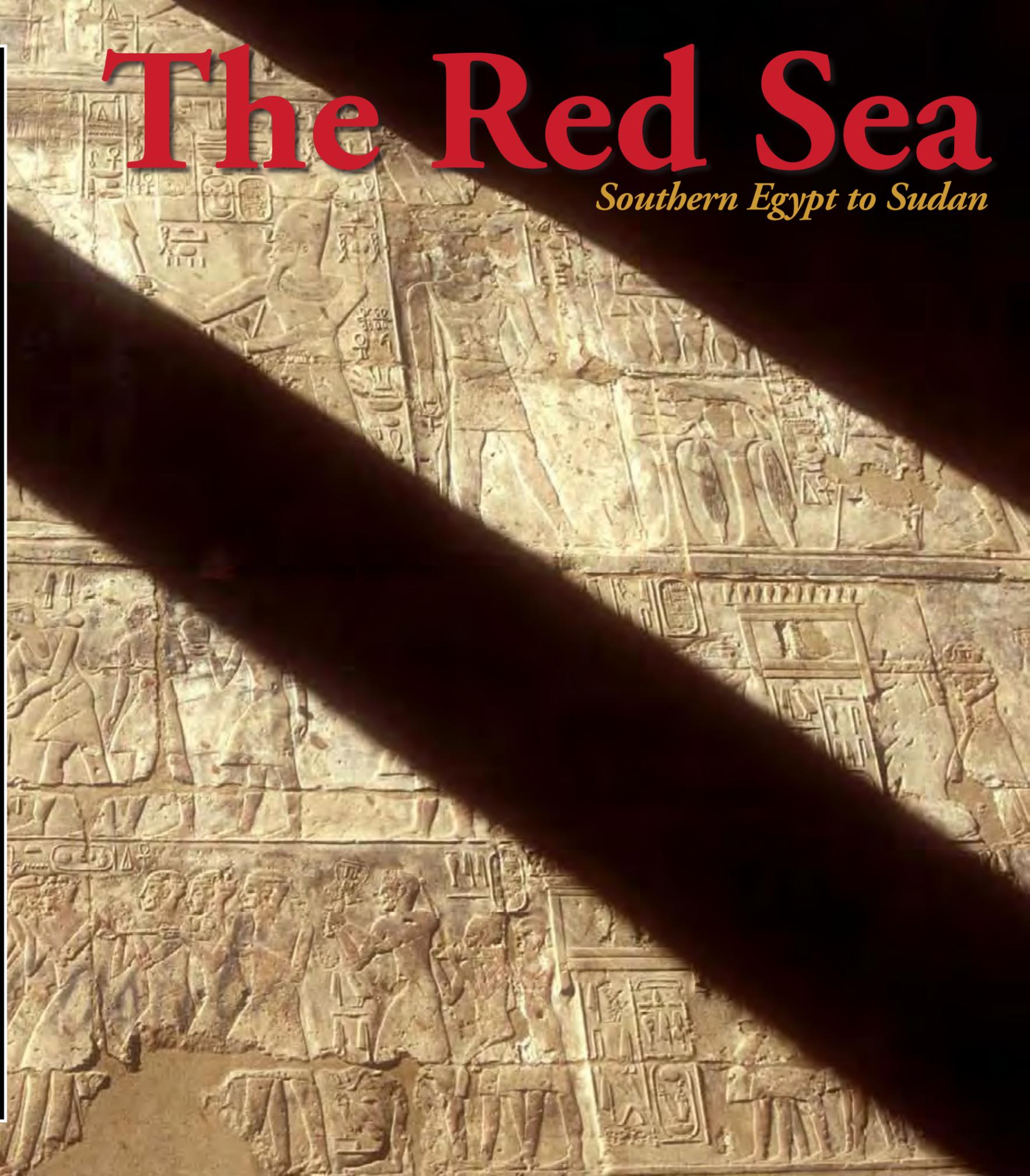


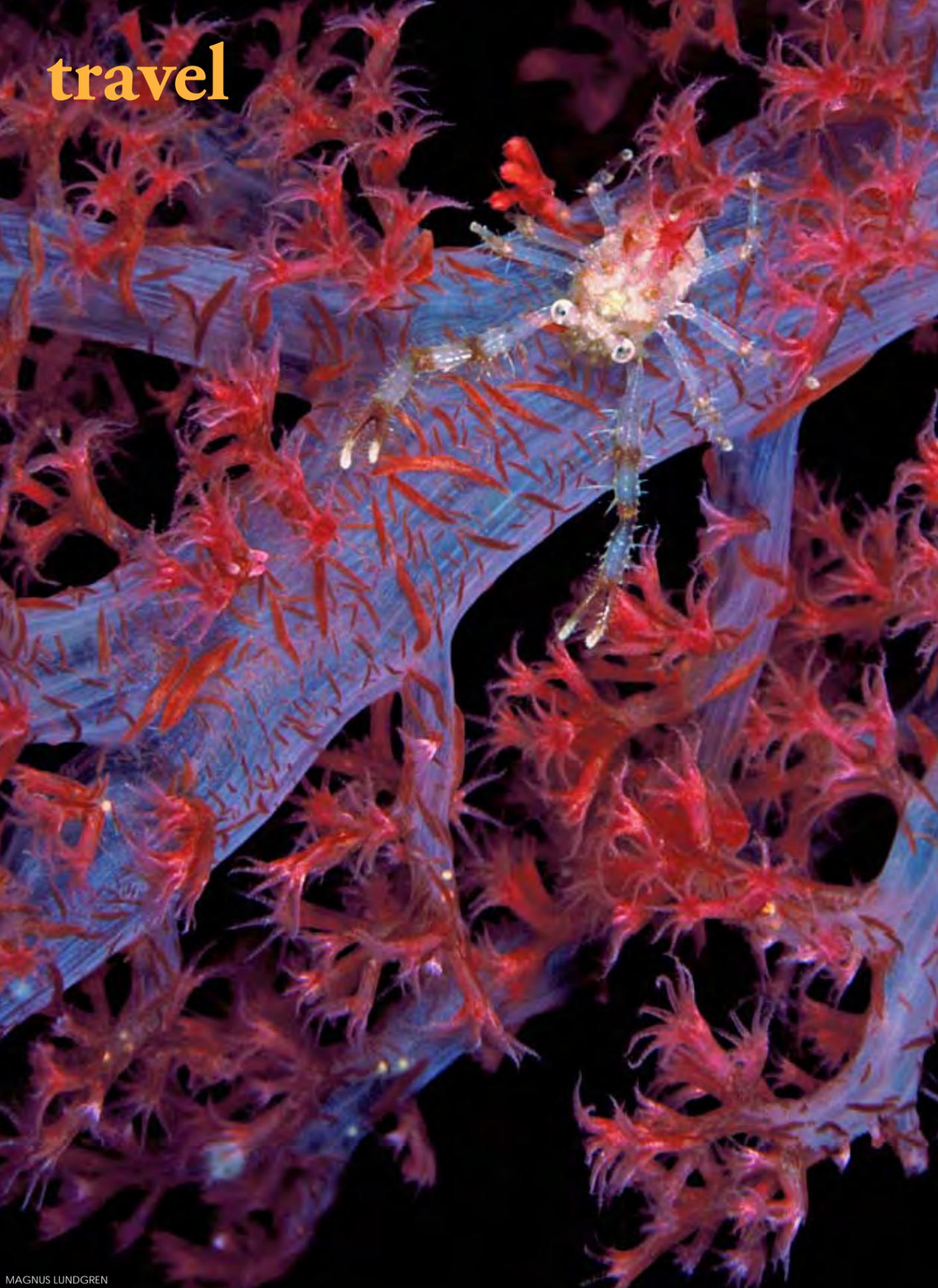
The Red Sea

Southern Egypt to Sudan



MAGNUS LUNDGREN

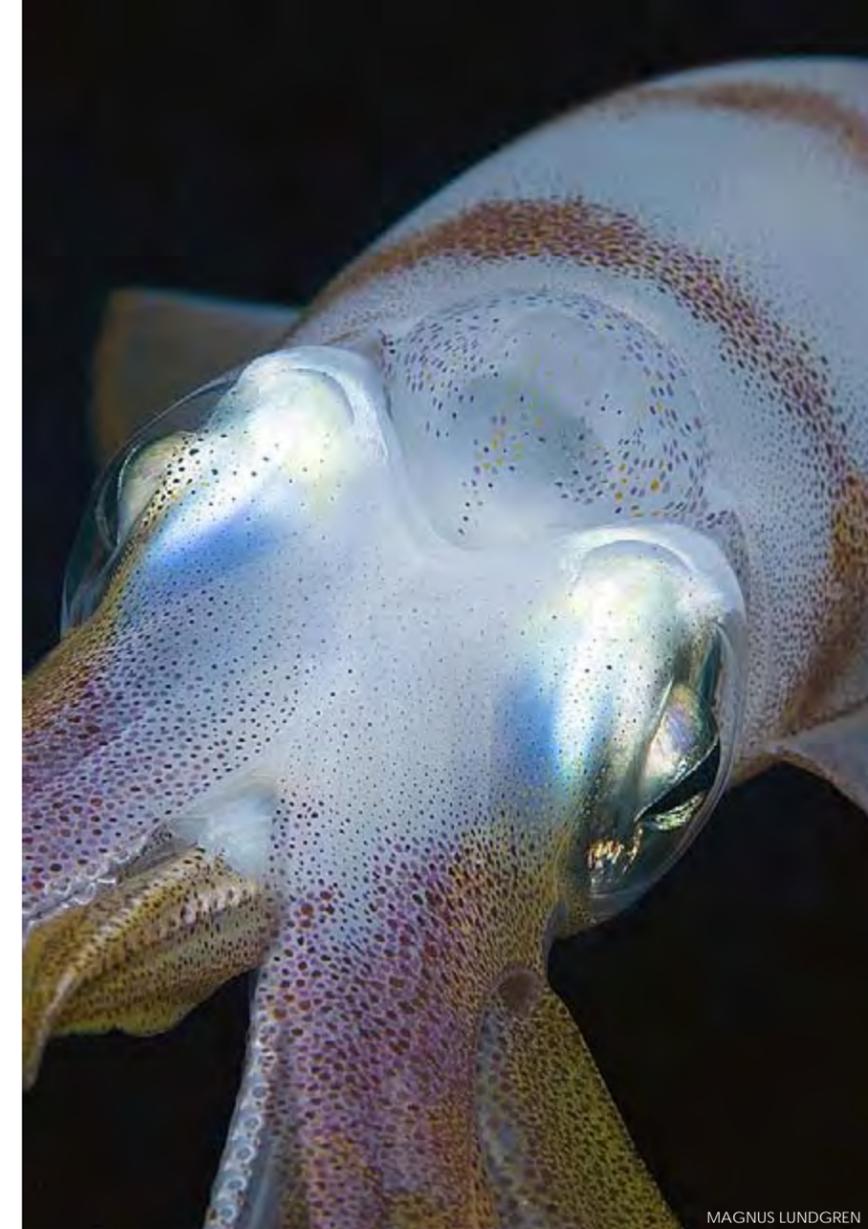




The Red Sea

Text by Peter Symes
Photos by Peter Symes
and Magnus Lundren

There is something special about it, the Red Sea, that I have not found anywhere else on the planet. Granted every destination has its own, but here there is this special ambience of timeless mystique, of remoteness and rugged adventure that just hangs thick in the atmosphere with a whiff of historical greatness and millenias past, topped up with a scent of spices and a distant smell of charcoal from a campfire, or perhaps a *sisha*—a waterpipe. Once you get past the sprawling resorts that now send their sprouting tubers and seeds out along the barren coastline—yes, they do market this place aggressively as the “Red Sea Riviera”—you suddenly find yourself in a land where time just seems to cease to exist. The sun wanders across the sky, so does the moon, but what day is it? Out in the desert, who cares? Who is there to care anyway, save for a few scattered Bedouins?



MAGNUS LUNDGREN



PETER SYMES

Despite its relative proximity to Europe and the ever increasing convenience and affordability of cheap direct flights, once you head out of the resort areas, you can still wander off and turn around the next corner, or anchor behind the next reef and see no other people or boats in the horizon—nothing but dry and magnificent wilderness. This goes both for what is above and below the surface, but what a contrast. Above the surface, it is dry, reddish and scorched by the merciless sun under which only mad dogs and Englishmen stray during the height of the day; every other sensible creature is hiding. Below the surface, it is like a garden of Eden, rich in vibrant colour and teeming with energetic life.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Squat lobster; Egyptian sisha; Squid. PREVIOUS PAGE: Egyptian hieroglyphs. INSET: Diver explores Lahami cave. NEXT PAGE: Diver explores a wreck at Brothers Island





LEFT TO RIGHT: Dugong face with underwater photographer lurking in the background; Closeup of a goby on soft coral

Sitting on the deck of a Red Sea liveaboard after a good day's diving, enjoying a pensive moment of après-diving and a cool drink as glowing red sun sets over the Egyptian desert, is the epitome of escapism. Pondering who wandered those mountains in biblical times or during the reign of the pharaohs blend in and out of reflections on the day's experiences down in the blue realm. What day it is soon ceases to have any meaning. Email and SMS is far away, and the daily cycles just break down into a rhythm of diving and dining in no particular order.

Ohoy! There's a wreck down there...

One morning, as we were enjoying a lazy breakfast while anchored at a reef enroute on a live-aboard to Brothers' Islands, we heard cries from the water. Startled, we got to our feet to see what all the commotion was all about fearing that someone was in trouble, since an early bird buddy team had gone out before breakfast (certainly not me, as I need my infusions of hot coffee first).

"There's a wreck down there—come, come!" Within one gulp of coffee everything else about breakfast was instantly forgotten, and we were in our dive gear quicker than Clark





PETER SYMES

Kent could change into Superman. Getting into the water could only go too slow. Still covered in breadcrumbs from brunch, I jumped in the clear blue water and immediately caught a glimpse of a whitish wooden hull in the distance. It was another dive boat that sank recently—a fact that only very fleetingly managed to bother me before a primal urge to explore got the upper hand.

This is the Red Sea in a nutshell. You never quite know what you might bump into, and there are still so many undiscovered nooks and crannies along the extended coastline that anyone can be some kind of explorer in these parts. The beauty and fairly good health of the Red Sea reefs stem from its vast expanse and relative absence of human infrastructure along its extended coastline, thanks to the sur-

rounding landscape being a desert.

Until quite recently, looking back past only a few decades during which resorts started to dot the coastline,

there were only a couple of small fishing villages here and a few ports. The place was empty, pretty much, until divers started coming in the sixties and



MAGNUS LUNDGREN

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Divers explore the mast gun of the *Thistlegorm* wreck; Excursion on camel-back to a Beduin camp for music and feasting; Diver and Green sea turtle with remora attached

NEXT PAGE: Decorative interior of a mosque



PETER SYMES





MAGNUS LUNDGREN



MAGNUS LUNDGREN



PETER SYMES

LEFT TO RIGHT: Portrait of a Hawkfish; Hunting Moray Eel; Diver explores internal caverns of the *Aida* wreck at Brothers Island

