

Topsfield, MA. Vis: 70 to 100 ft. Water: 82 to 84 degrees, calm and flat, strong currents. Dive your own profile. Island very well run and food, although buffet style, was varied and excellent. Dive shop very efficient and well-run, able to dive house reef any time day or night, but loss of corals due to El Niño 2 years before was disappointing. Kudrahtila and Broken Rock were two exceptionally good dives with thousands of blue-lined snapper at former. Got great video sequence of octopus changing color. Manta Point had very few mantas. Too many diving resorts in the area and if a few congregated at the same location, it was chaotic. On one dive it seemed there were more divers than fish.

RED SEA (EGYPT, ISRAEL, JORDAN)

The Red Sea is on every diver's top-ten list. When it was under Israeli control, the reefs were well-protected, but now, under Egyptian domain, Hurghada dive operators are failing to provide loving care to nearby reefs. Live-aboards are trying to move southward, but they're still having difficulties with other governments. Many of the good southern sites remain closed. Be sure to check ahead of time to see if this has changed. Water temperatures can drop into the cool 60s during February and rise into the 80s by August. . . . Many divers combine a Red Sea trip with a visit to Israel and biblically historical sites. . . .

Egypt

Dahab, South Sinai

Reef 2000, Bedouin Moon Hotel, April 2000, Isaac Aharon, New York, NY. Vis: 50-60 ft. Water: 22-23 C. Since I came just for one day diving I asked them to find me an instructor or DM's. They found me Arlene from Ireland. She was very nice. Two dives with my gear for only \$50. Then another two girls joined us. We drove with 4 wheel to the sites by the famous Blue Hole and got to the dive site. The Bells we had to climb up hill and jump. Big and deep wall. Very nice max depth. We dove 100 ft. and saw many fish small and large, soft and hard coral. Good condition at the Blue Hole. Second dive was to the islands and shore dive was very nice. The dive operation is excellent. A week later I did another two dives that I loved.

Hurghada

Divers International, Hilton Plaza, September 2000, Dale Litney, Schaumburg, IL. Vis: 30-100 ft. Water: 72-78 degrees. is Europe's version of Cancun/Cozumel. Hotels abound. The Hilton is first rate, with private beach and boat launch. Much better location than the southern part of town that centers around the port. Excalibur wreck is within shouting distance of the shore by the port and had low vis, and not interesting. Long dives on the reefs, 1 hour plus. Eels, turtles, stonefish, scorpion and lionfish. Dolphins on one dive. Esperanto best daily dive boat I have

been on! Big and luxurious. Slippery deck though, just painted. If making reservations ask for that boat. The other boat had a diesel smell and top heavy. Made my reservations by Internet that gave a 15% discount. Dive shop did not help with gear on shore nor the crews on the boat. Lunch (\$6) not worth it and drinks (\$.75) extra. Bart, divemaster, gave excellent briefings, safety oriented. Don't go deeper than 100 ft., up at 500 psi and safety stop if needed. Crew had to be told by Bart to help the customers out of the water. Had to set up our own tanks, which had no marks on them to tell if they were full or empty. Not even a piece of tape over the nozzle. Service did not get better. Unloaded our own gear off the boat at the end of the day and cleaned it ourselves. In the morning we had to retrieve our own gear out of the storage area (very nice and secure) and carry to the boat. Last day of diving we had a local dive-master who was not even going to go in the water with us. He gave us a briefing and sat down. He only came after a customer demanded he come along. When paying for the trip, there was \$10 added because we left at 6 a.m. one day. Explained as a fee paid to the Coast guard to leave port early. Complained and they deducted it. **(Phone/Fax 20 62-64-0415; 20 62-64-0441)**

Israel

Aqua-Sport, Club Med Eilat, Barry and Sharlyn Stare, Cincinnati OH. We were traveling to Israel for other things and decided to do some diving. We chose Club Med and Aqua-Sport

because they are close together and we did not need to worry about transportation, though Aqua-Sport provides shuttle service to some hotels. We are in our mid 50s. We have dived at Grand Cayman (Cayman Dive Lodge) and at Marathon Key FL (Abyss Dive Center). We were pleased with Aqua-Sport. They are very professional, safety and environment conscious, and extremely helpful and friendly. Most staff was quite capable in English and other European languages. We did a couple of shore and boat dives at Coral Beach that is a coral reef preserve located at the dive center. These are shallow dives (30 ft. and less) but pretty nice for tropical fish, hard and soft coral. They have a catamaran that is pretty minimal for a dive boat. It tends to be windy there and there is no shelter other than a canopy. The best dives were from their Taba boat across the border in Egypt. Getting there involves going by van to the border crossing and walking across and to the boat, about a quarter mile. This means carrying your gear. Bring a good comfortable carrying gear bag. They provide tanks and weights at the boat, but you bring the rest. If you do multi-days there, you can leave your equipment. There are also shore dives available at Taba. The Taba boat is much better equipped and vastly more comfortable than the catamaran. It can handle a dozen divers nicely although we only had 3 divers each day. They go south 1-2 hours into Egyptian waters to dive sites they have discovered and have almost exclusive use of. They don't allow Israeli boats to go that far into

