

South West Ramblings 12

Red Sea wrecks

by Mark Webster

As winter has arrived in the south west of the UK the opportunities for the addicted underwater photographer to dive have been severely compromised. So when December kicked off as wet and windy it was definitely time to submerge myself and the camera in some warmer clearer waters and the Red Sea is an obvious choice being relatively close to home, offering dependable diving conditions, good visibility and great variety. Our group was rather keen on wrecks and so the plan was to dive as many as possible of the best on offer within the six days of diving available. Our total was a quite respectable 13 but that is quite a whistle stop tour with lots of vessel transits between sites.

Although many non divers might imagine that coral seas are always clear and calm this is not always the case and the winter months in the Red Sea can be very windy. However, our trip coincided with some very calm conditions and some unusually slack current conditions in places despite a full moon, so we were able to plan a route from Hurghada as far south as

the Brothers Islands before heading back north to the gulf of Suez. Diving predominantly on wrecks makes the lens choice fairly simple and I stuck with my fish eye zoom for all but one of the dives. You can of course use a macro lens on any wreck, particularly if you know it well, but it is hard to resist the urge to capture the big picture that these wrecks offer.

Our customs and coast guard approvals came late in the morning so the first day would only include two dives in order to reach the furthest point in our itinerary. So following a quick check out reef dive we headed south for the infamous wreck of the Salem Express.

The Salem Express was a roll on roll off ferry that sank when en route to Safaga from Jedda in December 1991 with more than 1000 passengers returning from a pilgrimage to the Haj in Mecca. She struck the Hyndman reef in bad weather close to Safaga and sank very quickly due to damage to the bow doors. Most of the passengers lost their lives, but the actual number may never be known as the ship was known to be overloaded



Salem Express - you have to search quite hard for a splash of colour on this wreck and it was quite a relief to find some on this deck vent. That is just my opinion of course. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-320, f8 1/30.

Salem Express funnel - a dive on this wreck is gloomy due to the human tragedy that occurred here. The wreck itself has very little coral cover which adds to the grey slightly depressing feel of the wreck. That is just my opinion of course. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-320, f8 1/30.





The Salem Express is a big ship and will take a few minutes to swim stem to stern. Adding a couple of fellow divers to the scene produces some sense of scale. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-200, f9 1/60.



On the shallower elevations of the Numidia orange soft corals seem to dominate which contrast well with the deep blue water of an early morning dive. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-320, f10 1/250.



The Numidia was carrying cargo including railway rolling stock. There are a number of wheels in the shallows above the main wreck covered by marine life. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-320, f10 1/250.

with passengers not on the manifest. As a result many Egyptians feel that this wreck should be off limits for scuba divers and there are often rumours that the Egyptian authorities will introduce a ban on diving here.

I had not dived this wreck before and on previous trips had avoided including it on the itinerary, however I did dive this time as we were on location. The experience for me was a gloomy one with the knowledge that so many people lost their lives here. Although you can apply this thought to many of the wrecks in the Red Sea, this is somewhat different as the disaster is in living memory and the passengers personal effects and the life boats are still to be seen on the seabed. There is very little coral growth on the wreck even after more than 20 years submersion, so this and the sheer size of the ship adds to the grey and gloomy

feel and the dive is quite a somber experience. So dive it with these expectations and don't expect many colourful images.

Following our dive on the Salem Express we made the 8 hour transit overnight to the Brothers Islands in very calm seas and arrived at first light to moor the dive boat. In fact it was so calm that we were able to moor at the north end of Big Brother island just on the edge of the reef table and directly over the location of the Numidia, our next wreck. If you are familiar with diving at the Brothers then you will know that the normal procedure is to moor at the south of the island and then use a RIB to reach the location of the wrecks on the northern end often in less than calm conditions. There is normally quite a strong current running north to south here which splits at the northern end of the island directly over the Numidia, so the beginning of the

dive can be challenging to get to the wreck where you will be sheltered from the current. In addition to flat calm seas we also had almost no current, despite a full moon, and so were able to make a very leisurely entry from the stern platform and swim down to the wreck.

