

SHARM WITH CAMEL

AND A VERY LIGHT CCR



JOHN LIDDIARD gets to see some classic dive sites in a new light, and enjoys being bubble-free to get among spawning shoals of snapper and batfish



SAY WHAT YOU LIKE ABOUT diver crowding, I always get a buzz from diving at Ras Mohammed, and here I am again, getting a buzz among the currents and the fish. There are no divers other than my buddy, and it's less than 12 hours after a late arrival the night before.

Clever scheduling by Camel Dive Club means that we are clear of other dive boats at all the critical points.

A first dive at Jackfish Alley lets the others get ahead of us. Then we jump in for the classic Anemone Reef to Yolanda Reef drift around the tip of Ras Mohammed while the other boats stop for lunch, and have the reef to ourselves.

I repeat the trick on a smaller scale. By loitering while the rest of our group gets ahead, guide Uri and I really do have it all to ourselves.

It isn't just a repeat of a familiar site, but a wonderfully new dive. I have only been here in winter before and now, in

Above from left to right: Big shoals of fish form through the summer at Shark Reef, Ras Mohammed; containers of bathroom fittings from the *Yolanda* wreck sprawl over the reef; preparing to dive on the *Lara* wreck.

Below: Engine and boiler on the *Dunraven*.

Below right: A shoal of goatfish.

June, the big shoals of snapper and batfish are gathering to spawn.

Rather than drift, we stay at the leading edge of Shark Reef, loop out among a targeted shoal of fish, then swoop back into the reef and work our way back into the current to do it all over again. The subsequent drift past the hanging soft corals to the garden of bathroom fittings from the *Yolanda* and the pick-up point is almost a chore.

There is still plenty to see, but I am coming down from the adrenaline high of the current and all those fish. Like any dive junkie, I want to do it again.

A couple of days later, this is just what I do with guide Polly. Again we have the site to ourselves, this time after an early start from Travco Marina for a day-trip

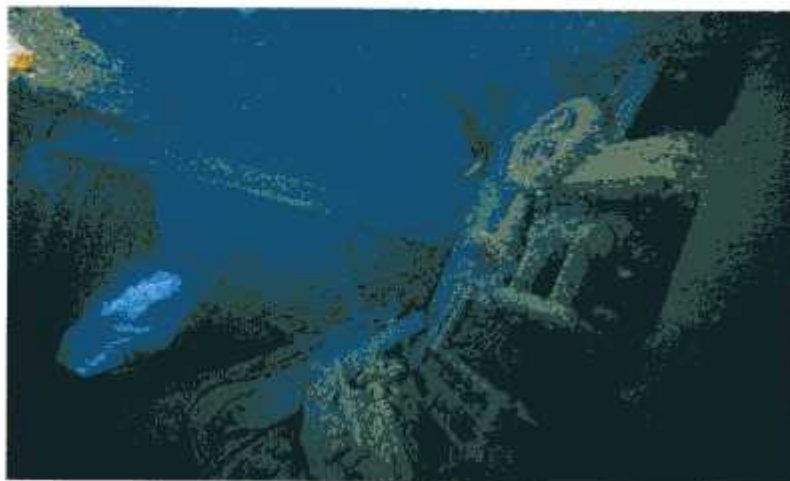
to the wreck of the *Dunraven*.

This 1873-vintage steamship sank after striking the reef in 1876 while returning to Britain from Bombay. The hull is inverted, with the stern at 30m and the bow 10m shallower. Polly and I follow the starboard side aft, dawdling beneath the overhanging hull to allow the rest of the group to get well ahead.

The key part of any dive here is to enter the hull at the stern and swim all the way forwards inside the wreck, the only restriction being the boilers and two-cylinder inverted compound steam engine in the middle.

While visibility outside is average reef, inside it's perfect, given time for detritus from the preceding divers to settle out.

The *Dunraven* is not a big wreck, and there is not much interesting structure





other than on the swim through the hull, but it is very pretty. And after this wreck dive, Polly and I get back among the snapper shoals, and then batfish. I'm left wondering how much fun it would be to do the same thing bubble-free.

I don't have to wonder for long, because I'm spending the second half of this Sharm trip doing crossover training on a rEvo rebreather with Dutch instructor Pim Van der Horst.

You may have seen the rEvo at the Dive Shows, a very compact unit made of shiny sheet metal, with back-mounted counterlungs and an innovative dual scrubber.

Originally it was a manual closed-circuit rebreather, where a constant-mass flow valve trickles oxygen into the breathing loop at an approximation of the diver's metabolic rate, and the diver

adds oxygen manually to maintain a constant ppO₂.

A more recent option is an electronic set-point controller and dive computer from Canadian developer Shearwater, which makes it a fully electronic eCCR.

The unit is not CE-certified, though manufacturer Paul Raymaekers has been testing it at ANSTI, and has invested in a test facility for his factory in Belgium.

