



Red Sea 7-14 July 2000

[Trip Report Index](#)

Photo galleries from the trip can be viewed by clicking [here](#).

Red Sea Divers

- Sam Cockerill
- Guy Hewitt
- Devin Mackenzie
- Ana Claudia
- Iain Smith
- Cat Everard
- Fiona Bottrill
- Ed Coney
- Tom Riley
- James Harper
- Ida Lister
- James Anderson
- Serena Dobson
- Rowan Woodhouse

With guest appearances by:

- Chris Redman
- Clare Hatton

Dive Guide:

- Sonia Goggel

Given the tendency of Egyptair's planes to fall out of the sky, it was something of a relief to find our carrier to be the less infamous "Sabre" Airlines. After a six-hour delay whilst a working plane was constructed from the salvaged parts of our two previous cancellations, we were able to disembark into the warm night air of Hurghada without major mishap. When our return flight was cleared for takeoff some 10 minutes early by the Egyptian ground crew there was some doubt as to whether this was due to rigorous maintenance or lax inspection. Though a cursory glance over the engines and wings as we boarded didn't indicate a serious shortage of either, I struggled to convince myself that the Hurghada maintenance staff would have used a more substantial checklist.

The remainder of our first night was consumed by a bus journey via the dive shop to our boat, Conquest II, moored two hours away in Quseir. No sooner than we had loaded our baggage onto the deck and fallen bleary-eyed into the bunk rooms down below, the captain decided the time was nigh, and the whole structure filled with the thunderous reverberations of the diesel engines as we began our week long voyage South.

Conquest II was a reasonably well-equipped dive vessel masquerading as a pleasure cruiser. Her main selling point was the slick arrangement of dive gear on the rear deck which, coupled with the zealous assistance of the boat's crew, made kitting up for each dive as simple as could be imagined. Reared on the routine of sites like St Abb's, where the harbour wall walk and the air fill drive conspire to make 2 dives per day an effort and 3 an achievement, this was pure indulgence to many of us. After a dive brief from Sonia, we would slip into a morning dive around 7:30am before the sun was too high. The crew would fill our tanks over breakfast, and following a snooze on the sun deck, a second dive would fit just before lunch around 1pm. After a third in mid-afternoon we would often have the opportunity to dive again in the evening, depending on the shelter offered by the site.

Heading south close to land, we occasionally passed a jeep safari shore diving the more accessible sites. With the searing heat of the mid-day sun, and without the shelter or sea breeze on the boat, I tried to imagine waddling across the desert to the sea with full dive kit on and was quietly relieved we'd chosen this option.

As a pleasure cruiser, Conquest II had some way to go. It emerged that the air conditioning could not be operated for more than a few hours per night. When the desalination unit or compressors were running, the air conditioning would be shut down entirely leading many to defect to a more temperate night's sleep under the stars on deck.

The boat did generate an occasional supply of 240V mains power for those who could brave the shocks delivered by the un-earthed sockets. This allowed the recharging several 'artificial sun' type torches for night dives, and the batteries of Guy's digital video camera. In conjunction with the saloon TV, this provided plenty of entertainment as the highlights of each passed dive were played over again.

Day 1 - July 8 - Mangrove Reef, Shoana (2)

Our first dive of the week is alongside a relatively shallow reef bounded by a sandy bed. With the early morning sunlight picking up every colour of the coral and resident fish, this really could have not been more glorious way to start. As we drop down in formation beneath the boat, silhouetted sharply on the sun-dappled sand below, we can see everything up to the 50m horizon where all contrast finally fades out to deep blue. Navigation in these conditions really is as simple as looking around and knowing where the reef is. Sonia points out occasional flora and fauna of interest, but there is almost too much to take in. Shoals of poetically named unicorn-fish circle at the reef wall, lionfish duel for territory, puffer fish hover nervously as we dwell and pass. A closer inspection reveals a couple of octopus, and on our return a crocodile fish has come to bask in the shadow beneath the boat.

