

# A Week in the Red Sea

By Chris Schenker

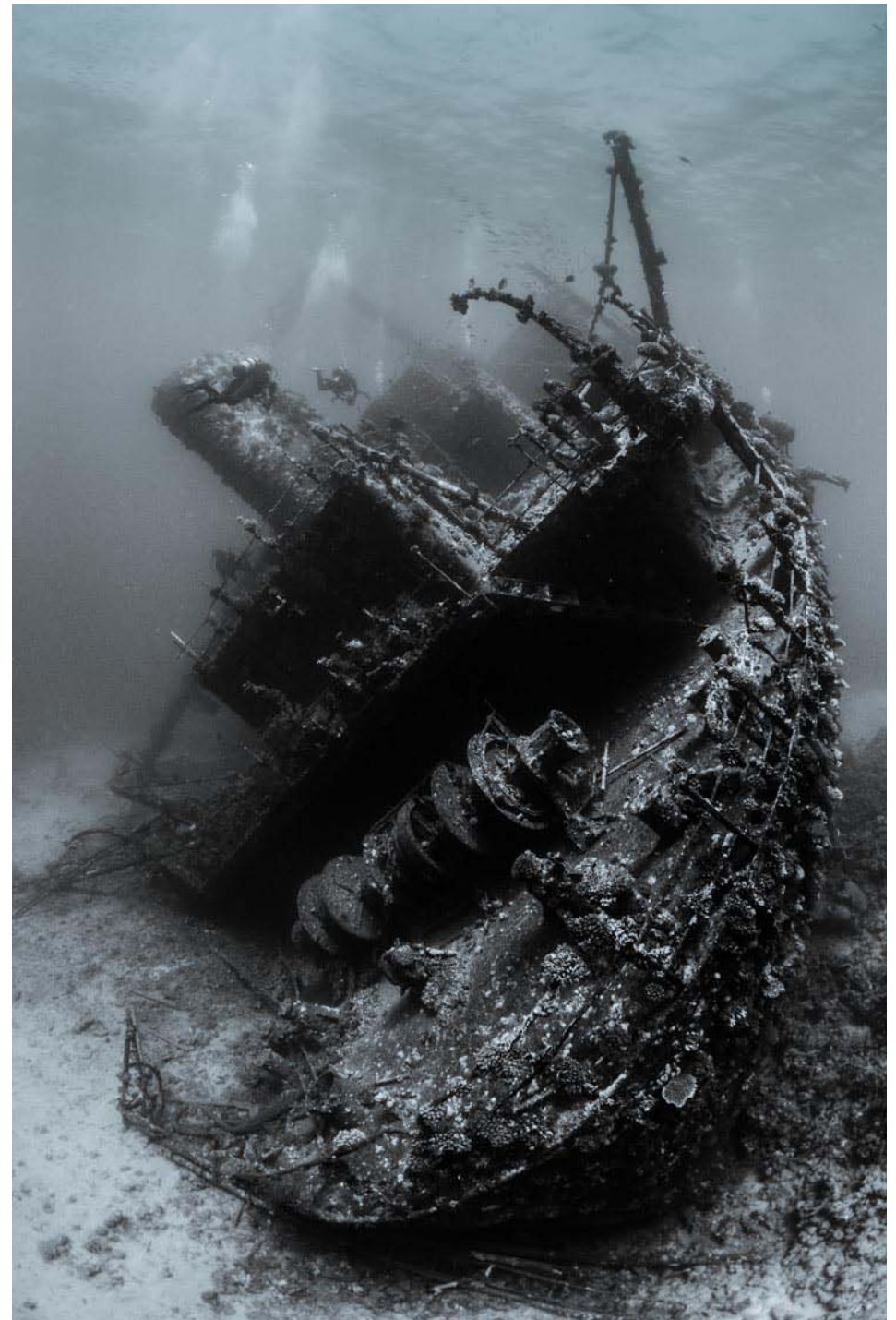
For the average underwater photographer, there aren't many opportunities to spend time in the water with other focused shooters, doing nothing but discussing techniques, holding group image review sessions, post processing, and, of course, taking pictures. As a 17-year-old high school student, I am even more limited in the amount of time I can spend in the presence of other like minded souls. Such topics as whether or not to use red filters or the merits of fiber optic versus electronic sync cables are far from the mind of the typical teenager! So you can imagine I jumped at the opportunity to spend a week on the MY Whirlwind in the Red Sea with Dr. Alex Mustard this past June, eating, sleeping, and breathing photography while diving some of the finest reefs and wrecks on the planet.

