

7 Chill Out in the Red Sea

by John Logan, aged 32 1/2

'Twas on a sunny August morning that 7 intrepid explorers gathered in darkest Gatwick to fly on an airline no-one had ever heard of, to a faraway land steeped in history and ancient culture - only to ignore the history & culture and paddle about in the sea.

Andy & Angie, Clare & I, Bryan & Sandra (that's Bryan's sister, before you get curious) and Phil Langridge arrived in Hurghada airport to find the usual chaos. On the bus we met the other divers for m.y. Greta. Omar, an Iraqi from Southampton; Paul & Colin, 2 brothers (you'd never know to look at them) from Laaaaahndon; 2 Norwegians, Torgen & Baad (pronounced bored) and Tony, a biker & former dive shop owner, also from the big smoke.

The welcome chat mentioned the plumbing and how not to upset it, and introduced us to Sonia Goggel, our dive guide for the week. She is a Swiss biologist who was brought up in Columbia and rounded us up before every dive with a cry of "Briefing! Briefing! Briefing!". We also met the assistant dive guide, Emma, a teacher from Cheltenham who had been to Plymouth Poly (just like Clare & I).

The next day, the boat headed south, to Safaga, where we would do a couple of easy dives so that we could sort out our weight and so Sonia could get an idea of what we were like. I made a poor first impression, having to confess to leaving my mask behind. Fortunately I'd brought a spare, but it wasn't quite as comfy or well-fitting as my nice new one.

The first dive was at Ras Abu Soma reef in nice clear, warm water, not a bit like we were used to. We soon acclimatised. We dived in the groups we'd stay in all week: Emma dived with Sandra as she was only a PADI Open Water Diver with 5 dives and Bryan tagged along with them. Clare & John dived in a pair and Andy, Angie & Phil were in a 3. The others dived in their pairs, with Tony & Omar buddy-ing up. The reef hit the sandy bottom at about 20m. There were

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a lot of little fish & things in holes to see (or so it seemed) with the occasional bigger fish, a free-swimming moray and some snorkellers. The coral looked fantastic in the sun and there was a fair variety of hard corals, large & small. When we came back to the boat, we all had a good look at the bottom so that we could recognise it later... The water was warm enough for some of us not to bother with wetsuits, just a T-shirt & Lycra leggings - bliss!

After the dive we headed into dock at Safaga to take on water, have some lunch and a do bit more lounging. While we lounged we had a good view of the beach, complete with a sunken dive boat and women swimming in full hijab - which didn't look very easy, not much fun. As the sun thought about setting behind the coastal mountains, and we polished off our teatime cakes, the boat headed off to our second dive at Tobia Arba, the Seven Pinnacles.

The pinnacles came out of 4 big lumps which lurched out of the seabed at 12m, all of them splitting into 2 on the way to the surface. One of these had had a close encounter with a boat at some time and was no longer in evidence. The pinnacles were apparently a great dive, but I had borrowed Andy & Angie's spare mask which was a completely different shape from my head, despite seeming OK on the boat & on the surface. I had 1 minute cycles of misting mask, flooding mask, clearing mask; despite moving it around on my face, tightening the strap, loosening the strap and generally trying everything. After 45 minutes I'd had enough and climbed back on board, 20 minutes before the rest, who'd all had a fantastic dive. Buggers.

Immediately we were back on board, the boat was pointed out towards the horizon and we steamed off to the Brothers. According to Colin, who'd stayed up, we'd arrived at 2am to much clanking and banging as bow & stern anchors were let go into 80m of water and the lines were made fast to the reef fringing Big Brother. I woke up at a normal sort of time and found that a) we were there, and b) it was quite rough.

This was normal. The wind got up with the sun and the current came from the same direction as the wind. As the day went on, the wind & current slackened and swung clockwise until by sunset, there was none.

The procedure was to get kitted up, jump in the RIB, thrash out to the entry point and all roll backwards on the count of 3. As soon as we hit the water we had to swim like mad for the wall to stop from being swept off (according to Sonia) but usually the current wasn't too bad. This ended up in us tending to dive in a "loose 7" rather than the normal pairs, but it seemed to work out well.

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The first dive on Big Brother was an absolute stonker if only for the viz. It was so good it took me about 5 minutes to realise how good it was. The Eastern side of Big Brother takes the full force of the current when it's running, so is mostly hard corals, of all different shapes, sizes & colours. All the usual fish life hangs about on the reef with the occasional biggie cruising by 50m or so off the reef in the hope that we'd be looking the other way. The wall here drops sheer to about 50m but the best life is in the first 30. The current washed us along the reef like a conveyor belt, allowing us to hang and expend no effort as the scenery drifted past us. The only requirement for activity was to check the big blue occasionally or to move closer in to explore a likely hole. Eventually we arrived at the southern end, where Greta was moored. We gradually ascended during the dives so that we did lots of "deco" and 40m dives an hour long were to be a regular feature, without any actual deco being incurred. The best example of this was our 3rd dive when we dropped in at the same point as the first, but the current had shifted & we were washed the other way, around the northern end of the island. On our way round we dived 2 former supply ships to the lighthouse on Big Brother. The Numibia & the Aida 2 both lie at the north end, the Numibia lying almost vertically from 18 to 50, the Aida 2 is a bit further round in 30-50m. After the Aida 2 we ascended along the wall, still being wafted by the current until we came to the appropriate set of mooring lines where we waited for the RIB to pick us up after our 1 hour, 40m, double-wreck, drift dive. Then back on board for supper. Does it ever get any better than that?

OK, so I missed the Manta and the Hammerhead, but there were sharks around, as the divers from another of the boats could testify when they tried a dusk dive on evening. They spent all of 10 minutes in the water, the last 3 screaming for the boat to come and get them!

There were 3 sets of dives on Little Brother, on the Gorgonian Garden and to look for sharks. The first 2 involved a trip across by RIB, so that the big boat didn't have to disengage itself from the moorings and risk losing our place out of the wind and current. The RIB trip looked a bit iffy the first time, so some of us sat it out and practiced our lounging. The reports were so good that everyone made the second trip.

The wisdom of keeping the big boat moored while crossing in the RIB was proved when we went to do our last dive on Little Brother. We would move the big boat across, dive, and then head back to Hurghada. Taking the mooring lines off the reef was simple enough, but raising the bow & stern anchors was more difficult, involving lots of manoeuvring of Greta to get the anchors free. Sometime during this, one of the RIBs was caught under the exhaust cowling on the port side, which punctured the hull and, as we watched, the RIB started to sink. This boat was then cut free (with 2 of the crew on board) while the anchors were brought up, but by the time we'd finished this, the boat had completely deflated and was about to disappear

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altogether. It was 2 hours before the engine was removed and the RIB brought back on board.

Our last 2 dives were on Panorama Reef and Abu Hashish. Both were nice enough in their own way, but nothing on the previous dives, apart from the rumoured sighting of a dolphin on the last dive....