

Simply the best

by Erik Oskarsson

Diving around the Brothers, Daedalus reef and Elphinstone is widely known around the world, in fact so good that CNN a few years ago ranked the Brothers to be one of the world's top 10 dive sites. So it's not for nothing that travel agencies sometimes, slightly pretentious, name cruises to the Brothers, Daedalus reef and Elphinstone as Simple the Best. But diving at these remote locations should not be done without caution, as the conditions around Brothers and Daedalus can be somewhat of a challenge even for more seasoned divers. Strong currents, heavy seas and relatively deep water are common, but it is also these factors that make the diving around these reefs so fantastic.

A few friends and I decided to prove if these reefs are worthy of their name, so we spent one week cruising with the Emperor Superior live-aboard between the Brothers, Daedalus and Elphinstone in early November last year, with Hurghada as a starting point.

We could clearly see the lack of tourists in Hurghada, both on land and out at the dive sites, given I presume the past year's political instability

in Egypt. If matters now are settling down, hopefully Egypt's precious tourist industry will once again pick up.

As for the cruise, the service was superb and the food way better than I have experienced on any Egyptian live-aboard prior this trip. As Emperor Superior measured about 25 meters in length there were plenty of space on-board, with 3 decks to be used as leisure space between the dives. My only complaint, which does not involve any of the staff or organisation in Egypt but rather the lack of tourists in general, would be the unnecessary long flight from Stockholm via Copenhagen, Cairo and finally Hurghada.

Brothers, which are also known as Al Akhawein, are two small islands located just on the border between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The slightly larger island is "inhabited" by a few Egyptian soldiers responsible for the care of the lighthouse that was built in the 1880s. If I'm to be completely honest, it does not seem to be a pleasant employment.

At 06:00 we hit the water for the first dive, every day during our cruise. Big Brother, the larger of the

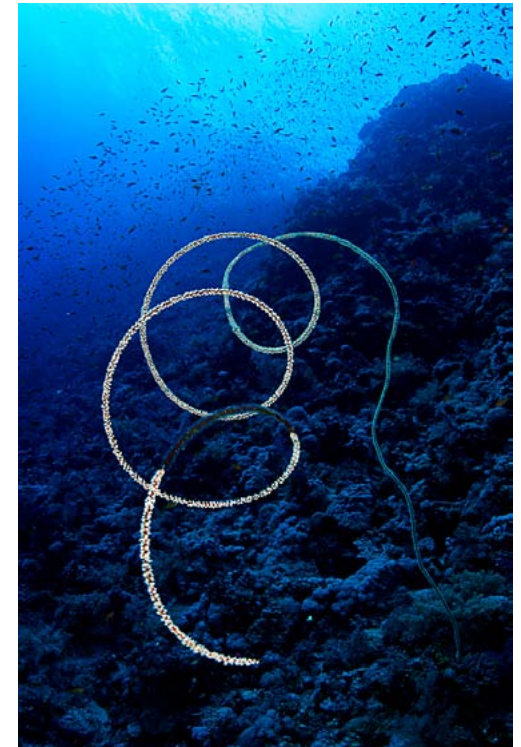


A view of Superior (and her sister ship) from Daedalus.

**Nikon D7000, Tamron 28 – 75, 1/40
f8,0 ISO: 200**

A twisted whip coral on Elphinstone
**Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, 2
Inon Z-240 Strobes, Tokina 10 – 17mm
Fish eye Lens, 1/100 f7,1 ISO: 200**

two Islands is known for its wrecks and the high chance of pelagic action. The island has two main dive sites, the southern tip and the northern tip. The southern end of the Island has a large plateau which extends at approximately 35-40 meters depth, and the dive typically offers good visibility and beautiful corals. On our





Hawk fish on the slope of Elphinstone . Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, 2 Inon Z-240 Strobes, Sigma 105 mm EX Macro 1/200, f5.6 ISO: 320