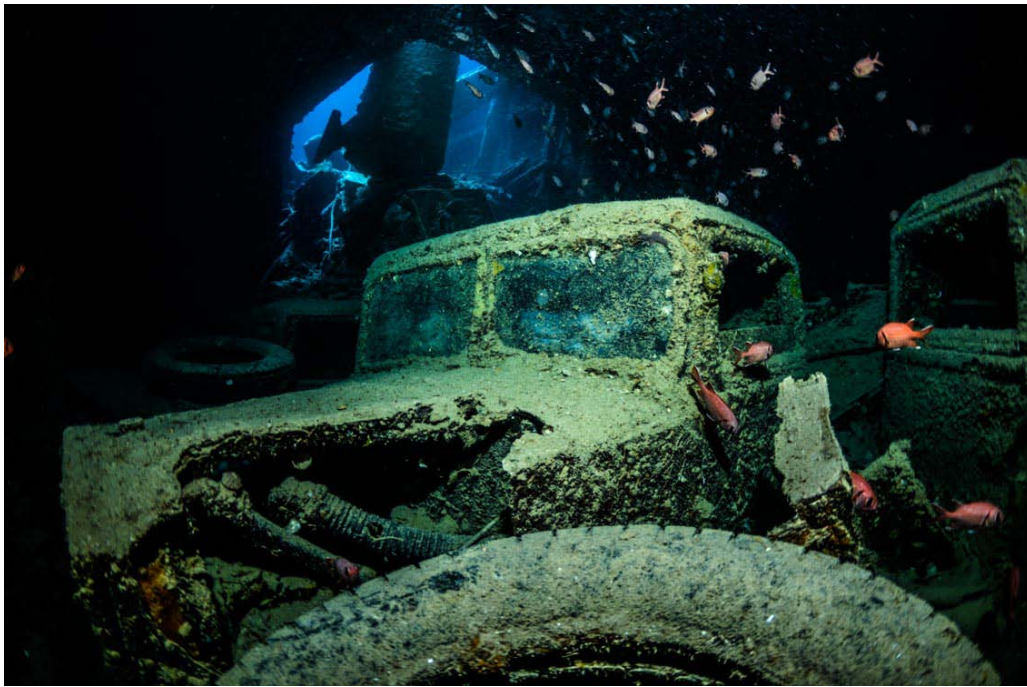
Alex has been running the workshop for years, and there were veterans on the trip who return year after year. I was the youngest photographer on board by at least ten years, and I was certainly the only one travelling with his mother! Before the workshop began in earnest, I must admit that I was a bit nervous. It certainly

was a bit intimidating at first to be surrounded by seasoned photographers with years of awards and publications under their belts, especially since I've been shooting for less than two years.

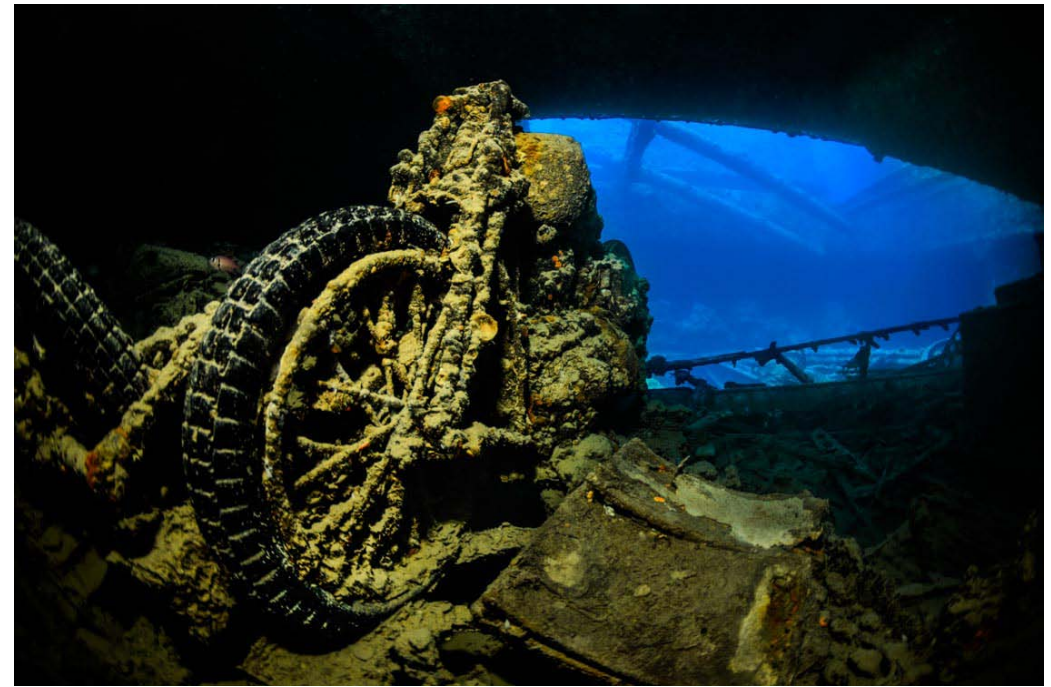
My fears of inadequacy were soon put to rest, however, as Alex and all of the other guests were incredibly open and generous in sharing their knowledge, and the overall atmosphere on the boat was one of collaboration and cooperation. Having little experience with Lightroom, I was constantly asking for post processing tips and opinions on specific images, and there was always someone willing to help. There was never an air of competition, an environment which Alex tries hard to create and which greatly helped the newcomers like me to settle in. All in all, a new photographer could not choose a better trip for their first foray into serious underwater image making.

