

African trainee dive masters. Carlos, one of the first Mozambican native dive masters, is a great critter-spotter. Their crew will also load and unload the dive kit into the boat, something that Diversity insisted on its clients helping with. Unlike Diversity, their centre is right on the beach with a pleasant deck where one can enjoy great breakfast and lunches including superb, freshly baked muffins. John will blend Nitrox. The extra bottom time that buys after most other divers ascended was well worth it. Unfortunately, fresh water and electricity are intermittent in Tofo, and don't count on everyone having generators. The air conditioner in our room, one of 3 units in the whole village, was largely ornamental. Tofo is mainly a backpacker resort. It also attracts lots of Teutonic divers looking for an alternative to pricy Maldives and the crowded Red Sea. US-based visitors are advised to use a South African agent to help with logistics. Flights to Inhambane are tricky to book. I recommend www.mozambiquetravelservice.com.

OMAN

Oman Dive Centre, Shangri-la (Al Bustan), January 2007, Angela Gostling (angela.gostling@btinternet.com), London, W4 3SS. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Feet. Water: 23 to 25 Celsius, choppy, no currents. Shangri-la Hotel provided us with complimentary transfer to and from the dive centre every day. The centre was well appointed, with good rinsing and storage facilities, so we were able to leave our gear to drip at the dive centre overnight and didn't have to cart it back to our luxury accommodation to make pools in our bathroom. Diving was interesting, topology comprising enor-

mous boulders, some corals and some real giants, such as honeycomb morays. We also spotted a number of creatures endemic to the area, such as Arabian angel fish. The windy conditions made diving risky in the afternoons when the conditions became more difficult. Diving was cancelled on one occasion because the conditions were not safe. The festival of Eid meant we were healthy divers as the hotel did not serve alcoholic drinks over the two days of the festival. We felt virtuous during this short period.

RED SEA

EGYPT

Europeans flock to the Red Sea for excellent live-aboard diving, scoffing at Americans who miss the fine diving because of their inordinate fear of terrorism. Hurghada dive operators are failing to care for their reefs, so divers head farther south. Live-aboards get divers to the best Red Sea diving. Water temperatures can drop into the cool 60s during February and rise into the 80s by August.

Colona Divers, Sheraton, January 2007, Rainer and Kristin Farrag (kweck@cardunal.net), Dundee, IL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 67 to 68 F, choppy, surge. Colona Divers was terrific! experienced divemasters, (it's Swedish owned/operated, but everyone speaks English). They were accommodating when we realized the unseasonably cold water temp (normally we go there in October and the water is 84 degrees F) of 68 — brrrr! I usually only dive with a

skin, but had to borrow a 3m from the Colona manager). The diving is awesome anywhere you go in the Red Sea! The boats are comfortable. There was no camera table per se, but you could always use the tables inside the cabin.

Ocean College Divers, April/May 2007, Hollie and Eric Lindauer (hollielindauer@comcast.net), Salem,

OR. Experience: 500+ dives. Vis: 50 to 80 feet. Water: 72 to 75 F, some white caps. My last dive visit to Sharm was 1998. What a surprise. It's gone from sleepy and quiet to Grand Central rush hour traffic at the docks and moorings, condos as far as the eye can see — think Mexican Riviera, without any locals. The Bedouins camp inland, and the Egyptians need a permit to stay and work the tourist towns created near the resort strips. Egypt is not a problem for Americans to visit. They recognize their economy is tourist-based and try hard to please everyone. We visited the mainland's archeological sites and then spent a week in Sharm/Naa'im at the Hilton Fayrouz, a 10 min. walk to Ocean College. Most of the tourists were Italian, British and French on the mainland. At Sharm, Ukrainians and Russians were in the majority (they're buying the condos), with the Europeans a distant second. Dived with Ocean College, whose clients are mostly experienced divers; the majority are Brits, with a smattering of Poles, Danish, etc. Ocean College appeared to match their divers (they have about 6 boats) based on experience and ability. We had fun with the group; everyone was courteous and skilled. Our dive guide (Hamed) gave excellent briefings. He was safety-conscious but allowed a lot of freedom. He was good at making sure that everyone was comfortable with their buoyancy and that no one touched or damaged the reefs. Not every dive