The sheer proliferation of fish is incredible, and after our dive we pore over the laminated sheets on the boat to try and put names to them all. The reef has the feel of a busy metropolis where the individual creatures go about their day largely oblivious to each other but for a few business and social transactions. Cleaner wrasse pick at the teeth of their larger symbiot hosts, while pairs of angel fish dance with such perfectly choreographed symmetry, I wonder at first whether my eyes are playing tricks. Everywhere advertising hoardings clamour for attention: "I'm sexy", "I'll sting you", "I'm poisonous", "back off" "Maybe, maybe not, are you feeling lucky?" There is a conservation policy in the Red Sea that forbids divers to wear gloves, and I am accordingly disinclined to touch anything.

Day 2 - July 9 - Elphinstone Reef (3), Dolphin House

Named because of its shape, Elphinstone is a 400m long slender reef, arching to within a few metres from the surface and then dropping back to the 70-100m depths at each end like a huge elephantine tusk.

Appearing in several dive magazines before our departure, this was an eagerly anticipated site. The reef not only provides shelter and food for an abundance of smaller species, but by virtue of its form also amplifies currents which attracts a variety of large ones to come and feed on them. This creates an oasis of life several miles offshore, and though occasional day boats service this from the mainland our live-aboard provided us with a more comfortable day's diving.

On our first dive here we are greeted almost immediately by a 3' Napoleon wrasse. Conditioned to take food from the back of dive boats, it is a struggle to find space to stride in without landing on him. We descend along the east wall, an almost vertical drop to the deeper surrounding waters, and continue along the cliff face to the north plateau where this opens out before narrowing to a point and pinnacle at 40m. For the first time in my life I am separated by only a few metres from several grey reef sharks patrolling the reef walls with self-assured indifference to us. To my surprise, I feel only elation that we have come across such fantastic creatures, without a trace of nervousness. This I attribute partly to the pleasant effects of the nitrogen at this depth, and partly to Ed's dismissive assessment of sharks during our brief. "They're just a bunch of o-vergro-wn DOGFISH."

Our second dive follows a similar course, but returning along the west side. Expecting an anti-climax following our shark encounters of the last dive, we fin out to the point once more against a significant crossing current. Taking advantage of this is a manta ray, filters open, flexing his enormous wingspan to propel him with effortless grace through his invisible cloud of lunch. Banking 20m in front of us in slow motion, he returns to complete another circuit. We return along the wall where to our extended awe we are passed by two hammerhead sharks. Renowned for their curiosity, the first passes well below us at 40m, then returns for a closer look at 30m. It is fascinating to watch such strange, awkward shapes move with such fluidity.

Day 3 - July 10 - Gota Sharm (2), Dolphin House

A grazing green turtle is the subject of most interest on our first dive, carelessly munching away on soft coral as we huddle around to watch. It's easy to forget, strapped into our 230bar cylinders, that this creature is doing this on a single breath of air.

Our evening dive is further south at Dolphin House, a horseshoe shaped reef where a school of spinner dolphins gather each morning and night en-route between some un-known origin and destination. Before diving, we are ferried out by the Zodiac in our snorkelling gear for a precious few moments of free-swimming with them. This family of dolphin are so named because of their playful nature, and they are often seen spinning along their line of travel both through the water and as they jump. Mimicking this provides some curious interest for them, and they briefly pass underneath us, spiralling around the free-divers. Our aquatic ineptitude and presence are too much and either through boredom or intimidation our encounter is short lived as they head back out to open water.

Day 4 - July 11 - Elphinstone Reef (2), Nabaa Reef

On our return up the coast, we stopped once again at Elphinstone reef for another chance to see some of the larger residents.

Our first dive is a little unnerving, as the building current on the south plateau makes finning out and back hard work at such depth. The second is more relaxed, as we keep close in to the north plateau. We have seen so many moray eels, usually at least one each dive, but this time we were treated to a free-swimming encounter. Accompanied by an entourage of cleaner wrasse, he glides between rocks and corals with a soft rippling of his dorsal fins on the way to some hidden lair. Despite his impressive length, I can't help but wonder why he needs such a big mouth.