*The Giannis D is one of the most photogenic wrecks in the Red Sea. Nikon D7000, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17 at 10 mm with Magic Filter. ISO 200, f/7.1, 1/100 sec*





*Soldierfish inspect one of the many trucks deep within the Thistlegorm's holds. Nikon D7000, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17 at 10 mm, one Sea & Sea YS-D1, and one Sea & Sea YS-250. ISO 400, f/7.1, 1/40 sec.*



*Many of the motorbikes in the Thistlegorm have atmospheric blue light piercing through behind them. Nikon D7000, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17 at 10 mm, one Sea & Sea YS-D1, and one Sea & Sea YS-250. ISO 400, f/8.0, 1/30 sec*

Besides being my first dedicated photo workshop, this was also my first liveaboard. Especially in the northern Red Sea, liveaboard diving has many advantages to being land-based. Waking up at 6 AM sharp every morning already moored over the site meant that we were guaranteed at least one dive before the day boats began pouring in. Four dives were offered every day, except for the last diving day, which is just simply not possible without being based on a boat. We would tie up at a protected

anchorage every night, and most of these sites had shallow coral gardens which proved to be great night dives. I, however, chose to focus many of my nighttime efforts on sunset split shots. Exposing for the setting sun in the background and lighting the coral beneath the surface with strobes was difficult, but being on a liveaboard afforded me the opportunity to practice every night when all of the day boats had long since gone home. I now understand just how much hassle is saved by liveaboard diving,

and I must admit that I have a hard time envisioning my next trip being land-based.

One definite benefit of joining a well-established workshop like Alex's is that the itinerary has been finetuned to maximize photo opportunities. The week began with three days worth of wreck dives, all of which were carefully planned in order to capture the best features. The Giannis D, for example, our first dive at Abu Nuhas, was done later in the day in order to maximize the amount of sunlight

hitting the deck. Timing the dive in this way allowed everyone to come away with the classic stern shot of the wreck that is so highly sought after. Before diving the Carnatic, Alex made sure to tell everyone about the school of glassfish hiding at one end of the ship, but warned us to take turns photographing them so that everyone could have a shot. Some fantastic images incorporating glassfish and soft coral resulted, and all lacked divers and bubbles! Similar careful planning went into our dive

on the Chrisoula K. For those of us who hadn't dived the wreck before, Alex made a special point of showing us to the workshop and drill press, providing specific instructions for the best ways to photograph it. He was even kind enough to lend out an off camera strobe to light up the drill, a shot which I somehow managed to miss. Being a relative newcomer both to the Red Sea and underwater photography in general, I found the guidance provided by Alex, the boat crew, and the other guests to be invaluable for getting good shots of such complex subjects like these.

