

Hurghada, December 2010

Trip organised by Stuart Moore

Report by Alex Hoffmann

The Divers:

- > Stuart Moore
- > Tasos Avgoustidis
- > Ben Richards
- > Chris Rafaluk
- > Alex Hoffmann

Practical Arrangements

The practical arrangements by Emperor were very good. The mini-bus generally picked us up from the hotel at around 7:55 and took us directly to the dive centre, where we found boxes for our diving kit, with our names written on them, waiting for us. There were enough staff members to sort out weight-belts and to give us any additional equipment if necessary. Our (Nitrox) cylinders were also ready; we analysed them and within a few minutes we were in the boat.

Boats & Guide

Our boat for the daytrips was the Sea Dream, a comfortable 30m diving boat with very friendly and helpful crew; which was swapped for the slightly larger Asmaa during our overnight wreck exploration mini-expedition. Facilities included hot showers, which some of us didn't fully appreciate until the next day, when the weather got colder (sea temperature was always great, though, mostly above 25°C). Our guide, Serge, was very friendly and outgoing. He was a very competent diving guide with more than 2000 dives in the Red Sea, and he also happened to be an IANTD technical and rebreather instructor. He gave us daily briefings both about the boat and the diving.

Going Diving

Day 1: 11th December

Dive 1: El Fanadir

The first day's dives were at "El Fanadir", which, we found, was an ideal site to start our diving. The coral reef stretches several hundred meters along the North-South direction, starting from shallow waters to about 15m. There is a plateau at around this depth, the width of which increases as one moves from North to South, from a few to several tens of metres. After this, there is a second drop to deeper waters. Our first dive was at "El Fanadir, North", where the plateau is narrower, which allowed our guide to start our first dive at shallow depths for quick checks, and then to move across to the second drop up to a maximum depth of roughly 25 metres, heading south. This was a quite nice dive, full of colourful creatures. The water temperature was 25°C! We saw a pretty nudibranch, a couple of moray eels, lion fish, puffer fish, parrot fish, clown fish, a blue spotted sting ray, butterfly fish and many more. Dive time was a little over 50 minutes.



Dive 2: El Fanadir, South

The second, shallower dive was "El Fanadir, South" (where the plateau is wider) and we spent the whole of the dive on the plateau, with a maximum depth of about 16m. The shallow depth, however, did not impede us from seeing a host of amazing underwater friends. On the contrary it allowed some of us to dive for over an hour. This was also a very enjoyable dive with rich and diverse sea-life.

Day 2: 12th December

After an exciting first days diving we were all looking forward to a second day in the sun ... well, cloud. Chris and I managed to set our alarms in Egyptian time and so we had a leisurely wake up, including a complementary breakfast from the hotel which included some ominous scrambled eggs on very crispy bread. The orange juice was quite sweet, the selection of jams reasonable, and the chocolate-cereal-balls delicious. After analyzing our breakfast (and our nitrox ...) we sorted our kit and set sail.

Dive 1: Abu Ramada

- > Time: 52 minutes
- > Max depth: 29.3 m
- > Avg depth: 15.5 m

This was a beautiful dive site. We descended from the windy surface into perfectly clear, tranquil, 26°C water. Following our ever beloved leader Serge we swam down along the cliff face observing the huge numbers of reef fish. At about 25m depth we bumped into huge schools of bannerfish perched carelessly around blocks of coral. Computers beeped at us furiously as we neared our maximum depth of 30m, but we all definitely without doubt didn't break Egyptian law by going any deeper than this on our helium-absent gas mixes. I think Chris was narced at this point as he poked his tongue out at me.

Our safety stop was around a small wreck site which was a perfect way to wile away the time at 5m. There was a huge moray eel lying dormant in a dark looking box in the middle of the wreck. I was tempted to feed Chris to him.

After a warm shower and a quick drink, we were straight back into the sea for our second dive. It was to be in the same site, but in the opposite direction.

Dive 2: Abu Ramada

- > Time: 60 minutes
- > Max depth: 15.2 m
- > Avg depth: 10.1 m

This was one of my favourite dives for marine life, the reef was abundant in all sorts of "pretty/cute fish" - as Chris put it. Moray eels hid themselves in all available crevices, lionfish littered the shady alcoves and clownfish threw themselves at all passers by. One of the more exciting moments of the trip was when a rather large moray decided he fancied a swim, right towards the CUUEG divers. As Chris, Stuart and Lex hid behind a safe looking coral, Tasos and I stared the moray down. It was a close call, but thanks to our Sports Diver lecture on 'moray eel defense' we came out of the situation unscathed. The moray eel fled with his tail between his ... well, he swam off into a cave.