shop was as fastidious as OC. There are boats darting about everywhere so we stayed in groups on the surface for greater visibility. At moorings there can be as many as 5 dive boats tethered together and underwater we frequently found ourselves being passed by other dive groups. With so many visitors, keeping the reefs in good shape will be an increasing problem even with the protection as a marine park. The dive boats were comfortable (small live-aboard type) with rear platforms. They allow for shade or sun, have a shower in the toilet and a small kitchen in the cabin that makes a hot lunch (usually with salad, rice/pasta, chicken or meat stew). If you need special assistance due to a bad back or something, you would need to put in a request ahead of time to be accommodated. Everyone was required to set up completely, walk across deck with fins and come up the ladder with fins, et al., when in current. Most dive locations were within reefs or behind islands so getting off and on the boat was easy with no swells. It's easy diving. The boats cruise at a comfortable 15 knots avg, to dive sites about 40 min. to an hour each way. We'd get picked up from the hotel at 8:00-8:30 am, first dive at 9:30, break for 1 to 1.5 hours, lunch or second dive, break, lunch or third dive when offered, and then dropped off at our hotel anywhere from 3 to 5 pm. Generally we had 6-10 divers with one guide — often the repeat OC guests would go off on their own, photographing. After our 'check out dive' day at local dive sites, we requested and went to Ras Mohamed and Tiran. The dive sites generally had some gentle current, check out first by the dive guide, but I liked having a sausage given all the boats about. No big critters, beautiful soft and hard corals, often feeding. There were lots of lion fish,

blue spotted rays, Napoleon wrasse (not huge), anemone with clown fish, some crocodile fish, glass fish, morays (giant and small pepper), giant clams (small), large nudis, yellow tail barracudas, tuna, jacks, emperor angels, small bait balls; in short, colorful and pretty. The vis was not fantastic and it was a bit cold — I needed (2) 5 mm with hoodie. We enjoyed the Hilton Fayrouz. Great service, a wonderful expanse of beach, beautiful grounds, gardens and pool areas, and good food. It is in the middle of the walking promenade that separates the beach sand from the hotels, so it's fun for people watching. Shopping, bars, internet cafes, shisha bars, pharmacies, dive shops are all within walking distance. The more elegant 4 Seasons and Conrad in Shark's Bay (close to the airport) seemed a bit far from town to me, but they may front the beach directly, which the Naama Bay hotels do not. Hilton Waterfalls did not get great reviews from fellow divers. If you're just there to dive, any hotel close to the dive shop will do. They are all relatively new and western in appearance and service levels.

Sheikh Coast Diving Centre, Domina Coral Bay, February 2007, Russ Person (a1move@verizon.net), Solvang, CA.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 Feet. Water: 71 to 72 F, calm. Flew to Moscow and then with a hotel/flight package to Egypt. Mostly Russians and some Italians at the hotel, with British people staying in the area. Egyptians speak English. Diving trips were scheduled on a weekly calendar. We dove Ras Mohammad, Tiran Island and WWII wreck. The corals, invertebrates and fish are beautiful. More fish are present during the summer, but so are the hot daytime temperatures. Wreck divers left the hotel at 4:45 am for a 4-hour motor to the wreck site. The wreck is in good

condition from WWII and all divers penetrated the holds and most passages. Current and wave action arose in the afternoons. All equipment was brought to the boats and the Centre had good facilities and a great staff. Water temperature was 71 degrees with a 5 mm wetsuit and hood perfect at this time of year. The towns of Naama Bay and old Sharm El-Sheikh are fun for shopping, restaurants and the smoking of Shish-shish from huge water pipes. The hotel package includes 2 meals, and evening entertainment was fun. The beaches and water are beautiful and the tourist area is being enlarged considerably. The trip cost was about \$1500 pp for 7 days including all airfare, hotel and diving. Pointer. Take Ambien first 4 days to adjust to 11-hour time difference. UW Photography Comments: Dive instructor had CD's available from each diving trip that were excellent. The centre also had cameras for rental and instruction.

