
Poseidon's Quest Revisited

Diving the southern Red Sea

Dear Fellow Diver:

"With the *Poseidon's Quest* anchored in the lagoon at Sha'ab Rumi for the night," the diver was telling me, "I figured I'd relax and plan the next day's diving, but that was spoiled when the Sudanese boarded the boat and confiscated our passports. They escorted us into Port Sudan, along with a French boat and a British yacht that were also moored in the lagoon. But they left the Italian dive boat that had been photographing our boat names earlier in the day. Once in Port Sudan, they posted armed guards to make sure we didn't make a break for it. They sealed our ship's radio. Then things got grim: they locked up the ship's liquor cabinet.

"We sat there for three days, dreaming of diving and wondering what was going to happen to us. The Sudanese wanted \$15,000; but that finally got negotiated down to \$8,000 in cash and a promise not to dive Sudanese waters in the future without a permit. Then we were set free."

Operating a dive boat here seems fraught with difficulties; a month earlier, the *Poseidon's Quest* had been hit by a Somali freighter. The incident above happened the week before my trip. The ten months that had passed since my last trip had taken a heavy toll on this fine boat. But I wanted badly to dive the southern Red Sea, and I was willing to put up with a lot.

Living Up to Expectations Below

Despite the operational and travel challenges, diving in the southern Red Sea is excellent, though not as good as the waters off Sudan and southern Egypt. My 20-day southern expedition started at the port of Djibouti and ended at the Eritrean port of Massawa. We stayed primarily off the Hanish Islands of Yemen, where we managed to avoid further conflict. On some four dozen dives in delightfully hot 89°F water, I found the wondrous varieties of fish and other sea life that have given the Red Sea its excellent reputation.

Just north of Djibouti lie the Seven Brothers, an island group seldom dived because of the difficulty of getting permits from the Djibouti government. Here, despite limited visibility and moderately rough seas, I wasn't disappointed. Thousands of schooling juvenile blue surgeonfish formed a constantly moving curtain

Last summer this reviewer dived the northern Red Sea aboard *Poseidon's Quest* (In Depth, Nov. '94). He was enthusiastic about boat, crew, and diving, but warned readers of boat problems such as air-conditioning malfunctions, cabin odors, and lack of some promised equipment. Last month he returned to *Poseidon's Quest* to do the southern Red Sea.

J. Q.



Red Sea

against the deep blue ocean backdrop. A friendly school of dolphins let me dive with them for a few minutes -- a rare treat. Crocodile fish and chain moray eels added zest to the dive. And here, as on most of our dives, hundreds of schooling ocean triggerfish surrounded me.

The highlight of Seven Brothers was the 120-foot dive at Rhonda Khomaytou to find the giant red nudibranchs, the largest known to exist. These beauties, over a foot long, resemble Spanish dancers with their brilliant red coloration and yellow-and-white naked gills. I found more than a half dozen of these unusual red giants off the northern point of the island, along with their magnificently whorled egg cases.



In our June issue we printed a review of the Lammer Law in the Galapagos. Our reviewer said it was a great boat, great trip, but had a list of items she thought needed to be addressed to raise the Lammer Law to a five-star rating. Annie and Duncan Muirhead, owners of the Lammer Law, read our report and responded, not with the abuse that we sometimes get from resorts and live-aboards after a review, but with a letter saying that they

take criticism seriously. It included a complete list of each of our reviewer's complaints and how they were addressing them. For example:

"1. Noisy radio: It's a legal requirement in Ecuador for a ship to monitor the radio 24 hours per day and to have the radio in a place where it can be heard, in case there is a distress warning. Unfortunately, Cabin #5 is over the galley where there is a repeat speaker mounted. The main radio is in the salon. We are putting a switch on the galley speaker so it can be switched off at night.

"2. Air conditioning: We are making alterations in the fall refit. The system has quite frankly been a nightmare. As installed, it's sea-water cooled; however, we have found marine-growth fouling problems in the Galapagos to be extreme compared with other parts of the world. We are going to convert the entire system to freshwater cooling, which will eliminate this problem.

"3. Reading lights: I quite agree, they are a disaster, as I found during my recent trip. The original reading lights were nice and bright but were starting to look a bit shabby, so were replaced with new ones which, unfortunately, are very dim. All of them are going to be changed again during the refit.

"4. I also quite agree with the lady's comments about the cost of wine, as I found out about this during my recent trip. The alcoholic side of the bar was being run on a concession basis and the person concerned was overcharging. He has now lost his concession!