Our journey back to the boat included a brief romance with a clownfish, several blue spotted rays, a pair of stonefish and a large napoleon wrasse. Reports say the wrasse was as big as 2 metres long, but I personally believe I was exaggerating.

After the dive our intention was to move sites which allowed us some down time, which involved eating, sleeping and talking about diving. It's a hard life ...

The food provided on the boat was always fantastic. I wish I knew what any of it was, but what I did know was that it was all very tasty. We were given a wide selection of mysterious meats in sauces, pasta dishes, salads and all of it delicious.

Dive 3: Gota Abu Ramada

- > Time: 58 minutes
- > Max depth: 12.5 m
- > Avg depth: 9.5 m

It didn't seem possible for the marine life to become more abundant or diverse than on the dives we'd done, but our final dive of the day proved it was very possible. Our site was nicknamed the 'coral gardens' and it certainly lived up to its name. Our decent took us down to a vast expanse of live rock scattered with fish of all sorts. There were more shoals of fish at this site, and at one point I was entirely surrounded by a school of small barracuda.

After a lengthy swim round the gardens we started making our way back, being sure to keep a watchful eye out for the oceanic white tip which was no doubt keeping an eye on us from the blue.

All in all a hugely successful trip, I really enjoyed it. From the diving to the food and the company, it was one of the best weeks I've had. Thanks guys for making the trip so enjoyable and Stuart for organising it!



Day 3: 13th December

The next couple of days were set aside for the much-anticipated overnight trip to the Thistlegorm, resting on the seabed at a depth of 30m, as well as to a couple of other wrecks on our return. During this mini-expedition on the Asmaa live-aboard, we were accompanied by Walter from the Netherlands, as well as by Ben, an aspiring PADI Dive Master and Ezter, another Emperor guide. Our kit was quickly transferred to this the Asmaa, and we only had to re-assemble the weight-belts. Also, the Asmaa was equipped with a compressor, such that we only embarked a 15L cylinder each, which could readily be refilled and blended to the appropriate mix onboard. We left Hurghada shortly after 09:00 o'clock, after refuelling in the Old Marina, due north for a predicted 6h journey towards the Sinai Peninsula. The usual tasty lunch was served at 12:00 and we arrived on-site ahead of time at 14:00; a few other dive boats already anchored to the Thistlegorm. Mooring is indeed the less enjoyable part for the dive guides: the boat has to be attached to the wreck during a sequence of up to three quick ascent dives to roughly 25m, sometimes during episodes of rather strong currents, and symptoms of DCI have been suffered by more than one after the exercise.

The SS Thistlegorm was a British armed Merchant Navy ship sunk on 6th October 1941 near Ras Muhammad, where it moored, after two bombs had been dropped on hold 4 by a German aircraft searching for troop carriers. It had sailed from Glasgow and was set for Alexandria, had gone around South Africa and transported two steam locomotives with tenders for the Egyptian railways and cargo for the Allied Forces (Western Desert Force) in Egypt, predominantly trucks, armoured vehicles, motorcycles, radio equipment, aircraft parts, Wellington boots, guns, rifles and ammunition (the cargo remains well preserved even today). Due to the force of the explosion which set off some of the ammunition in hold 4, one of the locomotives was blown off to the port side of the wreck. Cousteau was the first to rediscover and to explore the wreck in the early fifties, before it sunk into oblivion again until the Thistlegorm started to be exploited for recreational dive tourism in the nineties. It now figures as one of the top wreck diving destinations in the world. An interesting documentary to increase the anticipation may well be BBC's 'Last Voyage of the Thistlegorm'.

Our first dive of the day was a familiarization dive of the vessel at 16:00, to a maximum depth of roughly 27m (17m average depth). We descended on the rope anchoring us to the stern (actually the prop shaft at the aft end of the blast area) and explored the starboard side of the ship, past the armoured vehicles and ammunition lying in the blast wreckage, through side corridors, without penetrating into the ship, towards the coal tender along hold 2. We descended into hold 2 to catch a glimpse of the cargo, before continuing aloft towards and into hold 1. We then proceeded towards the second rope fixed on the bow's railing and ascended after a dive time of 35-40 minutes. Overall, a fascinating dive - and strongly recommended before venturing into the wreck or onto it at night.



