



Red Sea  
In The  
Pink

JIM ANDERSON



## Red Sea In The Pink



**Jim Anderson of West Lothian SAC is one of many Scottish divers who travels regularly with popular dive company, Oonasdivers. When those nice people at Oonasdivers invited Jim on a trip to the southern Red Sea to celebrate their 20th birthday, he accepted graciously. Oh! and he took his camera ...**

UP UNTIL a year ago, the Southern Red Sea was only available to those hardy enough to face a gruelling six hour bus journey after a four and a half hour flight to Hurghada; or after several days cruising on a live-aboard. All that is in the past now with flights from the UK going to direct to the new Marsa Alam airport 250km further south. This means journey times are considerably reduced and provide easy access to the deep south live-aboard departure points for offshore sites like St Johns, Rocky Island and Zabargad.

We were a group of strangers who travelled as guests of Oonasdivers on their celebratory 20th anniversary trip to the southern Red Sea. Shortly after meeting at Gatwick, we were soon well on the way to becoming a group of friends on a memorable seven day trip.

Our base was Red Sea Divers Eco-village at Marsa Shagra. RSD have successfully established themselves since 1988 with Eco-Resorts at Marsa Shagra, Marsa Nakari and Wadi Lahmi. Our accommodation in Marsa Shagra was in the Madyafah Chalets.

The diving around Shagra is wide and varied and we enjoyed what is some of the best shore diving in the Red Sea. Zodiacs ferry you out to the house reefs to the north and south of the bay. These reefs are in superb condition with steep

slopes and little walls dropping in steps from the surface down way beyond the 30m max. depth limit. Life was abundant, with plenty of turtles, the odd reef shark and large shoals of fish.

20 minutes offshore lies the legendary Elphinstone Reef where hammerhead shark, oceanic white tip shark, grey reef sharks, manta rays and dolphins are regularly encountered. The resort also run trips to shore dives further afield including the bay at Shaab Abu Dabaab, where green turtles graze on the sea grass and if you are very lucky you could enjoy the company of a dugong who is regularly spotted. For us though, it was the same old story:

“You should have been here last week!”

The Dolphin House reef complex at Shaab Samaday is 40 minutes to the south by hard boat from the harbour. The reef area is separated into a zone that allows snorkelling with the resident dolphins and also keeps boats away from them, and of course diving zones too. Although no one seems to have told the dolphins this as they frequently come out of their designated areas and are seen by divers.

So the first three days passed – diving, eating well in the open-air restaurant buffet, supping a few beers at the bar and getting to know the other strangers in the group.

For the next part of our adventure we were transferred by bus to Hamata 100kms further south where we boarded the MV *Sea Flower*, our live-aboard home for the next three days.

After departing at 6pm we stopped somewhere off-shore for a night dive and then it was full steam ahead overnight to Rocky Island and Zabargad. These two islands offer spectacular wall diving and there is always the chance of seeing big pelagics.

Two dives on the south end of Rocky in the morning and two on Zabargad in the afternoon. These islets lie 90km off-shore in the bluest of blue water. Above they are brown and barren with only a few sea birds and on Zabargad the ancient remains of mines dating back to the Pharaohs; below the surface they are a riot of coloured fish, soft and hard corals and invertebrate life.

This was an amazing day’s diving, but our itinerary meant that we had to head back so by the next morning we were moored on Habili Kebir in the St. John’s Reef complex, still 30kms off-shore, but quite different to Rocky. Here the reefs rise off relatively shallow (25–35m) sandy plains and offer superb swim throughs, caverns and isolated pillar reefs to wander and wonder among.

A day at St. Johns then reluctantly north to Fury Shoal, it was our last dive; we dropped off *Sea Flower’s* zodiac onto the reef at Abu Galawa Saghira, the last resting place for the ocean going yacht whose wreck lies photogenically at 20m along the side of the reef.

Back in Hamata we boarded our bus and led by our host Hossam we headed back to base at Shagra. The surprises were not quite over. As the sun set we turned off the main road and headed out into the desert for a delightful dinner and entertainment at the Bedouin encampment of the local Beda people.

Last days of any diving holiday always seem to be spent hanging about, either in bars or around pools, waiting for the flight home. We were not left too weary. Our host laid on an entertaining and informative presentation to us and then a visit to the very well equipped and professionally manned recompression chamber just across the road from the resort.

You know you will be in safe hands here; the doctor is a diver and the chamber came from Aberdeen. The advice to all of us to help prevent a necessary visit to these facilities, apart from the obvious depth/time/repeat diving was to drink plenty of water – three litres a day and in case you want to substitute beer a further litre of water is necessary for every large bottle of beer imbibed!

Happy birthday and thanks to Oonasdivers for inviting me on this 20th anniversary trip, I have been booking all my foreign dive holidays with them and always find them very friendly and helpful. Even when they recently had to phone and tell me that the boat I booked for the club holiday had sunk. Not to worry - they soon had a replacement and so we are all looking forward to enjoying another excellent trip with Oonasdivers.



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### PHOTO CAPTIONS

Page 23 (full page)

A shoal of fusiliers within the cave system in St. John's Cave.

Page 24 (clockwise from top left)

A Big-eyed Soldier Fish, hanging off the reef at St John's Reef;

Soft coral sp. in one of the swim-throughs, Habili Saghir, St. John's Reef;

Grey reef shark, *Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*, at 30 metres on Habili Kebir, St John's Reef;

A juvenile Moray eel, *Gymnothorax javanicus*, with cleaner shrimp during the night dive on Sataya reef;

Martin Robson, leading UK cave diver, pointing the way in St. John's Cave;

A common site in the Red Sea, a pair of Masked Butterfly fish, *Chaetodon semilarvatus*, at Habili Saghir, St. John's Reef;

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Yacht wreck – panorama of the wreck at Abu Galawa

Photos: all taken with Fuji F810 in Ikelite housing with Inon D-2000 flashes.