

## **Easter 2005 Red Sea Live-aboard Trip**

We departed for our Red Sea live-aboard holiday from Gatwick Airport on a wet, misty March morning. We had been staying with friends who were regular Red Seaers, although not of the live-aboard kind. Their repeat visits and other divers' ravings of the wondrous marine life and spectacular wrecks had egged us on to booking this holiday. We had our fingers crossed that our week would be one of fantastic diving and not plagued by sea sickness and annoying divers that we couldn't escape from! We would soon find out...

We finally arrived on our live-aboard in late afternoon after edging our way slowly through passport control at Sharm el Sheikh Airport and doing our best to avoid rather annoying bag couriers. Still, this gave us a chance to chat, and get to know, the other people on the flight who would also be spending 6 days on the MV Excel (everyone seemed normal so far!). After the mandatory briefing we had the rest of the evening to explore the boat, unpack and settle in. We were to be in port that night leaving at 6am to dive at around 7am the next morning.

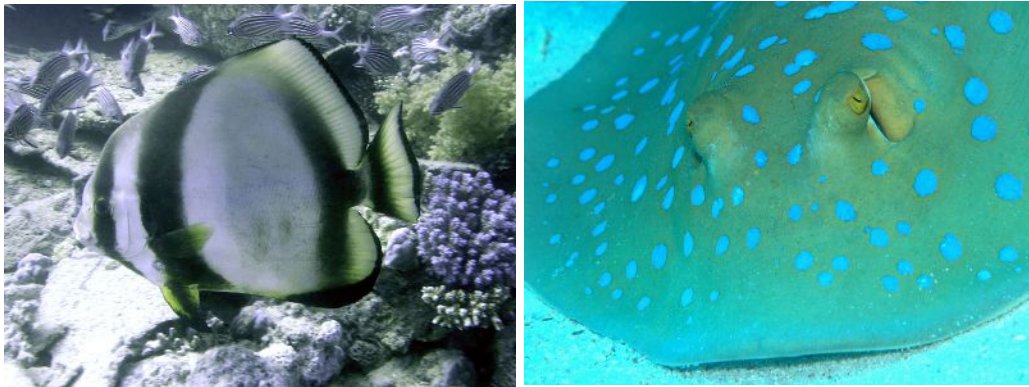


MV Excel, moored

Sure enough we were woken by the sound of the engines and we were on our way. We did our first dive at Ras Katy, a reef dive to check weight and equipment etc. This was also our first chance to meet some creatures that would become familiar as the week progressed. We had chosen the 'Wrecks and Reefs' itinerary with a possible 21 dives taking in the delights of the Ras Mohammed Nature Reserve and the wrecks of the Thistlegorm, the Dunraven and the Carnatic among others.

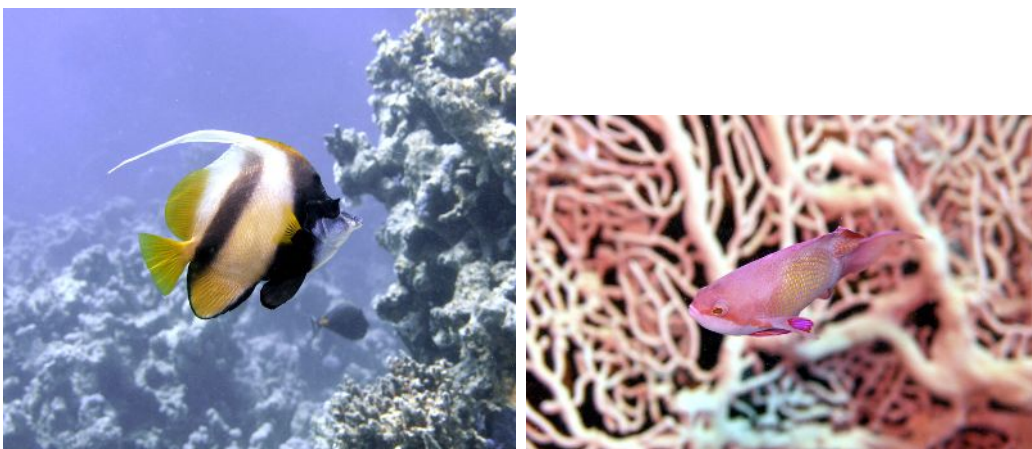
Our second dive was on the Dunraven, a sail steam ship built in 1873 and sunk in 1876. She was carrying a cargo of timber and spices and

now rests on the sea bed between 22 and 30m. The wreck was encrusted with life and swimming through it you could appreciate how Grouper, Parrot fish, Spade fish and Wrasse have claimed it over the centuries and taken possession. Our dive lasted 35 minutes (5mms are a little chilly this time of year even with a hood) and then it was back on our floating boat to shimmy out of our snug wetsuits and warm ourselves with the delicious shot of hot choc that was eagerly offered and greedily swigged after each dive. No one should underestimate the medicinal reviving ability of chocolate!



