

Diving the Red Sea



With a living history stretching back several millennia, it's no wonder that so many tourists in Egypt never give a thought to exploring its underwater world. Of course, while landlubbers are busy sweating bullets and dodging touts in the desert, divers are plunging into the Red Sea's clear depths, and finding themselves surrounded by one of nature's most magnificent sights.

In 1989, a panel of scientists and conservationists chose the northern portion of this 1800km-long body of water as one of the Seven Underwater Wonders of the World. Here divers will find coral mountains, shallow reefs swarming with brightly coloured fish, sheer drop-offs disappearing into unplumbed depths and coral-encrusted shipwrecks, all bathed in an ethereal blue hue.

Indeed, the Red Sea boasts a legendary reputation among diving enthusiasts, and undoubtedly deserves its status as one of the world's premier underwater destinations. The two jewels in the Red Sea's crown are Ras Mohammed National Park, home to the 'Holy Trinity' of Shark Reef, Eel Garden and the Yolanda, and the WWII wreck of the Thistlegorm, a British warship first discovered in the 1950s by Jacques Cousteau.

The strongest appeal of the Red Sea is that you can tailor your diving holiday to your own travelling style. Independent travellers spend more time than they planned in the backpacker-friendly village of Dahab, and to a lesser extent Nuweiba, while package tourists enjoy their creature comforts in the resort towns of Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurghada. If you truly want to maximise your underwater time, there's no better option than a week on a dive safari.

Regardless of your travelling style, however, the Red Sea never fails to impress, and is one of the top highlights of any trip to Egypt.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Be overwhelmed at the magnificent underwater world of **Ras Mohammed National Park** (p447)
- Explore the remains of **The Thistlegorm** (p448), one of the top wreck dives in the world
- Push your limits by sinking into the deep blue abyss of Dahab's notorious **Blue Hole** (p446)
- Combine diving and Bedouin culture in a camel/diver safari from Dahab to **Gabr el-Bint** (p445)
- Spend your days sailing from one remote site to the next on a **live-aboard dive safari** (p453)



MARE ROSTRUM

Surrounded by desert on three sides, the Red Sea was formed some 40 million years ago when the Arabian Peninsula split from Africa, allowing the waters of the Indian Ocean to rush in. Bordered at its southern end by the 25km Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Red Sea is the only tropical sea that is almost entirely closed. No river flows into it and the influx of water from the Indian Ocean is slight. These unique geographical features, combined with the arid desert climate and high temperatures, make the sea extremely salty. It is also windy – on average the sea is flat for only 50 days a year.

In regard to its name (the Red Sea is in fact deep blue), there are two competing schools of thought regarding etymology. Some believe that the sea was named after the surrounding red-rock mountain ranges. Others insist it was named for the periodic algae blooms that tinge the water a reddish-brown. Whatever the spark, it inspired ancient mariners to dub these waters *Mare Rostrum* – the Red Sea.

Orientation

Diving tends to be concentrated at the northern end of the Egyptian Red Sea, although increasing numbers of advanced divers are pushing further south. The most popular sites are around the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, most famously the thin strip of land that juts out into the sea and forms Ras Mohammed National Park.

Another major diving area is in the Strait of Tiran, which forms the narrow entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba. The currents sweeping through the deep channel allow coral to grow prolifically, attracting abundant marine life. The reefs further north along the shores of the Gulf of Aqaba are also popular.

On the western side of the Sinai Peninsula lie the Straits of Gubal, a series of coral pinnacles just beneath the surface of the sea, famous for snagging ships trying to navigate north to the Suez Canal. This is where the majority of Egypt's shipwrecks, including the Thistlegorm lie.

Heading south, the best reefs are found around the many offshore islands. Although most reefs near Hurghada have been damaged by uncontrolled tourist development, there is a plethora of pristine dive sites further south.

Information

BOOKS

Lonely Planet's Diving & Snorkelling the Red Sea is a full-colour guide that includes detailed descriptions of more than 80 dive sites in Egypt.

Red Sea Diver's Guide from Sharm El Sheikh to Hurghada by Shlomo and Roni Cohen has excellent maps and descriptions

of sites around Ras Mohammed, the Straits of Gubal and Hurghada.

Sinai Dive Guide by Pete Harrison has detailed maps and explanations of the main Red Sea sites. Also good is *Sharm el-Sheikh Diving Guide* by Alberto Siliotti, with maps and ratings of numerous sites around Sharm el-Sheikh and Ras Mohammed National Park. *Red Sea Diving Guide* by Andrea Ghisotti and Alessandro Carletti covers Egyptian sites, as well as others in Sudan, Israel and Eritrea.

The Red Sea: Underwater Paradise by Angelo Mojetta is one of the better glossy coffee-table books, with beautiful photos of the flora and fauna of Egypt's reefs.

The Official HEPCA Dive Guide, produced by the Hurghada Environmental Protection & Conservation Association (Hepca), details 46 sites with artists' drawings and a small fish index. Proceeds from the sale of this guide go towards maintaining mooring buoys on the Red Sea. For more on Hepca, see the boxed text, p425.

INTERNET RESOURCES

GoRedSea.com (www.goredsea.com) A growing index of dive centres and live-aboards as well as links to jobs on offer for divers, and other information on the Red Sea.

H2O Magazine (www.h2o-mag.com) The website of the quarterly publication of the Red Sea Association for Diving and Watersports, with articles and updates on diving in the region.

Man & the Environment (MATE; ☎ 069-364 1091; www.mate-dahab.com) Environmental resource centre in Dahab where divers can learn more about the area's reefs and how to protect them. It also helps organise trash dives in an effort to keep rubbish off the reefs.

Ras Mohamed (www.rasmohamed.com) A comprehensive site on Ras Mohamed National Park, which includes

good background information on local corals and other marine life.