seventies. This particular ratio of wilderness to human infrastructure is still quite favourable if we, for arguments sake, ignore the immediate vicinity of the big resort towns of Sharm el Sheikh and Hurghada, which have now grown to a considerable size—each with a number of hotel beds well into the six figures. But even here, considering the massive load of tourists and divers in the area, the reefs even close to the towns appear to be in a decent condition. I was actually pretty impressed to see a healthy garden of fragile and sensitive gorgonians at Ras Umm Sidd, just outside Sharm el Sheikh.

“Deep South”

It is in the south that the frontier of development lies today. In the past few years, places like Marsa Alam have apparently started undergoing the same transfor-

mation from a sleepy village with a dirt road to a resort dotted community that Sharm el Sheikh underwent 15 years earlier. Down here, you still have shore diving in the old style, which is one thing you can't do up in Sharm anymore (and one reason that I won't head for Sharm el Sheikh again). In contrast, you can still dive your preferred time, have a breakfast in your own time before rigging your gear and simply wade out to enjoy the nearby house reef. I like this style of diving and holiday making simply because it is so relaxing, and that is what I usually need. But who knows how long it will last. The developments seem to happen fast and the frontier just gets pushed southwards by the day.

But it is the live-aboards that are the *crème de la crème* down here. Ever more luxurious and spacious yachts take discerning divers on one or two-week long



winding itineraries in and out of archipelagos and reef structures.

In the deep south of the Red Sea, we find many of the great renowned reefs including St. John, Deadelus, Elphinstone and the Zabargad islands. You find some of the best diving in the word here. Surely, there are more small critters and biodiversity in the Far East; that is no secret. But the corals of the deep south—especially the gorgonians—are lush and colourful, and there is an amazing amount of fish life. And if you are on good vessels with all the amenities you can ask for, lip service and great food, then life can hardly get any better. Often you can get as many dives as you like and your Nitrogen loading permitting but what's the point of diving yourself to exhaustion? You can work your self haggard back in the office. ■

LEFT TO RIGHT: Profile of the Sphinx with one of the great pyramids behind it; White tipped shark diving; Feeding Squat lobster; Cloud of Anthias display the bounty of the coral reefs



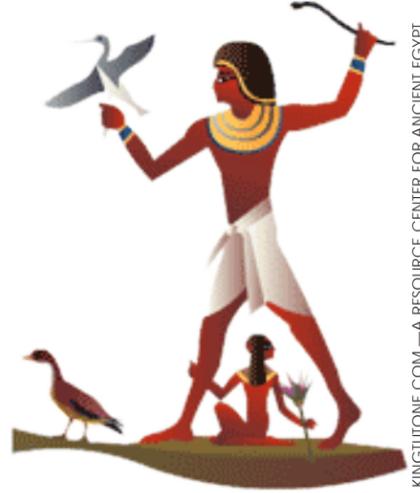
Placenames are hyperlinked to Google Maps

Thistlegorm Ras Muhammad
 Hurghada
 Port Safaga Salem Express
 Quesir
 Marsa Shagra Marsa Alam
 Port Sudan

Text by Arnold Weisz
 Edited by Gunild Symes

The Red Sea

Parted by Moses... Bridged by Islam



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Erythra Thalassa—Red Sea, as directly translated from the ancient Greek name—is what it was called by the ancient Romans as well. Long has this great body of water been a focal point of trade in the Middle East, which has stood as a crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa for many thousands of years. The Red Sea, today, is still an important vehicle of global trade as well as a major tourist destination for millions.

history including the development of trade routes by the Phoenicians, as far back as the 12th century B.C., when extensive routes up and down the coasts were established as well as a base at what is now the port city of Jiddah, Saudi Arabia. Later, ancient

ships bearing clothing, copper and cooking pots left the ports at el-Quseir and Berenice and came back with elephants, ebony, spices and gems. In the Medieval Age from the 13th to the 16th centuries, Mamluk merchants brought Iranian and Chinese ceramics to el-Quseir via the Red Sea, which virtually became an Ottoman lake after the Turks took Cairo in 1517.



Moses Smashing the Tables of the Law by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn

By the 15th century, Europe began to show interest in the region. The first European chart of the Red Sea was drawn in 1760 by Carsten Niebuhr on a scientific expedition sent by Frederick V of Denmark to explore Egypt and Arabia.

During World War I and II, the Red Sea saw its fare share of the fighting. The Ottoman Empire controlled large parts of the Red Sea coast during the first world war—from the Bay of Aqaba to Aden on the east side and on the west side, the Egyptian and northern Sudanese coastlines. Arabs had brief control over the territories around the Red Sea during the Arab Revolt of 1916, from which rose the fame of a certain Captain T.E. Lawrence, or as Lawrence of Arabia as he is more commonly known, when he staged an attack against the port city of Aqaba. By the end of World War I, the Red Sea was controlled in practice by Britain, France and Italy.