The 'Numidia' was a British cargo ship, built in Glasgow in 1901 and was quite a large ship at 6399 tons and 140 metres long. On 6th July 1901, she set out from Liverpool carrying a general cargo of 7,000 tons and a crew of 97, under the command of captain John Craig, bound for Calcutta. They passed through the Suez canal without drama and continued south towards the Brothers Islands. The Brothers Island light house was sighted early on 20 July and the captain altered course intending to pass the island one mile to the west. However, the course change was obviously inadequate as the ship struck

the reef on the north west of the island and stuck fast despite attempts to free the vessel over the next few hours. By now the ship had taken on too much water through hull damage to be refloated and the crew abandoned ship. Salvage operations to remove the cargo continued for the next seven weeks and the ship then slid down the steep reef slope to provide us with a spectacular dive site today.

The wreckage starts in 6-8m depth on the remains of the bow where some of the wheels from rolling stock cargo can be found amongst the very rich hard and soft coral communities. The remainder of the wreck is wedged on the reef at a surprisingly steep angle and is very intact and covered by abundant growth. If you are a depth hound then you can head for the stern in 50m + or penetrate the hold and engine room. I spent most of my dive on the main deck between 15-25m where there is plenty of marine life and structure to photograph.

The second wreck on Big Brother island is not far from the Numidia on the west face of the island and from our moored position just a short swim from the stern platform. The Aida sank more than 50 years after the Numidia and although remains of her bows and machinery can be found in the shallows, the wreck itself starts in 28-30m and continues much deeper

than her neighbour. If you are diving these two wrecks on the same day as we were then you have to make a choice on which to dive first as you will have limited bottom time on the second dive. For me the Numidia is the nicer wreck being shallower and absolutely covered in corals, whilst the Aida due to her depth is more barren by comparison. Some of our group explored the Aida for deeper and longer which of course may take you into a decompression dive, which these days is a no go for many live aboard operators and is an additional risk when you are so far offshore from the nearest chamber.

The Aida was built in France and launched in 1911. She was quite a small ship at 75.1m x 9.7m and gross weight of 1,428 tonnes. Egyptian troops used to be garrisoned on Big Brother island and the Aida was used to ferry them and provisions at regular intervals. On 15 September 1957 the Aida was on approach to Big Brother island to disembark troops at a small jetty on the south west of the island in a heavy storm. Despite the sea state he tried to dock and in doing so ran onto the reef and stuck fast. Everyone was rescued, but shortly after the ship freed herself and drifted further north on the island where she again grounded and then began to sink by the stern. The ship remained at a steep angle on the reef before breaking at



The Aida is close to the Numidia on the west face of Big Brother Island. As the wreck starts in nearly 30m your time is short here if you dive it soon after the Numidia. I also find it far less colourful due to the increased depth and shelter from the prevailing current. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, ISO-400, f11 1/60.

her bow and slipping down to where she rests today.

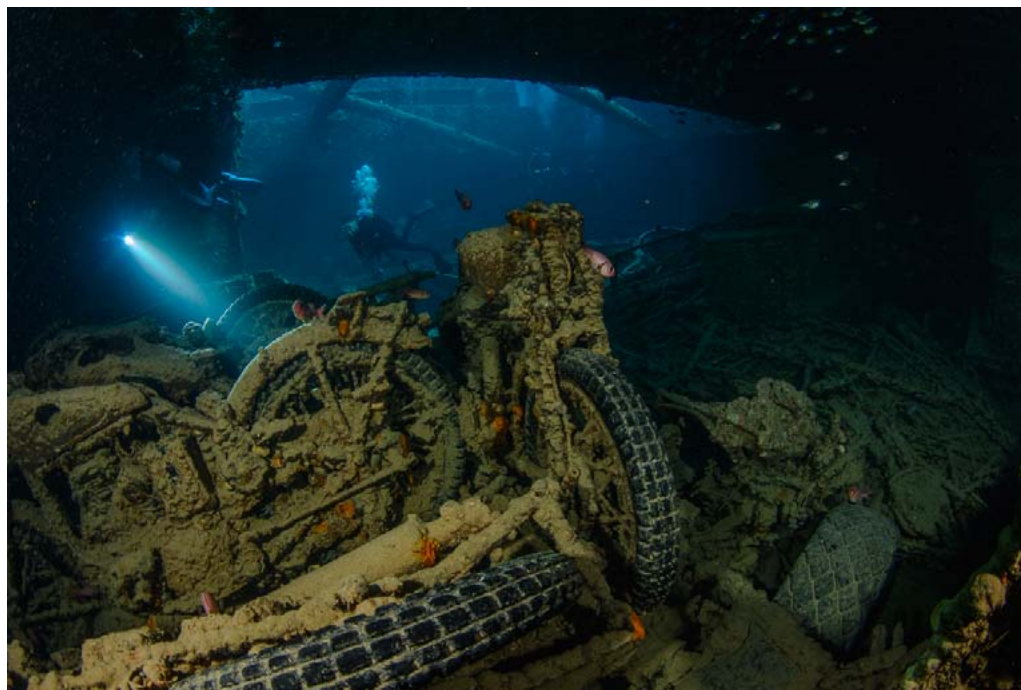
I rarely spend much time on this wreck as photographically it is a disappointment (for me at least) as it lacks the colour of the Numidia, but if the visibility is good you can try to capture an image of the wreck on the reef slope from above.