Red Sea Association for Diving & Watersports

(RSADW; ☎ 065-344 4802; www.redseaxperience.com; Hurghada) The goal of this NGO is to raise the quality of dive centres and other water sports throughout the Red Sea governorate.

Red Sea Virtual Dive Center

(www.redseavdc.com) Detailed descriptions of more than 73 dive sites.

Reef Check

(www.reefcheck.org) A membership organisation working to save coral reefs in the Red Sea and elsewhere in the world.

South Sinai Association for Diving & Marine

Activities (SSDM; ☎ 069-366 0418; www.southsinai.org) An entity similar to the Red Sea Association for Diving and Watersports, though with an emphasis on the Sinai.

MEDICAL SERVICES

El Gouna Hospital & Hyperbaric Centre (☎ 065-358 0011, 012 218 7550, 012 219 0383; Al-Gouna)

Marsa Shagra Decompression Chamber (☎ 012 218 7550, satellite 0195-100 262; Marsa Shagra) Located 24km north of Marsa Alam.

Naval Hyperbaric & Emergency Medical Center

(Map p423; ☎ 065-344 9150, 065-354 8450; Corniche, Hurghada)

Sharm el-Sheikh Hyperbaric Medical Center

(Map p463; ☎ 069-366 0922/3, 24hr emergency 012 212 4292; hyper_med_center@sinainet.com.eg; Sharm el-Sheikh; ☎ 10.30am-6pm)

Sharm el-Sheikh International Hospital

(Map p463; ☎ 069-366 0893/4/5; Sharm-Na'ama Bay Rd, Sharm el-Sheikh)

Hyperbaric specialists:

Dr Adel Taher (☎ 012 212 4292; Sharm el-Sheikh)

Dr Hanaa Nessim (☎ 012 219 0383; Hurghada)

Dr Hossam Nasef (☎ 012 218 7550; Hurghada)

Dangers & Annoyances

There is no government regulatory body responsible for overseeing dive clubs in Egypt, although two nongovernmental organisations – the **Red Sea Association for Diving & Watersports** (RSADW; ☎ 065-344 4802; association@redseaxperience.com), for the area from Al-Gouna south to the Sudanese border, and the **South Sinai Association for Diving & Marine Activities** (SSDM; ☎ 069-366 0418; www.southsinai.org), for all of southern Sinai – are increasingly taking on this function.

All dive guides must have a valid ID card from one of these entities, and in the southern Sinai, all dive centres and live-aboards must be members of the SSDM. However,

accidents still occasionally happen as a result of neglect and negligence. Before making any choices, carefully check out the club you're considering. Confirm with the relevant organisation that a club or guide is registered.

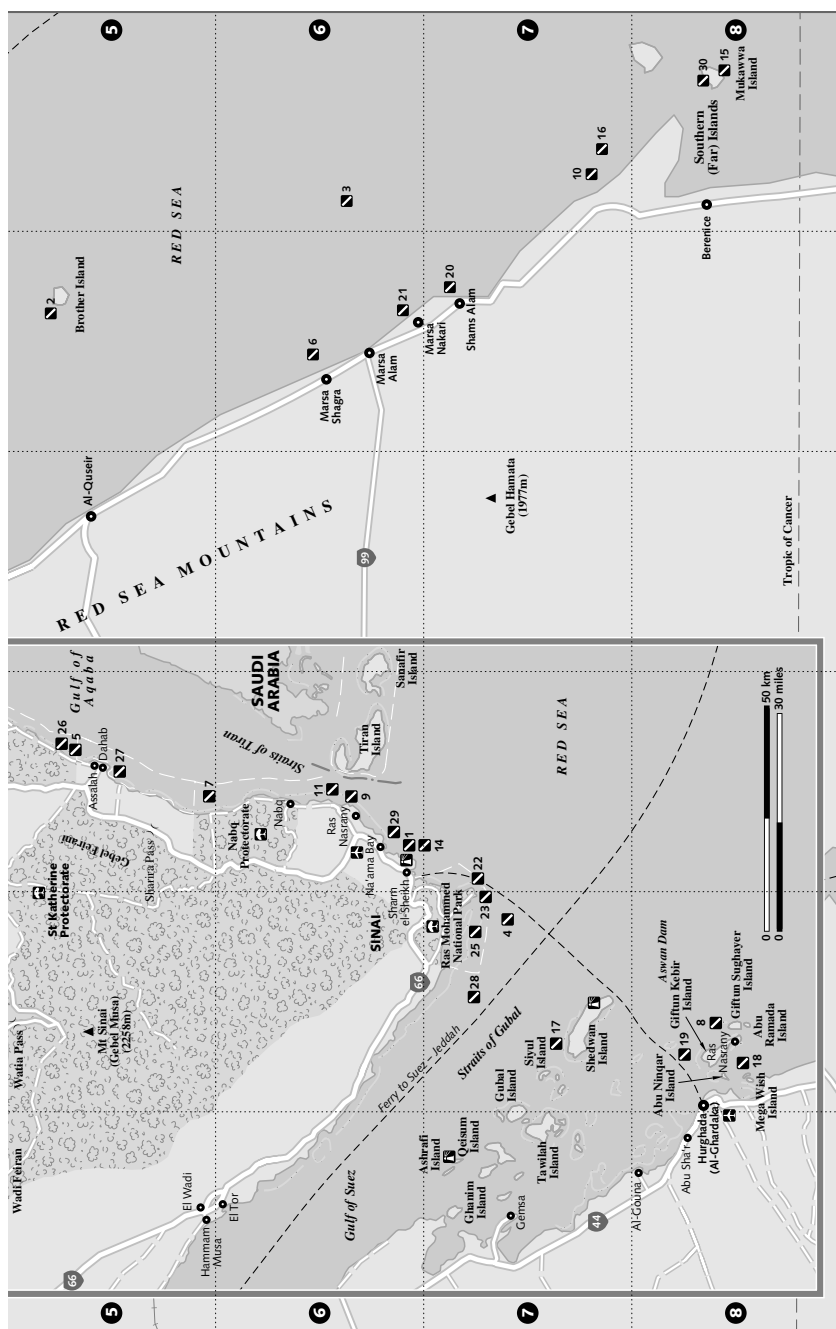
Before embarking on a scuba diving, skin diving or snorkelling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Possess a current diving certification card from a recognised scuba diving instructional agency (if scuba diving).
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of the local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local trained divers deal with these considerations.