PIM AND I FIRST SPEND A DAY diving from the beach at the Grand Rotana Resort, where Camel has a smaller dive centre, going through drills and getting used to the kit.

The first issue is getting the weight right. Simple enough, I think – just use what I would for an AP Evolution.

The rEvo is lighter out of the water, so I place a couple of spare weights on the

Above: A big shoal of glassfish can always be found on this head of coral in Jackfish Alley.

jetty just in case. Usually I can guess my weighting for new kit within a couple of kilos, but this time I'm very, very wrong. I sink fast – it's a good job I checked that the diluent and wing feed were working.

Back at the jetty, I slide a weight off my belt for another check. Then another. Then yet another. Then the belt with the last 1kg weight on it.

I feel happy with my buoyancy only after shedding the entire 7kg belt, and between dives I remove another 1kg from the trim weights.

That adds up to a total of 8kg less weight than I had expected!

I am thankful to be diving on the lightweight titanium rather than the standard stainless-steel rEvo, which would have been 2.5kg less buoyant.

Had I been in a thinner wetsuit, I could have found a use for the old



DIVER Awards wooden weightbelt.

The site is Eagle Ray Bay and, indeed, a small eagle ray does flap by in the distance. The floating jetty in front of the dive centre makes this an ideal training site. Those doing basic open-water training love having interesting shallows right outside the classroom, and the security of a private beach.

For more experienced divers, it's very convenient for the first day's training, but I'm glad to be heading off to Ras Mohammed again.

THE GENERAL FORMAT of the first day is repeated, starting on the wall at Ras Ghasani while other dive-boats get ahead of us. It's a chance to take the rEvo a bit deeper and polish the drills. At Ras Mohammed itself I have ambitious plans for photographs in among the fish, so don't want practice drills to interrupt.

Claudio, head guide for the regular scuba group, gives the usual briefing about a drift past Shark Reef, then on to the bathroom fittings from the *Yolanda*, which he cites as the world-record deep wreck dive at 205m.

Pim gives me a knowing smile, and explains to Claudio that a few weeks previously he was part of a team to dive

the *Milano* in Lake Maggiore in Italy – a new record dive of 233m.

From the swirling on the surface, I can see that the current is storming. We drop right at the tip of Shark Reef, and a strong downcurrent takes us with it.

I head into the blue, aiming to immerse myself in a big shoal of batfish. The current is less intense further out from the wall. Drifting through the shoal, I find a nice back-eddy that moves me back to the starting point without spitting me out.

I can repeat this circuit ad infinitum and get pictures of the fish and self-portraits of myself with fish behind.

Try as we might, however, we can't coordinate a move to get both Pim and myself among the fish at the same time. The variations in up and downcurrents make it impossible.

We spend so long among the fish that other boats' divers complete their surface intervals and drop in.

It's fun zooming the opposite way in my back eddy as the current carries them off towards the bathroom fittings far round the corner.

Sharm el Sheikh has been the site of massive development, notably with the new terminal at the airport and resorts and housing along the coast, but back in downtown Na'ama Bay I don't

Above from left to right: Anemonefish in Eagle Ray Bay; relaxing at the Camel Dive Club in Na'ama Bay; propeller and rudder of the *Lara* at Jackson Reef

Below left: *Lara's* mast, adorned with soft corals, reaches up to 45m to mark the first deco stop.

Below: Breathing deco gas for additional safety.

feel I am returning to a transformed or spoiled location.

Staying at the Camel Dive Club helps. Camel has been here so long it's an institution rather than a simple hotel for divers. The legendary Camel Bar is still the best in town. Camel's Indian restaurant is also popular, and its new Italian ice-cream shop looks set to be a similar success.

IT WAS ALL JUST A GLEAM in Hesham Gabr's eye on my first trip to Ras Mohammed in the mid-1980s. There were a couple of hotels further along Na'ama Bay, and Camel had just opened as a walled compound alone in the desert. Accommodation was under thatched shelters, where we lay our sleeping bags on mats.

Hesham, now Chairman and General Manager of a much bigger Camel Dive Club, had introduced me to George the huge Napoleon wrasse, the *Yolanda* bathroom fittings and the splendour of the wall at Ras Mohammed.

He had also spoken with passion and vision of the future of Camel, and Red Sea diving in general.

Late one afternoon, Hesham shows me the approximate location of the original Camel compound, behind the dive centre, roughly between the swimming pool and one of the





Above: John Liddiard dives the rEvo in Thomas Canyon, Tiran.

Above right: Oh no, missed the flight! Or have we?

blocks of hotel rooms. I try to visualise where I lay my sleeping bag all those years ago. Modern rooms now surround the pool, where new divers have just completed the confined-water part of their training.

Returning to the dive-centre courtyard, I sit on a shaded sofa and sip a glass of freshly squeezed lime-juice, chilling out with other divers returning

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Flight to Sharm el Sheikh.