From the Brothers we set sail overnight north for the Gulf of Suez and our next infamous wreck, the

Thistleborg. This wreck needs little introduction but every time I dive it I feel a little sadder as I was fortunate enough to have dived it shortly after it was rediscovered in 1991. Then the wreck was an artificial reef covered with hard and soft corals and teeming with fish life. Of course today almost all of that is long gone due to the popularity of the wreck which can see twenty or more boats visit on a busy day. The wreck structure itself is also

suffering and some areas have already collapsed due to corrosion accelerated by the vast amounts of exhaled air and nitrox collecting under decks and walkways. However, as a naked wreck she is still impressive and it is fun to get into the holds with the cargo and try to capture the sense of exploration with all the dozens of divers passing by. This can be tricky as the visibility in the holds degrades during the day, so early morning is always best before the crowds arrive.

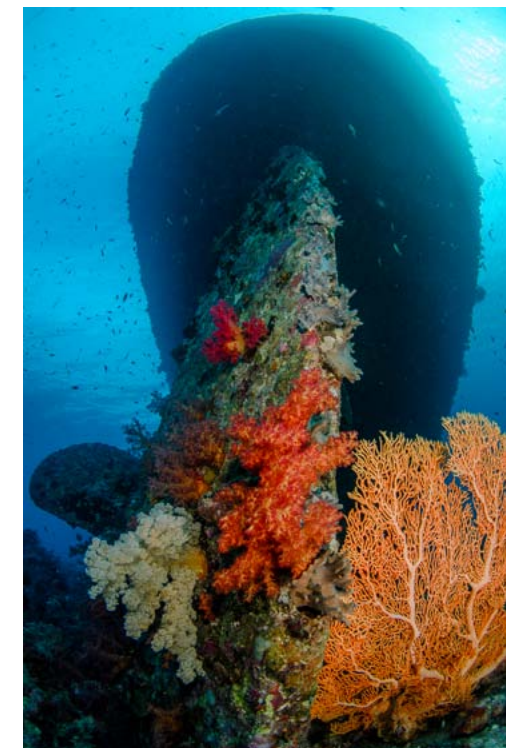
So after a couple of dives on the Thistlegorm we headed a little further north to the small reef system known as Shag Rock. This reef is the final resting place of one of my favourite wrecks in the area, that of the Kingston which was a graceful steam sailer that sank here in 1881. This wreck is sometimes referred to as the Sarah H which dates back to the time she was first dived by David and Sarah Hillel who ran the live aboards Manta Ray and Sea Surveyor in the early 1990's. Until the wreck was identified David named it after his wife, hence Sarah H. The Kingston was yet another victim of poor navigation when she ran aground on the northern face of this reef destroying her bows but surviving above the water for a couple of days before settling back and fully submerging fully upright on the reef slope. You need flat calm conditions



The holds on the Thistlegorm are of course the main attraction for most divers. If you position yourself off the main tour route beside a truck or motor bike you may find better visibility and the opportunity to use passing divers in your shot. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-200, f11 1/25.

to be able to moor on the north side of the reef over the wreck and once again the weather gods were smiling on us, but there is often a very strong current running north to south over the wreck and we could see that was the case as the boat settled on the bow line. If you are not aware of this you can be washed off the wreck and down the reef before you even start your dive and some of our group, despite a detailed briefing, ended up on a roller coaster ride down the reef! You need

to submerge and dive as quickly as possible and once you are close to the wreck the current will not be quite as strong. One of the best views of the wreck is the stern towering over you with its intact screw and rudder, now covered in soft corals and gorgonians. The best position to capture the stern shot involves swimming into the current away from the wreck and then looking for a colourful foreground subject. Returning to the wreck you can explore the main deck area which



A closer view of the rudder on the Kingston reveals soft corals and gorgonians that thrive in the strong currents here with the stern in silhouette above. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-200, f11 1/25.

is now populated by a wide variety of hard corals, reef fish, morays and a number of scorpion fish. The remains of the accommodation provide shelter from the current, but you need to plan your departure from the wreck to the down line if you want to avoid being carried away down the reef. A

hard swim into the current and then riding it back towards the down line works best for me, but if that fails then put up the SMB and wait for the pick up boat!

