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The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

A Hot Time in the Red Sea

Exploring the southern Red Sea aboard the Sea Surveyor

The southern Red Sea is on the bleeding edge of dive travel — live-aboards held ransom for flying too small a flag, trips canceled due to hassles in getting dive permits, long supply lines that make it hard to keep a boat in top condition. Is it worth the effort or ad hype to sell a destination that has been troubled with political unrest?

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Dear Fellow Diver,

Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's dive destination. But my neighbor had been to the Red Sea. I lusted after the Red Sea -- not just the Red Sea, but the mysterious and little-explored southern Red Sea. I had to go. And I did.

It started out smoothly enough with uneventful flights from JFK to Cairo and on to Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, a new country at the southern end of the Red Sea. In Asmara I boarded a minibus that would take me down nearly 8,000 feet on a wild, gut-wrenching, horn-honking, 3¹/₂-hour mountain drive to the port of Massawa, where I would board the *Sea Surveyor* for 12 days of exploratory diving in the extreme southern Red Sea.

After that it was a mere 20-hour crossing southeast to the Zubayr islands, 40 miles off the coast of Yemen. It had been an epic journey to reach this cluster of a dozen uninhabited islands (all the islands in the southern Red Sea are uninhabited due to a total lack of fresh water).

Hot and Hotter

The first thing that surprised me was the water temperature: it was uncomfortably hot, 91° to 93° at the surface. At depth the temperature dropped to a chilly 87°-89°. In these August temperatures, anything more than a Lycra dive skin was like wearing a fur coat. Air temperature was even hotter; at 7:00 a.m. it was over 90°, by midmorning well into the triple digits.

With the water hot and the air hotter, what would the boat's greatest deficiency turn out to be? That's right, air conditioning. The *Sea Surveyor's* primary system uses a seawater heat exchanger originally designed for North Sea operations. In the Red Sea's bathtub-warm water, there's not enough temperature differential between the air and the water, so the system

After a couple of slow years for Egypt's tourist industry, due to the violence of Muslim militants, foreign travelers are back. Hotels in Cairo are 80 to 90 percent full for the winter. The reason? Militant attacks are down.

J. Q.

doesn't function efficiently. The temperature in the cabins never dipped below 85°. The salon and bridge, however, were augmented with conventional air-conditioning units, which kept them tolerable most of the time, except when everyone was in the salon for the evening meal.

Compensating Contrasts

The flat-topped conical shape of these desolate, barren rocks made their recent volcanic nature obvious but their parched and hellish landscape contrasted starkly with the rich riot of life beneath the waves. The waters were as thick with fish as any I've seen, a density of sea life that strained the imagination.