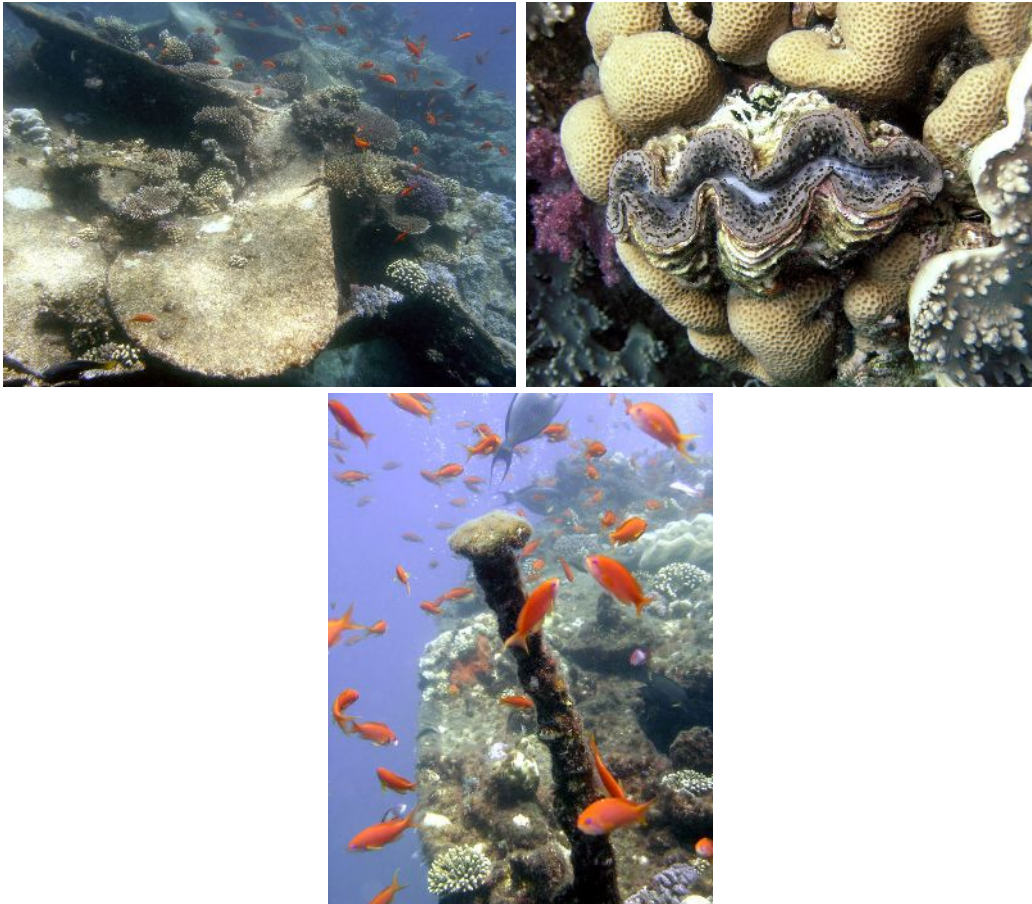
Spade fish and Blue spotted ray

To pick out the highlights of the trip is extremely difficult. Our guides did their best to ensure that we got the most out of each dive by provided a detailed hand drawn sketch of the site accompanied by a wealth of information: from the conditions to expect and the history of the site/wreck to the specific creatures to look out for.



Red Sea banner fish and Lyretail anthias.

For marine life Shag Rock and the wreck of the Kingston were fabulous. This is a shallow dive where our max was just over 12m, and we spent the majority of the dive at 6ish m. At this depth the light illuminated the bright colours of the corals and sponges which were everywhere. We had dived the impressive Rosalie Moller in the morning and Shag Rock was a lovely contrast to the solid, dramatic and imposing wreck of that Glaswegian vessel.



Propeller lying on top of the Kingston, thought to be a spare and, Giant clam, Anthiases on wreck.

There is of course one wreck that everyone will ask you about and assume that you have dived if you make a trip to the Red Sea. The Thistlegorm. She was built in 1940 and was attacked the following year when bombs ripped apart her stern section sinking her on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1941. The main attractions lie in her holds where divers can still see the motorbikes, aeroplane wings, welly boots and rifles that she was carrying. There are two locomotives and Bren-gun carriers lying close to the wreck, which had been thrown off in the attack. The wreck also

harbours an anti aircraft gun and a number of unexploded shells. On the base of one of the shells the date 1929 is clearly visible as passing divers have repeatedly polished it to keep it clear of growth.



Bren gun carrier, unexploded shells and, locomotive.

To dive the Thistlegorm on a day boat means getting up early and enduring a long trip out to the site. It also means sharing your dive with divers from the other 20 or so day boats also running to the same schedule! This is where being on a live-aboard makes a huge difference. We arrived at the site in the afternoon and did our first dive contending with a strong current. We made a second dive later that day on the wreck at night which offered much calmer conditions. The following day we hit the water at 6.09am (that woke us up!). We had the wreck to ourselves making it hauntingly impressive. As the onslaught of day boats on the horizon approached we settled down to pancakes, omelettes and fruit. We were already on our way to the next diving destination.

In summary we had a week of fantastic diving with a good balance of both wreck and reef dives. We were not plagued by seasickness and only felt a bit dodgy crossing the Straits of Gubal. We didn't feel claustrophobic and trapped on the boat as it was large enough to have space to breathe. There was a good mix of divers, only one token annoying person, and the crew were very helpful and stealth like in

keeping the boat in order. We had a divetastic week but after 19 dives our ears were feeling sticky and everyone was exhausted. The final day spent by the pool at the hotel was very welcome!



Group photo at 20 metres

### **Trip details**

We made our booking with Tony Blackhurst and flew from Gatwick to Sharm. Our package was 'Wrecks and Reefs' in the Northern part of the Red Sea. We spent 6 days diving and one day in a hotel in Sharm inclusive. MV Excel carries 20 divers and 10 crew members and offers a range of courses. Accommodation is in twin rooms with en-suite (there are 2 double rooms available upon prior request). The food was plentiful and as a vegetarian I was well catered for.