

Sudan dive trip 2007

Introduction

This was a two week trip sailing from Marsa Ghalib in Egypt and diving mainly in Sudanese waters as far south as Port Sudan. Originally I had been booked onto the MV Hurricane through Tony Backhurst Scuba, diving 50% Egyptian and 50% Sudanese dive locations. However, due to apathy at the Sudanese Embassy in London and incorrect information on their website, it became apparent that the visas were not going to arrive on time and the trip was cancelled. I was offered a last minute place on the MV Royal Evolution. This turned out to be far better than what the original Hurricane trip would have offered and I ended up with a very good deal indeed. The trip took place in the last week of February and first week of March.

The other divers on the boat were a superb group with nationalities including English, Scottish, Dutch, German and Russian. Onboard was Mark Evans (editor of SportDiver magazine) and Gavin Anderson (contributing photographer for SportDiver magazine); a report from Mark Evans on this trip will be appearing in the May 2007 issue of this magazine.



MV Royal Evolution



Preparing for departure

The Royal Evolution is extremely luxurious, accommodating a maximum of 24 guests in twin-share and double cabins; all en-suite. The size of the cabins is far larger than the average cabin on Red Sea liveaboards, with the two forward bow cabins being even larger. Food is of a very high standard and the lounge is equipped with a huge plasma screen for displaying satellite TV, DVDs or a live GPS map showing the boat's current position and course. On the top deck is a heated fresh water spa.

Arrival and Day 1

The first evening saw us arrive safely at Marsa Alam airport and a speedy transfer to the Coral Beach Hotel. We had arrived a day early as Wednesdays are the only days UK flights are made to Marsa Alam for this time of year. So we had time to relax until the Royal Evolution was to arrive the following day. A good evening meal and beers followed by a good night's rest saw us ready for two weeks of solid, hard diving. Little did we know at the time of the cock-ups and red tape that were to follow. The first day saw the arrival of the Royal Evolution, back from the previous trip. We were soon on board, assembling kit and being allocated cabins. After a comical farce clearing customs we were ready for departure and headed off into the blue.

Day 2

After an overnight sailing from Marsa Ghalib the first dive was a check dive at the Tug boat Tien Hsing (aka Tienstin) at Abu Galawa, Fury Shoal. This is a very pretty dive site with a maximum depth at the



The wreck of the Tienstin tug boat

stern of around 18 metres and the bows almost breaking the surface. The wreck is totally encrusted in corals and makes for a very pleasant dive, it is said to be at its best when dived at night. This was one dive that I had wanted to do for a long time and it certainly lived up to its reputation, a very easy and relaxed first dive. The second dive of the day was again at Fury Shoal at the Sha'ab Claudio site. Again, another very easy and relaxing dive with a maximum depth of around 16 metres. That evening we prepared for an overnight sailing into Sudanese waters, but bad news was soon to follow.

Day 3

The following day we were informed that our itinerary had changed. Due to Sudanese beauracracy our plans for diving on our way down to Port Sudan were cancelled and we were instructed to go directly to the port without making any dives along the way. This meant we sailed solidly for 36 hours missing all dives for day 3 and the morning dives of day 4. Time to relax though and read a book or watch some DVDs was welcome even though we didn't dive.

Days 4 & 5



Port Sudan

We arrived at Port Sudan mid morning of day four and the process of getting visas arranged began. This took several hours with immigration officials boarding the boat. Eventually all the paperwork was completed and at around 1pm we set sail for the Umbria wreck which lies just a few kilometres out of Port Sudan at Wingate reef.

The Umbria is a very large wreck which lies at a maximum depth of around 30 metres and contains a cargo of wine, 3 Fiat motor cars and 360,000 bombs. This Italian ship was sailing into Port Sudan on 10th June 1940, just as Italy was about to enter the Second World War. Rather than let ship fall into the hands of the British Royal Navy the captain scuttled her where she lay anchored.