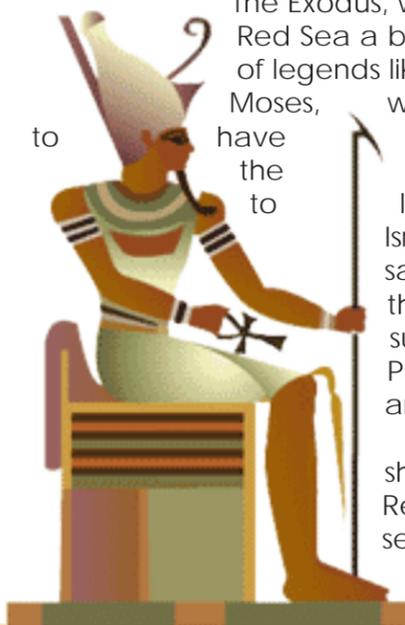
The Red Sea has acquired world-wide interest in more recent times from the allure of its underwater wonders. Yet, if we go back a long way to the time of

The Exodus, we find the Red Sea a birthplace of legends like that of Moses, who is said to have parted the Red Sea to lead the Israelites to safety from the pursuit of the Pharaoh's army. Along its shores, the Red Sea has seen much

Roman ships, laden with cargoes of treasure such as gold bound, for Indian cities, visited ancient Egyptian Red Sea ports such as Berenice.

The Red Sea continued to be an important trade route from the 7th century AD when untold numbers of boats and dhows—traditional Arab sailing vessels—carried merchants and muslim pilgrims to Mecca. In those days,

In World War II, Italy entered the war against the Allies in 1940. Italian forces became a potential threat to British supply routes in the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Britain had troops in Egypt and Sudan. Italy had troupes in Libya,



NASA

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MAGNUS LUNDGREN

The Red Sea

LEFT: Sea turtle and two remoras going for a ride. BELOW: Whitetip shark patrols the waters of the Red Sea

Eritrea and Somalia. The conflict in the Red Sea left some great wrecks for divers to explore later. Well-known ships such as the *Thistlegorm* and *Umbria* were sunk during World War II.

One of the most important events to affect the Red Sea region was the creation of the Suez Canal. Even though a canal had been envisaged since the reign of the Pharaohs, the realization of a canal was not made until 1869 when the Suez Canal was first opened. The Suez Canal reinforced the role of the Red Sea as a trade route and "Passage to India" for European travellers. In 1967, the canal was closed as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Six Day War culminated in the closure of the Suez Canal from 1967 to 1975. However, the canal was reopened in 1975 and enlarged.

It was Austrian Hans Hass who, in the 1950s, discovered that the Red Sea was an amazing diving destination. Within the same decade, Jacques-Yves Cousteau also touted the underwater wonders of the Red Sea.

In 1949, Hans Hass set off alone for Port Sudan. Over a period of two months of solitary diving, using underwater camera housings he designed and built himself, Hass took over 1,500 photographs of the underwater realm of the Red Sea. He returned again to Port

Sudan in 1950 and made the motion picture, *Under the Red Sea*. The film presented the first images ever taken of a whale shark underwater.

In 1951, Jacques Cousteau arrived in the Red Sea on the *Calypso*. His first book, *The Silent World*, and a film by the same name, was researched while diving near Port Sudan and on the shallow reefs of the Saudi Arabian coast.

Soon after Hass and Cousteau revealed the fantastic underwater wonders of the Red Sea with their books and films, the first leisure divers arrived at

the Red Sea. Recreational diving came to the area in the 1950's when Greeks and Italians working for oil and mining companies took to skin diving along the Hurgghada coast. However, the wars between Israel and the Arab nations in the next two decades stopped large-scale tourism to the Red Sea region. But, tourism to the area resumed in 1982 when the last section of the Sinai was returned to the Egyptians. The late 80s saw a building-boom at the Red Sea, and resorts like Sharm el Sheik and Hughhada sprung up. ■

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MAGNUS LUNDGREN

THE RED SEA – OR THE SEA OF REEDS *Did Moses cross the Red Sea?*

The biblical event where, in the Exodus, Moses crossed the Red Sea with the Israelites has always been difficult to explain without using the help of a miracle. However, the designation 'Red Sea' appears nowhere in the Hebrew text of the Bible. The Hebraic term yam suph is used which means sea of reeds. The word yam means any large body of water, be it fresh or salty, while sulph means reeds or rushes, as used, for example, in the account of Moses in the bullrushes.

This mistranslation, or whatever you like to call it, which was introduced in the King James' version of the Bible, has led to much debate and confusion. Although there are still many different hypotheses about the route actually taken, one thing is sure – due to this mistranslation most of the suggestions put forward have been nonsense.

The actual location of this 'Sea of Reeds', plainly not the Red Sea, is the subject of much discussion even today. For an interesting discussion of this topic see www.crivoice.org/yamsuph.html. ■



Mysteries of Egypt

Text by Barb Roy. Photos by Barb Roy, Magnus Lundgren and Peter Symes

ALL PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY BARB ROY

LEFT TO RIGHT: A hot air balloon floats along the Nile in the early morning; Merchant drives a donkey through the streets of Cairo; Khan El Khalili bazaar in Cairo; Nubian felucca guide in Aswan

The sun was just greeting the day as I hurried to the top deck of our cruise boat with a steaming hot cup of coffee in one hand and a camera in the other. I was alone, enjoying the splendor of another Egyptian morning. Wispy veils of fog danced across the Nile's glassy surface, slowly dissipating as the sun's rays enveloped the distant mountains and countryside. As I sipped my cup of java, I wondered how many of Egypt's nobility had once come this way.

I gazed upon the beauty of an early morning colorful terrain. Was the Nile used to trade with other communities? Did they travel with their gold and jewels and attendants? Two hot-air balloons in the distance broke my concentration as their pilots stoked their fires to gain altitude. Several local fishing boats pushed off from shore and it seemed within minutes the morning had come to life once again on the Nile.

After hearing about the unrest and turmoil in the Middle East I almost canceled my trip to Egypt, a place I have always wanted to visit and dive in the Red Sea. My friends and associ-

ates were afraid that I would become a Caucasian target and my dive and photography gear was sure to get stolen! I am happy to say, their worries did not detour me in the least. By investing some time on the Internet, my research proved Egypt to be a wealth of cultural and historic knowledge, well worth a visit indeed. Actually there was little to no risk involving security, because I would be traveling with a group of other journalists, all desiring to experience Egypt's wonders as I did. There was even another diver along, who I later talked into joining me for some Red Sea diving!

Egypt is located in the northeastern

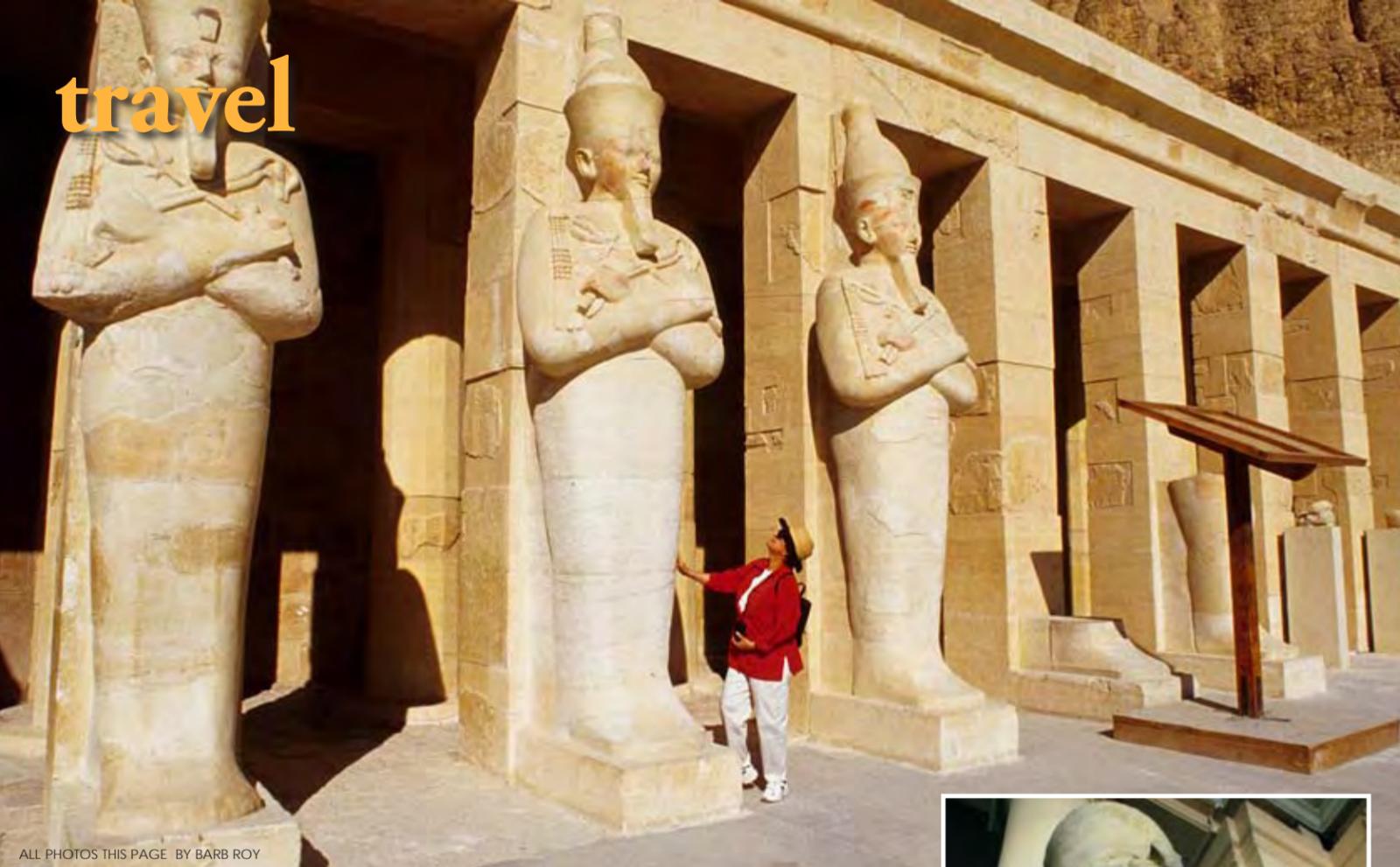
corner of Africa, between Libya and Saudi Arabia. The Sinai is to its northeast, Sudan is just below, with the Mediterranean Sea along its northern shore and the Red sea bordering its eastern shore. Egypt's history was first recorded around 4000 BC when nomadic hunters settled in the Nile Valley. In 3100 BC Egypt crowned its first Pharaoh – Menes, who unified Egypt's two regions. The development of society, law and religion soon followed.