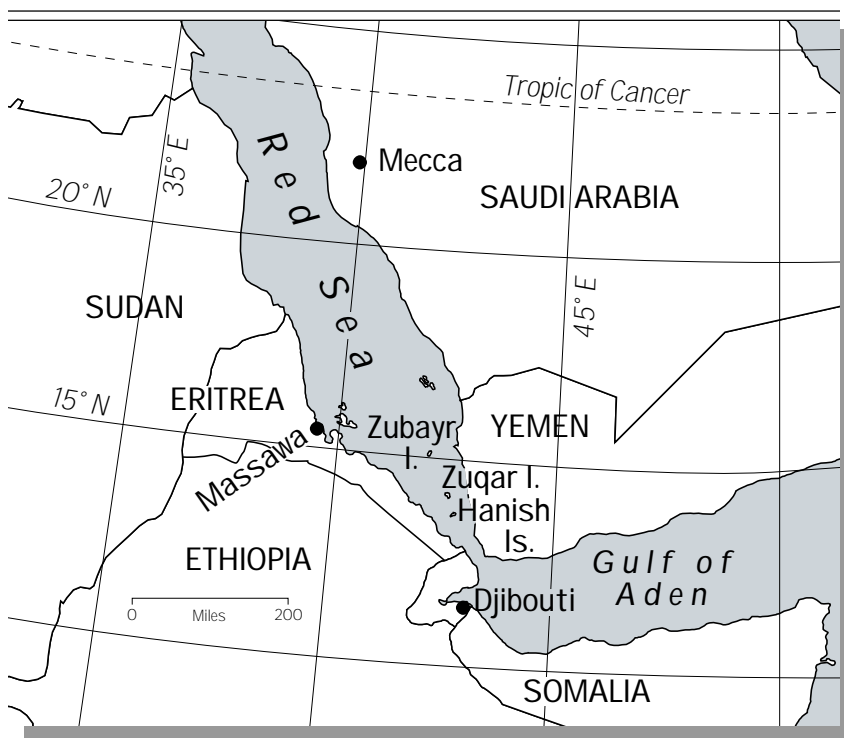
I quickly discovered that diving in the southern Red Sea is mostly shallow. The reefs have some vertical walls, but mostly it's steep slopes ending in sand flats a little over 100 feet down. Many of the dives had some current; I enjoyed several relaxing drift dives, but a few sites, such as the southwest corner of Hanish Island, had dangerously fast currents. Visibility was not remarkable, usually less than 70 feet. This was the end of June and there was a lot of plankton in the water. By the fifth day of the trip, the watermaker's filter and its backup

were hopelessly clogged. In some places the plankton was so thick that the wind and currents blew it into long lines like oil slicks on the surface.

We moved further south, to the Zuqar Islands, where the diving was even better. Although there was a fair amount of soft coral, I didn't see the densely carpeted walls typical in the northern Red Sea. The north's clouds of anthias were also absent here, even though the most striking attribute of the diving was the sheer quantity and diversity of fish. A few of the sites were truly spectacular -- such as Marescaux Rock, the equal of the best I've seen in Palau or Papua New Guinea with its endless shoals of surgeonfish, lunar fusiliers, and blackspot

snappers. On a single dive I could count a half dozen species each of butterfly fish, triggerfish, and angelfish. There were colonies of multicolored Christmas-tree worms that completely enveloped overstuffed-recliner-sized coral heads. A frighteningly huge jewfish appeared briefly but was immediately replaced by schools of humphead wrasses and ocean triggerfish.

An abundance of brilliantly colored encrusting sponges added brilliance, but others, such as tube or rope sponges,



Southern Red Sea

were usually missing. The quantity of nudibranchs, which feed on sponges, was overwhelming.

Built for the North, Cruising the South

Originally used by the Danish government for oceanographic research, the 110-foot *Sea Surveyor* was built in 1974 but converted to a dive boat in 1993. Designed for the North Sea, this boat was exceptionally stable crossing the rough water of the straits. The nine guest cabins accommodating 18 divers are nearly identical: upper and lower bunks, small closet, large porthole, small desk with three drawers and two book shelves, a sink and a mirror. (Insider tip: The two rear cabins, by the stairs, are slightly larger.) The lower bunks have a decent small reading light, but there's nothing for the uppers but the too-bright ceiling fixture. There are two heads and four showers on the cabin deck, two more heads off the salon.

Also on the cabin deck is a camera storage room with a large, neoprene-covered work table and comfortable upholstered benches. There are 16 carpeted camera cubicles, each equipped with 220V/110V electrical outlets. E-6 processing is available, but the two video monitors (one in the dining salon) are PAL format. Although it's possible to patch in an NCST-format video camera, the playback is black and white only.