Watching Wildlife

The Red Sea is teeming with more than 1000 species of marine life, and is an amazing spectacle of colour and form. Fish, sharks, turtles, stingrays, dolphins, corals, sponges, sea cucumbers and molluscs all thrive in these waters.

Coral is what makes a reef a reef – though thought for centuries to be some form of flowering plant, it is in fact an animal. Both hard and soft corals exist, their common denominator being that they are made up of polyps, which are tiny cylinders ringed by waving tentacles that sting their prey and draw it into their stomach. During the day corals retract into their tube, only displaying their real colours at night.



TIPS FOR SAFE DIVING

The most important thing to remember when diving in the Red Sea is to use common sense. More often than not, most diving fatalities are caused by divers simply forgetting (or disregarding) some of the basic rules.

In Dahab, where the majority of accidents have occurred, drink and drugs have often played a starring role in these tragic and largely avoidable deaths. Many of those who lose their lives are experienced divers who should have known better than to go beyond safety limits or dive under the influence. Others are divers who were not experienced enough for the situations they found themselves in. The next time you complain about having to take a test dive, remember that dive clubs have a good reason to be cautious.

The following are a few common-sense tips for safe diving:

- Don't drink and dive. Alcohol dehydrates, especially in a dry climate such as Egypt's, and increases your susceptibility to decompression sickness.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving. If you are taking prescription drugs, inform your medical examiner that you intend to go diving. Sometimes diving can affect your metabolism and your dosage might need to be changed.
- Dive within your scope of experience. The Red Sea's clear waters and high visibility often lull divers into going too deep. The depth limit for sports divers is 30m. Stick to it.
- Do not fly within 24 hours of diving. You also shouldn't climb above 300m, so don't plan a trip to St Katherine's Monastery or into the Eastern Desert mountains for the day after a dive.
- Make sure you can recognise your boat from in the water. Some dive sites get crowded and boats can look similar from underneath. It's not unknown for divers to get left behind because they didn't realise that their boat had left without them.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary tremendously from site to site, and that both daily and seasonal weather and current changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence not only which sites you can dive on any particular day, but the way you'll need to dress for a dive and the necessary dive techniques.
- Be insured. If something happens to you, treatment in the decompression chamber can cost thousands. The most reputable clubs will make insurance a condition for diving with them. If you hadn't planned to dive before arriving in Egypt, many of the better clubs can provide insurance.

Most of the bewildering variety of fish species in the Red Sea – including many that are found nowhere else – are closely associated with the coral reef, and live and breed in the reefs or nearby sea-grass beds. These include such commonly sighted species as the grouper, wrasse, parrotfish and snapper. Others, such as tuna and barracuda, live in open waters and usually only venture into the reefs to feed or breed.

When snorkelling or diving, the sharks you're most likely to encounter include white- or black-tipped reef sharks. Tiger sharks, as well as the enormous, plankton-eating whale sharks, are generally found only in deeper waters. If you're skittish about these apex predators, you can take comfort in the fact that shark attacks in the Red Sea are extremely rare.

The most common type of turtle found in these waters is the green turtle, although the leatherback and hawksbill are occasionally sighted. Turtles are protected in Egypt, and although they're not deliberately hunted, they are sometimes caught in nets and end up on menus in restaurants in Cairo and along the coasts.

As intriguing as they may seem, there are some creatures that should be avoided, especially moray eels, sea urchins, fire coral, blowfish, triggerfish, feathery lionfish, turkeyfish and stonefish. To help protect yourself, it's a good idea to familiarise yourself with pictures of these creatures before snorkelling or diving – single-page colour guides to the Red Sea's common marine hazards can be bought in hotel bookshops around diving areas.

DIVE SITES

Following are brief descriptions of some of the Red Sea's more popular diving destinations, listed from north to south – keep in mind that this list is by no means comprehensive. Although we've given a general indication of difficulty, you should always seek the advice of your dive guide when deciding where to go. Furthermore, remember that strong currents or winds can make an otherwise fairly tame site dangerous and at times undiveable.

Nuweiba

A major port town that serves as the departure point for ferries to Jordan, Nuweiba attracts significantly less divers than its more famous cousins in Sinai. However, there are a handful of excellent dive sites in the area, and Nuweiba does serve as a low-key base that attracts independent-minded divers.

RAS SHETAN

Location: 15km north of Nuweiba

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Shore

Although hard corals are not a strong point of the dive, there is a profusion of graceful soft corals between 10m and 20m, as well as the usual array of reef fish. However, the highlight of the dive is undoubtedly the contoured topography, including narrow valleys, sand-filled depressions and deep chasms.

SINKER

Location: In Nuweiba

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Shore

A stone's throw away from the Hilton Coral Beach Resort, the Sinker is a massive submerged mooring buoy designed for cargo ships, which was sunk by mistake in the mid-1990s. Since then, it has developed into a fantastic artificial reef, attracting a host of small, colourful species.