Today, historians are still debating whether Egypt's history doesn't date back even further, perhaps 8 or 10 thousand years BC. With the help of missions and archeologists from

around the world, Egypt's history is slowly being uncovered. To date, over 62 tombs have been discovered and archeologists have compiled a treasure of over 120,000 objects for the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities in Cairo (established in 1902). Among the objects displayed in 107 halls are actual mummies, statues of past royalty and the most prized – a collection of King Tutankhamen's burial items, including his golden sarcophagus.

Over the years Egypt has built modern skyscrapers and leaped head first into the computer age, but occasionally one can still see small stone huts and women washing clothes in





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Queen Hatshepsut Temple. INSET: Bust of King Akhenaten at the Cairo museum

the Nile. Donkey pulled carts surrounded by cars and trucks in the cities, still hint of an old and new era trying to coexist. The country's government is called the Arab Republic of Egypt, with a democratic society and an elected president.

The Journey

It was December when I visited, during the mildest time of the year (60-80 degrees Fahrenheit) with little to no wind and not too many tourists. From New York I flew to Amsterdam, then to Egypt's capitol city of Cairo. During the day the city is packed with automobiles and constant honking because there are very few traffic lights and only a few stop signs! Needless to say, we took a taxi or hired a car and driver for transportation while in Cairo.

After a visit to the Museum in Cairo, we were able to tour the

Khan El-Khalili Bazaar, boasted to be the largest bazaar in the Middle East, where we found a selection of fine fabrics, clothing, souvenirs, jewelry and excellent local cuisine. I was able to find a reputable jeweler recommended by our guide, to custom make a cartouche (pendant) made of fine silver for each of my three daughters back home. I had their name printed on one side and the Egyptian hieroglyphic symbols for their name on the other. It was very stylish and well received.

The 4500 year-old Pyramids on the Giza Plateau (9 miles West of Cairo) were next on our tour, built as burial chambers for the Pharaohs. I'll have to admit I felt a bit like Indiana Jones climbing up and down makeshift ladders, through narrow passageways and crawling at times to reach the various pyramid chambers. We were



told each of the huge structural blocks used to build the pyramids, weighed an impressive 2.5 tons each!

To the east was the legendary Sphinx, guardian to the Pharaohs, representing power and wisdom.

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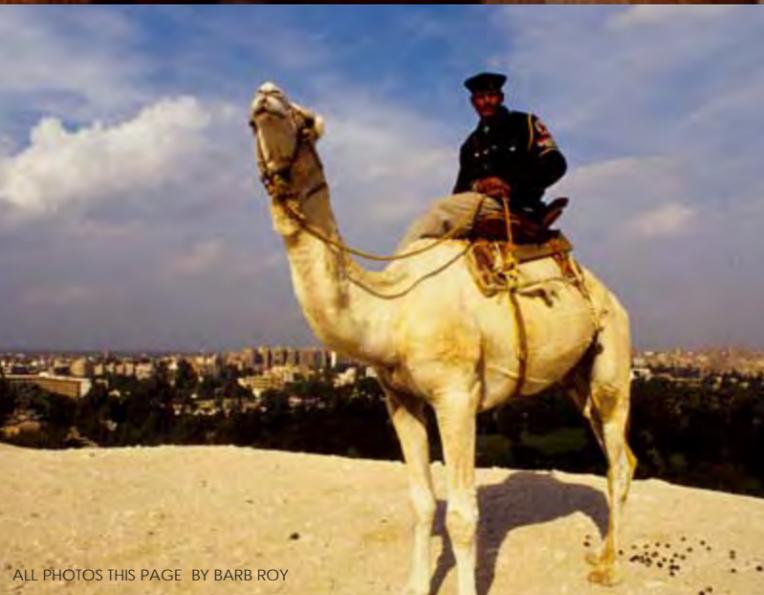


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I noticed at most of the Pyramids, temples and other antiquities, armed guards stood watch from camels and at all attraction entrances.

The sight of camels intrigued several of us to opt for a camel trail ride. I guess this is one of those things we like to do – just once in our lives. We soon discovered these creatures had very individual personalities, and can be extremely moody. Fortunately, I had an apple to share with mine, which gained me the lead of the herd, at least for a while! I found out quickly it's no fun being behind other camels.

Sharm El Sheikh

The day finally came when the group was flown to Sharm El Sheikh, located at the southern tip of Sinai. I was amazed to see very modern seaside luxury hotels and resorts, all with big swimming pools and beautiful landscaped decor. Even our hotel, the Four Seasons Resort, came with a property directional map for navigation. The town was equally as nice, filled

with restaurants, novelty shops, fresh food stands and great coffee shops. We were mainly surrounded by other tourists, mostly European, but friendly nevertheless. If I didn't know better, I would swear I was in Bonaire or another Caribbean dive hot spot!

Although all but two of us were to spend the day touring temples and monuments, I was looking forward to getting wet! We booked a day of diving with one of the many day-boat dive charter operators servicing the Sharm area. On the way to the departure dock our driver explained that the Red Sea runs from the Gulf of the Suez down to the Gulf of Aden. He also said it was the mineral-rich red mountain range that gave the ancient mariners the idea to call it Mare Rostrum or the commonly known today as - The Red Sea.

"But our beaches are almost white," he explains. "At different times of the year you can see migrating birds along the shore; bird watchers really love it. We even have National Parks and

protected areas. There is an area of the Elba Mountain and Abrak and the coastal islands with mangroves. Shayeb Al-Banat is another protected area southwest of Hurghada city. There are many more too, where you can find wildlife."

We thanked our knowledgeable driver and bid him farewell as we went to board the dive boat. Most boats leave around 8-8:30am, and return at 4-5pm, serving lunch and snacks between two dives. Tanks and weight belts are supplied, although rentals and

Nitrox were available for an additional fee. A night dive tempted us, but we were expected back at the resort for a Bedouin style dinner with the group.



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HARVEY PAGE



Egypt

PETER SYMES

The Red Sea is abundant with soft coral (left) and marine life such as the lionfish (right)

Diving

Our boat was wide and roomy, with over 20 divers and room for more. After the briefing I grabbed the divemaster to inquire about what the Red Sea has to offer visiting divers.

He seemed pleased to elaborate, "Most of the operators who take divers out, don't allow the taking of any marine life or shells, or touching or spear fishing. In Ras Mohammed National Park you can not even wear gloves! There are over six good sites in the park alone, but we must leave even earlier than today to get there."

When asked what kind of marine life lives in the Red Sea, he replied; "Just about everything you see in other parts of the world lives here. We have giant mantas, whale sharks, dolphins, big sharks and other pelagics, turtles and beautiful soft corals, the Dendronephytia species. You can see lionfish, polyclad colorful flatworms, clownfish, triggerfish, butterfly fish and the graceful blue-spotted stingray. And if you are lucky, maybe even a cuttlefish – of the Sepia species."

All of this info was wonderful and helped prepare us for our first dive, only 45 minutes from where we departed. Our divemaster also noted that most of the day boats all find great sites within an hour run from Sharm.

Water temperature was warm as we entered off the back of the boat, maybe 27 degrees Celsius (82 Fahrenheit). All I wore was a shorty wetsuit. To keep things simple for my underwater photography, I used a wide angle lens so whole scenes could easily be captured. The water was no deeper than 18 meters (60 feet) and the visibility must have been over 30 meters (100 feet)! I did notice the water was quite a bit saltier and I needed more weight on my belt, compared to a Caribbean destination. Perhaps with all of this heat, evaporation over the years has caused the Red Sea to have a higher saline content.

With camera in hand I began to photograph one tall coral head after another, each covered with a dressing of soft coral and tiny reef fish. With over twenty divers in the water, I was

PETER SYMES

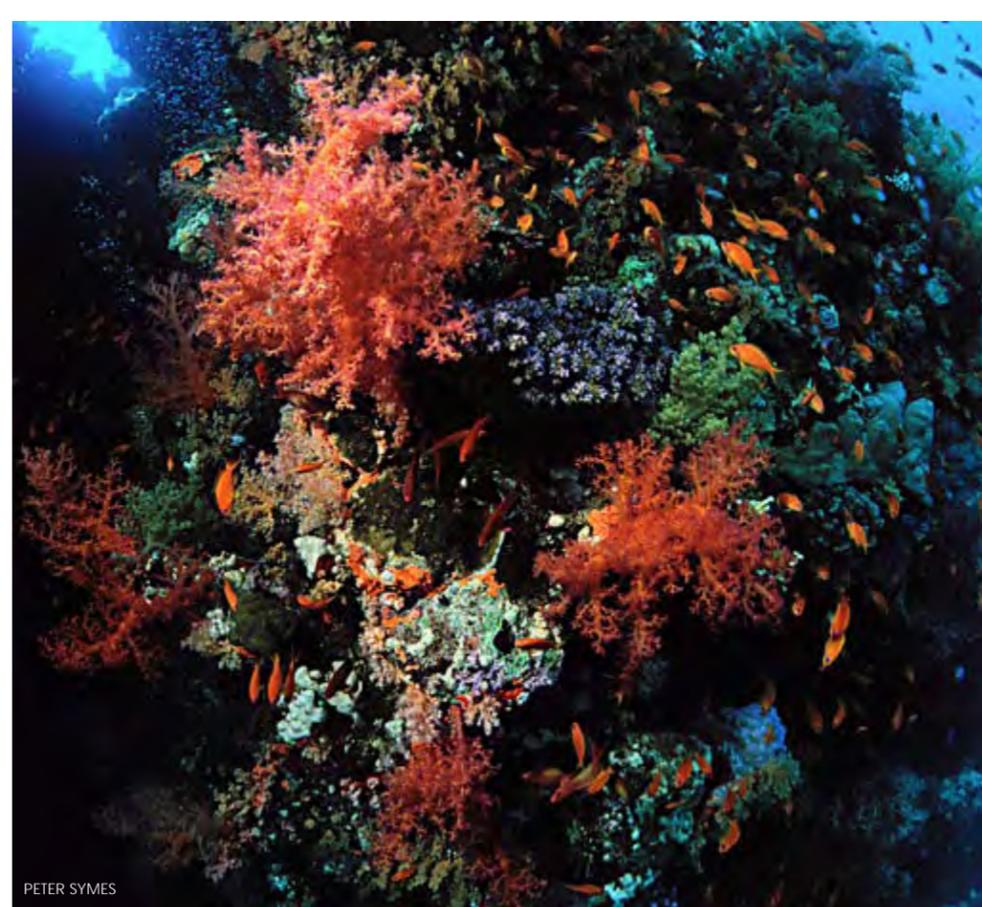


PETER SYMES

surprised to rarely see anyone except my buddy. A few snorkelers glided overhead, often following the divers. On a sandy patch between fingering small reefs, I spotted a crocodile fish! It looked prehistoric and oddly cute with its long snout and sharp little teeth. It was only about a 30-5 cm (12 inches) long, but I kept my distance, in case it had a

nasty disposition. The underwater sounds were like any other tropical reef and the water a bit cooler at depth. Life was everywhere I looked including critters hiding in the sand.