"5. Inflatables: Since this writer's visit, we have purchased a 21-foot hard-bottom inflatable, and a second one is being added this summer. In the fall both of these boats will be modified to accept a transom-mounted boarding ladder. Those people who have been on the *Cuan Law* in the BVI will know how well set up our dinghies are there, and the ones on *Lammer Law* will be brought up to the same standards. As most of the diving in the Galapagos is done from the dinghies, we obviously have to make them as comfortable and easy to use for the guests as possible."

A candid and constructive reply to our review; if only all operations were as professional. If you are considering traveling on the Lammer Law and would like a complete list of the complaints and how they were addressed, write, fax, or call the editorial office and I'll send you a copy.

J. Q.

A late-afternoon dive along the northern edge of this island into brilliant fields of purple soft corals and a deep purple sea is a picture forever burned into my dive-lesioned brain. Strangely, the anthias so prolific in the Egyptian Red Sea were nowhere to be seen. Also absent in the south was the King Solomon's dottyback, so colorful a part of the reef life further north.

Although we made few night dives, they were excellent -- a scarlet Spanish dancer nudibranch writhing in the water column, prowling whitetip reef sharks, and broomtail filefish contrasting with the plentiful spiny sea urchins.

Sayel Island, closer to Eritrean waters, was a prime dive site. The bare rock was alive with sea birds (and their aromatic guano), and the underwater panorama of reef fish was its equal -- except for a startling sight on my morning dive. Finishing my dive alone in shallow water, I came across sixteen shark heads and a dead whitetip. Not sure whether I was completely narked, I looked up and saw the outline

of a Yemeni fishing boat and a bloody oil slick. I had come across the killing fields, a sight I shall not forget.

Our last dives were at Quoin Island, another world-class site with a profusion of reef fish and some prowling pelagics, such as tuna. Huge green morays being cleaned by shrimp provided good photo ops. As in most other dives on this trip, I found jacks galore and plenty of groupers, including a few giant jewfish. Perhaps most interesting was the deep sighting of a sand tilefish (*Hoplolatilus*) previously unknown in these waters. A group of bumphead parrotfish, whirling schools of feeding fusiliers and unicorn fish mixed with whitetip reef sharks -- including some babies hiding under table coral -- all helped me forget the deteriorating conditions back aboard the boat.

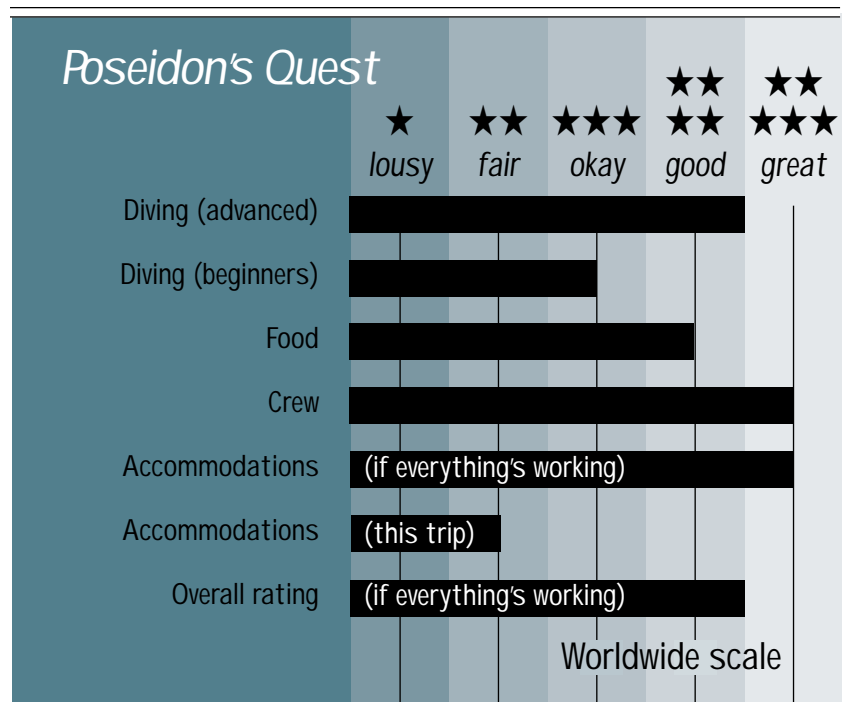
Egypt is considering a law that would require foreign vessels (dive boats, live-aboards) operating in Egyptian waters to pay a yearly fee equal to twenty per cent of their assessed value. I believe that law, if passed, would spell the end of our current selection of dive boats in the Red Sea.

