Over the past 25 years Sharm El Sheikh has been transformed from a small fishing port to an international beach resort. Sharm remains a favourite with divers, but with so many topside facilities how do you get the best out of the area? Charlotte Boan is your guide.
Divers have been travelling to the Sinai Peninsula for decades, and although underwater adventurers were the pioneers, we now find ourselves accompanied by families, sun-seekers and even clubbers. The growth of mass tourism in the Egyptian Red Sea has brought in the crowds, but it has also generated some competitively priced, high-quality resort facilities. These days, your first question may be what dive site to choose, but the dilemma of which restaurant to book comes a close second.

SHARM EL SHEIKH is a gift to divers – clear water brimming with fish, corals and wrecks, all a five-hour flight from the UK. It is hardly surprising that in the prime period from May to September, Brits make up the majority of visitors to Sharm. As a result of all this popularity, it has to be said that some of the sites can be extremely crowded, but it’s not too hard to time your dive and find a space to admire those beautiful golden anthias fish shimmering against the clear blue water. Of all those people you see packing into the charter planes, only a few will actually end up on one of the blue-chip dive sites – the others will disappear into the resorts, the clubs and the glass-bottomed boats, leaving you to discover the true Red Sea.

Today, the value of Sharm lies in the diversity of options, from luxury resorts to bargain hotels. The town is equally suited to the solo traveller or the family in search of a good resort with a pool (and, of course, the occasional cheeky dive while the kids are being looked after by resort staff). You can smoke a sheesha pipe and watch the evening unfold on the main drag, lose yourself in the party scene or enjoy a top-end meal at knockdown prices. This town delivers on every level, and with the information in these pages, you can discover the Sharm that suits you.

The diving

SHARM HAS two marinas catering for 120 diving centres and 400 dive boats. While smaller centres are popping up all over the place offering cheap deals, it’s worth noting that most of these do not have boats. Some of the larger dive companies, such as Camel Dive Club and Red Sea College, have satellite centres at the larger hotels. RIB trips from hotels are also starting to be offered. Sina Blues at the Four Seasons offers RIB trips to Tiran, for example. Divers have a choice of five-day and three-day diving packages, however, the number of people opting for one or two-dive days is increasing, particularly among those travelling with the family.

Boats: The standard of dayboats operating out of Sharm El Sheikh is generally excellent. Boats are getting more comfortable, bigger and faster, which means most centres offer three dives a day outside the winter months. Dayboats are also notably arriving at different times on sites, which is easing underwater congestion. Red Sea Diving College has even begun to offer a range of services whereby divers can take advantage of later starts on boats that have a maximum of ten divers.
The diving

**Shore dives:** There are plenty of house reefs offering novice divers good training and photographers excellent opportunities for underwater photography. The reef-rotation policy (whereby certain sites are used and then rested) has done well to keep the sites in good condition. However, the rapid increase of building activity on the shore has had a detrimental effect on some sites to the north of Na'ama Bay. While there are strict building requirements designed to minimise impact on marine life, places such as Far Garden are seeing run-off sediment and noise pollution from current construction.

**Highlights** Ras Mohammed National Park and the Straits of Tiran remain the real gems of diving in this part of the world. For wreck fanatics, both the Dunraven and the Thistlegorm are popular with Sharm-based divers – the 4.30am early start is not as bad these days, with plenty of comfortable, napping areas on the boats.

**Seasonality** May to August is the high season for diving in the Red Sea. July, August and September are when sharks, such as scalloped hammerheads, are more likely to be seen. Whale sharks and mantas rays appear earlier, usually from March. The large schools of snapper and jacks on sites such as Shark and Yolanda reefs are more likely to appear in June, July and August.

**Nitrox** Most dive guides recommend a 30m limit on dives, which means most sites are perfect for using nitrox. All the major dive centres are offering free nitrox to those qualified to use it, with others such as Camel offering free nitrox for life to those who certify with its centre.

**Nitrox**

Mixed-gas, extended-range diving is becoming more popular in this part of the Red Sea, with all the major centres offering technical diving. Sharm’s obvious advantage for technical divers over other Sinai centres such as Dahab is the ease of boat access. Ras Mohammed and Tiran offer plenty of options for deep dives.

