

# *Tranquillity in* **Taba**

Text and photos by Peter Symes





## Taba

FAR LEFT: Anthias dart in and out of the thriving reef

LEFT: Enjoying snacks in the twilight on the terrace of the Marriott after a good day's diving

BELOW: 'Big Brother is watching you'—what is presumably a grouper gives the onlooker and ominously stare from behind a geometric moray, *Gymnothorax griseus*

**The northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba in the Red Sea is full of new opportunities and fresh dive sites Find something new and interesting to report on at the Red Sea was the assignment I gave myself. Right. Easier said than done. It is one of the most popular and visited dive destinations on the planet and countless articles have already been written about the underwater wonders of its spectacular underwater world. I found myself with a challenge on my hand.**

It probably dates me a bit, but I remember when Sharm el Sheikh was a small, sleepy village at the tip of the barren Sinai peninsula, which was reached by overnight coach from Cairo. Domestic flights from Cairo's international airport, which was the common place of entry to Sharm's airstrip, were available but came at a substantial price. This was about 20 years ago, and I still recall how the sensation of remoteness filled me with joy and excitement—it was an adventure. The waters were amazing, and I think they still are. But they are not quite as accessible anymore, and in places, have become somewhat crowded. Sharm has turned into a bustling resort town with over 150,000 hotel beds, or so I have heard, and a busy international airport, and the

once barren, rugged and dramatically beautiful coastline has been extensively developed and clad with resorts, which now extend in an unbroken chain far into the mist on the horizon. Granted, a lot of these hotels are very nice, and there are few other places on the planet where you get so much standard for your buck. However, I was yearning for the original Red Sea experience and for at place where I could go diving off the coast at my leisure, without being compelled to get up in the wee morning to catch a bus to a day boat in the next bay. This is now what you have to do in Sharm. I don't want to get up early, and I do not want commute on a holiday. While the "Deep South" area south of Marsa Alam on the western coast of the





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The life inside the reef structures is quite vibrant. TOP RIGHT: A marble snake eel, *Callechelys marmorata*, pokes its head out of the sand. Approach slowly and you may be able to get up quite close. BOTTOM RIGHT: Huge lionfish are omnipresent

Red Sea possibly could offer all this in plenty, my attention was drawn to the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba and the area of Taba just south of the border with Israel. The macro life was said to be really good there with a healthy population of frogfish. "Is that so?," I thought. A decision was made, and off to Taba I went.

Fast forward to arrival in Sharm el

Sheikh airport. I was amazed and impressed how fast I was whisked through customs and immigration by the guides from our travel company. It only took a few minutes from the time I stepped out of the plane until I sat in the minibus on the outside still gasping and panting from the massive and almost burning wall of hot air that greeted me upon disembarkation. That is Sinai in

early August for you. Thank goodness for air conditioning.

Taba Heights is a small resort town built around a golf course and a cluster of four international hotels which takes about 2.5 hours to reach from Sharm el Sheikh. Whether the drive through Sinai's rugged landscape is considered an experience in its own right and part of the whole adventure or just a tedious



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Many of the dive sites are very conveniently located just below the resort; Many of the dive sites are at moderate depth. There are no dramatic drop-offs with lush gorgonians, but there are lots of small critters; Blacktip grouper, *Epinephelus fasciatus*; Sergeant major fish (inset)

and unwanted stage just to get over with the sooner the better depends, I suppose, on your personal inclinations in that respect. I kind of like it, and it helps resetting my frame of reference, as I stare out on the vast and empty

expanses of the desert. I could not help studying the landscape that passed pondering on all the biblical stuff that took place on this peninsula. It's mind-boggling in a way—all the strife that has taken place in this region—and at the same time, I wondered what all the fuss was really about and why people were here in the first place.

There is no water here, no growth, no green pastures nor food for that matter—just dust, sand, gravel, rocks and scorching temperatures. It seems as fertile as Mars. I am passing through in transit to undertake some great diving on colourful corals and sip cocktails or cold beers by the pool side in the evenings—that is my good excuse for being here. But it eludes me as to why anyone would like to hang around in this beautiful but forsaken place before diving was invent-

ed and dragged along its masses of tourists with their cash and credit cards.

Underwater Sinai is a completely different world, and breaking the surface is like going through a portal to another universe that is colourful, vibrant and alive.