Dahab

Long dubbed the 'Ko Samui of the Middle East', the backpacker paradise of Dahab is a Thai-inspired collection of beachside hotels and restaurants. Banana pancakes and apple *sheesha* (water pipes) aside, the diving here is world-class, though independent travellers often use Dahab as a jumping-off point for dive sites around the Sinai.

THE CANYON

Location: North side of Dahab

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Shore

One of the area's most popular dives, the Canyon is a long, narrow trench that runs perpendicular to the reef shelf, and is home to prolific hard and soft corals. If you're an experienced diver, you can descend to the bottom of the canyon (30m), and then swim towards shore through a chimney and past the 'fishbowl' (20m), a small chamber full of billowing curtains of glassfish and anthias.

EEL GARDEN

Location: North side of Dahab

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Shore

Eel Garden takes its name from the countless garden eels that carpet the seafloor not far from the entry point of the dive – as you approach, the eels vanish into their burrows like synchronised swimmers. Although the eels are the main focus of the dive, other highlights include huge coral boulders, dense congregations of barracudas and big groupers and snappers.

THE ISLANDS

Location: South side of Dahab

Rating: Novice

Access: Shore

Just south of Dahab before the lagoon, this underwater *Alice and Wonderland*-esque dive site offers an outstanding topography of coral alleyways, amphitheatres, valleys and gulleys. The quality and quantity of coral is phenomenal, with all shapes, colours and varieties imaginable – from massive elkhorns to delicate table corals.

GABR EL-BINT

Location: 25km south of Dahab

Rating: Intermediate

Access: 4WD / Camel

What makes this dive so unique is the unorthodox means of transport you must take to get here – from Dahab, the journey combines a 4WD Jeep trip and a Bedouin-led camel convoy (yes, camels can actually carry full scuba tanks and a full complement of dive gear!). The dive itself features a dramatic seascape that is highlighted by a 60m wall cut by numerous chasms, faults and sandy ravines.

THE BELLS & BLUE HOLE**Location:** 8km north of Dahab**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Shore

The Blue Hole is Egypt's most infamous dive site. Carved into a reef just offshore, the Blue Hole is a gaping sinkhole that drops straight down to unfathomable depths – some say as deep as 130m. Unfortunately, the site has claimed several lives over the years, mainly thrill-seekers who took unreasonable risks, venturing well below the sport-diving limit.

An archway at approximately 65m connects the sinkhole to the open ocean – this is the trap. Solo divers, mostly Israelis who brought their own equipment here in years past, have attempted to swim beneath this archway. Victims have succumbed to narcosis, missed the archway entirely, lost all sense of direction or simply ran out of air.

If you leave the depths to the experienced technical divers the outer lip of the Blue Hole is full of marine life, and a reasonable plunge into the hole itself is somewhat akin to skydiving.

The entry point is at the Bells, a narrow breach in the reef table that forms a pool close to shore. From here, you descend through a chimney, exiting at 27m on a ledge that opens to the cobalt sea. If you swim south along the wall, a saddle in the reef at 7m allows you to enter the Blue Hole. As long as you monitor your depth carefully, you can finish up the dive by swimming across the sinkhole towards the shore.

Sharm el-Sheikh & Na'ama Bay

Near the southern tip of the Sinai and bordering Ras Mohammed National Park, Sharm el-Sheikh and the adjacent Na'ama Bay together are one of the busiest dive destinations in the world. Unfortunately, in recent years package holiday and upscale resorts have become the norm, though the diving here still remains world-class.

JACKSON REEF**Location:** Strait of Tiran**Rating:** Intermediate to Advanced**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

Midway between Tiran Island and the mainland, Jackson Reef is crowned with the remains of a Cypriot freighter, the *Lara*, which ran aground here in 1985. Home to sharks and large pelagic fish, Jackson Reef is a stunning dive, though you should always inquire about sea conditions as the currents here are at times dangerous.

GORDON REEF**Location:** Strait of Tiran**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

This reef is famous for the battered remains of the *Louilla*, which eerily sits atop the northern end of Gordon Reef. Descending from the wide plateau on the south side of the reef, lucky divers can spot whitetip reef sharks in the morning hours in a large circular depression known as 'The Amphitheatre'.

THE TOWER**Location:** Just south of Na'ama Bay**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Shore, boat or live-aboard

Named for the tower of fossilised coral that rises from the water on the south side of the bay, this site features a deep canyon with walls that drop below 120m. Between 15m and 30m, you'll find some beautiful coral pinnacles, while the shallower depths are home to several caves that can easily be penetrated.

AMPHORAS & TURTLE BAY**Location:** Just north of Ras Um Sid**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Shore, boat or live-aboard

Named after the resident wreck of a 17th-century Turkish galleon that went down with a full cargo of mercury, Amphoras is renowned for its ancient history and its stunning topography. Leaving Amphoras, you can easily drift into Turtle Bay, which is home to a sloping reef that attracts schools of fish.

RAS UM SID**Location:** Opposite Hotel Royal Paradise**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Shore, boat or live-aboard

One of the best dive sites in the area, Ras Um Sid features a spectacular gorgonian forest along a dramatic drop-off that hosts a great variety of reef fish. As you pass by the swaying fans, be sure to look out into the abyss as manta rays and whale sharks

have been known to occasionally cruise by Ras Um Sid.

Ras Mohammed National Park

Without a doubt, Ras Mohammed is one of the best dive destinations in the world, with superb and extensive corals and an unparalleled diversity of fish and other marine life. The national park protects 200 hard coral species and about 120 soft coral species, and is home to approximately 1000-plus species of tropical fish.

For detailed site descriptions and ratings of the park sites, check out the very informative www.rasmohamed.com.