**Getting there**

The number of eateries offering top-class menus from around the world is staggering. The quality of cuisine is certainly now on a par with good European restaurants. Imported wine is expensive, however, the cheaper alternative, Egyptian wine, has noticeably improved. Here are a few recommended eating spots:

- **Sala Thai** at the Hyatt hotel. This restaurant offers posh décor, excellent food cooked by Thai chefs and amazing views over Middle Garden dive site. The food is good value, but the wine list is expensive.
- **Tandoori Indian Restaurant** at the Camel Dive Club and hotel courtyard. An award-winning range of authentic curry dishes cooked by an Indian chef. Unless you like being hotter than a wrapped up Eskimo in the desert, it’s best to ask for medium heat. Extremely good value with bar-price drinks.
- **Pomodoro Italian Restaurant** at the Hyatt hotel. This Italian restaurant offers posh décor, excellent food cooked by Italian chefs and amazing views over Middle Garden dive site. The food is good value, but the wine list is expensive.
- **Sala Thai** at the Hyatt hotel.

**Eating out**

**Main photograph:** schooling barracuda at Ras Mohammed and anthias on a typical Red Sea reef

**WHERE to stay**

There are currently around 66,000 hotel beds in Sharm El Sheikh. From five-star treatment to basic no-frills accommodation, visitors have a mass of options to suit every budget.

The main areas of Sharm, starting from south to north, are Sharm El Maya, Na’ama Bay, Garden Bay, Tiger Bay, Sharks Bay and Babq Bay. Some hotels are resort compounds, offering all holiday needs in one spot. Others are more open, particularly along Na’ama Bay, where the boardwalk provides access for everyone to various hotel facilities.

The Four Seasons hotel in the Sharks Bay ‘White Knight Reef’ area is considered the best of the big five-star hotels. Other top, luxury hotels include the Hyatt, Ritz Carlton, Radisson SAS, Mövenpick, Marriott and the Hilton chain.

- **Little Buddha** at Na’ama Bay
- **Mixed-gas**, **extended-range diving** is becoming very comfortable 28–29ºC.
- **November** is also a bit cooler on land, compared with the 40ºC-plus in the heights of summer. September to November is also a bit cooler on land, with the water temperature being a very comfortable 28–29ºC.

- **Technical diving**

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- **Avoiding the crowds** If you want to get away from the crowds and the highest temperatures, the best time to come to Sharm is outside the school holidays. While the water temperature in May is generally cooler at around 23–25ºC, the air temperature is a more comfortable 30–33°C when compared with the 40ºC-plus in the height of summer. September to November is also a bit cooler on land, with the water temperature being a very comfortable 28–29ºC.

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In Na’ama Bay Since Na’ama Bay closed to private cars and taxis in 2004, places to hang out have spread out a bit because a lot of the residents have to park miles away from town. However, Na’ama Bay is still popular with tourists and instructors out on a big night.

- Camel Bar This is the archetypal divers’ hangout, with monkey nut shells strewn across the floor (which explains the sign out front saying ‘this bar contains traces of nuts’). Signed T-shirts cover the walls (a new DIVE T-shirt will be unveiled later this year) and there are plenty of screens for watching football. A massive screen will project all of this year’s World Cup.

- Camel Roof Bar Stroll from the first-floor bar to the roof and you enter a completely different world. Cushions, low-down tables, low lighting and excellent views of Sharm are combined with cool chill-out tunes played by the Roof Bar’s resident DJ. Tables are hard to come by if not pre-booked.

- The Tavern Also known as the ‘Brit Bar’ by ‘Sharmers’ (local residents), this bar shows all major football and rugby matches and also serves up classic English roasts.

- The 1st Floor Bar and Roof Top Terrace Based at the Ocean Bay Hotel, this venue offers lots of themed nights, including karaoke and comedy events. The large, atmospheric rooftop bar recently opened and has live bands playing every Friday night.

- Pirates Bar is the original après dive hangout and is famous for its Long Island Iced Tea.

In Hadaba

- Mojo Pub is a laidback bar with cozy outdoor areas. A popular hangout for Sharmers.