From Shag Rock we moved west to Gubal Island for a night dive on the barge and to be closer to our next wreck target of the Rosalie Moller. The barge is a very small wreck and has collapsed a lot in recent years, but is still a great dive as it is crammed full of marine life. There are many schools of cardinal fish here and it is a good spot to capture mouth brooding of eggs by the males in season. Two large morays are resident, crocodile fish, numerous lion fish (particularly at dusk) and it is a great spot to find stone fish, false stone fish and any number of scorpion fish. Don't ignore the surrounding low lying reef which does not look too promising but is a great place for macro critters including some unusual species of nudibranchs.

Early the following morning we were moored up over the Rosalie Moller which was sunk in October 1941 whilst at anchor waiting for permission to depart for Suez. In fact the sinking of the Thistlegorm and the Rosalie Moller were only two days apart by the same flight of Heinkel bombers, both ships had been defenceless against the air attack. The location of the Rosalie Moller is slightly deeper than the Thistlegorm and the seabed conditions are soft and silty so the visibility is rarely stunning on the wreck. Although one of the masts still remains upright teaching perhaps 18m depth, the main deck of the wreck is between 32-34m and you will reach 45m or so if you choose to explore inside the holds. Consequently this is a short dive and due to the depth and silt there is not as much coral growth as you might expect. As we were diving early in the morning the light levels

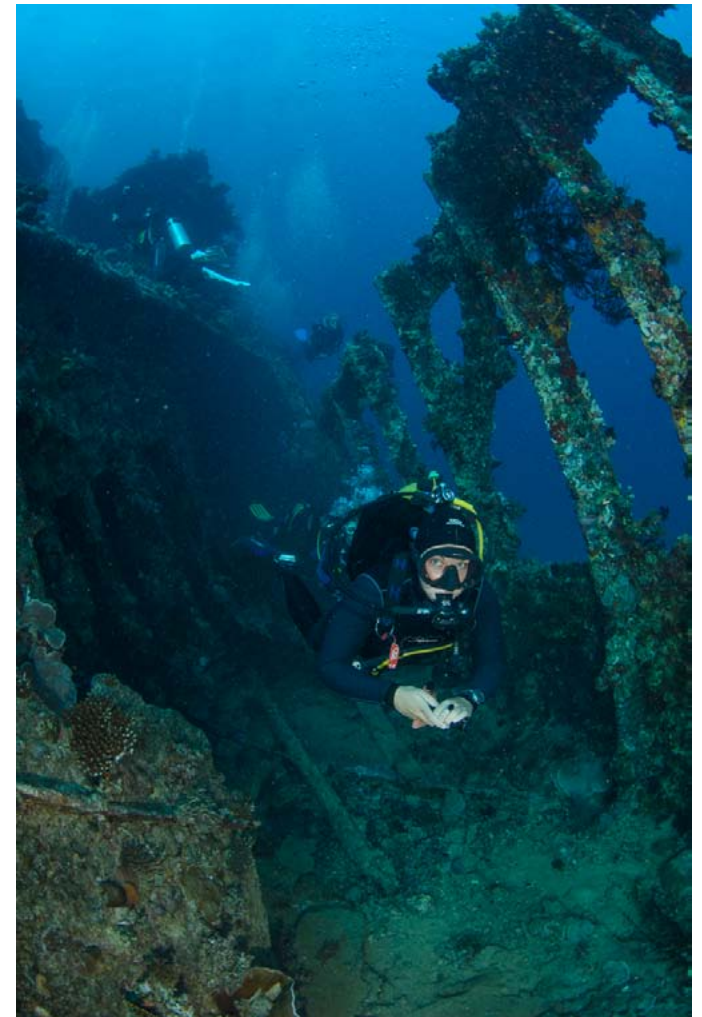


The Rosalie Moller is quite intact and sitting upright on the seabed. If you want to see the whole wreck in a single dive then you need to swim quickly or accept some decompression at the end of the dive. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-500, f11 1/20.

were also pretty low and I found myself shooting at ISO 500 to capture some natural light. There are some nice soft corals on the high points of the accommodation and on the masts and you may also be surprised by some large tuna checking you out as they appear from the gloom.