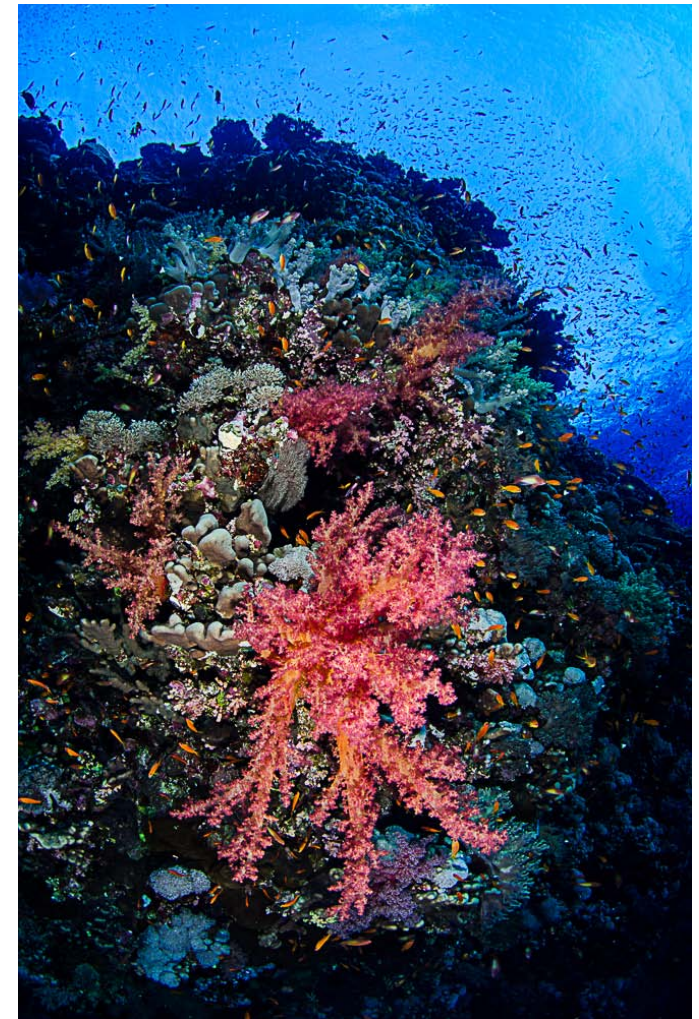
dives around the southern tip we did not see any large game. However, we did miss a manta ray just in the beginning of one of our dives with just a 2 minute margin. Bitterness is not a very attractive trait, but as I diver I sometimes have a hard time concealing it. Perhaps bitter management should



Crocodile fish. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, 2 Inon Z-240 Strobes, Sigma 105 mm EX Macro 1/160, f11 ISO: 320

be incorporated into every diver's basic training, or perhaps it is just one of my personal issues that I need to resolve.

Anyway, big Brother's north point is where the famous Numidia wreck lies almost intact, alongside the vertical wall. Because the wreck is almost in a



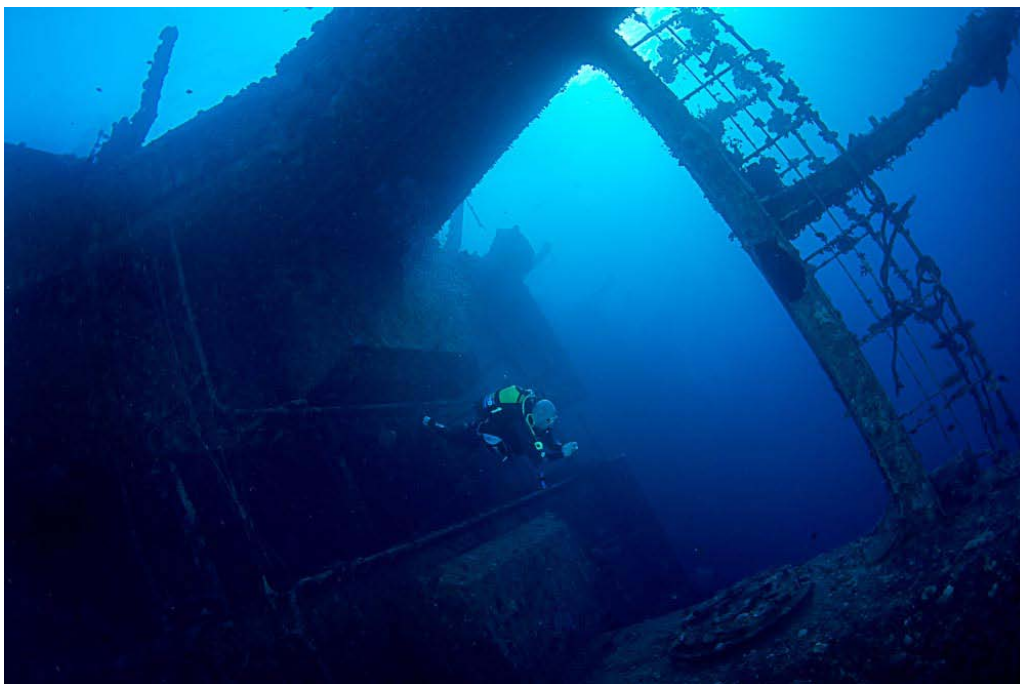
Soft corals on the Brothers Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, 2 Inon Z-240 Strobes, Tokina 10 – 17mm, 1/80, f7,1 ISO: 200

vertical position, it becomes a bit of a surreal wreck dive, everything feels upside down. And it is a bit limited when it comes to space, so it will easily become filled up with divers.