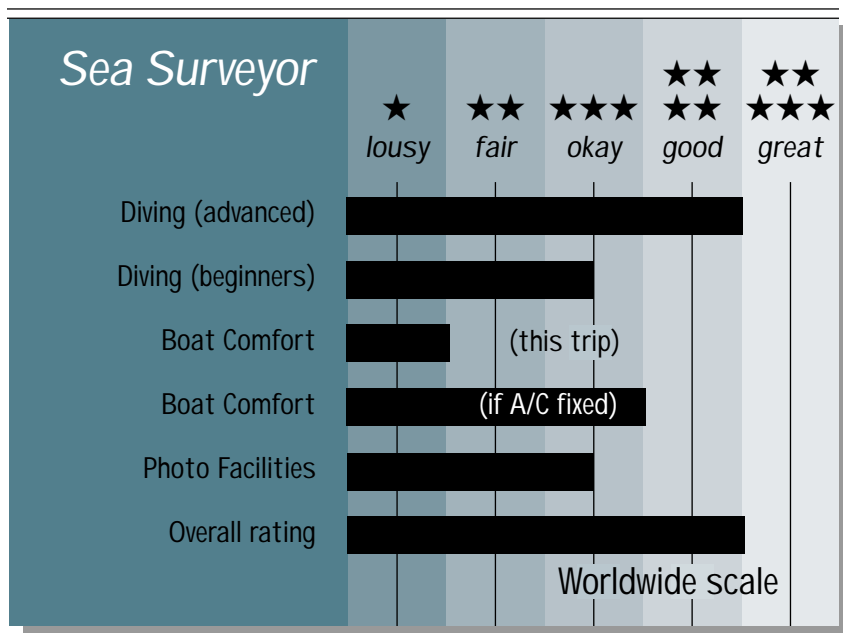
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Yankee Go Home

The boat crew of nine were mostly expats from England and South Africa. The dining salon is decorated like an English pub, with dark-wood-paneled walls and ceiling and a full-service bar (most charters are British groups). The Brit crew members enthusiastically indulged in good-natured American-bashing. The captain's wife said they prefer European divers to Americans because the Americans are too demanding -- for example, they insist on more than two dives a day. (We averaged three dives a day, with a night dive every other evening.)

I can say, good-naturedly, that fine cuisine is not the Brits' strong suit. The meals were filling but uninspired. Breakfasts were French toast, pancakes, eggs, or oatmeal. Lunch was nearly always a selection of salads. Between-dive snacks consisted of

peanuts, pretzels, and packaged cookies. Dinners were typical dive boat fare: spaghetti, stir-fry, lasagna, barbecue, and chicken curry. Red and white wines were provided gratis at dinner, which



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was always served at 9:00 p.m. (night dive or not), despite several requests for earlier meals. There's a reason: all crew, including kitchen staff, dived every day.

A Big Deck and Mixed Gas

The captain, David Hillel, who can be a bit cranky, and his wife, Sarah, handle dive-deck operations. All diving is done from two rigid inflatables (near the end of our trip, when gasoline ran low, we shuttled to dive sites in a single boat).

The wood-surfaced dive deck is nearly 24 feet wide and very roomy. Even with 16 divers gearing up, we weren't crowded. Every dive buddy pair gets a large storage bin for dive gear. Air refills are provided from six long compressor hoses, so the tanks and BCs stay set up and racked along the deck bench. The dive deck has a good selection of plastic tables, chairs, and loungers for sunning. There's a freshwater hose for post-dive rinses, but you'll have to bring your own deck towel. Each guest is given a single bath towel and hand towel for cabin use at the beginning of the trip.

Last year the boat was designated an ANDI Nitrox training facility and has since certified, on the average, 10 new Nitrox divers every month. Because most of the diving here is shallow, using Nitrox affords extended bottom times and extra safety margins. However, the Nitrox station does not use a bank system, so each tank is indi-

Prices were low but are now rising as tourism returns to normal. New boats entering the market could mean competitive pricing. Compare packages of major dive travel agents such as Tropical Adventures (800-247-3483 or 206-441-3483), See & Sea (800-348-9778 or 415-434-3400), Island Dreams (800-346-6116 or 713-957-0311), and International Diving Expeditions (800-544-3483 or 213-655-5225). Try to get a commitment on expected itinerary (north vs. south). The north can be crowded but can produce excellent dives. South is more pristine but can include exploratory diving, especially in the far south. A major complaint about the northern Red Sea is that the water's too cold, into the 60s in February. Though it's supposed to be in the 80s by August, cooler temperatures and thermoclines can make a wetsuit worthwhile.

vidually mixed. This is a time-consuming procedure, and only the captain is currently certified for mixing, which tends to limit the amount of Nitrox diving that can be done.