But before one descends, one cannot help taking a look around at the peaks draped in an amazing spectrum of soft pastel colours ranging from sandy yellows to dusty pinks, which only get softer, hazier and redder as the day progresses.

And once one gets water over one's head and immerses oneself in the blue realm, the whole tonal range completely

changes, and one is greeted with the full palette of strong colours coming to life in the form of orange anthias and damselfish darting in and out of coral structures, yellow butterfly fish, blue surgeonfish, and the almost psychedelical juvenile emperor angelfish to name a few.

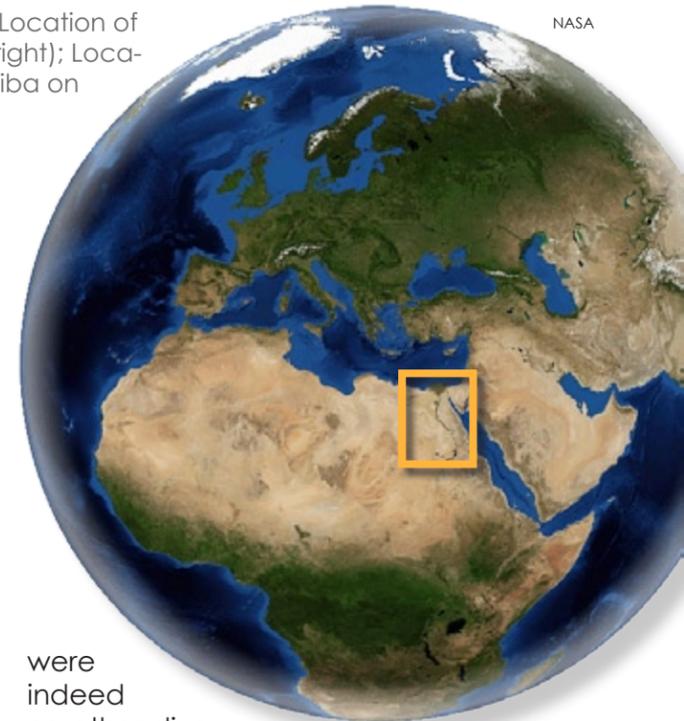
### Zen moment

The tranquillity down below was soothing, and I slowly descended to the bottom about 15m below me. I was on the house reef just outside the resorts. From the boat deck, I just stepped off, and I could see my hotel room. It was that close and





Stonefish on reef (left); Location of Egypt on global map (right); Location of Taba and Nuweiba on map of Egypt (below)



NASA

swim from A to B and keep up with a group of divers, some of which invariably have questionable skills in buoyancy control and limited situational awareness, is not very conducive for working properly with a camera. But, much to my relief,

that easy to get to. As I gently touched down like a humanoid lunar lander on a sandy patch and started adjusting my belts and buckles, fidgeting with my camera gear—all my everyday worries had already left me. Ah, peace!

The diving in these parts was everything but dramatic. The bottom was a flat sandy plateau scattered with lots of coral heads and table corals under which all sorts of critters were playing hide and seek. I came to think of a garden with bushes and plantations. There were several big table corals under which groupers, morals and lionfish huddled, pushing shoulders and shoving each other out of the best spot.

I don't recall ever seeing so many moray eels in one location, both in terms of specimens and different species. The maximum depth of 18m also made this dive relaxed in terms of ample margin to no-deco limits and remaining airtime.