SHARK OBSERVATORY

Location: Eastern tip of Ras Mohammed

Rating: Advanced

Access: Boat or live-aboard

Shark Observatory is a high promontory that is used to spot sharks in the surrounding waters, though the wall beneath is extremely sheer and there are no ledges to mark your depth – this is for advanced divers only. With that said, the wall is truly stunning, covered with soft corals and gigantic gorgonians, and there is a good chance you'll see a shark or two cruising in the distance.

SHARK & JOLANDE REEFS

Location: Southern tip of Ras Mohammed

Rating: Advanced

Access: Boat or live-aboard

This two-for-one special is among the most famous dives in the Red Sea, and rated one of the top five dives in the world – strong currents take divers on a thrilling ride along sheer coral walls, through vast schools of fish and eventually to the remains of the *Jolande*, a Cypriot freighter that sank in 1980. Although not much remains of the wreck, its cargo of bathtubs and toilets makes an interesting contrast to the deep blue water and surrounding reef shelves.

DUNRAVEN

Location: Southeast tip of Sha'ab Mahmud

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Boat or live-aboard

In 1876, the *Dunraven* was on her way from Bombay to Newcastle with a cargo of spices, timber and cotton when in seemingly good weather, she hit the Sha'ab Mahmud reef and sank to the bottom. Today, this enigmatic wreck is encrusted in coral, and home to

various knick-knacks including china plates, metal steins and jars of gooseberries and rhubarb among the detritus.

THE ALTERNATIVES & STINGRAY STATION

Location: Southeast tip of Sha'ab Mahmud

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Boat or live-aboard

The Alternatives are a 3km long stretch of seven coral pinnacles, which are sheltered from the weather conditions and home to varied wildlife including enormous leopard sharks and teeny-tiny nudibranchs. At the west end of the Alternatives is Stingray Station, marked by a large blocky coral outcrop at 15m, which is swamped with bluespot, feathertail and honeycomb stingrays.

Hurghada

In recent years, the reefs close to Hurghada have been heavily damaged by unfettered touristic development – experienced divers now generally prefer sites further afield. On a positive note, conservation measures are finally being implemented, spearheaded by groups such as Hepca (p425), and there is a chance that the situation around Hurghada will begin to improve.

SHA'AB ABU NUHAS

Location: Southeastern Strait of Gubal

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Boat or live-aboard

This group of small, submerged islands at the southern entrance to the Straits of Gubal has snagged more ships than any other reef group since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The most famous ships in this marine graveyard are the *Carnatic*, which went down in 1879, and the nearby wrecks of two Greek cargo ships, the *Giannus D* and the *Chrisoula K*, both of which sank in the early 1980s.

SHA'AB AL-ERG

Location: Off El-Gouna

Rating: Novice

Access: Boat or live-aboard

This huge horseshoe-shaped reef with a shallow lagoon is famous for attracting dolphins and manta rays as well as the occasional reef white-tips. The lack of strong currents and ease of access means that this is an excellent dive site for beginners, though veteran divers will still enjoy the towering brain corals and fan-encrusted rock formations.

THE THISTLEGORM

Location: Southeast tip of Sha'ab Mahmud

Rating: Intermediate to Advanced

Access: Boat or live-aboard

Built by the North East Marine Engineering Company, the 129m-long cargo ship christened the *Thistlegorm* was completed and launched in 1940 in Sunderland, England. Prior to setting out from Glasgow in 1941, she had previously made several successful trips to North America, the East Indies and Argentina. However, with a cargo full of vital supplies destined for North Africa where British forces were preparing for *Operation Crusader*, the relief of Tobruk against the German 8th Army, the *Thistlegorm* met her end at 2am on 6 October, 1941.

While waiting in the Strait of Gubal for a call sign to proceed up the Gulf of Suez, four German Heinkel He 111s that were flying out of Crete mounted an attack on the ship. The planes were returning from an armed reconnaissance mission up the Sinai coast, and targeted the ship to offload their unused bombs. One bomber scored a direct hit on the No 4 hold, which tore the ship into two and sent the two railway locomotives that the vessel was carrying hurtling through the air. Incredibly, they landed upright on the seabed, one on either side of the wreck. In less than 20 minutes, the ship sank to the ocean floor, taking along with it nine sailors out of a crew of 49.

The *Thistlegorm* lay undisturbed until 1956 when legendary French diver Jacques Cousteau located the wreck, laying at a depth of 17m to 35m to the northwest of Ras Mohammed. Cousteau found a cache of WWII cargo packed in the hold, including a full consignment of armaments and supplies, such as Bedford trucks, Morris cars, BSA 350 motorbikes and Bren gun carriers. Although Cousteau took the ship's bell, the captain's safe and a motorbike, he left the wreck as he found it, and proceeded to keep its location secret. However, it was rediscovered in 1993 when some divers stumbled upon its location, and it has since become one of the world's premier wreck dive sites.

The *Thistlegorm* is best dived on an overnight trip since it takes 3½ hours each way from Sharm el-Sheikh by boat, though dive operators throughout the Sinai can easily help you arrange this. On your first dive, you will do a perimeter sweep of the boat, which is highlighted by a swim along the soldier walkways on the side of the vessel. On your second dive, you will penetrate the ship's interior, swimming through a living museum of WWII memorabilia.

UMM QAMAR

Location: 9km north of the Giftun Islands

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Boat or live-aboard

A long, thin reef with a vertical wall plunging down on the east side, Umm Qamar is highlighted by three coral towers that are swathed in beautiful purple soft coral and surrounded by glassfish. Experienced divers will enjoy diving along the drop-offs, particularly if there are large pelagics cruising by.

GIFTUN ISLANDS

Location: Off Hurghada

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Boat or live-aboard

The islands of Giftun Kebir and Giftun Sughayer (Big Giftun and Little Giftun) are a short boat ride from Hurghada, and rank as one of the most popular dive destinations in the Red Sea. They are surrounded by a number of spectacular reefs teeming

with marine life, including Hamda, Banana Reef, Sha'ab Sabrina, Erg Somaya and Sha'ab Torfa.