To this day the bombs remain where they first lay, in fear that if disturbed they could explode and Port Sudan could be wiped off the map. This is an impressive wreck, with access to the holds and the Bridge at fairly shallow depths. That evening we stayed moored at the Umbria for a repeat dive the following morning. The next day started with a 6:45 am dive on the Umbria, this time I found the three Fiat cars that had eluded me on the first dive, they were tucked away in a corner of the hold beneath

the ship's bridge, they looked quite spooky as they had lain in complete darkness for over 65 years. They were in surprisingly good condition though, considering the time they had been there.

Next, we moved the short distance to Sanganeb reef for the day's remaining dives and the opportunity to visit the lighthouse there. The view from the top of the lighthouse is quite spectacular and the whole hooked shape of the reef can be made out, well worth the steep climb up the very narrow steps. At the south western point of this reef is a plateau at 20 – 30 metres depth and is the best part of this reef for seeing sharks, however I didn't see any on my dives that day.

The side of this plateau is often the best place to see scalloped hammerhead sharks and manta rays.



Sanganeb lighthouse

Days 6, 7 & 8



Bluespotted ribbontail ray

The next day started with an early morning dive at Sanganeb reef again, this time on the north side. Large schools of barracuda were present and they were completely unperturbed by the presence of divers. I was able to get my camera within a few centimetres of them as they swam around in large circles. An amazing experience to get so close to such large numbers of these fish which were around 80cm to 1 metre in length.

Our next location was Sha'ab Rumi and this was to be our base for most of the next 2 days. Dives alternated between the southern plateau and Jacques Cousteau's Precontinent II project.

The southern plateau is renowned for good shark sightings and it didn't disappoint today, for it was here that I saw my first Tiger shark. I estimated it to be 3 to 4 metres in length and although it was some distance away it was a very impressive sight, definitely the highlight of the trip for me. As I climbed back onto the zodiac after the dive I was greeted with scepticism and disbelief when I reported having seen a Tiger, until I showed them my video footage; poor quality but enough to identify the shark. After that dive the Tiger shark appeared on nearly every subsequent dive at this site and most people saw it, on one occasion the shark came within several metres of some members of the group.

Grey reef sharks were present on all dives here, many in groups of 3 or 4. They showed little signs of concern by our presence; some came up close showing curiosity at the presence of so many divers but they quickly shot off when I tried to approach some of them with my camera.

Two of the dives were at Jacques Ives Cousteau's Precontinent II project. This was a project that Cousteau set up in the sixties to investigate the possibility of man living for long periods of time underwater. We dived amongst the various buildings and inside the domed hangar where there is an air pocket at the top. Nearby was the "garage" that he built to house his underwater scooters and it was possible to swim right through it. The project lies in fairly shallow water at no more than 15 metres

depth or so. This was one of the highlights of the trip and the corals surrounding the project were extremely vibrant and colourful.



Toyota truck

The last 2 dives of day 8 were at Sha'ab Suedi, with the first one on the Blue Belt shipwreck. This ship ran aground in the 1970s. The crew was supposedly attempting to off-load several Toyota trucks into a small Sudanese port to avoid paying the import taxes they should have paid had they gone through Port Sudan. Unfortunately the captain misjudged the shallow reef and the ship ran aground and started to take in water. The trucks were dumped overboard in a vain attempt to lighten the ship, but she sank nevertheless. She now lies upside down with her keel pointing upwards at a depth of 20 to 80 mtrs or so. The entrance to the hold lies at around 30 metres, so this is a deep dive if you want to penetrate the wreck. I found that the most interesting part of the dive was around the trucks, which lie at around 20 metres near the

ship's bows. The second dive at Sha'ab Suedi was at the reefs adjacent to the Blue Belt wreck. At a maximum depth of around 17 metres this makes for a very relaxed and easy dive around many small pinnacles (Habilis) and mounts. At the end of the dive I had arrived back at the Blue Belt wreck with the Royal Evolution just a few metres above me..... a perfect end to a perfect dive.