During lunch the divemaster continued with his talk to us about the various places within the Red Sea to dive; "We have many shipwrecks too. The Thistlegorm is



PETER SYMES

a merchant vessel 126 meters long (413 feet) in 30 meters (98 feet) of water near the Suez Canal, sinking in 1941. You can see trucks, motorbikes, parts of WWII plane parts and more. The Dunraven is a British steamer, 80 meters (252 feet) long, found on the Southern side of Beacon Rock in 30 meters (98 feet) of water. It went down in 1876 and is now upside down! There are four more wrecks at

Saab Abu Nuhas and more to the south."

Several other divers also on-board had joined us by now, listening intently as he continued; "There are four nice dive sites in the Straits of Tiran to the north and six popular sites within Ras Mohammed, one of my favourites."

When asked about the dives accessible from shore, he replied;

"I can think of fourteen good dives between Ras Nasrani in the north, to Ras Katy in the south."

It wasn't until the second dive that I noticed all of the lionfish (also called turkeyfish) hiding under the coral head ledges. Unlike the brave frilly looking ones we are used to seeing in aquariums, these were quite reserved and shy. The few morays of a formidable size, with cool gray eyes, were also spotted. I really enjoyed just going into deeper water and looking back on the beautiful reef, brightened by a ballet of rays from the sun. It was like watching a virtual underwater scene playing on a computer screen!

a wider range of diving and area coverage, try a liveaboard dive boat. After talking with the local divers, most believe fall through spring is exceptional for diving in the Red Sea, but a few prefer July and August, if the heat can be



PETER SYMES

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Steep wall at Brothers Island
Top view of coral garden
BOTTOM: Crocodilefish

Egypt

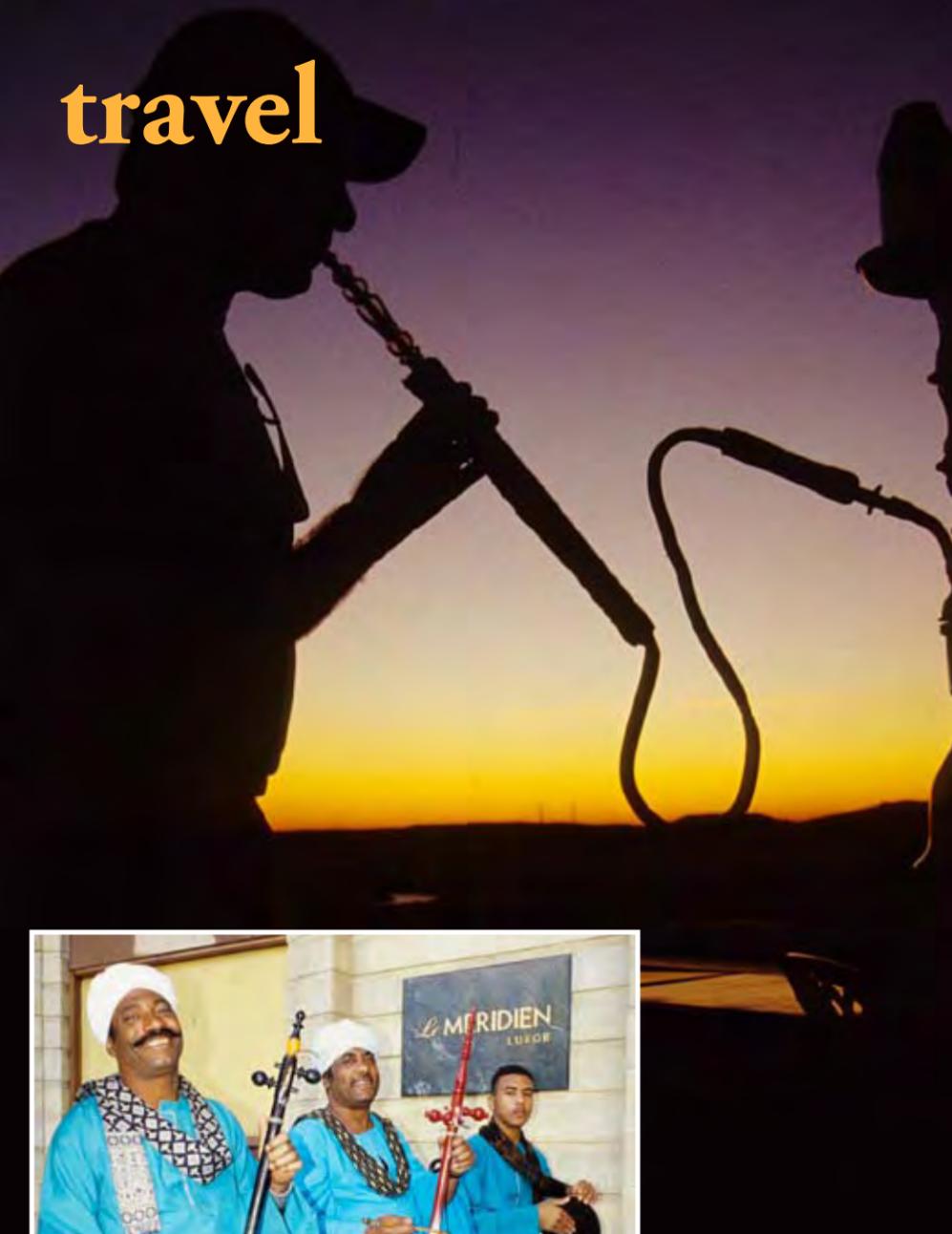
Our diving time in Sharm turned out to be loads of fun. Most of the reefs ranged from 10-800 meters, with the latter being a drop-off wall full of color and life fading into the abyss. When venturing into deeper water, there is always a possibility of strong currents, also felt at some shallower sites. Quite a few critters choose mid August to begin mating, so care should be taken. I counted over 81 dive sites in the Red Sea, so the exploration opportunities are endless. For

tolerated!

If you decide to do a little trekking on your own in the Sinai, it is advisable to stick to well-known trails or tracks, and only explore beaches recommended 'safe' by the locals. Unfortunately Sinai may still hide live land mines, left over from previous wars, so caution would be advised.

Egyptians

During my journey through Egypt I found the Egyptian people to be extremely friendly and very helpful in every way. Most of the local people active in tourism, speak English, Spanish, French, German and Italian, besides their native tongue. On many occasions, residents in Luxor, Cairo, Aswan and Sharm el-Sheikh (South Sinai) would come up to me and just start chatting. Our whole group was invited to smoke a Sheesha water pipe sweetened with apple juice in Aswan during our Nile River cruise. We were also treated to a sailboat ride in a felucca (boat)



PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY BARB ROY

on our Nile journey. Egypt doesn't tolerate terrorism, which was very evident from the additional security measures at the airports, hotels and to protect the antiquities.

For a city of over twelve million, Cairo's crime rate was almost non-existent. I did gather, with the conservative nature of Middle Easterners, concerning women and sex, females can avoid verbal harassment by simply covering more skin. I didn't notice this attitude at the resorts in Sharm, as most visitors are European. I would recommend women to bring or buy a lightweight scarf to use when needed. The scarf also will come in handy when touring some of the more

popular mosques.

As with traveling to any international country, a little knowledge will go a long way in making any trip as smooth and incident-free as possible. The State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs has an excellent website for visitors from America, accessible at; <http://travel.state.gov/> to learn more about Egypt's local health conditions, entry requirements, political stability, as well as any current travel warnings. If you are concerned with the safety aspect of a country, travelers can also register a detailed itinerary with the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in that country before you go. Leaving the same detailed itinerary with a friend or relative

at home provides even more peace of mind.

Travel Hints

The National currency is the Egyptian Pound (LE), but US cash, Travelers Checks and major credit cards are accepted. Many businesses and banks are usually closed on Fridays. Gratuity or *Bakshish* should be awarded based upon service, but generally around ten percent will work. Be sure to get receipts for all purchases, and if the items are antiques, be sure to get an official museum export tag. Hint: the marble statues make great gifts—you can tell if they are authentic by scratching the bottom with your fin-

gerail. Real marble won't scratch!

Bring plenty of sunscreen, shades, a valid passport, a windbreaker to wear after boat dives, your certification card, an electrical adapter or converter (220V AC, 50 Hz) and plenty of film or memory cards and batteries. By making a list of the serial numbers of the computers, dive and photography gear you are traveling with, you may avoid problems concerning ownership with Customs upon entering and exiting the country. Drink only bottled water, and take along a supply of Imodium in case the Pharaohs Curse catches up with you. Remember, a little research goes along way... ■

INSET: Traditional musicians perform at Luxor LEFT TO RIGHT: Traveler enjoys a Sheesha pipe; Temple of Horus; Women washing on the Nile; The great pyramids dwarf visitors

fact file



SOURCE: WWW.CIA.GOV

Egypt



History One of the world's great civilizations was born on the banks of the Nile. Due to the richness and regularity of the annual flooding of the Nile River as well as the semi-isolation of the valley created by the surrounding deserts, the rise of a unified kingdom around 3200 B.C. brought a series of dynasties into power in Egypt for the next three millennia. In 341 B.C., the last native dynasty fell to invading Persians who in turn were replaced by the Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines. It was the Arabs in the 7th century who introduced Islam and spread the Arabic lan-

guage and religion throughout the region over the next six centuries. Around the year 1250, a local military caste, the Mamluks, took control. They continued to govern the country after the Ottoman Turks conquered Egypt in 1517. In 1869, the Suez Canal was completed and Egypt became an important center for world trade. However, it also fell heavily into debt. In order to protect its investments, Great Britain seized control of Egyptian government in 1882. However, some allegiance to the Ottoman Empire maintained influence in Egypt until 1914.

