Um Sidd



David Doubilet and Eugene Clark aboard Fantasea 1 Liveboard 1984.

a degree un-imagined 30 years ago. How easy and comfortable Dive Travel to the Red Sea has become, so many excellent operators, comfortable day boats, luxurious live aboards and first class professionals servicing this impressive industry. Today's Red Sea travelers take much for granted.

To reach Sharem in those early years the visiting diver had to traverse all of the Sinai interior from the northern Sinai, through the Mitla mountain pass still cluttered with the remnants of war, crashed jet fighters, endless columns of burnt out tanks, half-tracks and rocket launchers. After the pass, you had to be escorted by an Israel military convoy as you skirted the Suez Canal which was still under fire in a war of attrition (which finally ended in 1970). And then down along the Western Sinai shore until you reached Sharem.

My first dives in the Red Sea just after the 1967 6 Day War. I was immediately smitten by its beauty and the thrill of discovery and would spend the next 45 years of my life working, diving and living along the Red Sea shores from Neweiba to



Red Sea Diver 1 the first real dive boat in the Sinai

Sharem (Ofira), and Eilat and never regretting it, (well, perhaps occasionally regretting it :-).

My Red Sea professional diving career began In 1972, based in a small shack on the beach at the oasis of Neweiba. By 1973 and just before the Yom Kippur War I moved the operation down to Sharem and created Red Sea Divers which pioneered Red



Howard Rosenstein (2nd left) with Egyptian and Israeli Military officials in 1981 going over the maps of diving sites



The Yolanda Sinks Ras Mohamed 1979

Sea Dive travel in the Sinai until it closed its doors in 1982 with the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. From 1983 to 1997 I had the privilege and challenge to operate one of the regions very first Live-Aboard operations "Fantasea Line" Pioneering dive travel from Sharm along the entire Red Sea.

You get the point, it was not the piece of cake we know today, where the tourists biggest headache may be dealing with overweight charges on your diving gear or a log jam in the port getting on your dive boat and clearing port procedures. In 5 hours from UK or even less from many other European airport and within hours of arrival the diving holiday of a lifetime begins.

This can never be taken for granted, never, things can and just may change dramatically. Diving tourism as we know it may cease all together or be curtailed and restricted beyond recognition.

We cannot ignore current developments and must be very much aware of the potential risks involved. The current lawlessness of the region has and most likely will lead to attacks on tourists as it



Fantasea 2 at Daedalus

has in the past (Taba, Neweiba, Sharm and Luxor to name only a few).

Egypt's recent parliamentary elections (conducted democratically for the first time ever) gave the Islamist parties nearly 70% of the seats and together with this development there are real questions being raised by the new political leadership in Egypt about the existing policies regarding the peace treaty with Israel while at the same time, areas of Sinai has become a serious security threat with active terror and criminal groups operating and attacking civilian and touristic targets. Eye witness reports of armed Bedouins with Kalatchnikov rifles protecting resorts abound.

Recently at an international dive show in Germany I met with many colleagues who continue what I helped begin what seems like a lifetime ago and they describe today's reality of lawlessness, confusion and a degree of fear for the future as more and more dive centers, boats and hotels are shutting down and the tourism flow to the area slows to a trickle.



The Dunraven Expedition by Shlomo Cohen

European as well as the UN and other world leaders must act to help stabilize the situation. The international tourism industry together with international diving community (tourists, operators and media alike) to cooperate with like-minded people in Egypt) must make every effort to keep the Sinai open and available for all and of course to do its utmost to protect and preserve it and to keep from fading into darkness of its historical past yet once again.

A clear message should be given to the new



a region was transformed into an international playground to be enjoyed and appreciated by one and all.

In the 45 years I have called this area my home and based my various diving businesses here. I had the profound pleasure and good fortune to be a participant in and observer of, this regions incredible transition and accomplishments. Yet I sincerely fear that the incredible efforts made by so many wonderful, amazing people in this process may soon literally go up in smoke. I hope and pray that I will be proven wrong but I feel it my responsibility to share my concerns, thoughts and fears with the international diving community.

The bows of the Yolanda

leaders of Egypt that that peace treaty is good, that tourism is good and that the Sinai should never return to its previous status as badlands and battle ground. Tourism is critical to Egypt's economy, bringing important foreign currency and employing up to 20% of Egypt's work force.

Tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of diving tourists over the years from all over the world came and experienced diving at its very best and went home raving about the Red Sea, wonderful times were had by all, an industry was created, jobs were created and

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