Days 9 & 10

Two morning dives at the Angarosh site brought us whitetip reef sharks and grey reef sharks. Very strong currents forced me to abort one dive before I was swept out of range of the surface patrolling zodiacs. These type of dives drive home the need to carry a DSMB with you at all times, with fast currents and high waves (at times) it would be very easy for surface support not to see you. A DSMB for every diver, not one per buddy team, is an absolute must. It is also surprising just how many "experienced" divers do not know how to use one, as I discovered amongst those on the trip. I strongly recommend anyone going on one of these trips to practise first and get used to using one. Reels snag and you need to know how to prevent yourself being dragged to the surface, recompression chambers can be several day's sailing time away when this far south and you won't be popular with the rest of the group if you write-off their holidays and their diving.



Moray eel with unicornfish

The afternoon saw us sailing to Merlo reef nearby and following with a night dive there. A very pleasant shallow dive, ending in a spectacular display of a giant Moray eel catching and eating an Orangespine unicornfish. I was photographing a Spanish dancer when I saw several other divers videoing some furious activity in the reef wall. I swam over and there was this Moray eel with a unicornfish in its mouth. Norbert, the guy with the camcorder, obtained some excellent footage of the whole event whilst I reeled off half a dozen still shots. Fascinating and yet quite disturbing to watch. Also seen on the dive were several large parrotfish sleeping in their mucous cocoons and a couple of Spanish dancers; unfortunately, not performing for us on this occasion.

The next day saw us diving Merlo reef again, this time at the southern pinnacle in the pursuit of sharks; I didn't see any, but others did. Plenty of shoaling barracuda and at very close distances; less than 1 metre at times. The visibility was quite poor towards the end of the dive.

The remaining dives of day 9 were at Abington reef, which is easily identified by a small tower lighthouse. Whitetip reef sharks were present as this site is renowned for its shark activity.

Day 11

Back to Angarosh again for the whole day in the hope of some serious shark action. Grey reef sharks and whitetips were present as expected, as were the now familiar large schools of barracuda. However, it wasn't until the end of the third dive of the day on the southern plateau that I had my first encounter with a silky shark. I had been diving solo on a somewhat uneventful dive, had dropped down to around 47 metres and nothing was happening. Time was up and so back to the boat. I was coming to the end of a long safety stop when into view came this 2 metre plus shark, slowly swimming my way across the back of the boat. Other divers joined me watching the shark get closer until we could see that it wasn't a grey reefy.



Barracuda

No white markings on the pectoral, caudal or dorsal fins, so not a Oceanic Whitetip or Silvertip, no, this was a silky for sure and we knew that silkies were in the area from other divers reports. It moved so slowly and gracefully around the back of the boat for a minute or so before heading off into the blue. A wonderful experience and one not to forget.

Day 12



Today we only made the one dive as we had some serious distance to cover to get back to Egypt. The location was Merlo again and again there were loads of large barracuda in some very large shoals. Unfortunately, one of my strobes failed so I was left to take silhouette and ambient light shots. I did however manage to get one or two nice shots of other divers above me with the sun silhouetting them against the bright surface. My strobe failure was down to nothing more than a couple of dry-joints on the batteries, as I discovered when I got back home.

Left: Silhouette of Gavin Anderson

Day 13

All trips have to end and this was our last day diving. We had motored solidly the previous afternoon, evening and overnight to arrive back in Egyptian waters at St. Johns Reef. Two dives at Habili Ali saw whitetip reef sharks again and myself getting stung by a tiny jellyfish that had been hovering just under the boat, awaiting my return I'm sure. However, a liberal application of vinegar soon relieved the pain and swelling and the incident was soon forgotten. The icing on the cake however was on the third dive