The Deep South

The further south we traveled, the better the diving became. One of the best dives was at South West Haycock Island. This remote, exposed rock had good currents with fish in uncountable myriads. One diver in my group spent over 30 minutes here being circled by a minivan-sized manta.

At the southern end of the Red Sea we passed through the Straits of Bab el Mandeb to dive two of the Seven Brothers. This group of small islands off the coast of Djibouti is actually in the Arabian Sea and has species of corals and fish, such as Moorish Idols, not found in the Red Sea. The dive off the island of Kadda Dabali, largest of the Brothers, was one of the best of the trip; I was enveloped by an incredibly massive, vision-obscuring cloud of juvenile blue triggerfish that seemed to stretch endlessly. But the dive at neighboring Tolka Island was nothing special.

Ditty Bag

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At a nearby seamount called Ship Rock, I stumbled upon an uncharted shipwreck, its keel broken across the rim of a sunken volcano, but luckier divers swam with an 18-foot whale shark.

All in All

The diving on this trip was exploratory diving, so the quality and conditions ranged from bad to good, with an occasional magnificent. Although this area has been infrequently dived over the years during seasonal transits by the old *Lady Jenny*, and now the *Sea Surveyor*, *Fantasea II*, and *Poseidon's Quest*, it is still largely unexplored. What this means is that even though I've been to the Red Sea, I now lust to return.

S. K.

Readers Report on the North and South Red Sea

Divers traveling in the Red Sea last September found poor visibility (30-50 feet) due to an algae bloom. By October the bloom had subsided and the visibility was an acceptable 80 feet.

Dive boat traffic in the northern end is getting heavy, with readers reporting at least ten dive boats on every site. Several readers, like Hal Mozer, Bellevue, Washington, complained that these northern sites were showing a lot of damage. Other readers reported large areas destroyed by dynamite.

Maryann Gee, Atlanta, Georgia, paid six grand for an October-November trip to get away from the busy north and head south on *Poseidon's Quest*. Once she was aboard, the captain told her he never intended to go south because of weather conditions this time of year, and that they were lucky to make it as far as the Seven Brothers.

Gayle Jamison, Woodstock, New York, said her October trip to the south aboard *Poseidon's Quest* was also scrapped due to weather conditions. Another *In Depth* reader who signed up to head south aboard the new *Gazala Explorer* in September didn't even make it as far south as the Brothers. He was told that live-aboards don't go the Brothers except in June, July, and August because of unpredictable weather.

But even good weather doesn't necessarily ensure a trip South. John Zumbado, Gaithersburg, Maryland, wrote that he didn't want to dive the northern sites like Ras Mohammed because of what he had read about the deteriorating reefs and the comment by Diver's Alert Network's Peter Bennett that he had disliked diving in the excrement from untreated boat discharges. The weather was right for John's July-August trip, but upon arrival he was told that *Poseidon's Quest* did not have an Egyptian permit required to go to the south. John rated diving in the north only two stars for experienced divers: "I don't like crowded dive sites with a lot of empty mineral water bottles; where there are so many divers that I found a weight, a weight belt, and a flipper; and where I was almost run over by another boat while waiting to be picked up."

The southern Red Sea may not remain unexplored for long if the rumored Egyptian dive-boat tax drives the non-Egyptian boats out of the north. Eritrea, a half-Christian country that gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, could become a gateway to this vast, unexplored territory.

J. Q.