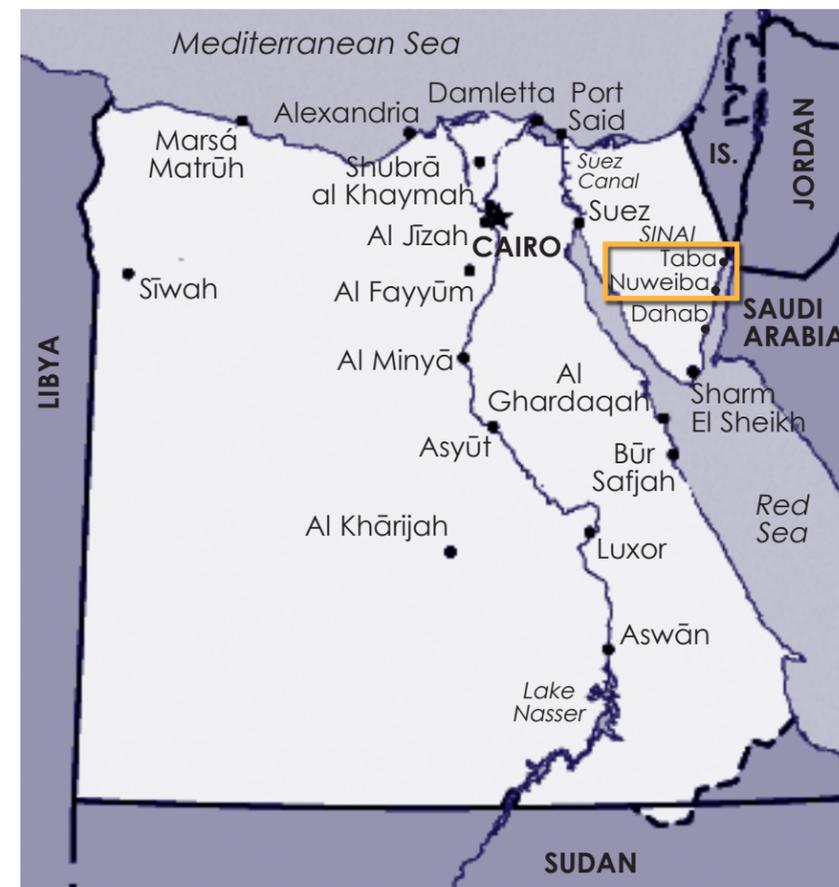
Being a photographer I was, obviously, not keen on going with groups. Having to

in this case A to B turned out to be a short and sedate semi-circular course, so I was fortunately able to mind my own business while staying within eyesight of the group, or rather the dive guides. I believe I even hummed a few tunes as I went about taking my pictures.

I didn't see any other divers in the water. I believed we were the only group on this whole stretch of reef, and once out of the water almost an hour later, there

were indeed no other dive boats in sight.

It was a beautiful day, and the surface of the sea was flat and smooth as glass. I got out of my gear and headed for a strong cup of tea and some fresh baked cake before we went on our next dive a little further down the reef. There was no rush.



The moon rises over the gulf of Aqaba. On the other side is the Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

According to Wikipedia the name of the sea may signify the seasonal blooms of the red-coloured *Trichodesmium erythraeum* near the water's surface.

But what about the special hue the surface takes in the twilight?

**Stellar moments**

That evening I had my first of several good dinners with a magnificent view over the opposite coastline. Jordan is on the left, and Saudi Arabia is on the right.

As the daylight dimmed and turned into twilight, the moon rose across the gulf, reflected by the still waters that had taken on a rosy tone. This was the Red Sea all right. I understood that it got its name from this very phenomenon where the local circumstances combined in a way that made the sea appear reddish.