J. Q.

Crumbling Expectations Above

The 100-foot *Poseidon's Quest* was built to accommodate ten divers in luxury. The lounge is still large and comfortably appointed, the mahogany still shines, and the brass still gleams, but the boat has deteriorated from its summer 1994 condition. The air-conditioning problem I reported on then has worsened; we suffered in cabin and salon temperatures of 87°F. The dining room was even hotter, especially with a full house of ten guests sweltering through meals. Days of diving were lost because of problems with the generator that drives the compressors. During several days while the generator was being repaired, a small rented portable compressor slowly filled our steel tanks to 2,500 psi, and intervals between dives stretched to many hours. A plumbing malfunction shut down the cabin toilets for five days, during which all ten guests and most of the crew shared a make-do toilet in the main-deck dark-room (which, by the way, has never been set up for film processing). Toilet paper had to be deposited in a small wastebasket, which lent amazing fragrances to the stifling heat.

The ship's electrical generating system is stretched to capacity. When the anchor winch is pulling a heavy load, something else must be shut down, and the galley stoves and oven are turned off when the compressor is running.



Two new additions to the Red Sea are the 98-foot *Rearis* and the 77-foot *White Shark*. The *Rearis* offers 8 twin/double cabins, with private heads, for \$1,595 per week. The *White Shark* has 6 double/twin cabins, \$1,195 per week. Tropical Adventures has packages starting at \$2,575 including airfare from New York, 2 nights Cairo, 7 nights live-aboard with all meals and diving. USA/CAN 800-247-3483 or 206-441-3483, fax 206-441-5431.

J. O.

Ditty Bag

Poseidon's Quest is operated by Luxury Dive Charters, Whitefield Road, Bredbury, Stockport, Cheshire SK6, England, phone 061-430-6818, fax 061-430-7928. See & Sea books trips in the States (\$2,970 without air).

Call 800-DIV-XPRT or 415-434-3400, or fax 415-434-3409, or call other dive travel wholesalers. Readers should be aware of the potential for problems when planning dive trips to this part of the world. A two-hour delay in departure of our Air France jet from the U.S. caused a 48-hour layover in Paris awaiting a connecting flight to Djibouti, and a subsequent loss of two dive days from our trip. We lost another day's diving because Air France later failed to load and forward to Djibouti a lost dive bag. Wise readers will double check recommendations for airline routing and ticket price, as well as land accommodations.

The Cairo airport is pure chaos. Ask your travel agent to ensure that you get escort service to expedite customs and immigration (and transfers, if you overnight in Cairo). Late summer is considered the best (although hottest) time to dive the Egyptian Red Sea, but it can be rough. In the winter months you'll need a wetsuit. The boat has emergency spares, but no rental gear, so bring your own (plus repair kits and spares). You'll need an Egyptian visa from a consulate; allow time for it.

Cabin 5 is smaller, has a double bed, and would work for a couple. Cabins 3 and 4, off the salon, are the best. Cabins 1 and 2 are forward, have a steep stairway, and tend to be a bit warmer.

Only one of the ship's two Rib inflatables was working during my trip (99% of the diving is done from the inflatables). The broken outboard motor could not be repaired, so one boat had to shuttle and cover all our divers – usually not a major problem, but a potentially unsafe situation when the mother ship is sheltered far from the dive site undergoing generator repairs. One of the Rib hoists broke during the trip and the crew had to tow the inflatable part of time.

Muddling Through

Operating in brutal heat in developing countries on the Horn of Africa is not conducive to smooth-running machinery. The ship's British crew worked long and hard trying to keep the ship and the dive operation going. Engineer Ian collapsed twice from heat exhaustion while working in engine-room temperatures approaching 150°F.

First mate Duncan and divemaster Peter also kept stiff British upper lips as they struggled to save our trip from complete collapse. Chef John, an Englishman trained to cook in Her Majesty's Army, worked around generator repair times and constantly changing dive schedules to serve excellent food at reasonable hours. Standing guard nightly for the pirates reported to be in these waters did not add to the pleasures of working a "luxury" dive boat. The constant struggle with mechanical problems, coupled with a rumored four months' arrears in pay, seemed to take a toll on crew morale.

Captain Martin has informed me that the boat is scheduled for major refit and repair in a Malta shipyard this winter. An infusion of work and money may bring this boat back up to its full potential. Until then, *In Depth* readers would be well advised to ascertain whether the boat is up to snuff before laying out cold cash for trips in the immediate future. Although *Poseidon's Quest* is owned and operated by Luxury Dive Charters, be aware that "luxury" in this part of the world is a relative term.

E. E.