SHA'AB ABU RAMADA

Location: 5km south of the Giftun Islands

Rating: Novice

Access: Boat or live-aboard

Also known as the Aquarium due to the mind-boggling abundance of marine life on display here, Gota Abu Ramada is a popular spot for underwater photographers, snorkellers and night divers. The site comprises two impressive pinnacles on a flat and sandy seafloor in less than 15m of water.

South Coast

As tourist development expands southwards, so too does the diving, though be advised that high winds and strong currents make the following sites best suited for experienced divers.

Since this part of the coast remains remote, most diving is done from live-aboards, though the lack of tourist crowds more than make up for the difficult access.

ELPHINSTONE

Location: 12km east of Marsa Abu Dabbab

Rating: Advanced

Access: Boat or live-aboard

Elphinstone has steep reef walls that are covered with soft corals, and washed by strong currents that are ideal for sharks – seven species reportedly frequent its waters. Legend has it that a large arch in the reef, between 50m and 70m down, contains the sarcophagus of an unknown pharaoh.

SHA'AB SAMADAI (DOLPHIN HOUSE)

Location: 18km southeast of Marsa Alam

Rating: Novice to Intermediate

Access: Boat or live-aboard

Nicknamed Dolphin Reef, Sha'ab Samadai is wrapped around a shallow lagoon that is home to a school of spinner dolphins. Even if the dolphins don't show up, the site offers beautiful coral ergs along the edges of the lagoon, as well as a series of caves and tunnels that can be explored if you are comfortable with overhead surfaces.

SHA'AB SHARM

Location: 16km northeast of Wadi Gamal

Rating: Advanced

Access: Boat or live-aboard

This large, kidney-shaped offshore reef has steep walls hosting rich corals as well as shallow plateaus on both ends – it is an impressive underwater site in regards to topography. Currents are strong, but marine life is excellent, with hammerheads, barracuda, groper, snapper and yellowmouth moray eels.

HAMADA

Location: Just north of Marsa Wadi Lahami

Rating: Novice

Access: Boat or live-aboard

Atop an inshore reef lies the wreck of this 65m cargo ship, which was on its way to Jeddah with a cargo of polyethylene granules (better known as packing peanuts) when she sank on 29 June, 1993. Lying on her side in just 14m of water, the Hamada is a fairly easy, though extremely picturesque, dive site.

SATAYA (DOLPHIN REEF)

Location: 11km south of Sha'ab Mansour

Rating: Intermediate

Access: Boat or live-aboard

The horseshoe-shaped Dolphin is the main reef of Fury Shoal, and has steep walls leading down to a sandy slope scattered with coral heads. In addition to a great variety of corals, especially in the uppermost 10m, there are also abundant pelagics including frequent schools of dolphins and sharks.

The Far South

Egypt's southernmost waters are home to four islands, all of which are coveted and highly challenging destinations for experienced divers. Only accessible by live-aboard, the islands of the far south are home to spectacular and rarely visited reefs – as veterans of these parts will tell you, once you've dived here, nothing else will compare.

BIG BROTHER

Location: 67km east of Quseir

Rating: Advanced

Access: Live-aboard

The most northerly of the two 'brothers', Big Brother has a small lighthouse and two wrecks lying on its walls: one an English freighter (the *Numidia*) and the other an Italian ship (the *Aida II*). Currents are strong, though the soft corals are stunning, and the marine life is varied and plentiful.

LITTLE BROTHER

Location: 67km east of Quseir

Rating: Advanced

Access: Live-aboard

This magical island has a long reef protruding from its northern end, which is a popular spot for cruising thresher sharks, silver tips, hammerheads and grey reef sharks. Elsewhere, there are huge fan corals, caves and overhangs, though divers tend to simply slow down and be overwhelmed at the sheer number of apex predators about.

DAEDALUS

Location: 96km east of Marsa Alam

Rating: Advanced

Access: Live-aboard

Lying right in the middle of the Red Sea nearly halfway to Saudi Arabia, this isolated dive spot is marked by a 19th-century British-built lighthouse lying in the centre of the circular reef. As you'd expect from a reef in the middle

REEF PROTECTION

The Red Sea's natural wonders are just as magnificent as the splendours of Egypt's Pharaonic heritage, and appear all the more stunning when contrasted with their barren desert backdrop. However, care is needed if the delicate world of coral reefs and fish is not to be permanently damaged. Almost the entire Egyptian coastline in the Gulf of Aqaba is now a protectorate, as is the Red Sea coast from Hurgada south to Sudan. Divers and snorkellers should heed the requests of instructors *not* to touch or tread on coral – if you kill the coral, you'll eventually kill or chase away the fish, too.

Overall, the paramount guideline for preserving the ecology and beauty of reefs is to take nothing with you, leave nothing behind. Other considerations:

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. Never ride on the backs of turtles.

of nowhere, the coral here is pristine, and there's nary a dive boat in sight.

ZABARGAD ISLAND

Location: 96km south of Ras Banas

Rating: Advanced

Access: Live-aboard

This mountainous island emerges majestically from the sea, though its tranquil beauty shouldn't detract from the fact that Zabargad has snared several ships over the years. Fortunately for divers, these wrecks, which include an ill-fated German dive boat known as the *Neptune*, lie at the bottom of a shimmering lagoon of turquoise water.

ROCKY ISLAND

Location: 5km southeast of Zabargad

Rating: Advanced

Access: Live-aboard

Exposed Rocky Island, with its noisy seabirds and breaking waves, lies just north of the

Sudanese border, and is one of Egypt's most far-flung dive sites. When the dive conditions are perfect, it's possible to see anything here – divers often jump in the water here and find themselves surrounded by everything from pods of dolphins to passing whale sharks.