While I watch in silence how the twilight



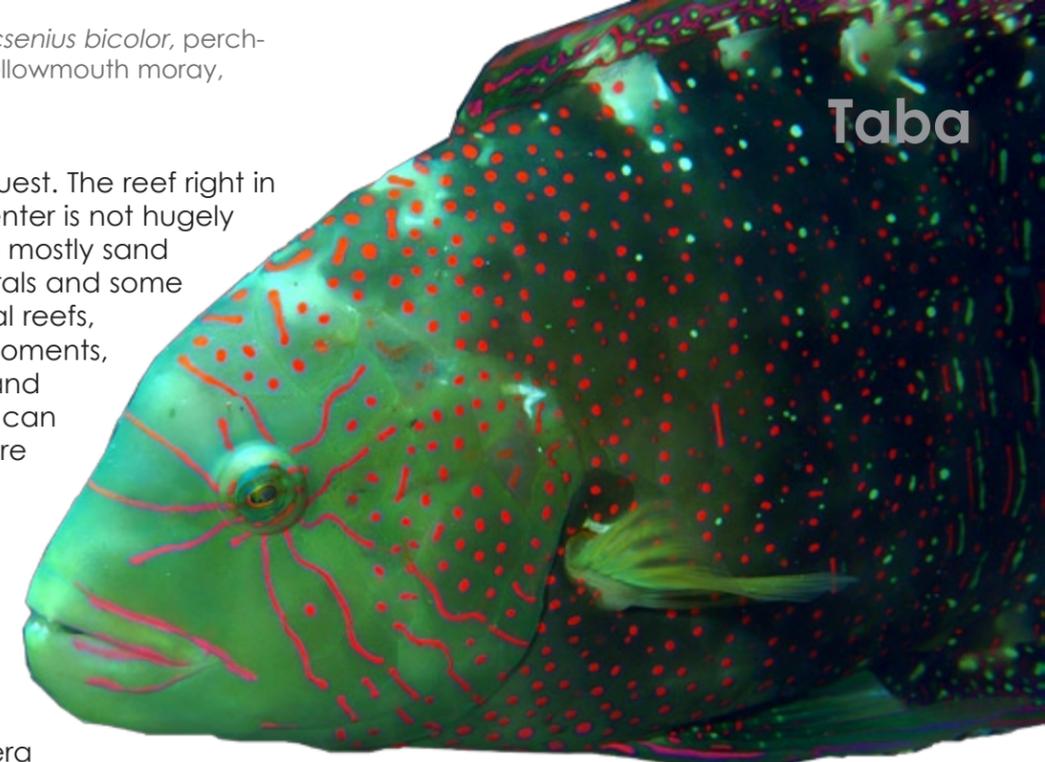
COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A tint bicolor blenny, *Ecsenius bicolor*, perches on a coral head; Nose-spotted, *Synodus binotatus*; Yellowmouth moray, *Gymnothorax nudivomer*; Spotted wrasse (right)

but it is close enough. The Red Sea Waterworld dive center lies adjacent to the hotel complex and is reached in only a few minutes by the complimentary shuttle bus that stops by the hotel twice every hour for most of the day. Equally important, if you are an occasional lazy bum like yours truly who wants to sleep in now and then and decide to give the morning dive a pass, you can jump in later.

There are three boat dives a day—one in the morning, one at 11 and one after noon. In addition, there is unlimited beach diving from either the house reef in front of the dive center, aka the aptly named "Confined Training Area", or in the nearby Marina Bay area to which you get driven in

a 4WD on request. The reef right in front of the center is not hugely exciting being mostly sand with a few corals and some smaller artificial reefs, but it has its moments, as seahorses and pipe ghostfish can be spotted here and, as the name implies, it is an excellent training area. Also, it is good for getting kit adjusted and the camera configured if you have not been in the water for a good while.

I went out several times during the



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week, just because it was so easy to just grab another tank and walk straight out. I never saw any seahorses but, somewhat ironically, lots of other exciting stuff.

**Fjord**

No, we have not washed up in Norway. Fjord is the name of a site some 25 minutes sailing time from the marina where there is a freshwater well on the bottom. The well itself appears to be a cylindrical depression in the reef some 15 meters in diameter. The rim starts around 15 meters, so even OWD divers can come along but cannot go to the bottom of the well, which lies at 27m. Also, because freshwater seeps from the bottom of the



Rounding off a day of diving with a glass of cold Stella—a reasonably good Egyptian beer



slowly transformed itself into a velvety blue night, I enjoyed a cool Stella—an Egyptian beer. It did not quite meet the standard of the Belgian or Czech pilsners—but then again, what is—and I found it actually pretty good. I can't help thinking, is there any better way of wrapping up a very nice but warm day full of great

diving than with a cool beer while looking out of over the sea. That night I slept like a baby.