I personally find the best part of the northern tip at big Brother to be the west side of the reef as

*Salem Express with
Anders in the Foreground
(taken on our way back)
Nikon D7000, Nauticam
Housing, 2 Inon Z-240
Strobes, Tokina 10 –
17mm 1/125, f6,3 ISO:
400*

it is strikingly beautiful,
almost completely covered
in colourful soft corals. It
is great place to finish the
dives being done on the
northern tip, if the current
grants you permission that
is.



Little Brother is
located about 1 km south of the big island. If you
dive the northern tip of the island, which is probably
the best starting point, the current's direction is
usually a good benchmark for how to plan the dive.
Either you take the eastern side or the western
side. Fairly straight forward I must say. Just as big
Brother, little Brother is excellent for large game. At
one of our dives at little Brother we saw 3 different
species of sharks, including hammerheads and a
thresher shark. Sadly, none of these sharks were
particularly interested in a Swede with a strange
looking camera.

Another 10 hours sailing towards the south
from the Brothers is the Daedalus reef situated. The
reef is about 400 meters long and 100 meters wide,
thus quite a bit smaller than the Brothers. On the
reef there is a small artificial island, which houses a
small lighthouse with some local staff. Daedalus is

primarily known for its large schools of scalloped
hammerhead sharks that can regularly be seen
during the late spring and early summer, when the
water is at its coldest temperature.

Diving Daedalus is similar to the Brothers,
with steep drop-offs and strong currents. When the
current permits it, diving out in the blue probably
renders the highest chance of encountering the
hammerheads. We were really lucky to encounter
a small school of scalloped hammerheads during
one of our early morning dives. The sharks did not
seem to be intimidated by our presence, and I even
managed to snap of a few shots.

Hammerheads, I have been told, are one of
the youngest shark species in our oceans. They
are estimated to be about 70 million years old and
have extremely well developed senses through
their slightly oversized head. Hammerheads are



*Hammerheads at Daedalus reef
Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, 2 Inon Z-240
Strobes, Tokina 10 – 17mm. 1/50, f5,6 ISO: 320*

exceptionally graceful animals albeit during our
encounter they occasionally had a fairly quirky
swim style, as they were swimming on the side. All
in all I believe the sharks circled us for about 10
minutes at a depth of about 40 meters, an amazing
experience that I will treasure for the rest of my life.

Another nights sailing in the northwest
direction from Daedalus, towards the Marsa Alam
area you will find Elphinstone reef. Elphinstone,
unlike the Brothers and Daedalus reef, is situated
fairly close to the mainland so daytrips to this reef



Oceanic White tip cruising just below the surface
Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, 2 Inon Z-240 Strobes, Tokina 10 – 17mm,
1/125, f8.0 ISO: 200

are perfectly possible with high speed boats. Several dive centres in the Marsa Alam area offer day trips to Elphinstone especially during peak season, which sometimes results in a fairly diver intense underwater landscape.

Elphinstone is particularly famous for the possibility to encounter the Oceanic white tip sharks. The Oceanic white tip is a pelagic shark species that lives in warm and temperate seas worldwide. They grow to be just over 3,5 meters long and weigh nearly 200 kg, and they all too

often carry a somewhat irritated face expression. I guess it fits their general personalities as they are completely unafraid of scuba divers. I might even stretch it as far as saying that the Oceanic White Tips seems to enjoy hanging out with scuba divers and do their best in trying to intimidate us with “chicken-race” similar tactics and swim-up really close once you turn your back on them. They seemed to be a very intelligent fish species, as by circulating divers they try to fool us to swim away from the reef.

However it is not just large



A tiny porcelain crab
Nikon D7000, Nauticam
Housing, 2 Inon Z-240
Strobes, Sigma 105 mm
EX Macro 1/200, f3.5
ISO: 200

pelagic sharks that can be found at Elphinstone reef, the walls are crowded with fish, soft corals and macro stuff that deserves attention. That, of course, goes for the Brothers and Daedalus reef as well, however I always find it perplexing to focus on small things when I know there is a chance that something extraordinary swims by.

As for if the cruise lived up to its name, Simply the Best, I would unhesitatingly say yes, at least as far as diving in the Red sea goes and the chance of seeing large pelagic game. So, I probably need to revise my earlier statement about the nickname Simply the Best being slightly pretentious. The few minutes we spent with the hammerheads are probably one of my most memorable dive moments to date.

This trip is definitely something I would recommend to anyone with an

interest in the opportunity of a first-hand shark experience and beautiful healthy reefs.

Erik Oskarsson



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