



*masked butterflyfish in coral*

Patrick Shier's trip to Southern Egypt was full of memories. Mesmerising encounters with colourful underwater life coupled with 'living the passion' with a group of local wild dolphins . He even got to name his own dive site ...

# Red Sea Dream Dive



*spinner dolphins*



*divers and dugong*

DOLPHINS EVERYWHERE, I couldn't believe my eyes, I wasn't in an aquarium with half a dozen depressed animals waiting for their next fix of prozac while they performed tricks, I was swimming with hundreds of wild dolphins in their natural habitat just a 45 minute RIB ride from Wadi Lahami.

To get to the first of my diving destinations Marsa Wadi Lahami I had travelled just about as far south as you can possibly go on an Egyptian tourist visa. After this point and up until the border of Sudan the area is controlled by the military. Although the Sudanese border is 300km away they have a check point at Shalatin which is just 140km further south of my destination.

I left Gatwick at 10.15am on a Wednesday morning and found the mid week departure a breeze. Within minutes of arrival I had checked in my baggage and was through passport control and on my way to Garfunkel's for brekkie. The flight left on time and I arrived in Marsa Alam around 5.00pm. Once out of the airport terminal I had a scenic three hour journey by mini bus ahead of me, the Red Sea on my left and the mountains of the desert on my right. I finally reached my destination Wadi Lahami at 9.30pm. Some may think that travelling all day is going to be tiring but surprisingly enough it was quite relaxing and definitely exciting.

Once I had had something to eat and a couple of cold beers I was shown to my apartment and told of the following day's diving programme. There are three types of accommodation at all of the eco villages owned by Red Sea Diving Safaris, there are tents, which seemed quite popular while I was there. They are spacious, have electric light and a power point for charging batteries. There are also huts which are fairly basic with a bed and shelf unit for your clothes etc and the amenities are close by. I stayed in one of the spacious chalets that have views overlooking the desert and the sea, my accommodation came with twin beds, wardrobes and en-suite facilities.

The day starts early at all of the villages with breakfast being served from 6.00am, then after a short stroll across the beach to the waiting RIB you leave for your first dive site of the day around 6.45am. But like all new guests I had to do a compulsory check dive so didn't have to be at the dive centre until 8.30am. My guide for the morning was the manager of the centre Ross McGrath. We loaded the RIB with our equipment then set off for the 15 minute RIB ride to the dive site.

First up was Lahami (North). Ross gave us a short briefing on what we could expect to see and then it was a backward roll into the clear warm turquoise water, as we made our descent we were greeted with an array of colourful soft corals of greens, blues, reds, yellows and purples all pulsating with life, there were fish literally everywhere, swimming above, below, in front and behind us, it was difficult to know where to look next. Then we found a big whip lash ray resting between two small rocks. As we approached it raised its tail in a defensive manner so we made sure that we didn't get too close. I took a couple of photos and then slowly moved on. Our depth at this time was around 20 metres. Nudibranchs, moray eels, puffer fish and box fish were on or around the many small beds of coral that we came across. In the sand we found a Moses sole which was so well camouflaged that unless it moved you would pass right over without noticing it.

Ross was one of the original team that researched, found and named many of the dive sites 19 years ago that Red Sea Diving Safaris have to offer and knew exactly where to take us for the best underwater landscapes. As we neared the end of the dive we decided to spend some time at 5 metres, this way we could extend our dive time, do a safety stop and investigate the reef further. When we reached 50bar it signalled the end of a fantastic dive but we had been under for around an hour and a half. Ross and his team are quite laid back, they won't rush you, they will show you

things that you might otherwise miss and will stay under water for as long as possible, they really do enjoy their work.

The skipper helped us back on to the RIB and within minutes we were on our way to the next dive site, Shabrour. We changed our tanks, had a cup of coffee and generally relaxed during the surface interval on the RIB. The hour went quite quickly and while we all kitted up Ross gave us a briefing on what we could expect to see. Once in the water Ross guided us over a plateau of soft coral that was heaving with marine life, again the depth was shallow around 18 metres. I could barely make out the outline on one pinnacle because of the density of fish. Lots of macro photography on every pinnacle; nudibranchs, shrimps, pipefish and crustaceans all ready and waiting to pose for the camera. We didn't need to move very far, in fact I would have been surprised if we had moved more than 30 metres the entire dive. There wasn't any current and the visibility was brilliant, so I could take my time and choose my photos. Once we had done our safety stops and rejoined the RIB it was a five minute ride back to Lahami for lunch.

I dived the house reef (Torfa) in the afternoon which I am told also makes for a good night dive. There have been sightings of sea horses in the sea grass (try saying that when you've had a drink), one of the other dive guides had used a cup to mark the area where he had seen them. We found plenty of sea grass and pipefish and we had fish swimming all around us but unfortunately none of the animals or crockery on our list. Our depth was no more than 7 metres so we could in theory stay down for a good couple of hours, however after an hour and a half we decided to end the dive. As we surfaced we found that we were just a short distance from our exit point. Although I didn't see what I hoped to see it was still an interesting dive.

The following day we left the dive centre as planned at 6.45am for the first >>>



*pink soft coral*



*beautiful nudibranch*

# Red Sea Dream Dive



*Literally hundreds of dolphins swim all around you, above you, below you, between your legs and by the side of you, swimming within inches of your body. To watch them playing in their natural habitat and to hear them communicating is really something special ...*

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of our dives of the day, Abu Galawa Big. Abu Galawa which means 'father of the pools' is a reef system that is covered by colourful soft corals and the big is just a name that highlights the general size of the part of the reef we would be diving. However, this particular site is more widely known for the wreck that has been here since the Second World War. Not much is known about this wreck except that it is a Chinese tug boat that hit a shallow reef. Why it was in the area is still very much a mystery.