**The elusive frogfish**

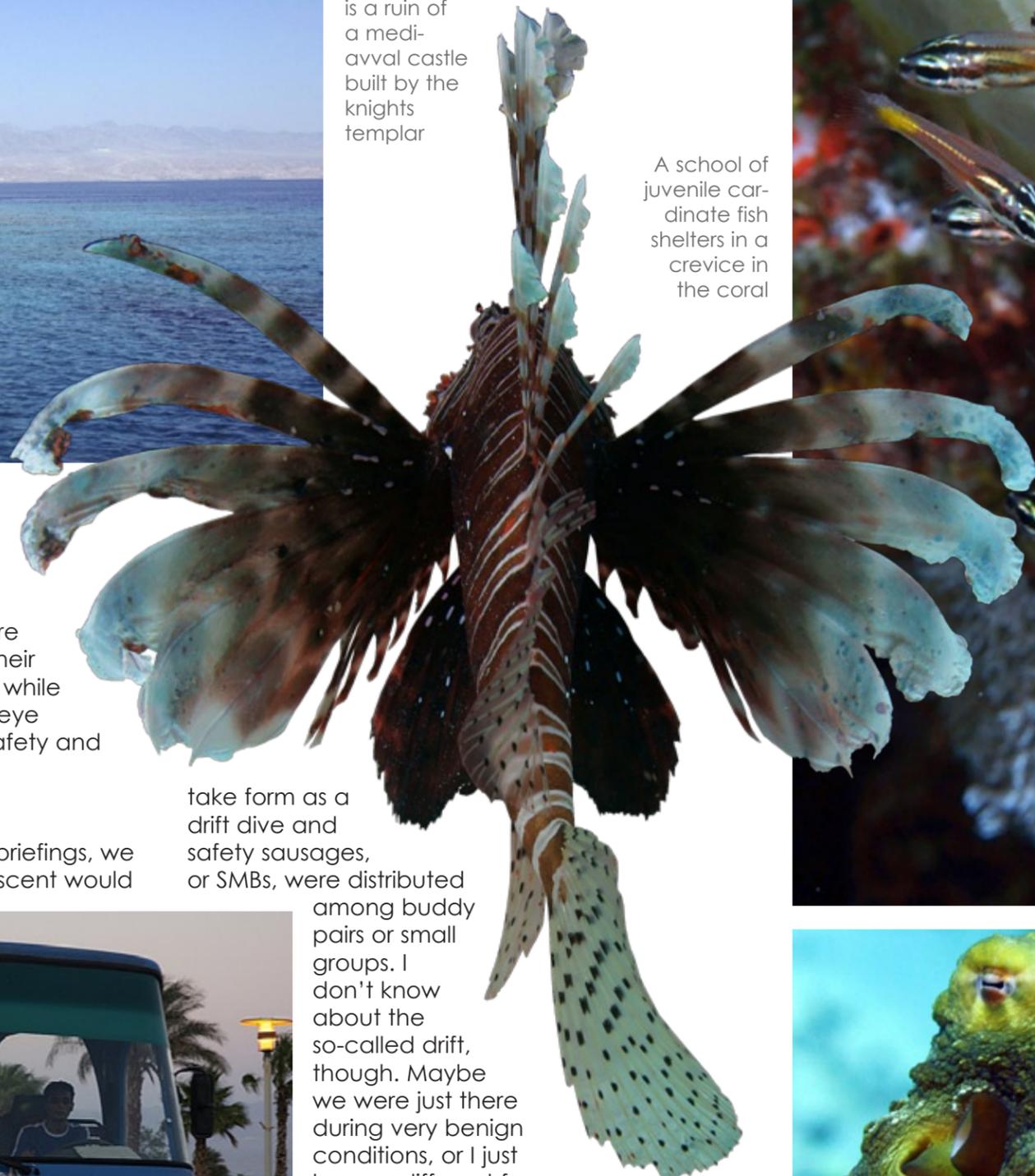
Ideally, I wanted to stay at a resort with a house reef I could have direct access to at my leisure. It is not quite possible here,



On Pharaoh's Island near the Israeli border there is a ruin of a medieval castle built by the knights templar

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A school of juvenile cardinal fish shelters in a crevice in the coral



Red Sea racoon butterflyfish, *Chaetodon fasciatus* (left)

people around but letting people explore the surroundings in their own time and pace while keeping a watchful eye out for everyone's safety and minor needs.

### Drift diving

During many of the briefings, we were told that the ascent would

take form as a drift dive and safety sausages, or SMBs, were distributed among buddy pairs or small groups. I don't know about the so-called drift, though. Maybe we were just there during very benign conditions, or I just have a different frame of reference on currents, having learnt to dive in Scandinavian waters, but I did not feel much of a current. I think it only makes sense to talk about drift dives when it is a) impossible or at least prohibitively strenuous to swim against the current, or b) when the current is used for sweeping you effortlessly along on a joy ride along the



Day octopus, *Octopus cyanea*, about to blend in with the reef; The shuttle bus is free and runs every 30 minutes (left)



well, divers will experience a loss of buoyancy, which needs to be countered as one descends into the well.