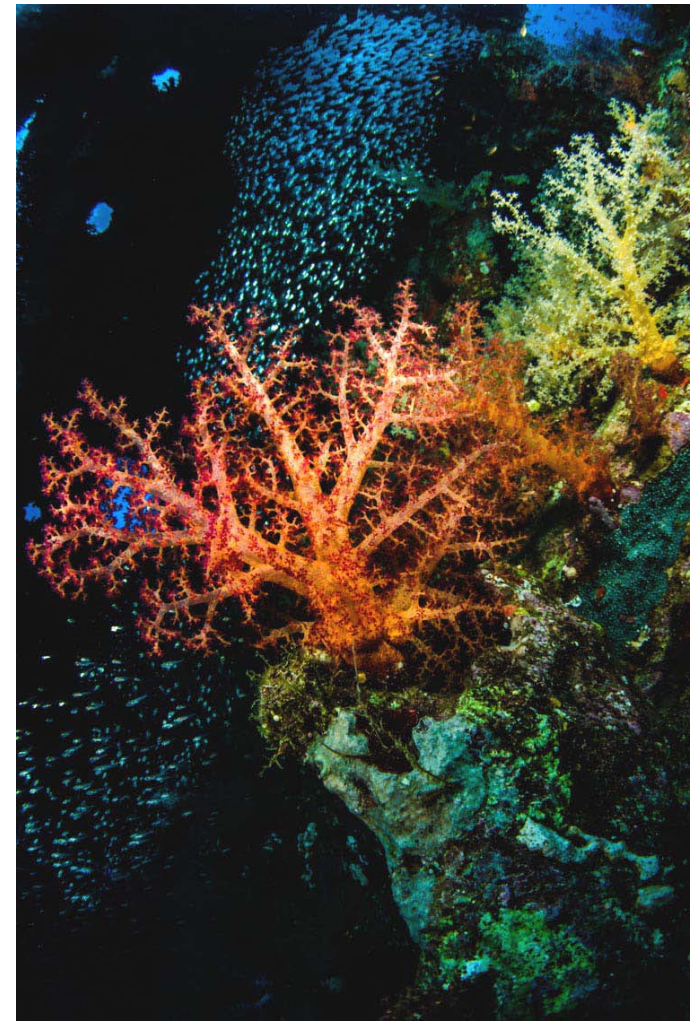
Of course, no trip to the northern Red Sea would be complete without diving the Thistlegorm. Comprising our third and final day of wreck diving, the Thistlegorm represented somewhat of a summit that we'd been working ourselves up to. With its fierce currents, unpredictable visibility, massive scale, and countless photo opportunities, it truly seemed like a fitting end to the wreck diving portion of the week. Shooting the trucks and bikes inside the Thistlegorm's holds was certainly challenging from a technical standpoint, but the detailed briefings from the dive crew and Alex's insight into the most photogenic artifacts took all of the trouble out of finding good subject matter. There are certain trucks and bikes with blue water backgrounds, adding depth and intrigue to the image, and it was these very-well documented subjects which Alex encouraged us to focus our efforts on. Not only did this advice lead to some stunning, atmospheric shots of the mysterious wreck's cargo holds, but it was also an important moment in my development as a photographer when I began to think of my images as stories rather than just pictures.

After completing our third and final dive on the Thistlegorm, we motored over to Ras Mohammed



*The bohar snapper arrived in force this year, although they were a very difficult subject to light. Nikon D7000, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17 at 10 mm with Magic Filter. ISO 200, f/8.0, 1/160 sec*

National Park for the reef diving portion of our week. For three days straight, we did nothing but dive Shark and Yolanda Reef, a dive that has justifiably garnered international fame for its brilliant colors and obscene amounts of fish. Dive



*Soft coral and glassfish abound on the Carnatic. Nikon D7000, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17 at 10 mm, one Sea & Sea YS-D1, and one Sea & Sea YS-250. ISO 200, f/8.0, 1/250 sec*

after dive, the routine was always the same: jump en masse off of the back of the boat, retrieve cameras, and then fin madly towards the wall in anticipation of the action to follow. In early summer, Ras Mohammed is stirred into a biological frenzy,



*Practice makes perfect with sunset split shots. Nikon D7000, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17 at 10 mm, one Sea & Sea YS-D1, and one Sea & Sea YS-250. ISO 100, f/13, 1/200 sec*

taught me a valuable lesson about the humility that I must adopt and the unpredictability of nature that I must accept if I wish to advance my skills as an underwater photographer.

Unfortunately, all great trips must come to an end, and this one was no exception. As sad as it was to leave the company of an incredible group of photographers and all around good people, I know that the memories, skills, and new friendships that I acquired will stay with me for life. The great wide world of underwater photography still appears to be a rather intimidating place from where I'm standing, but my week in the Red Sea certainly gave me the confidence to dream of all of the possibilities it holds.

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and massive schools of different species of fish congregate to spawn and feed. The main players are the barracuda, the batfish, the unicornfish, and of course, the ubiquitous bohar snapper. Over the course of three days of diving, each dive seemed to be dominated by one subject in particular. There were certain dives when the barracuda were tornadoing nicely (a phenomenon which I unfortunately missed), some where the batfish seemed more inclined to stick around, and others when the unicornfish were particularly magnetic in their schooling. The rarest dives, however, were

the few when the bohar snapper were performing. On only two of our dives were the conditions suitable for the snapper to school, but on those two occasions, they formed a massive wall of fish that ranks as one of the most impressive spectacles I've ever seen underwater. I elected to shoot them with a Magic Filter, but the conditions were rather soupy, and I often became too distracted by the awesome show in front of me to remember the basic principle of "shooting with the light". I was less pleased with my snapper shots than I was with my results from the other schools, but those frustrating fish certainly



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