As the weather was remaining so calm we had the opportunity to visit a wreck close by that is not often dived due to its exposed location. The Ulysses lies in the north side of Bluff Point on Gubal Island and is normally washed by swells which can make diving here both uncomfortable and hazardous. So we anchored on the south side of the point and then made the transit to the wreck by RIB in calm seas.

The Ulysses is another casualty from the late 1800's and is a very similar steam sailer construction to the neighbouring wrecks of the



A diver explores below the hold of the Ulysses. The wreck is easy to penetrate at the wooden decks have dispersed long ago. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-250, f11 1/125.

Kingston and Carnatic with very graceful lines and a high swept stern. She met her fate on August 16th 1887 when she struck the reef and stuck fast. Although refloating the ship was not feasible most



The remains of the main deck on the Ulysses is covered in both hard and soft corals attracting many reef fish and predators like this lion fish. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-250, f18 1/250.



The stern of the Kimon M is decorated with soft corals which make an attractive foreground focus for a diver shot on the wreck. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-250, f10 1/100.



Much of the coral cover on the Kimon M is hard but there are little pockets of soft coral on the hull which stand out and make a great focal point for your image. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-250, f10 1/100.

of the cargo was unloaded in the next few days onto HMS Falcon which had arrived to assist soon after the wrecking. Shortly after this the ship began to settle and then eventually slipped down the reef slope coming to rest on her starboard side in 28m, scattering several large reels of cable over the reef which had been part of the cargo which has led to her the local name of the cable wreck.

The stern of this wreck is still largely intact lying on the sand just off the reef slope and is decorated with soft corals and tubastrea. The timber decks are long gone which gives easy access into the holds and hull which you can follow towards the bow area at around 8m on the reef. Although the bow is heavily damaged and collapsed the steelwork in the shallows is absolutely covered healthy hard corals and populated by swarms of reef fish. Within the wreck you will find the usual suspects - schools

of glass fish, hatchet fish, lion fish and even some nice orange gorgonians more commonly seen in caves in the Red Sea. However, silt is easily disturbed inside the wreck and if you are not one of the first inside then your images will suffer. Outside the main mast runs from the wreck to the seabed and it a good spot to hunt for pixie hawk fish, midas blennies and small pipefish. When you finish your dive here make sure you swim away from the wreck and the reef to surface as even with a very light breeze the RIB will soon be pushed onto the shallow reef.

From Gubal Island we moved back across the Gulf of Suez towards the Sinai and the infamous reef of Abu Nuhas, often referred to as the Red Sea wreck graveyard. Here there are no less than five wrecks, four of which are in easily diveable depths and lined up in a neat line on the north face of this

treacherous reef. Three of these are modern wrecks whilst the fourth, the Carnatic, hails from the same era as the Kingston and Ulysses.

We started our exploration at the eastern end of the reef on the wreck of the Kimon M, also known as the lentil wreck due to the cargo she was carrying at the time. The Kimon M ran onto the north east corner of Abu Nuhas at full speed on 12 December 1978 and it was immediately obvious she was not going to be salvaged. Fortunately for the crew a passing cargo ship, the Interasja, was able to divert and rescue everyone and then over the next few days salvors offloaded as much of the cargo as possible as the ship settled further onto her starboard side and slipped down the reef. Further salvage work was carried out in the following years, removing large parts of the engine and non ferrous items. Today the stern of the wreck is still



The bridge and accommodation area of the Marcus is easy to penetrate and open enough to allow some natural light in and even capture a passing diver. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-320, f11 1/80.

very intact and makes an impressive wide angle shot and also has the best selection of soft corals which you can capture in the foreground for tighter compositions. The ship is broken and collapsed in the centre as a result of the salvage work, but this does allow easy access to the holds and engine room if that appeals to you.