There seems to be little need, however, to explore the bottom, which appears to largely consist of coarse gravel and is a waste good breathing gas.

It is mostly what lives on the walls that seems interesting, including a bright pink anemone zealously guarded by clownfish. The well is a curiosity and a good excuse for an excursion, but once you have seen it, you have seen it, and what goes on in the surrounding reef is more interesting.

Once again, we have the place to ourselves, and there is no hurry. In general, I have to give the dive guides much credit for not herding





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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Tube worm blenny, *Plagiotremus rhinorhynchos*, peeks out of its hole; Steinitz's shrimp goby, *Amblyeleotris steinitzi*, usually shares its burrow with a shrimp that keeps the burrow tidy in return for protection and food scraps; Two-banded anemone fish, *Amphiprion bicinctus*; Pyjamas nudibranch, *Chromodoris quadricolor*; Juvenile emperor angelfish, *Pomacanthus imperator*



reef. This dive had neither, but we got a good excuse for some very good practise in deploying the buoys, ascending along their lines and performing a safety stop suspended under these sausages. You never know when you will really be dependent on such skills. In any case, it is my firm belief that a surface marker buoy should be part of any diver's safety kit.

### Other dive sites

The local dive sites lies pretty much like pearls on a string along side the resort and a bit to north. And none of them are very far from the



marina. Most of the sites are dominated by relatively flat or gently sloping areas with a mix of sandy patches and coral heads. This physical structure combined with the fact that there is plenty of macro life makes it a very good area for photographers, because there always seems to be ample room to kneel down on sand and mess around without damaging the sensitive coral by accidental physical con-

tact. The dive guides also seem to have a keen eye for spotting elusive or camouflaged creatures, which is very helpful for photographers.

One dive site, Farun Island (aka Pharaoh's Island) lies close to the border with Israel, around 45 minutes sailing time from Taba Heights marina. On the island,

the most prominent landmark is the old fort.

In the 12th century, Crusaders defending the route between Cairo and Damascus controlled by the nearby city of Aqaba, in Jordan, built the first fortification on the island. In December 1170, Saladin conquered the island and reconstructed the citadel. In 2003, the citadel on Pharaoh's Island was added to the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List.

History aside, it is also a popular dive site, with lush coral reefs making it a popular sightseeing attraction among tourists based in Taba, Eilat and Aqaba. From Taba Heights, this is a full day weekly excursion with lunch served on the boat.



Dense schools of glass fish (above) congregate over the reef structures; A pipefish of indeterminate species (right) hides in the sea grass bed



### Sea grass and glass fish

The lush meadows of sea grasses constitutes a different habitat than the coral reef. At a glance, there doesn't seem to be much life there, but look again and look closely, because a lot of the species there are very well camouflaged. Hiding behind the sea grass, you can find seahorses and pipefish, some of which are fiendishly well camouflaged. Or you might come across a grazing sea turtle.

It was on one of these shallow nearby sites where I had one of my most enjoyable dives for many years. The name of the site is Muqabila and lies few minutes south of the marina. We started the dive among table corals and pillars on the sandy bottom, and as usual, the amount of life taking shelter among the corals was a spectacle one could keep watching forever.



TOP TO BOTTOM: Wandering feather star traverses the sea grass meadow; Painted cardinalfish, *Archamia fucata*; Schultz's pipefish, *Corythoichthys schultzi*



A school of juvenile The pickhandle barracuda *Sphyræna jello*

Seaside view of Taba Heights (right)

Typical reefscape below the resorts (bottom right)

Two-banded anemonefish in pink bubble coral, *Physogyra* sp. (below)



All kinds of damselfish, more species than I could recognise, were darting in and out. Moray eels were tucked away in crevices at the bottom, and huge lionfish gave me the grumpy look.

On top of one the coral heads, the guide spotted and pointed out a stone fish, which I would never have seen on my own. What an ugly fellah. But some 45 minutes into this already pleasant dive, we came to a big coral head that sat just where the beds of sea grasses started.

The sun was coming from behind the underwater scenery, as I watched a school of large glassfish moving and swaying in and out of the reef. Suddenly, they passed over the reef and came in between me and the sun, which backlit the whole lot like a glass mosaic in a cathedral, and every little fibre in their translucent bodies stood out.