As we progress we come across another anemone in which a pair of clown fish nestle. These plucky little warriors are so aggressive for their size and so vigorous in their territorial defence, they remind me of Jack Russells as the male comes out of the anemone's protection to see us off his patch.

We moored up for the evening in Nabaa reef, closer inland where the shelter of the shore and shallows provided another ideal spot for a night dive.

Sea life is attracted by the glare of our lights, and we do not have to look very far for footage material. A blue spotted sting ray follows us for several minutes, and each time I look over my shoulder he sinks motionless to the floor at the periphery of the torch beam. Two lionfish enter the arena of our spotlights for an impressive display, though it's not clear whether this is aggression or passion. Huge parrotfish are strewn everywhere, lying haphazardly on the sand and under rocks as if their drivers have abandoned them for the evening and gone home.

Day 5 - July 12 - Elphinstone Reef, Abu Dabab, Mangroves (2)

Diving on the north plateau at Elphinstone is another incredible experience. There seem to be more sharks here than ever; black-tips, which tips, grey reef sharks, and most of them are larger than us. One circles the point with his jaws comically wide open - perhaps having a go at filter feeding for a change. Both divers and sharks are more bold, coming within a few metres without concern and rewarding us with yet more impressive footage.

Recalling this experience, it is with some concern that we surface from a later dive this evening to find the crew preparing our evening meal of fish and casting the various spare parts over the side, creating a tasty chum.

Day 6 - July 13 - Ras El Ajal, El Zereb

Through the week our tally of casualties remained mercifully low, and largely above the surface. A good proportion of us fell to various stomach complaints, exacerbated by the bottled water shortage towards the end of the week, whilst Devin and Ana sustained some impressive foot injuries early on when the sink in a phone-box sized shower cubicle collapsed on them. However, once again, the gold medal goes to Guy for his Triggerfish-inflicted finger wound. Though hardly life threatening, the style in which this was incurred and captured on video merits special mention.

As we fin along a sloping wall at 20m, the focus of Guy's digital zoom turns to a larger than average subject, which at this stage neither of us recognise as a triggerfish. As he closes in, sinking gently towards the 2' fish in a masterfully controlled approach, I notice the collection of eggs being aerated under its pectoral fins. The triggerfish is clearly uneasy about Guy's approach to its nest, and I consider giving a prod to move us on our way. Before I can act, something spectacular happens. Without further warning, the Triggerfish makes a sudden dart directly at the camera, and proceeds with a relentless bout of beating, biting, circling and thrashing. As Guy is enveloped in a cartoon-style knot of fins, bubbles and teeth, swiping at his aggressor and swearing so hard his DV falls out, I can't contain my laughter and, bent over double and mask flooding with hysterics can only look on in disbelief. Having made his point, the triggerfish returns to its station, and we retreat trailing small puffs of lood from Guy's finger, strangely green in this light. After establishing the extent of his injuries and regaining our composure, we continue the rest of our dive which is frankly rather pedestrian by comparison. Back on the boat, we found the video had been running throughout this harrowing experience, and the resulting footage will be at cinemas nationwide before the end of the year.

It later transpired that several divers had received similar treatment in varying degrees from this and other triggerfish on the reef - Tom got stuck into a boxing match with one, another knocked James' mask off, and Iain's squeak was quite audible when he saw one making a bee-line for his nose.

Day 7 - July 14 - Hurghada

Thursday evening had us back once more on dry land. After mooring up at Quseir and bidding our crew farewell, Sonia escorted us on our journey up to our Hurghada where our final night and day would be spent enjoying the luxuries of mains water and flushing toilets. The night's excesses at Papa's bar, adrenaline-fuelled quad-biking across the desert and attempts to trade various members of the group for 2000 camels are all to be commended, but belong in another story, and one which should be kept well out of reach of children!