Egypt gained partial independence from the UK in 1922 and acquired full sovereignty following World War II. The time-

honored place of the Nile River in the agriculture and ecology of Egypt was altered by the completion of the Aswan High Dam in 1971 and the resultant Lake Nasser. Even so, dependence on the Nile continues, and with a rapidly growing population—the Arab world's largest—and limited arable land, resources and society continue to be stressed. The government has

initiated economic reforms and massive investments in communications and physical infrastructure in an effort to ready the economy for the new millennium. Government: Republic. Legal system: Based on English common law, Islamic law and Napoleonic codes. Capital: Cairo

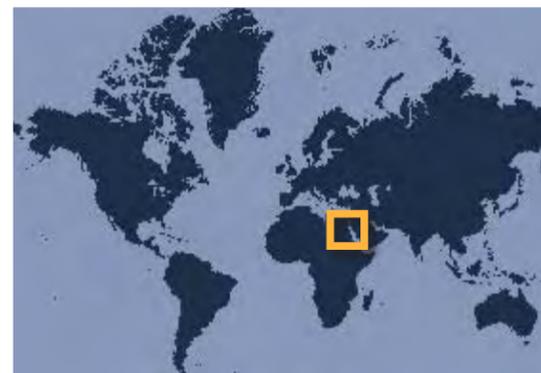
Geography Egypt occupies the northeast corner of the African continent. It borders the Mediterranean Sea—between Libya and the Gaza Strip—and the Red Sea north of Sudan, and includes the Asian Sinai Peninsula. Coastline: 2,450 km. Terrain: Vast desert plateau is interrupted by the Nile River valley and delta. Lowest point: Qattara Depression, 133 m. Highest point: Mount Catherine, 2,629 m. Egypt controls the Sinai Peninsula—the only land bridge between Africa and the remaining Eastern Hemisphere. Egypt also controls the Suez Canal—a sea link and major trade route between the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. Because of its size and juxtaposition to Israel, Egypt plays a major role in Middle Eastern geopolitics. However, Egypt does continue to depend on upstream neighbors and deal with the dominance of Nile basin issues. The country is also prone to influxes of refugees.

Climate Desert—hot, dry summers with moderate winters. Natural hazards: periodic droughts; a hot, driving wind-

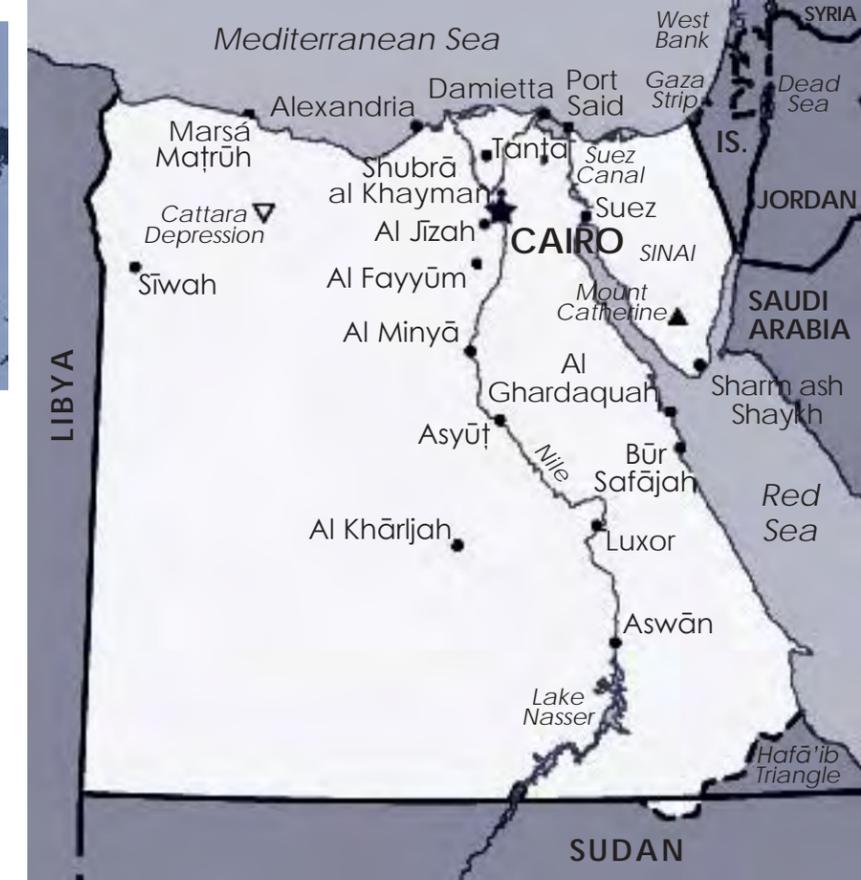
storm called *khamisin* occurs in springtime; dust storms, sandstorms; frequent earthquakes, flash floods, landslides

Environmental issues Desertification—agricultural land is being lost to wind-blown sands and urbanization. Soil salination below the Aswan High Dam is increasing. Oil pollution is threatening coral reefs, beaches and marine habitats. Additional water pollution comes from agricultural pesticides, raw sewage and industrial effluents. There are very limited natural fresh water resources away from the Nile River, which provides the only perennial water source. Rapid population growth is overstraining the Nile River and other natural resources. Egypt is party to the following international agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Environmental Modification, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands.

Economic In the last three decades, the Egyptian government has reformed the highly centralized economy handed down from President Nasser. Energy subsidies, and personal and corporate tax rates were reduced, and several enterprises were privatized in 2005 by Prime Minis-



World map and map of Egypt



ter Ahmed Nazif. There was a stock market boom, and GDP grew by about 5 percent for the next two years. Unfortunately, living standards remain the same for the average Egyptian despite these achievements, compelling the government to continue to provide subsidies for basic necessities. These subsidies have helped increase a growing budget deficit continue to be a significant drain on the economy and foreign direct investment continue to be low, however, export sectors—especially natural gas—show positive prospects. Agriculture: cotton, rice, corn, wheat, beans, fruits, vegetables, goats, sheep, cattle, water buffalo. Industries: textiles, food processing, tourism, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, hydrocarbons, construction, cement, metals, light manufactures. Natural resources: petroleum, natural gas, iron ore, phosphates, manganese, limestone, gypsum, talc, asbestos, lead, zinc.

Currency Egyptian pound (EGP). Exchange rate: 1EUR=7.69EGP, 1USD=5.69EGP, 1GBP=11.25EGP, 1AUD=4.69EGP, 1SGD=3.73SGD

Population 80,335,036 (July 2007 est.). Ethnic groups: Egyptian 98%; Berber, Nubian,

Bedouin and Beja 1%, Greek; Armenian and other European (primarily Italian and French) 1%. Religions: Muslim (mostly Sunni) 90%, Coptic 9%, other Christian religions 1%. Internet users: 5 million (2005)

Languages Arabic (official), English and French is understood by educated classes

Deco Chambers
Sharm El Sheikh
Hyperbaric Medical Center (069) 6609223 EMERG (012) 2124292
Dahab
Deco International Emergency (012) 1653806
Hurghada
El-Gouna Hospital (065) 5800118 EMERGENCY (012) 2187550
Naval Hospital Hurghada (065) 3544195
Marsa Alam
Marsa Shagra (065) 443156

Dive Centers
Wildcat Liveaboard Charters www.redseadiving.com
Camel Dive Club & Hotel www.cameldive.com
Sinai Divers Diving Centers www.sinaidivers.com
Red Sea Rangers Diving www.redsea-rangers.com

Web sites
Egyptian Tourist Authority www.egypt.travel
Egypt Tours & Travel interoz.com
Egyptian Museum Egyptianmuseum.gov.eg
Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts www.fourseasons.com
Abercrombie & Kent Nile Cruises www.abercrombiekent.com

Books
Imaging Egypt by Mark Millmore www.eyelid.co.uk
Egypt and Diving and Snorkeling the Red Sea published by Lonely Planet www.lonelyplanet.com ■



PETER SYMES

Diving the Red Sea

Text by Arnold Weisz

Sustainable tourism or environmental disaster?

There is no doubt that the Red Sea offers some of the best diving on the planet. Additionally, the Red Sea is easily accessible for European divers, which makes it one of the most popular dive travel destinations in the world. Diving has become a booming branch of the tourism business.



PETER SYMES

The Red Sea was "discovered" as a diving destination by Hans Hass in the 1950s. Tourism has grown steadily since the 1970s and has reached the point of becoming an essential part of the region's economy.

However, looking beyond the fantastic coral reefs, awesome wrecks, luxurious resorts and sandy beaches, there is a downside to the paradise. The reef-lined coasts all along the Red Sea, but especially in Egypt, depend on high numbers of tourist divers, thus resulting in degradation of reefs by mechanical damage, waste and water pollution. Often, this is accepted due to the short-term gain

from the tourism business.

Hotel complexes are springing up almost unchallenged all along the Egyptian Red Sea coast. Along the coastline of Egypt, from the Suez canal to the Sudanese border, huge armadas of dive vessels are bringing hordes of divers to the coral reefs.

Tourism—highway to wealth

It's almost stunning to see the enormous armada of dive charter boats at the ports of Dahab, Sharm el Sheikh, Hurghada, Safaga and Marsa Alam in the morning. The rumbling of marine diesel engines laying a carpet of fumes over the crisp sea air. Loud calls in Arabic whiz through the place, sometimes Russian or English pierce through the hustle and bustle, as the crews prepare to take out thousands of divers.

Everywhere, there are pyramids of airtanks and equipment bags.

Convoys of trolleys shuttle between the mini-buses and pickups at the parking lot and the dive boats.

Can we really criticise the Egyptians for taking advantage of dive hungry tourists? The mighty Nile is the life line, which feeds most of the country's 73 million inhabitants. The coral reefs of the Red Sea gives thousands of Egyptians jobs and supplies the country's economy with much needed hard currency.

Many of those who make a living in the tourist and dive industry come from Cairo or other large cities along the Nile. They work every day for three weeks, and then spend a week together with their

families in their home cities and towns. From their point of view, dive tourism is feeding their families.