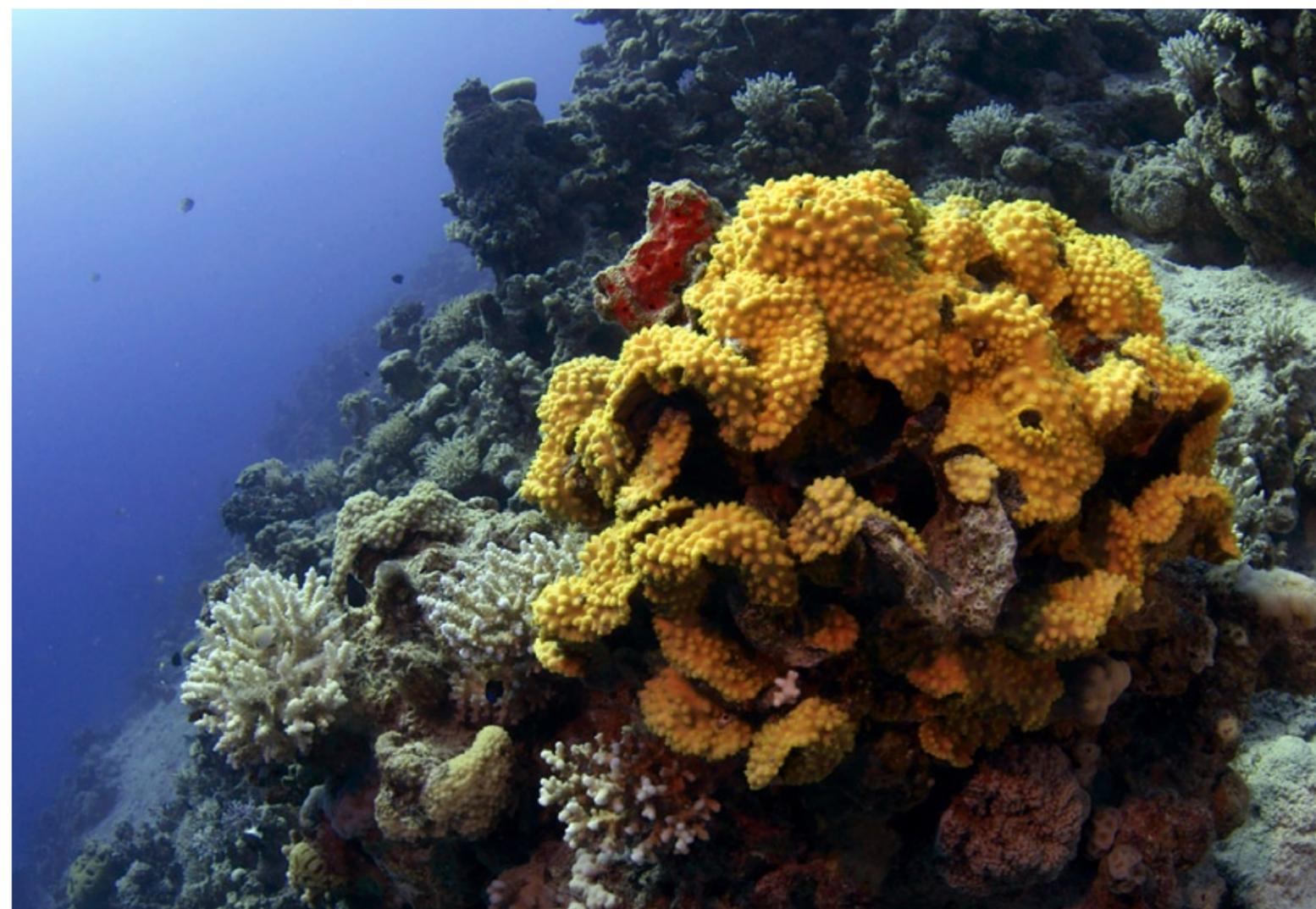
Slowly moving away from the

coral, we then went over the bed of sea grass.

First, I came across a wandering brittlestar, then a bright red pipefish—of a species I have not yet been able to establish with any degree of convincing certainty—some small wrasses, and then, a majestic sea turtle calmly grazing.