After sunset at 19:30, we submerged again for what was the first combined deep-wreck-night dive for some of us. The water was pitch black, currents were stronger than on the previous dive and we were advised to deploy a DSMB should we get separated or caught by a current - probably a reasonable challenge in the disorientating darkness. We needed at least three torches per buddy pair, Tasos was concerned about the shark and Walter's DSMB spool got separated whilst clinging onto a rope in the water along the Amsaa, which took him and Lex a considerable amount of time and effort to retrieve before they could start the descent. We dived down the rope anchored on the bow and investigated this part of the vessel amongst a horde of inquisitive lion fish. The buddy pairs had got separated quite early during the dive. We had a look down into the cargo bay from hold 1 before proceeding portside towards the blast wreckage and eventually towards the guns at stern, which were difficult to identify in the darkness. We ascended the stern rope after a dive time of about 40 minutes to similar maximum and average depths as before - where a very welcoming dinner awaited us on the Amsaa. To some of us probably the most stressful, though definitely the most impressive, dive of the Egypt expedition.

Day 4: 14th December

We were woken up at 5:15am by Serge, to see the sun rise and go for an early morning dive. Although we weren't too keen on waking up, at least the boat had been steady overnight - Stuart could have sworn he was on dry land - so we'd slept well.

We dived down on the same rope as on the first dive and swam round the stern to look at the guns there - one a giant and very obvious machine gun, the other a long barrel sticking out of the superstructure. We then went forward on the port side, and into a gap in the forward blast damaged hold, which allows you to swim through to hold 2's lower level. The swimthrough itself is easy enough, but there's not much to see before you get to hold 2 and it took a while to get the group there.

Hold 2's lower level contained jeeps with the infamous welly boots and weaponry, as well as motor bikes and tractors. As Stuart's and Chris's air was a little low, we proceeded round the upper level of hold 2 rather than going onto hold 1's lower level. We then headed forward, and went into a room in the superstructure near the bow with the doorway just above hold 1 (don't bother, nothing much to see) before Stuart and Chris left the rest of the group and headed up the line to the boat. On their stop, Chris spotted a tiny, circle shaped fish (about 7mm diameter) which was hanging around nibbling our boat's line. There were also huge shoals of batfish hanging around. The rest of the group proceeded back portside towards the blast area, not missing out on the bridge and the Captain's quarters with the famous bathtub.

Serge released the Asmaa from the Thistlegorm, then joined us for breakfast - an excellent spread of pancakes, scrambled egg, bread, pastries, salad and cheese. We started off towards Abu Nahas by about 08:00, and most people took the opportunity for a snooze.

Our next wreck, the Chrisola K, was a cargo ship carrying many granite floor tiles, still visible stacked up and with "MADE IN ITALY" stamped underneath. The holds provide many interesting opportunities for large and narrow swimthroughs round the sides, with plenty of hard and soft corals making their homes on the ship, and again many batfish. Somewhere in the wreck is a workshop with a pillar drill and lathe - which some found and others did not. Some parts of the wreck reach 4-5m, giving us something to look at whilst coming up a DSMB. The rather large depth difference on some of the swimthroughs catered for slight trim difficulties with a drysuit. It was a good wreck - but by no means as good as our next one, the Giannis D.

Giannis D is now found in two parts, fore and aft, with some wreckage between them. Our dive was on the stern section, which has a large superstructure and a crane remaining, all leaning strongly to port side. We went to the stern to look for the prop (couldn't see it), then inside the superstructure through doors to the port side of the stern, immediately turning right through a doorway, to enter the large engine room. This is the real highlight of this wreck - 3 stories with grid walkways and stairways between them, at an angle that would make MC Escher proud, with many dials, switches and valves on the wall. The swimthrough itself isn't too cramped - plenty of room for several buddy teams - and we exited by going up and through a skylight near the base of the funnel. The funnel itself has a large opening on both sides, one of which is easily visible, the other more obscured by coral, and there are many corals and lots of life here worth looking at. The crane goes up to about 3m below the surface, and parts of the deck to about 5m, again meaning plenty of interest to look at whilst doing stops. An amazing dive, definitely recommended again.