The boat sank and as far as we know there was no loss of life, the bow rests against the reef at a depth of 5 metres and the stern in 15 metres and it is literally covered in soft corals. On the briefing you will be asked not to enter her and to stay at least a metre or two away from the wreck so as to preserve her for as long as possible. No boats are allowed to moor near the wreck or on this reef so when you surface you will be asked to swim a little way out so that the RIB can pick you up.

Abu Galawa small which was our second dive of the day is on the other side of the reef system and as the name suggests is just a little bit smaller. It is just as colourful and it also has its own wreck, an American yacht that sank in the 1970s which is lying on its port side. Again you will be asked not to enter the wreck and to stay just a little away as the corals that have made the boat their home are quite delicate. When we had seen enough and had taken the photos, we did our surface intervals and once all were back onboard the RIB we made our way back to base.

Now I could go on about every dive I made while I was there, each one being successively better than the last. But for me the most memorable experience of my entire diving career has to be snorkelling with wild dolphins for the best part of two days. The Egyptians call the experience 'living the Passion'. Literally hundreds of dolphins swim all around you, above you, below you, between your legs and by the side of you, swimming within inches of your body. To watch them play-

ing in their natural habitat and to hear them communicating is really something special, but please remember a strict no touch policy is in place here, just take photos because without the evidence no one will believe you. I have been asked not to mention the exact whereabouts of the site because the Egyptians and the tour operator are both conscious of conservation issues and although small groups of divers are welcome they would like to preserve the site for as long as possible.

To get to the site takes around 45 minutes by RIB, so on the way you will stop and have a dive at a prearranged site. Then it's off to snorkel with these magical creatures for the rest of the day. You will be asked to pack an overnight bag as you will be staying on a liveboard that is permanently moored at the site. The boat is 30 metres long, has eight cabins and can sleep 16 people. Lunch and dinner are set meals and the food is excellent. The following morning after breakfast will again be yours to snorkel with the dolphins and then around 10.30am you will join a RIB for the trip back to Lahami, on the way diving at another fantastic dive site.

The following day I travelled for two hours by mini bus north to Nakari. Again the diving was spectacular, we dived reefs such as Shaab Nakari and Habili Eldrey which have a mixture of soft and hard corals and a couple of overhangs that you can swim through. Everything here is what you would expect from such untouched remote locations. My dive guide at Nakari was Mido the assistant manager and a shore dive that he thought we should visit was the wreck of the *Abu Ghusun*. To get to the site you have to travel by truck for about an hour, but I can tell you it is well worth the trip. The wreck is thought to be between 40 and 50 years old and was carrying bags of polyethylene balls to make plastic. When it was originally found the coastguard refused to let divers onto it because it still had all of its cargo.

It went to the seabed in two pieces but

time and tide have taken their toll and she now lies in three sections. The stern is lying on its port side in 10 metres and the rest of the wreckage descends gently to a maximum depth of 20 metres. Most of the bags of ethylene have now burst and the contents can be found mixed with the sand on the beach. I did two dives on this wreck and still didn't see it all. We followed the contour of the wreck for the first dive and then on the second dive we entered her and followed some of the passages; we found the galley, the washrooms and the bridge. Now don't worry if wrecks aren't your thing as the nearby reef and the sea grass have a whole host of inhabitants just waiting for you to find them.

I stayed at Nakari for another day and even got to name a dive site (how cool is that?). So when you do decide to dive the south ask Mido to take you to Ashraf Reef, it is one colourful dive site that has more than enough marine life to keep you entertained for a very long time.

For the last part of my journey I moved further north to Marsa Wadi Shagra the largest and most popular of the three eco villages. Here I was able to dive sites such as the world famous Elphinstone reef which is just a 10 minute RIB ride away and with sharks such as hammerheads and oceanic white tips as regular visitors this is a must do dive. Abu Dabab south is where you can find the Dugong but you will more than likely come across giant turtles and guitar sharks.

At all three of the eco villages I found the guides and the staff relaxed, friendly and helpful. The food was excellent and there was lots of it. The accommodation was spacious and comfortable and the scenery both above and below the surface was just about the best I have ever seen. The evenings can be spent relaxing in the Bedouin tents drinking coffee or enjoying a meal in the desert.

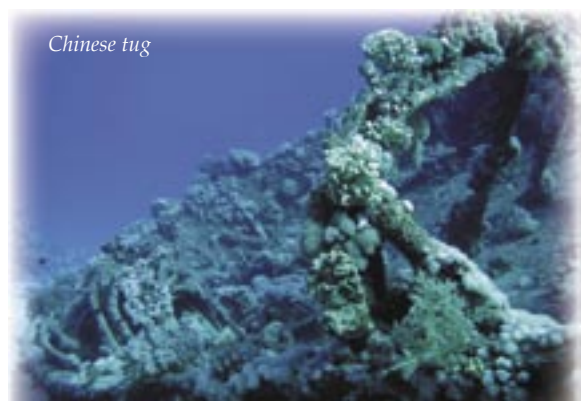
My trip was arranged by dive specialist tour operator Oonasdivers and you can contact them on 01323 648924 or via email: [info@oonasdivers.com](mailto:info@oonasdivers.com) or via their website [www.oonasdivers.com](http://www.oonasdivers.com)



American yacht



multi-coloured soft coral



Chinese tug