**Security**

Due to the proximity to the borders with Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia guests are required to bring their passports on all boat dives, but this is not a major hassle. Every morning, when divers got picked up outside the hotel by the dive center shuttle, the dive guide collected the passports for safe-keeping. Security is in place everywhere. During the transfer from the airport in Sharm, we passed through a number of checkpoints where we were waved straight through by soldiers who looked utterly bored out of their skulls, as they cooked in the heat and fly-infested manholes for I don't know how long. Around the perim-





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On the road from Sharm el Sheikh to Taba, you never know what you are going to meet

eter of the Taba Height urbanisation was another set of check-points, so if one had no legitimate business here, one was not able to get very far. Nonetheless, busses and transfer vehi-

cles were not able to pull up all the way to any of the hotels being prevented to do so by barriers, which are probably there to stop car bombers from entering the premises. It is probably all just healthy paranoia stemming from Egypt's critical dependency on the revenue from tourism, as it's better to be safe than sorry. But sometimes, it just got a bit silly and inconsequential. Everyday guests had to pass through a metal detector and empty

their pockets to enter the hotel through the lobby, while nothing prevented guests from going straight to their rooms via the sidewalk or by entering the hotel from the beach.

**The dive center**

Red Sea Waterworld gave me the impression of being organised and efficient in the way they dealt with the many groups of divers, snorkellers and other watersport guests. Operations were timely but never rushed or chaotic. The place appeared neat and orderly, and the rental equipment looked fairly new and in good shape. But perhaps most importantly, I noticed how the staff interacted among themselves, and the mood seemed relaxed and light hearted. If things are in a mess back stage, it will show.

The center has a café where one can have a light lunch or snack between dives or just enjoy a coffee, juice or smoothie.

**Accommodation**

The standard is good, as is often the case in Egypt, and relatively upscale with attention to detail without being uncomfortably push for divers in t-shirts and flip-flops. I stayed at the Marriott but poked into the other nearby hotels, which seemed to be of an equally good four star standard. That aside, I cannot pass any judgement on these hotels as I did not stay there.

At Marriott, I enjoyed having the all-inclusive board, which meant that all meals were included as long as I dined in the main restaurant. There were a number of other tempting restaurants in the hotel which I, however, did not get to try.

Amazingly, all-inclusive also meant alcoholic beverages—of which something was supposed to be excluded, but I never found out what it was. I presumed that it must have been the expensive liquors.

The hotel had some excellent big pools, a good fitness center



Marriott in Taba Heights (above)



with a spa and a tennis court, which I cannot believe a person could actually use in that searing heat without suffering a heat stroke within minutes. My main gripe was that Internet connection was shockingly pricey at €15 per hour, which deterred me from getting much work done while on location—a feature that might well assist guests in avoiding the temptation to work, or get bogged down checking emails, while on vacation.

**Sights**

Castle Zaman is a restaurant in a castle with a spectacular view about 15km down the coast. It specialises in slowly stewed dishes served still sizzling in huge ceramic pots. It is not cheap but well worth the visit if you fancy a change from the hotel's restaurant.

St. Catherine Monastery lies in the

heart of Sinai and is a full day trip, so are most of the other excursions on offer such as the Colored Canyon, Aqaba, Eilat, Jerusalem and, my personal favourite, the magnificent Petra.

Boats leave from the Taba Heights marina to Jordan, but during my visit, operations were put on hold pending some bureaucratic issues with permissions. Until this gets sorted out, trips to Jordan take place by going by coach to the Israeli border, which is crossed on foot. Then, another vehicle takes guests the short distance to the Jordanian border, which is then crossed on foot. And finally, some van or minibus takes guests to the sights they want to see. Petra is worth it, though.

**Recommendations**

As it has probably already been made clear, this is a place for macro pho-

tographers and holiday makers who are looking for a more tranquil location than what big resort towns elsewhere can offer. Of course, the trade-off is less shopping options and less night-life though there are bars enough in the hotels or the little 'uptown area' on the other side of the central golf course. You will not find the wild and dramatic diving here—go to Brothers or Elphinstone for that—nor did I spot many of the lush soft corals I have seen further south, but this area's got so many other things to offer. It is a good place to relax and seems like a good place for a family holiday unless one craves a lot of excursions and sights of which there are not so many.

Oh... and I never got to see my frogfish. I guess, I'll just have go again. ■



Dinner restaurant at Marriott (above); View of Taba Heights (top left)