Subex, Movenpick, August 2007, Thomas Lippert (thomas.lippert@bluewin.ch), Brugg, AG. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 35 Meters. Water: 26 to 30 C, calm, choppy. We had a direct flight from Zurich to Marsa Alam and then an hour transfer to the Hotel. The Moevenpick is operated by Swiss, and consists of bungalows that are arranged in groups (we were in group 18, which meant a rather long walk to the diving base of around 1 km). The whole resort is clean and all the staff is friendly. There are several restaurants (1 buffet-style, 1 upscale where you dine a la carte and get a credit from half-board, and one Italian + several special events, e.g., BBQ at the beach, fisherman dining etc.) you can use. The food was good and plentiful, but for the high reputation of Moevenpick in Switzerland it could have been better. There is also a nice bar overlooking the

ocean with fantastic sundowns, where you can have some good drinks (after testing some, I stayed with mojitos) and shishas (hookah). There are also a lot of things to do (horses, quads, camels, tennis, squash, etc.). Hot (up to 40C in the shadow, but all rooms and buildings have AC). There are 2 pools and a nice beach with lifeguards, but you need to rise early, as the places are reserved by towels early (horrible custom). The ocean can only be entered at designated path to protect the corals. The diving is mainly house reef diving with temperatures of 30 C at the surface and 26 in 30 m of depths (a skin or shortie was enough). The diving base is run efficiently with around 15 staff members. When you arrive, you leave your C-card and log-book (+ medical form), which is followed by a welcome dive (checkout dive) that went with a guide (max. group size of 4), followed by two exercises (out of air and mask flooding). Afterwards you are rated either as independent or you will have to go with a guide. You list yourself in the diving list in a certain time interval to enter (e.g., 2-4 p.m.) either from the base or by inflatable (with small added price). Then you get a card to check out and to get the tank (12 or 15l steel or nitrox for free to reserve 1 day before). Then you get the tank and after the dive you check back in at the counter. We had normally dives of 60-75 min with no restrictions (depth, etc.). Normal air is nitrox 28. The diving was easy, with good visibility (20+ m) and sometime a slight current (sometime some waves, when the wind picked up). We saw many morays (including larger ones), blue spotted rays, crocodile fish, grouper, lion fish, 1 eagle ray, 2 turtles, and a lot of the usual small reef fish, but the absence of larger fish was striking. I also went once with the boat for 2 dives,

where at the same reef as the house reef, just further left and right from the hotel, which was slightly better (also, the wave action was strong and some people became seasick). The diving is overall easy, the organization is almost perfect and safety and environmentally conscious, and a perfect place to go with a non-diving partner, or to start diving again (such as me, after 3 knee surgeries). I paid around 2000 Swiss Francs with flight and 6 dives.

RODRIGUES ISLAND

Cotton Dive Centre, Cotton Bay Hotel, January 2007, Stanley Zuk (szuk@nyc.rr.com), New York, NY. Experience:

Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm, choppy. Rodrigues is a quiet and lonely island situated in the southern Indian Ocean, a 2-hour flight from Mauritius. It's a dry, rocky land, surrounded by beautiful beaches and rocky lagoons. I stayed in a gorgeous Cotton Bay Hotel, which hosts Cotton Dive Centre. It's a very good operation with very skilled guides and owners, Fifi and her husband Jackie. The reefs surrounding Rodrigues are in superb shape, with many tropical fish. The best dive was done under the reef in a very strong current with many huge silver jacks and trevally jacks, and excellent coral garden. It was very interesting and beautiful; however, Rodrigues lacks many large pelagics, which are usually far away from the healthy reefs. What the island offers is a completely different setup than Mauritius, and remarkable serenity. You really feel like you are at the end of the world. The beaches are great and the hotel offers some tours and Sega dance performances, done by the locals.