DIVE OPERATORS

Whether you choose to plunge into the Red Sea with a small local shop, an established resort or a live-aboard, travellers will have no problem finding a dive operator. As Egypt's Red Sea and Sinai coasts continue to develop, the number of dive operators is mushrooming, and given the huge choice, there is something to suit everyone. Some clubs and live-aboards are laid-back and informal, while others are slick and structured. Regardless of which diving style you choose, however, you're going to get wet – and love every minute of it.

Dive Clubs

Almost all of the coastal hotels and resorts have a dive centre, though there are also smaller places – some long-standing, others fly-by-night outfits – cashing in on the area's popularity among divers. When deciding which dive club to use, the main considerations should be the club's attention to safety and its sensitivity to environmental issues.

Please be aware that there are literally hundreds of dive clubs along the Red Sea Coast and in the Sinai, so it's simply impossible to list anymore than a fraction of these. With that said, we have chosen dive clubs that have longstanding reputations of excellence, though there are certainly other dive clubs out there worth checking out.

Here are some tips to help you choose a respectable dive club:

- Take your time when choosing clubs and dive sites, and don't let yourself be pressured into accepting something, or someone, you're not comfortable with.
- Don't choose a club based solely on cost. Safety should be the paramount concern; if a dive outfit cuts corners to keep prices low, you could be in danger.
- If you haven't dived for more than three months, take a check-out dive. This is for your own safety (and is required by many operators), and the cost is usually applied towards later dives.
- If you're taking lessons, ensure that the instructor speaks your language well. If you can't understand them, you should request another.
- Check that all equipment is clean and stored away from the sun, and check all hoses, mouthpieces and valves for cuts and leakage.

- Confirm that wet suits are in good condition. Some divers have reported getting hypothermia because of dry, cracked suits.
- Check that there is oxygen on the dive boat in case of accidents.
- If you're in Sinai, ask if the club donates US\$1 per diver each day to the decompression chamber; this is often a reflection of the club's safety consciousness.

NUWEIBA

Diving Camp Nuweiba (Map p482; ☎ 012 249 6002; www.scuba-college.com) Located at the Nuweiba Village Hotel in the centre of town.

Emperor Divers (☎ 069-352 0321; www.emperordivers.com) Situated at the Hilton Nuweiba Coral Resort, this place is part of the multibranch Emperor empire.

DAHAB

Desert Divers (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0500; www.desert-divers.com; Masbat) A popular place offering a range of diving courses plus extras such as camel safaris, yoga classes and more.

Fantasea Dive Centre (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0483; www.fantaseadiving.net; Masbat) This long-standing Australian-Egyptian-owned five-star PADI centre gets consistently good reviews.

Fish & Friends (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0720; www.fishandfriends.com; Masbat) A small British- and Egyptian-run diving centre that is environmentally conscious and well managed.

Inmo Divers Home (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0370; www.inmodivers.de; Inmo Hotel, Mashraba) Run by Mohammed and Ingrid al-Kabany, this family-friendly outfit was one of the first dive clubs to start operating in Dahab.

Nesima Dive Centre (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0320; www.nesima-resort.com; Nesima Hotel, Mashraba) PADI. A well-managed and reputable club owned by local environmental activist and veteran diver Sherif Ebeid.

ACCESSING THE OFFSHORE MARINE PARK ISLANDS

Accessing the waters of Egypt's far south is strictly regulated. Divers must have completed a minimum of 50 dives before entering; night diving or landing on the islands is prohibited; and fishing, spear fishing and the use of gloves are banned.

Due to these restrictions, permission must be given for each trip, and a park ranger will often accompany boats to ensure that the rules are being enforced. In order to carry divers, boats must have special safety equipment, which national-park and Red Sea governorate officials inspect before each trip.

If you've been offered a trip to these remote areas, it's worth checking in with one of the organisations mentioned on p441 to see that the boat is licensed. If you are caught on an unlicensed boat you could have your own equipment or belongings confiscated and find yourself in custody.

WHERE TO GO?

With so many dive sites and operators to choose from, it can be difficult for first-time Red Sea divers to know where to base themselves. Here are our tips:

- **Nuweiba** (p479) Attracts independent travellers looking for low-key ambience and minimal crowds, though the diving here is not as rich and as varied as other spots in the Sinai and the Red Sea.
- **Dahab** (p479) The preferred base for independent travellers, this Thai-style village is surrounded by spectacular dive sites, and abounds with cheap guesthouses and chilled-out beach bars. It also serves as a quick and easy jumping-off point for diving Ras Mohammad National Park.
- **Sharm el-Sheikh & Na'ama Bay** (p462) Egypt's most famous resort strip is the most accessible base from which to access Ras Mohammed. However, Sharm has gone high-end in recent years, and primarily caters to European package travellers looking for Western-style resorts brimming with four- and five-star amenities.
- **Hurghada** (p422) Egypt's original resort strip, ageing Hurghada has been plagued by over-development and poor environmental management. As a result, serious divers now prefer to base themselves elsewhere, though there are cheap package deals to be had here.
- **Marsa Alam** (p433) This up-and-coming resort town is staking its reputation on its proximity to the south coast dive sites. If you're looking for resort amenities with a remote outpost ambience and the chance for desert excursions, this is your choice.
- **Live-aboards** For on-the-edge diving away from the crowds, true divers know that live-aboards are the only way to travel. If you're looking to explore the far south of the Red Sea (advanced divers only), live-aboards are your only option.

Penguin Divers (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 1047; www.penguindivers.com; Penguin Village, Mashraba) A popular dive club aimed at budget-travellers looking to have fun while saving a few pounds.