We then set off for Hurgada, a largely uneventful journey until about 5 minutes from Port, where the Captain managed to put us onto a reef. The Zodiacs (RIBs) came out, and with them pushing us sideways we managed to get free - but not before the Emperor Sea Dream had come out to offer assistance/snigger (its Captain had managed to do the same 2 weeks earlier!)

We made it back into Port without sinking; Serge said that if the Asmaa sunk overnight he'd run a discounted PADI search and recovery course for us, but it turned out it wasn't necessary!

Day 5: 15th December

The first dive of the day was at "Abu Ramada Cave". We were joined by two PADI open water divers. The site consisted of a small plateau that ranged from 15-25m getting narrower towards the end where it finished which a small "cave". We dived down and swam into a fairly strong current to reach the cave. On the way there were lots of corals but not much life to see. However a sea turtle appeared out of nowhere gliding gracefully along the current at about 23m. It was completely unphased by humans and we were able to drift along with it. Unfortunately for the PADI divers they were limited to 18m so had to watch and couldn't get quite as close. After we'd finished with the turtle we turned back into the current and swam to the cave. The cave contained several shoals of colourful fish but the effort against the current wasn't really worth it. We drifted back at 12m and saw much more life than on the way there. There was a particularly large eel hiding in an overhang that was nice to see. Dive time was about 40minutes.

During the usual excellent lunch on the boat we moved site to "El Aruk Giftun". This site consisted of a series of mini reefs at about 10m. This site was teeming with life. There were loads of small pretty-to-look-at fish as well as several lionfish and an eel. It was a very relaxing dive with lots of opportunities for photography.



In the evening we went searching for a kebab restaurant we had been recommended. We turned left out of sea garden then left on to the main stretch and along the stretch for a long way and left when the stretch eventually forked. We passed a kebab takeaway that we later found out to serve very good kebabs but did not manage to find the restaurant. We were later told that we needed to walk a lot further to get to it. Instead we ate at a Egyptian restaurant opposite the kebab shop which was nice and inexpensive (only about 120LE each).

What we should have brought

A few things that we should have brought with us, but didn't - leading to extra costs there:

- > Spare batteries for dive computers (they're very difficult to get in Hurghada)
- > DSMBs (on reef dives, not really necessary, as you can ascend safely next to the reef - but on wreck dives they are highly recommended - especially given the chance of a high current on the Thistlegorm)
- > Torches & spares (essential for the night dive - you need a minimum of 3 working torches per pair).
- > Drysuits for those who don't own wetsuits. Although the latter may be slightly more comfortable and absolutely sufficient for Red Sea diving in December, a drysuit worn with light clothing (track suit) underneath is definitely no excess, and was even more so appreciated from the second day onwards when the winds started to pick up and the airs chilled down slightly

Organisational Details

- > Flights were booked through Easy Jet, each person getting their own. They offer an extra dive bag as luggage for £18 each way, giving an allowance of 32kg in total.
 - > The club is part of the BSAC Discount Program for Emperor Divers, giving us a deal on dives and accommodation. We initially booked 5 days diving and 7 nights accommodation, when the flight times back allowed 6 days diving, and 27 hours out of the water before flying; we booked an extra day's diving while we were there for €44/head - we could have got a slightly better deal booking it beforehand.
 - > The Sea Garden hotel was basic but fine; the triple room was no larger than the twin room despite the extra bed, so consider putting people in twins if possible. It's a short walk from the Marina, providing various restaurants and bars - these were generally good; we were paying 150LE - 200LE per night for 2-3 courses plus drinks, but far cheaper deals are available if you walk into town and away from the Marina.
 - > Stuart and Tasos travelled on to Luxor for 3 nights after Hurghada and returned to the UK from there. The 4 hour private transfer was organised through Emperor and cost 600LE altogether, in a standard car. If you're interested by ancient Egyptian tombs and temples, Luxor is amazing; we stayed cheaply at the, [Nefertiti hotel](http://www.nefertitihotel.com/) (<http://www.nefertitihotel.com/>), which comes highly recommended; you could see most of the good bits in 2 - 2.5 days if you wanted to.
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