DIVING ▶ Camel Hotel Dive Club, www.cameldive.com

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round.

MONEY ▶ Egyptian pound, but most major currencies are accepted, notably the euro.

PRICES ▶ A seven-night package including flights from London Gatwick, transfers and B&B accommodation at Camel Hotel Dive Club, with 10 dives can be booked for an average price of £755 per person (two sharing) with Tony Backhurst Scuba Travel, 01483 271 765, www.scuba.co.uk. A separate five-day diving package with Camel costs from 225 euros, and technical dives from 80 euros per day.

FURTHER INFORMATION ▶ 020 7493 5283, www.touregypt.net; rEvo, www.revo-rebreathers.com; DIR-Rebreather, www.dirrebreather.com



Gate 6			
FLIGHT	TO	TIME	STATUS
XLA563	LONDON GATWICK	23:00	Departed
TAS7021	PISA Galileo Galilei	08:30+	ON-TIME
AP 8385	FIUMICINO	11:40+	ON-TIME
BI 1903	BERGAMO	12:25+	ON-TIME
BV 784	GENOA CRISTOFO	12:40+	ON-TIME
Sharm El Sheikh International Airport			11:03PM

from the boats. An instructor calls for our attention. "Congratulations to Cathy and Mike on completing their course. We have two new Open Water divers." I clap and cheer along with the rest. Celebrating newly qualified divers is a daily event.

It isn't all simple sports diving. Like most established centres, Camel has a technical department. In among the regular scuba sites, including those I dived on the rEvo, I make a couple of deeper dives – an open-circuit trimix dive on the *Lara*, and a trimix dive on the rebreather to Thomas Canyon.

The *Lara* is the wreck that stands gutted on the exposed edge of Jackson Reef, but that is just the forward half.

In December 1981, the 4752-ton Cypriot-owned motor ship drove straight on to the north face of the reef. There was barely enough fuel in the tanks to have got her this far from Aqaba, and rumours of insurance fraud immediately started to circulate.

The wreck was slowly stripped for salvage, some parts falling into deeper water down to 70m. It is where these parts came to rest that we dive.

EMERGING FROM THE BLUE-GREY background, my first sight of the *Lara* is the engine-room end of the propeller shaft projecting from the keel, tastily adorned in soft corals.

The hull itself is cut down to the flat floor of the holds, with no sides at all. We follow the outside edge aft to the propeller and rudder, past more soft corals and trees of black coral.

A section of superstructure has fallen against the inside edge of the keel, so big, boxy swim-throughs are a handy 10m shallower than the propeller and rudder.

From this, a mast leads across to the reef, and up to our first stop at 42m. Shallow enough for an air dive, and tantalising enough to tempt those finding it on air to continue deeper than they should.

Scraps of wreckage lead up the reef. Making my shallowest stops at 6m, I can see through the surf the forward part of the wreck looming above me.

Further south, Thomas Canyon is a narrow split in the seabed off Thomas

Reef, starting at 35m and winding down to 90m.

Pim and I swim out from the reef and meet the canyon at 55m, a chasm in the seabed below at the planned maximum depth. I am tempted to dive deeper and drop into the chasm, but this is an assessed dive on a training course, so I must be on best behaviour.

One of the drills is a stage removal and refit at maximum depth, so I get this out of the way while swimming. We follow the split below into the current, and the walls rise to surround us.

From here on we have some shelter and can enjoy this shallower part of the canyon, dipping beneath arches and into short caves.

HAVING TAKEN ENOUGH photos of Pim, I hand him my camera and set up some of myself, composing the scene by watching my reflection in the dome port, and also using it to see behind me and swim backwards along the canyon, a skill required for DIR-Rebreather.

Pim belongs to the DIR-Rebreather group, which aims to promote the same "Doing It Right" attitude to refined diving skills, standardised gas mixes, kit configuration and teamwork as the Florida-based DIR training agency GUE has done for open-circuit and twin-sets – though the groups are unconnected.

I learned to swim backwards while playing octopus, and often use the technique while taking photographs, but I have not had to demonstrate it on a rebreather course before.

My previous technical qualifications have been with IANTD, TDI and PSA, their training material sharing a common heritage. rEvo training uses ANDI material, which is refreshingly different. I can't say I prefer it to the others, but variety broadens the mind.

Pim pulls out cue cards requiring me to hover with no mask, helicopter turn, and do many more familiar drills one-handed or with no mask on. There is always room to improve basic skills.

I found the rEvo easy to dive and maintain, very compact and very light, especially with that titanium shell.

It's light enough to fit into the usual diver's baggage allowance – if only I didn't have to take a housed camera system as well!

Waiting in the departure lounge at the airport, I read on the new LCD display that my flight home is now boarding – then that it has departed on time.

In reality, it is delayed for an hour. Despite all the new developments, much in Sharm is reassuringly consistent. □