- The Station is a funky café with free wi-fi access.

Late-night clubbing

If you enjoy partying into the small hours and joining the crowds of clubbers and late-night drinkers, then think about these spots:

- El Fanar in Hadaba. Described as one of Sharm’s ‘classiest’ parties. Every Wednesday night.

- Dune at Ocean Bay Hotel in Na’ama Bay. Not a club, but a ‘late night lounge’, apparently. It has its very own pole for dancing.

- Hard Rock Offering late party nights on Sunday, this is particularly popular with Italian tourists.

- Pacha An Ibiza-style club with capacity for 3,000 people. Thursday night House Nation, Friday night Sintilate and Saturday night Ministry of Sound.

- Little Buddha Chillout music is played in the early evenings followed by club tunes and dancing until late. Big party nights are on Monday and Tuesday.

- Caligula A Roman-themed club night takes place at the Savoy Club every Tuesday until 4.00am.
EGYPTIAN shopping

As an English seaside resort souvenirs consist of sticks of rock and ‘kiss me quick’ hats, and Spain has comedy straw donkeys and sombreros, Sharm also offers some interesting tourist keepsakes. Even if these items end up hidden away with the rest of those ‘what were we thinking’ purchases, half the fun of shopping in Sharm is haggling. It’s best to avoid perfume palaces unless you really want to spend hours being talked into buying fragrance. A lot of the perfume palaces have guest books, which give you an idea of the hard-sell techniques employed. One read: ‘Help! I’ve been here five hours – get me out of here!’ If you want to avoid shopping, just a quick ‘No thank you’ suffices when being accosted by a stall owner.

Here’s our pick of the top tourist tat:

• Singing camel

Yes, it’s true! You can even buy a singing toy camel that doubles up as a bag. This camel may look cute, but five minutes of its ear-bruising sounds and you’ll more than likely to want to pull out its stuffing.

• Shisha

A shisha on Camel’s Roof Bar on a warm evening in Sharm is a very cool thing to do, but let’s face it; trying to recreate the atmosphere smoking an elaborate pipe in your living room is not quite the same.

• Belly dancing outfit

Yep, all shapes, colours and sizes. But where on earth would you wear it?

TUMMY trouble

It’s fairly common for non-residents to pick up some kind of stomach bug during a stay in Egypt. The most important thing is to keep well hydrated. Local food is fresh, but it’s good advice to avoid some uncooked food products such as watermelons. Avoid touching food or your mouth after handling money. One instructor told us that UK medication doesn’t work as well as Egyptian because of the different bacteria exposure.

Chemists

The chemists in Old Sharm are generally less expensive than those in Naama Bay: however, Marina Pharmacy in Shamandora Mall next to McDonalds on King of Bahrain Street is good value if you can’t get out of town.

Hyperbaric treatment

The first chamber introduced to the area was 32 years ago and could only fit one person at a time. Now there are two multi-person chambers operating at the Sharm Hyperbaric Medical Centre and the international hospital. Dr Adel Taher, the Sharm Hyperbaric Medical Centre director, is planning to open a new 12-person chamber later this year.

Ear, nose and throat doctor

Hilton Waterfalls Hotel Dental Sharm Dental Clinic in Naama Bay in Mall 8.
With the number of non-diving tourists increasing, as well as the number of families holidaying in this part of the world, the number of on-the-surface activities has grown. From desert star gazing to whizzing down the water chutes at Aqua Park, there’s a lot to keep you occupied when not diving. Always make sure that your travel insurance covers you for such pursuits. Here are a few ideas:

- One or two-day trips to one of the world’s oldest monasteries St Catherine’s, and to Mount Sinai.
- Quad biking: in the desert or behind the Oasis hotel near Sonesta Club
- Short trips to Cairo and Luxor by plane.
- Horse-riding trips organised by Concorde Hotel and Sofitel.
- Desert excursions, including camel rides and Bedouin dinners.
- Ocean Club is now offering a night’s star gazing with telescopes in the desert.
- Ras Mohammed National Park by land.
- Pharonic Aquapark behind Rosetta Hotel in Naama Bay.
- Bungee and paintball at the Sinai Extreme Park, near the Hyatt Hotel.