Increased awareness

The coral reefs of the the Red Sea are generally in good shape with rich, bio-diverse reefs the rule. However, coastal development continues to destroy mangroves, and damage from coral reef tourism is on the rise, especially in the Red Sea's northern Gulf of Aqaba.

The picture is not as bleak as it may seem. Awareness about the environmental damage has risen in the last few years. The local government, dive and tourism industries are seeing the effect of years of rapidly growing numbers of tourists and have started to take measures to protect their natural assets.

Several organizations have sprung up, and efforts to protect the marine environment are being put into effect. Everything from reef rehabilitation, mooring-buoys, waste control and non-contact diving practices are reducing the impact on the environment.

Still, many of the reefs show clearly visible signs of wear and tear. And it's not uncommon to encounter plastic bottles and other non-biodegradable waste. Many of these problems can be eliminated by simply changing the indifferent attitudes of locals and tourists. Nature can recuperate, if you just give it time! ■



Reef ball. Illustration courtesy of www.reefball.org

KURT AMSLER'S PHOTO-WORKSHOPS IN FRANCE 2007

In co-operation with AQUANAUT Dive Centre in Les Lecques on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, we have the best prerequisites for learning all the different techniques quickly and successfully in a pleasant atmosphere. The workshops are open to analogue and digital photographers!

For the theoretical lessons, we have a classroom and a photolab at our hotel, with light boxes, projector, beamer and all the necessary hardware and software for digital photographers.

We undertake the photo dives with the H2O—a fast comfortable dive boat. The dive spots in this area are outstanding.

We dive down the drop-offs of Ile Verte at the light tower; Balise, the cave of La Vierge; and visit the wreck of the famous P-38 Fighter, which was discovered by us in the spring of 1997. The participants are accommodated at the hotel, La Bastide, surrounded by beautiful countryside, the landscapes *provençal*. Guests have the possibility of booking only the hotel and/or diving.

My photo-courses are built upon a learning pyramid, which has been approved for over 15 years: "Hear, see and do!"

Such efficient working conditions are possible only here, because the sea lies right in front of our door; the classroom is just footsteps from your hotel room; and the number of participants in each workshop is limited to ten.

Please study the course programme at the link below. I can guarantee you that this workshop in the south of France will bring you a giant step forward.

—Kurt Amsler

www.photosub.com



Saudi Arabia

Diving the Kingdom

Text and photos by Dan Beecham

In the heart of the Middle East, occupying 80 percent of the eastern shoreline of the Red Sea, sits the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It covers an area of over 870,000 square miles, almost all of which is desert, which holds more than a quarter of the world's oil reserves. Despite its close proximity to Egypt and Sudan—places that are considered by many people to be some of the world's greatest diving locations—the reefs around Saudi Arabia have barely been dived.



Saudi Arabia is infamous for being difficult, and oftentimes impossible to get into. At the same time, it welcomes with open arms thousands of expatriate workers every year, as well as over 3.5 million tourists annually, almost entirely comprised of pilgrims performing the Haj or Umrah. If you're non-Muslim and are not sponsored by an employer in Saudi, attaining a visit visa is nigh on impossible.

It's this strict level of control, as well as the continued threat of terrorist activities that keeps the majority of westerners out of the country. The problems do not stop there however.

Saudi Arabia is a country that is struggling to strike a balance between its roots, which are firmly planted in Islamist tradition, while its younger generation demands reform to a modern, more western society. Many Saudi's want to defend

the Kingdom's fiercely Muslim character, returning to 18th century ideals where Islam reigned supreme, and where foreigners were not welcome. Others wish for change; there is talk of democracy and reforms on many issues including women's rights, a topic that is especially divisive.

The modern generation is demanding change, and it is slowly happening; western commercialism is increasingly impinging upon Islamic ideals.

Because of these reforms, there is tension in the Kingdom, so visiting or living in Saudi presents new challenges everyday. Clashes with the authorities including the religious police, or *Mutawwa*, are not uncommon. The *Mutawwa* strictly enforce the many social rules of Islamic culture. Women especially must be mindful of these rules, covering themselves head to toe in the traditional *Abaya*, not being able to



bounds, count themselves lucky that they can enter, explore and dive a part of the world that is generally off limits to westerners; Saudi Arabia can be considered the final frontier of diving in the Middle-East.

The Oil Giant

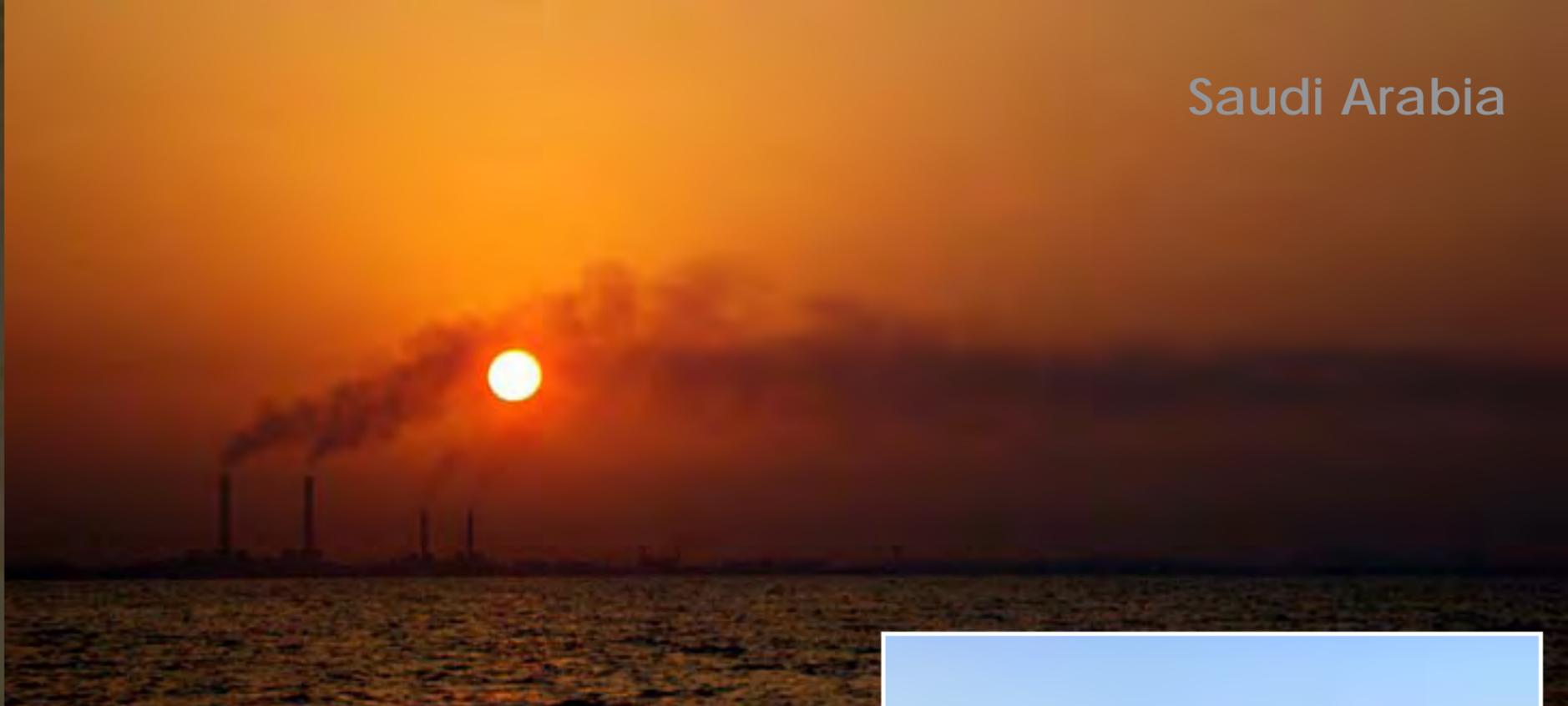
Sadly, Saudi is not known for it's diving, there's only one thing its famous for; Oil.

The 8.5 million barrels of crude that are pumped out of Saudi Arabia every day ensure that the Kingdom remains a driving force in the global economy. Unfortunately, the oil industry and the preservation of pristine marine environments do not make good bedfellows. There are large areas of reef that remain untouched, but in other places the environment is very much neglected; extensive damage caused by oil extraction or the reclamation of land for refineries has

work, go out in public unescorted and not being allowed to drive are just a few of the issues that must be overcome.

It is all of these strict rules as well as the issues relating to visit visas that either stop or put people off diving in Saudi. The opportunity to dive untouched, pristine reefs or discover new wrecks is impossible in other parts of the Red Sea. Because of this, many people (this writer included) who are given the opportunity to visit a country that normally sits so far out of

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Mosque in Jeddah; Mosque tower; Jeddah street scene; Saudi souk, or traditional market. INSET: Door to women's prayer chamber in a mosque. PREVIOUS PAGE: Saudi desert mountains



wiped out entire ecosystems. In 1991 during the Gulf War, eight billion barrels of oil were released into the Arabian Gulf on the Saudi's Eastern coastline by retreating Iraqi forces. There are fears in many that a similar event could one day happen in the Red Sea; the damage this could cause is unimaginable.

The threat of terrorist attacks remains very real today. Post 9/11, many expatriate workers who had called Saudi home for a long time moved away to neighbouring countries in the Middle East, in response to terror attacks on housing compounds and foreign embassies. Numbers of ex-pats in Saudi Arabia are steadily increasing nowadays, and with it, the diving scene, but once in a while an event will occur to shake everybody's confidence over safety in the Kingdom. In February this year, four French tourists were killed near Jeddah, and in April, authorities arrested more than 150 terrorists, seizing weapons and bomb-making equipment that was intended for one of Saudi's largest oil refineries.

Environmental issues

Some areas of the Red Sea that lie within Saudi waters are thankfully now protected. This is largely thanks to the work of active marine conservation groups. National Parks and "no-go" zones where fishing is completely prohibited have been created. This is often enforced, but unfortunately, not always. In other areas, fishing goes completely unchecked, but mainly consists of local fishermen on small boats. There is little commercial fishing in Saudi as there is simply more money to be made in the oil industry.