Sunsplash (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0932; www.sunsplash-divers.com; Mashraba) PADI. A long-standing German-run diving centre that has trained countless budding divers over the years.

SHARM EL-SHEIKH & NA'AMA BAY AREA

Camel Dive Club (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0700; www.cameldive.com; Camel Hotel, King of Bahrain St, Na'ama Bay) A respected club owned by Sinai diver Hisham Gabr.

Divers International (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0865; www.diversintl.com; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay) Large diving outfit offering a wide range of courses and dive excursions.

Emperor Divers (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 1734; www.emperordivers.com; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay) A branch of the five-star outfit offers a courses aimed at families of all ages.

Oonas Dive Centre (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0581; www.oonasdivers.com; Na'ama Bay) A popular centre at the northeastern end of Na'ama Bay.

Shark's Bay Diving Club (off Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0942; www.sharksbay.com; Shark's Bay) Also known as Umbarak, Shark's Bay is a Bedouin-run centre with years of experience and its own house reef.

Sinai Divers (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0697; www.sinai-divers.com; Na'ama Bay) Based at the Ghazala Hotel, this is one of Sharm el-Sheikh's most established dive centres.

Subex (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0122; www.subex.org; Na'ama Bay) CMAS, SSI. Swiss-based dive club at the Mövenpick Hotel with years of experience in the Red Sea.

HURGHADA

Aquanaut Red Sea (Map p426; ☎ 065-354 9891; www.aquanaut.net; Corniche, Ad-Dahar, Hurghada) Founding member of the Hurghada Quality Dive Club, a group of clubs that tries to maintain basic standards of safety and service.

Easy Divers (Map p426; ☎ 065-354 7816; www.easydivers-redsea.com; Corniche, Ad-Dahar, Hurghada) This British-managed club is active in local environmental conservation.

Jasmine Diving Centre (Map p423; ☎ 065-346 0475; www.jasmin-diving.com; Resort Strip, Hurghada) At Jasmine Village, this is another member of the Hurghada Quality Dive Club.

Red Sea Scuba School (Map p423; ☎ 065-344 4854; www.emperordivers.com; Resort Strip, Hurghada) At the Hilton Hurghada Resort, this is a highly reputable dive school.

Sub Aqua (Map p423; ☎ 065-346 4101; www.subaqua-diveteam.de; Resort Strip, Hurghada) Branch of Diveteam Sub Aqua at the Sofitel Hotel, which specialises in diving around the world.

Subex (Map p426; ☎ 065-354 7593; www.subex.org; Ad-Dahar) A well-known Swiss outfit, based near the California Hotel in Hurghada.

MARSA ALAM

Red Sea Diving Safari (in Cairo ☎ 02-337 1833, 02-337 9942; www.redsea-divingsafari.com; Marsa Shagra) PADI. Run by environmentalist and long-time diver Hossam Hassan. Hassan pioneered diving in the Red Sea's deep south, and has years of experience here. He runs three dive camps, at Marsa Shagra, Marsa Nakari and Wadi Lahami (see p434).

Diving Courses

Most dive clubs in Egypt offer **PADI** (www.padi.com) certification, though you'll occasionally find **NAUI** (www.naii.org), **SSI** (www.divessi.com), **CMAS** (www.cmas2000.org) and **BSAC** (www.bsac.com). Generally, PADI open-water dive courses take five (intensive) days, and cost between US\$250 and US\$370. When comparing prices, check to see whether the certification fee and books are included.

Beginner courses are designed to drum into you things that have to become second nature when you're underwater. They usually consist of classroom work, where you learn the principles and basic knowledge needed to dive, followed by training in a confined body of water, such as a pool, before heading out to the open sea. If you've never dived before and want to give it a try before you commit yourself, all dive clubs offer introductory dives for between US\$40 and US\$50, including equipment.

In addition to basic certification, most of the well-established clubs on the coast also offer a variety of more advanced courses as well as professional-level courses or training in technical diving.

Live-Aboards

The vast majority of the clubs listed can organise dive safaris to remote sites ranging

from one night to two weeks. The cost of these live-aboard dive safaris (also known as marine safaris) varies according to the boat and the destination, with the more remote sites in the far south generally the most expensive. While you won't see much of terrestrial Egypt, they allow you to access a greater range of dive sites, including many more distant destinations that are too far to explore as day trips.

As a general rule, you should always ask to see the boat before agreeing to sail on it. Also, if a trip is very cheap, check whether or not the cost of diving and food are included. Furthermore, the Red Sea Association for Diving & Watersports (RSADW) has the following two rules in place for its jurisdictional area:

- There should be a diver-guide ratio of one guide to every 12 divers (or every eight divers in marine park areas).
- Divers on live-aboards entering marine park areas must be experienced with a minimum of 50 logged dives, as well as insurance coverage.

While it's quite possible to book yourself a basic package on a live-aboard after arriving in Egypt, there are numerous agencies that specialise in Red Sea diving holidays. Here is a small sampling:

Crusader Travel (in UK ☎ 020-8744 0474; www.divers.co.uk) Diving packages in the Red Sea, including diving for people with disabilities.

Explorers Tours (in UK ☎ 0845-644 7090; www.explorers.co.uk) Diving packages and live-aboards around Sharm el-Sheik, Dahab and elsewhere in the northern Red Sea.

Oonasdivers (in UK ☎ 01323-648924; www.oonasdivers.com) Diving tours based at Na'ama Bay, Red Sea diving safaris from the Marsa Alam region and live-aboard trips.

Scubasnacks Diving Safaris (in UK ☎ 0870-746 1266; www.scuba-diving.safaris.co.uk) A full range of live-aboard safaris covering northern and southern Red Sea dive sites.

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