

# Happy Birthday!



ScotSAC chair Jack Morrison celebrated his 60th birthday recently and where better to do it than in the Red Sea. Here's his story of dazzling reefs, cheeky moray eels, regal whitetips and the best malt whisky in the world. And a cake too ...

WORDS & PHOTOS  
**Jack Morrison**

# It's Black Friday

NORMAL PEOPLE celebrate their birthdays having a nice meal with family and friends especially those memorable birthdays like a 60th. However, divers as we all know are not 'normal' people, which is why on my 60th I found myself standing on the dive platform of *MV Sea Flower* at 5.30 in the morning waiting to jump off into the Red Sea.

The water is calm and this is the first dive of the week - a check-out dive and a chance for our dive guide Marcello to see what we are made of and whether he can trust us to dive on our own or not. As usual these dives are on a safe shallow reef that shows signs of being over dived; lots of dead coral and a sandy bottom - but just as we reach the reef we find a crocodile fish well-camouflaged among the broken coral. There are the usual anthias in abundance and for a first dive it serves its purpose. Marcello seems happy enough with us, and while we are served orange juice as we de-kit, the crew are busy as we are off south to the area known as St Johns.

I do fill at least one of the criteria mentioned above as I am in the company of friends, West Lothian Sub Aqua Club. I was lucky enough to be invited to fill a place on this holiday trip and it just so happened to coincide with my birthday. I'm not sure why but my family encouraged me to come here rather than spend it with them, something else to ask my psychoanalyst about.

I have been paired with Douglas Foreman and we also share a cabin - a small cabin and I snore after diving, poor chap. Another thing, divers are not superstitious or we would not be here on Friday the thirteenth, even if it is my birthday.

A few hours later and we are at another reef - I was listening to the briefing honestly but I just can't remember the name of the reef and as I don't keep a log book, shame on me, it will be like all the others this week just another reef in the Red Sea. This one is steep - a vertical drop to about 40 metres (this is a guess as Douglas and I have no intention of going down to find out - 30 will do us). Even that depth is a rarity as I'd rather have a long shallow dive.

The good thing about this type of reef is it can't get damaged by anchors or divers so the corals are always

better and healthier. The RIB drops us on the sunny side of the reef and we are to swim with the reef on our right until we are back at the boat, see I do listen to the briefing.

Corals are excellent and the fish life is abundant. At 20 metres, under a small table coral, there is a moray eel, head out, surveying his territory. Out of the blue two jacks come in to the reef at speed, turn and, ignoring the divers, power their way along the reef scattering small fish before them.

One hour later and we're back at the boat climbing out to a welcome glass of fruit juice. Two hours later we are moored for the night and after our first night dive and dinner I retired to the cabin to download today's pictures and put batteries on to charge.

Douglas comes down to ask if I am coming up to join the others which eventually I do to be greeted by a chorus of 'Happy Birthday to You', I'd quite forgotten it was my birthday however my companions had not. The chef and the crew produced a magnificent cake which was delicious, all gooey icing and soft sponge. A beautiful hand made card from Mrs A and a huge bag of minstrels from Gordon and Jenny and hearty congratulations from all the rest had me almost in tears, aye right, a show of emotion with this bunch you must be joking.

After stuffing ourselves with cake Jim A invited Marcello, and everyone else, to enjoy a glass of the finest malt whisky in the world. Marcello agreed but was not quite so sure at 5.30 the next morning when he gave us a rather slurred briefing before the first dive. My 60th then was memorable - spent in excellent company under a star filled sky with the warm waters of the Red Sea lapping against the side of the boat. And with another five days of diving still to come - perfect. I told you divers are from another planet.

The pattern for the next five days was set, up at five, cup of coffee, briefing, watch the sunrise while waiting to dive. After the dive - breakfast, download pictures, briefing, dive, lunch, download, briefing, dive, afternoon nap, download, night dive, dinner.

On the second night Ian invited Marcello and everyone else to try his 'finest malt whisky in the world' with

the same result Marcello got drunk. On the third night Douglas invited Marcello and everyone else to try his 'finest malt whisky in the world' with the usual result Marcello got drunk, you need to practise more Marcello like this lot do.

If you're patiently waiting for more purple prose about pristine reefs and colourful fish well look at the pictures because I'm not going to repeat myself endlessly. There were two types of reef - ones with steep sides and ones that were shallow with caves and swim-throughs. They all have colourful fish and coral and most of them have lots of divers, which brings me to two observations.

Some fish are using divers when hunting prey for example the cornetfish on steep sided reefs use the divers for cover. They swim along on the outside of the diver where small fish can't see them then when the diver breathes out they dart through the curtain of bubbles taking the small fish by surprise.

Also at night the lionfish have adapted and swim just outside the beam of the diver's torch, then when a small fish appears in the beam they shoot forward and catch them. It's a bit disconcerting swimming in the dark knowing there are fish with poisonous spines beside you, don't thrash about with your hands or you could find a lionfish impaled on it.

Although I'm not going to describe every one of the 21 dives we did in the six days we were here, I would single out one reef as being a bit special. Elphinstone lies off Marsa Alam, not far off so it is visited on a daily basis by both liveaboards and day boats; there are even RIBs coming out to

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Elphinstone. It should be trashed on account of traffic it sees every day but it's not, it is actually a brilliant reef. In fact I reckon it's not far behind The Brothers for quality and variety.

Elphinstone is another steep sided reef - 300m long and less than 50m wide. It runs north-south and both sides are walls down to 45m. At the north end there are plateaus at different depths down to 50m. The south end drops down to about 45-50m where there is an arch with the sarcophagus of a long lost pharaoh, allegedly.

On our first dive we drifted along the west side from north to south enjoying watching the huge fan corals bending in the gentle current. Here the fish are so used to divers you get that rare feeling you are part of the reef. The fish don't scatter when you pass by; they just give you a quick look and carry on feeding or showing off to the females or whatever they do to get their fin over. I've never seen so many different varieties of fish, I could spend a week diving this exceptional reef just trying to photograph fish.

However the south end is where we spent our entire second dive because there are three or four oceanic whitetips hanging out here almost all the time. You do have to be patient as it is they who decide whether or not you are going to have a close encounter. Just hang there in at about 5m, stay still and wait. If you're lucky they will swim straight toward you one after the other, go round and swim away again - a fabulous experience.

If you're very lucky you might get a half decent picture to prove how brave you were. We tried to persuade the skipper to let us have just one more dive but to no avail he was insistent we had to return to port, besides we had just found one last bottle of the finest malt in the world and Marcello was at last getting the hang of it. He's not had a hangover for two days now. My thanks to West Lothian for the invite to join them, and to Douglas for being so patient and the best dive partner I have had for a long time.

The trip was organised through Oonasdivers. Visit [www.oonasdivers.com](http://www.oonasdivers.com) and go to galleries, picture of the day for October 2006 and see some of Jim Anderson's excellent pictures from the trip.



*Royal angel fish*



*Giant squirrelfish*



*Emperor angelfish*

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Coral grouper



Douglas and turtle

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Oceanic whitetip shark