Egypt. The sites are close to pristine. Lots of hard and soft coral, tropical, some larger fish. We did see a number of the exotics like stonefish, scorpionfish, lionfish, crown of thorns starfish, etc. Visibility was 30-100 ft. Only one dive had less than 50 ft. vis. Water temp 69 F, air temp mid 70s. The water was essentially flat. There were no appreciable tide or current problems. I would go in April or May when the air and water are a little warmer. Aqua-Sport is pretty conservative in their dive management. They had a divemaster lead all the dives. They used their established tour routes. The maximum depth they allowed was 60 ft. The first dive was 50-60 ft. and the second dive was always 30 ft. or less. They planned and led the dives. A couple of times the divemaster allowed those who wanted to stay longer in shallow water and explore in the vicinity of the boat after the divemaster returned to the boat, subject of course to having a buddy. Briefings on the Taba boat were the most thorough I've experienced, including site maps and sometimes pictures of things you were likely to see. There were only 2 dives a day, though we could have easily done a third even on the Taba boat. I think they are best for beginning and less independent divers. It is mandatory to have or buy diving insurance (\$17/person/yr.). We have DAN coverage, but they wouldn't recognize it without a policy in hand. We did not see any sharks, turtles, pelagics or other large fish. Whale sharks do come to the area around May. We rented fins and 5 mm wetsuits. Rental

gear appeared to be in pretty good shape. Dolphin Reef is a place just up the beach where they have raised some rescued and imported dolphins. There is an enclosure with openings where you can dive or snorkel with the dolphins. They are free to come and go as they please, but they apparently come there every day. We did this dive through Aqua-Sport one day. It was interesting, but I wish I had taken another day on the Taba boat. The Coral Reef Observatory is an underwater observatory at 20 ft. depth where you can look out on the reef in the preserve and see coral and most of the same fish we saw while diving. It's pretty impressive. They also have a submarine for a deeper viewing experience. (53 972-7633-4404; Fax 53 972-7633-3771)

Jordan

Seastar Watersports, Alcazar Hotel, September 2000, Georgina Wiersma (gwiersma@caiwnl) Monster, The Netherlands. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet.

Water: 78 to Fahrenheit, calm. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: 40 meters max. No big pelagics, great variety of small critters: seahorses, frog fish. Diving shore, transport by minibus. Great house reef near Seastar's 'Club Murjan'. Many big black coral trees, and strange creatures like the shortfin dragonfish. Nice wreck with beautiful soft corals and critters. A paradise for macro lovers. People friendly, food varies from basic (local) to superb (by European standards). Hotel clean, basic with a very helpful staff. The ancient city of

Petra and the desert of Wadi Rum are extremely beautiful and make great 'surface intervals'. Jordan is Egypt like it used to be 25 years ago, but facilities for modern tourist. (962 331-4131; Fax 962 331-4133)

SEYCHELLES

Billed as 3000 miles from anywhere, this group of islands has been trying to promote itself to divers as THE place to see whale sharks, but this is unproved. From time to time live-aboards run to the out-island of Aldabra, which is reported to have excellent diving. . . . Island prices are high. . . .

Seychelles Underwater Centre, Coral Strand Hotel, Beau Vallon, Mahe, September, 2000, Nick Valentine (nickvalentine@beeb.net), Leighton Buzzard, Beds, U.K. Vis: 5 to 15 Meters. Water: 26 to 28 degrees Celsius, choppy. Dive your own profile: yes; Any dive restrictions: Max 30M / 50 mins. bottom time. Magic sunny islands, with great beaches. The weather was mostly excellent and the odd day with cloud / rain did not affect the diving. I took my own equipment (I always like to!) but the kit at the centre looked OK and reasonably maintained. The dive boat was fast and had shelter from the sun so getting to the dive sites was not a problem. I am reasonably experienced and it was a pity that the dive sites visited tended to be selected for trainees and could become repetitive. However, even some of the novice sites - Conception & L'Illot in

particular - got more interesting when the current was running! The sharks that we saw were mostly white tips and the odd nurse shark, but we did get a clear site of a 6-7 M whale shark from the surface following the return to the dive centre and even got a brief swim with a snorkel with it before it headed off. The stars of this trip for me were the huge bump head parrotfish, as big as a Napoleon wrasse, bump head as well and a large, powerful "beak." The biggest disappointment of all was the state of the coral - what a tragedy! Global warming has destroyed enormous areas and what is left is uninspiring. However, there were signs that a recovery is in progress, but it will be 5 years before there is much to write, or to get excited about. Overall a good holiday and enjoyable diving even if not particularly challenging.

THAILAND

Thailand is a bargain. . . . Whale shark season is usually from March through May, with Richelieu Rock providing an excellent chance of encounters. . . . Trips to the Burma Banks have been put off limits from time to time for political reasons; check before booking. . . .

H₂O, Phuket, February 2000, W.J. Carroll, London, England. Vis: 30 to 70 ft. Water: 76 to 78 degrees, calm and flat, choppy. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 100 ft. and computer. Surprisingly good diving at Shath Point, Anemone Reef, etc. off Phuket. Provided you take a