Just a little further to the west along the reef lies the very similar wreck of the Marcus. This cargo ship ran aground on Abu Nuhas in rough weather in May 1978, just a few

months before her close neighbour. This wreck is often mistaken for another called the Chrisoula K which struck the reef in exactly the same place in 1981 and only remnants of the bow of this wreck are left on top of the reef after a failed salvage operation. The Marcus still has her bows firmly attached and is the wreck you will dive. Further confusion arises when you note that both these ships were carrying a cargo of marble bathroom tiles and even stranger is that the chief engineer was the



The masts and derricks alongside the Marcus do not all belong to this ship. Some are left over from the abortive salvage attempt of the Chrisoula K which was wrecked in exactly the same location. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-200, f11 1/125.

same man on both ships when they wrecked! If you want to dive the remains of the Chrisoula K then she lies in 65m or so to the north of Abu Nuhas where she sank during a failed tow operation.

The Marcus also lies on her starboard side and the stern and most of the hull is still quite intact. The holds, engine room and accommodation are easily penetrated and it is possible to enjoy a long dive here finishing off on the bow in shallow water at the top of the reef.

The forward hold is easy to explore and still full of marble tiles and quite often home to a handful of lion fish during the day and a number of scorpion fish, so look where you put your hands! You may notice that there are more masts and derricks than there should be lying next to the wreck and this is further evidence of the salvage attempt on the Chrisoula K.

Next along the reef to the west is the oldest wreck on Abu Nuhas, that of the Carnatic which for me is the most attractive of the four. The Carnatic struck Abu Nuhas in September 1869 whilst en route from Suez to Bombay in calm conditions and at first remained stable and upright on the reef top. Thinking there was no immediate danger the captain decided to keep the passengers and crew on board to wait for the next P&O vessel, the Sumatra, to arrive on the scene from Suez. Unfortunately on the second day the weather changed and the ship began to break her back and slip down the reef and in the panic to abandon ship 31 lives were lost. The Carnatic had been carrying a general cargo including champagne and tonic water for the expats in Bombay, which led to this wreck initially being called the bottle wreck before she was identified. A much more valuable cargo was £40,000 in gold coin which mobilised an immediate salvage effort which



Inside the bow of the Carnatic you will find several schools of glassy sweepers often with red mouth groupers and lion fish ready for a snack. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-200, f13 1/125.



The Carnatic is the oldest wreck on Abu Nuhas and despite that it still retains its graceful lines. Penetration is easy and you may find remains of part of the cargo of champagne bottles which earned it the name of the bottle wreck until its true identity was confirmed. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-200, f13 1/15.

included the first use of the Seibe Gorman standard dress for a commercial salvage.

The Carnatic is still a beautiful wreck with a healthy covering of hard and soft corals, but the indiscriminate mooring of heavy live aboard boats to the wreck has taken its toll. Large parts of the wreck including half of the transom with its square

portholes have been ripped off, but the skippers and dive guides seem oblivious to the fact they are destroying a valuable resource. However, I still enjoyed my dive here despite the damage and the wreck still shows her graceful lines under the coral growth. Having made my familiar tour I spent a happy period watching some determined jack fish



The Giannis D can often be very busy on the stern section, so it is worth swimming off the wreck to look for a different image. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO-200, f11 1/125.

herding silversides onto the wreck and taking turns to charge in and snap up a mouthful.

The final wreck for us at Abu Nuhas was that of the Giannis D which lies on the north western tip of the reef where she was wrecked in April 1983. She now lies in two halves on her port side. The stern section is normally where the dive starts as many of the boats will moor to the large cargo gantry above the bridge area. This is a popular wreck

and the stern is often swarming with divers, so I like to swim off it a little and look for subjects I can place against the silhouette of the wreck. The bow section takes a few minutes of swimming over a debris field to reach but is worth exploring and is often quieter when the stern is busy. The bow mast is still in place with soft coral decorations and again a good place to spot blennies and pixie hawk fish. I am sure that many will have shot the stern and bow section in



Most divers want to explore the engine room on the Giannis D but there are other internal features which few divers visit which can produce some interesting images. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17 FE zoom, ISO-800, f5.6 1/15.

natural light, but if you are diving here around the middle of the day then it is worth swimming up from the wreck to capture this classic view.

So a tally of twelve wrecks in six days of diving was pretty good going, but if your interest is in leisurely photography then the pace is likely to be too much to achieve this.

It helps to have dived these wrecks many times before, so I knew what to expect and also had an idea of what sort of images I wanted to

capture on each dive. But having said that I still yearned for a second or third dive on some of these classics, so I will be looking for a slighter slower tour of few wrecks next time!

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