Shark meat is unfortunately very popular, and small sharks often appear in abundance on the fish counters in large supermarkets. Row upon row of juvenile reef shark and Hammerhead Shark adorn these counters. Even though I see more sharks in Saudi waters than I have in other parts of the Red Sea, I regret to say that I see more sharks on the fish counter during my weekly shop than I would during a whole week of diving. The shark meat generally sells for

LEFT TO RIGHT: Sunlight spills into the corridor of a mosque; Saudi oil refinery at dawn; Desert scene



dreds of tonnes of land-fill, but it's difficult to comprehend how far-reaching the effects of this construction will be, and what effects the increased air and water pollution will have. Projects such as the iconic Palm Jemera in Dubai have disrupted the local ecosystems in more ways than was originally predicted, but thankfully now a lot of effort is being put into undoing this damage. Only time will tell what effect the King Abdullah Economic City will

have on the local and surrounding ecosystems. Spear-fishing is very popular in Saudi, both within the local communities and with the population of Southeast Asian workers that are present in Jeddah as well as the rest of the country. Unfortunately, this has damaged populations of many species of large reef fish. The reefs further offshore have been less affected by this though and remain healthy.



around ten Saudi Riyals per kilo—less than three US dollars.

Much of the coastline of Arabia is currently undergoing major changes. Reclamation of land for huge offshore projects is very common in the Middle East, and countries including Bahrain, the UAE and Qatar are creating huge offshore housing developments to try and attract overseas investors and strengthen economies. Dredging recently began off the sleepy town of Rabigh, which sits north of Jeddah in preparation for an ambitious building project—the King Abdullah Economic City. This kind of construction will obviously effect the local ecosystems. Infact, most of the local ecosystem will be covered in hun-



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT INSET: Hammerhead shark on the butcher's block; Juvenile shark on display in a fish market; Jeddah skyline; Jeddah airport; Store with the local fashion; Ancient Saudi fort





Jeddah

The city of Jeddah is where much of the diving in Saudi Arabia is focused. Jeddah attracts large numbers of expatriate workers attracted to the Kingdom by the big salaries that are often available when working for large Saudi companies. Jeddah is seen to be more liberal than cities such as Riyadh, the capital, and as such, there has long been an expat community present. There are a number of dive shops and boat operators that cater for this diving scene.

Shore diving is very popular in Saudi, as you often face difficulties with the local authorities when planning boat trips. Permission must be attained ahead of time before any private vessel may head out to sea, and failure to do so can result in heavy penalties including confiscation of diving permits. Saudi

Arabia continues to face a big problem with illegal immigration from poorer neighbouring countries, and the coast-guard's strict rules are an effort to reduce this problem, as well as curb smuggling of illegal contraband. Because of these regulations, many Hotel chains have set-up small dive operations in private beaches.

Here, you pay a nominal entry fee to get what can feel like a little piece of paradise, away from the strict every day rules of Saudi. Men and women can socialize together, which is normally forbidden, and women can remove their Abaya without fear of punishments from the authorities. Many people shore dive from these private beaches, and the reefs are very healthy, although sometimes the visibility can be poor due to sedimentation from construction

projects.

To get to the more impressive sites you need to get offshore. Reefs such as Abu Faramish, Abu Madafi and Shi'b al Kebir provide truly world class diving. In these areas, visibility is often excellent, 20-25m. The quality and diversity of soft and hard corals is very high, and you'll spot all the usual Red Sea reef fish alongside some larger specimens that are generally more difficult to see in more commonly dived areas.

Jeddah port is the busiest port in Saudi, and as one would expect, a few of the ships on their way to or from the port have inevitably ended up on the bottom of the sea. Mismari, the Cable Wreck and Chicken Wreck are just a few of the wrecks that are easily accessible lying in just 20-30meters of water, so allowing for long leisurely wreck dives.

ABOVE: Descending with spear; TOP RIGHT: Diver explores the wreck of the *Mismarie*



Away from the more frequented diving areas, there exists miles of coastline that remains largely unexplored by western divers. From personal experience, the diving in these areas can differ dramatically. Head south and visibility generally deteriorates, and there are some areas that are completely devoid of life. Head north, near to Wedjh, and you can drop in on spots where there are huge numbers of reef fish and pelagic fish including Tuna, Spanish Mackrel and Barracuda as well as healthy numbers of sharks including Hammerheads, Silvertips and Silkys. When you look at the size of the coastline and how little of it has been developed, it's tantalising to think what wonders are waiting to be discovered.

For now, divers who are lucky enough to gain access to the Kingdom of Saudi

Arabia can enjoy an abundance of beautiful reefs, devoid of the crowds of divers found at many popular sites in other areas of the Red Sea. Maybe one day, when things have changed and relaxed in Saudi Arabia, people will be able to visit and appreciate what's there, not only the diving, but also the historical sites, beautiful deserts and wildlife.

Let's just hope that the authorities realise what potential they have lying right beneath their noses, or beneath the waves, and that they must implement measures to properly protect the reef and regulate the numbers and movements of divers.

It's sad that so few people have been able to experience the amazing

diving that is on offer in Saudi Arabia, but in ways it's nice knowing that there are places out there that remain untouched, pristine and waiting to be discovered. ■

LEFT TO RIGHT: Scene from the Cable wreck; Diver examines a propeller; Interior of the *Mismarie*

fact file

Saudi Arabia

X-ray mag



SOURCE: WWW.CIA.GOV

History Islam was born in Saudi Arabia, which is home to two of Islam's holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina. In fact, the official title of the king is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. In 1932, the modern Saudi state was founded by Abd al-Aziz bin Abd al-Rahman Al Saud (Ibn Saud) after a three decade campaign to unify most of the Arabian Peninsula. Today, his son, Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz, rules the country according to the country's Basic Law of 1992. In 1990, Saudi Arabia accepted the Kuwaiti royal family and 400,000 refugees after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The country also allowed Western and Arab troops to deploy on its soil for the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. After the liberation of Kuwait, the continuing presence of foreign troops on Saudi soil was a source of tension between the public and the royal family until all operational US troops left the country in 2003. In the same year, major terrorist attacks compelled the government to initiate a strong continuous campaign against domestic terrorism and extrem-

ism. King Abdallah has continued the cautious reform program, which was started earlier when he was crown prince. In 2005, the government held elections nationwide for half the members of 179 municipal councils in order to promote an increase in political participation. King Abdallah completed the process at the end of the year by appointing the remainder of the members of the advisory municipal councils. Saudi Arabia remains a leading producer of oil and natural gas. Located within its borders is approximately 25 percent of the world's proven oil reserves. In 2005, Saudi Arabia joined the World Trade Organisation. Since then, the Saudi government has promoted foreign investment in the kingdom and continued to pursue economic reform and diversification. On-going concerns include

a growing population, depletion of aquifers and an economy primarily dependent on petroleum output and prices. The country is governed according to Islamic law. Government: Monarchy. Capital: Riyadh

Geography Saudi Arabia is located in the Middle East. It borders the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea north

of Yemen. Coastline: 2,640 km. Terrain: Sandy desert—mostly uninhabited. Lowest point: Persian Gulf 0 m. Highest point: Jabal Sawda' 3,133 m. Saudi Arabia's extensive coastlines along the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea give the country a lot of leverage in the shipping of crude oil and other cargo through Persian Gulf and Suez Canal.

Climate Rugged, dry desert with wide extremes in temperature. Natural hazards: Frequent dust and sand storms.

Environmental issues Desertification; underground water resources are being depleted; the lack of permanent bodies of water bodies and perennial rivers has led to the development of extensive seawater desalination facilities; coastal pollution from oil spills. Saudi Arabia is party to several international agreements including Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution.

Economic Saudi Arabia's economy is oil-based with strong governmental controls



LEFT: Map of Saudi Arabia and global map highlighting region

BOTTOM LEFT: Whitetip shark

Languages Arabic

Deco Chambers

Jeddah GNP Hospital
Decompression Chamber
(966-2) 682-3200

Riyadh King Faisal Specialist
Hospital & Research Centre

(966-1) 4647272 pager 8517

Jubail Armed forces hospital KANB

Warning to travelers

Check your travel advisory for updates on travel to Saudi Arabia. Due to attacks targeting foreigners in recent years, many travel advisories are recommending that foreigners avoid or leave Saudi Arabia unless on essential business. According to security departments, more attacks on foreigners are being planned. If you must stay in the country, it is recommended that you avoid public places where foreigners are known to congregate and to make sure your hotel has a good reputation for maintaining high security precautions.

Visa information & restrictions

Saudi Arabia has proclaimed this year the Year of the Diver. Dive tourism in Saudi Arabia is still new and in development, but some operators have pre-approved tourist visas for Europeans and Americans. These visas take 2-3 weeks for processing rather than the usual two months. Please note that destinations in Saudi Arabia report that they cannot accept visa applications from women travelling alone or with their boyfriends. Married women must be accompanied by their husbands, and single women must be accompanied by a father or brother.

Cultural issues & dress code

Be aware that local custom and law in Saudi Arabia have specific requirements in public dress and behavior, especially for women. Consult your local Saudi embassy for more information. ■

placed on major economic activities. Holding 25 percent of the world's proven petroleum reserves, the country ranks as the largest exporter of petroleum and serves as a leading power in OPEC. The petroleum sector makes up roughly 75 percent of budget revenues, 90 percent of export earnings and 45 percent of GDP. The private sector makes up about 40 percent of GDP. About 5.5 million foreign workers contribute to the Saudi economy, particularly in the service and oil sectors. After high oil revenues led to large budget surpluses, Riyadh substantially boosted spending on infrastructure development, job training and education and government salaries. A plan to establish six "economic cities" in different regions of the country to promote development and diversification has been announced by the government. Natural resources: petroleum, natural gas, iron ore, gold, copper. Agriculture: wheat, barley, tomatoes, melons, dates, citrus, mutton, chickens, eggs, milk. Industries: crude oil production, petroleum refining, basic petrochemicals, ammonia, industrial gases, sodium hydroxide (caustic soda), cement, fertilizer, plastics, metals, commercial ship repair, commercial aircraft repair, construction

Currency Saudi riyal (SAR). Exchange rate: 1EUR=5SAR, 1USD=3.75SAR, 1GBP=7.4SAR, 1AUD=3SAR, 1SGD=2.46

Population 27,601,038 including 5,576,076 non-nationals (July 2007 est.). Ethnic groups: Arab 90%, Afro-Asian 10%. Religion: Muslim 100%. Internet users: 3.2 million (2006)



MAGNUS LUNDGREN