of the day and the very last of the trip. We were at White Rock site at St. Johns and we were warned by Simon, one of our guides, of the possible presence of a large Napoleon wrasse who had an affiliation to divers. In the past this wrasse had been fed with hard boiled eggs by divers, unaware that they can kill these fish. Simon is a videographer and so often carries several small props with him on dives to include in his shots. One prop is a golf ball, and yes you've guessed it, a golf ball looks just like an egg. So there was Simon spinning the ball on the end of his finger when up shoots old Napoleon and takes a mouthful of golf ball and videographer's hand. Fortunately, Simon wasn't too badly hurt but we were warned to watch out for him. So off the back of the boat I drop and lo and behold there is Napoleon, powering vigorously towards me – it's quite worrying to see 2 metres of fish coming at you at a rate of knots like that. He veers off at the last minute and I relax and turn away and get on with the dive. Suddenly! I get a sharp nudge on my left shoulder and there is Napoleon face to face with me. He was telling me in no uncertain terms that he would like feeding and no doubt eggs would be very welcome. Unfortunately, or should that be fortunately? for him, eggs were off the menu. Quite an adrenalin rush and an excellent finalé to a fantastic two weeks diving.

Day 14

Today was time to rinse and dry kit and pack bags ready for the flight home. We stayed on board until after lunch when we sailed back into Port Ghalib and went through customs to officially arrive back in Egypt. We were zodiac'd across the marina back to the Coral Beach Hotel for a few beers prior to setting off for the airport. Once at the airport the fun and games started with my excess baggage. I had, according to the check-in clerk, 58 kilos of baggage. He wanted to charge me the full £9 per kilo excess on the full amount over my allowance – no concessions were going to be given that day. When I offered my credit card he announced that only cash could be accepted. As I only had around 80 Euros and £20 on me that is all I could give him, take it or leave it. In the end he gave in and took what I offered, but I did see the cash disappear into his back pocket. Not a great amount for an airline, but a nice little earner for an Egyptian on a lowly wage. So back to Blighty and a high of 8 degrees centigrade awaited us 😞



The MV Royal Evolution



Home after a long trip

Summary

This can be quite a gruelling trip if you do all the dives, including the night dives (on some nights 2 dives were made). The itinerary is very new, the trip I was on was only the third made travelling from Egypt and sailing into Sudan, and so, many problems were to be expected. These will undoubtedly continue for a while until a regular routine is established with the Egyptian and Sudanese authorities.

The first dive briefing of the day is usually around 6am (sometimes 5:30am) and it takes some commitment to turn up at this hour every morning. The dives came fast and furious once we were settled into a regular routine though, with little time between dives to catch up on the mandatory paperwork, completion of logbook and camera/camcorder preparation. Life starts to slow down later in the afternoon and if you don't do the night dives then a good supply of books and DVDs will be

needed to see the evening through. Diving on Nitrox is highly recommended as this will significantly reduce the build up of Nitrogen in your body due to the large amounts of dives being made. I made 27 dives over the whole trip, with all but a couple lasting over 1 hour in duration. I opted to miss many of the night dives and a couple of day dives. However, there is the scope for making at least 40 dives should you have the stamina to keep up – don't forget to take a half day off half way through the trip to off-gas a little. All in though, a highly recommended trip on a superb boat doing a superb itinerary. The only negative comment I can make were the farces with the Sudanese immigration authorities. The clarity of the water was quite poor at times causing large amounts of back-scatter when using flash and the light levels (particular on the very early morning dives) was fairly low, so the quality of the photographs suffered somewhat. The up side was off course conditions were just right for sharks, which was the reason why many people make this trip at this time of the year. The reefs and corals this far south are noticeably more profuse and colourful than further north in the Red Sea.

The air temperature remained fairly constant in the mid-twenties degrees C, although whilst in Port Sudan I recorded 30 degrees C. Water temperature was between 22 degrees in Egypt to 24 – 25 degrees further south. A 7mm semi-dry suit is recommended for this time of year, I used a 3mm full wetsuit and a 7mm semi-dry. The 3mm did give a bit of a thermal shock when first entering the water and whilst I could handle the cold the 7mm was far more comfortable.

Due to the expense, this is one of those trips you make once in a lifetime - the whole trip costs £2200 plus Nitrox, beers, tips etc. but is well worth the expense. So what are you waiting for? You can book through several UK diving tour operators or directly with Yasser on the Royal Evolution website: <http://www.royalevolution.com>



Safe diving y'all,

Steve Cain