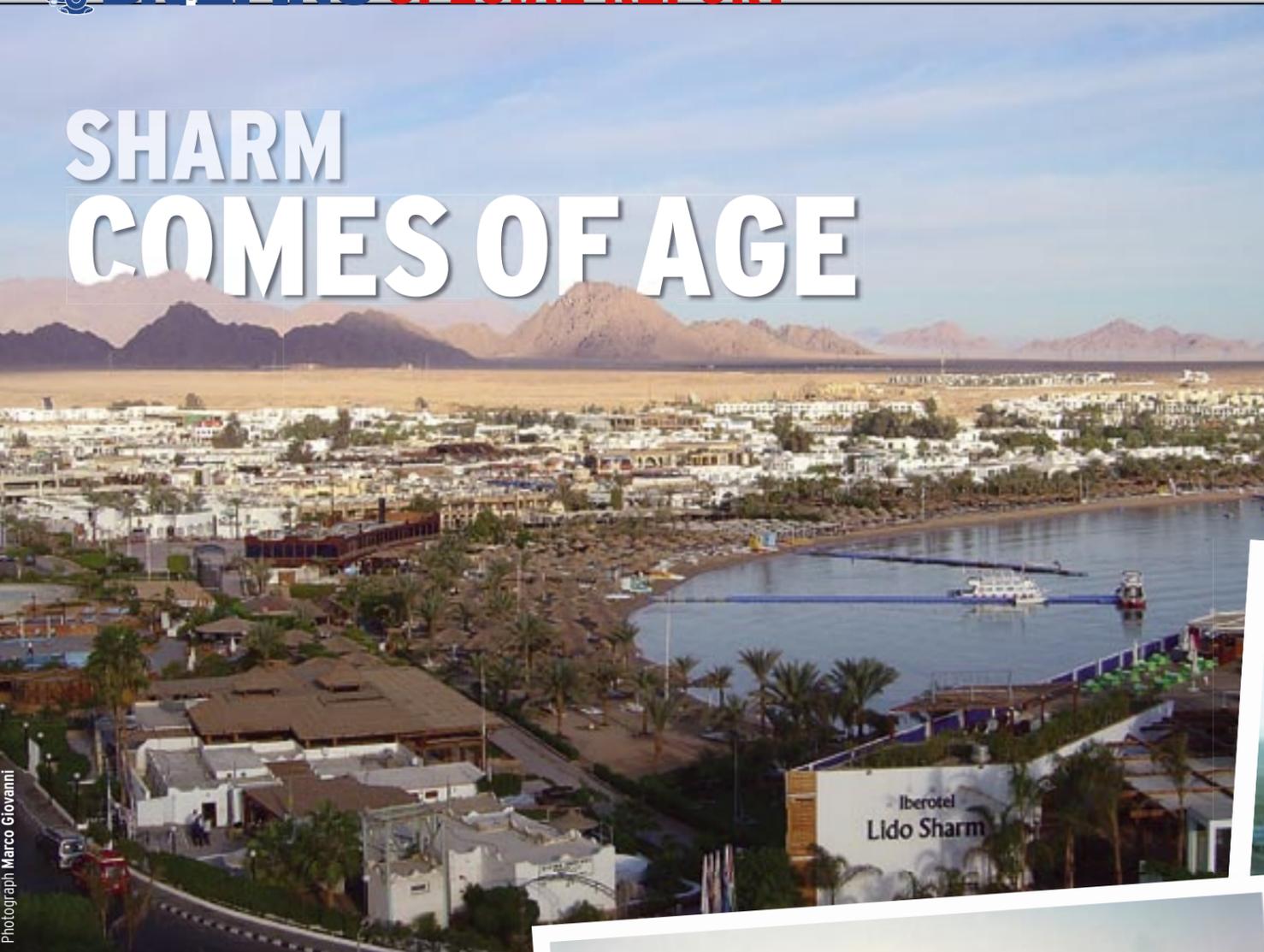


SHARM COMES OF AGE

Photograph Marco Giovannini



2



1

Sharm El Sheikh's longest-established dive centres have been celebrating anniversaries this year, marking more than two decades of diving in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. **Charlotte Boan** reports

A FEW decades ago, Sharm El Sheikh, the northern Egyptian Red Sea resort on the tip of the Sinai Peninsula, was little more than a stretch of sand, scattered with a handful of rudimentary buildings with a populace made up of fishermen, adventurous dive travellers and camels.

A diving trip in the early days was a real adventure. Divers faced a long trek through the desert to set up camp at the beach to go for a shore dive. Diving kit was hard to come by, as were basic food items.

Twenty-five years of development later, and there are now more than 400 modern dive boats operating out of Sharm's two main marinas, offering access to all the best dive sites of the northern Egyptian Red Sea. On land, you can experience fine dining in cosmopolitan restaurants, party throughout the night in the many clubs and bars, or get away from it all in the luxury of one of Sharm El Sheikh's many five-star hotel resorts.

Although it is no longer the domain of only divers (today we only make up ten per cent of visitors), the resort was built on a foundation of diving and the hard-work ethic of early Red Sea diving pioneers.

The Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt after 15 years

of Israeli occupation in 1982 – the country's government was keen to expand the tourism in the area, which at the time was being driven by diving. Plots of land were being acquired and dive centres, although basic, began to take shape.

Hesham Gabr, owner and

founder of one of Sharm's most established dive centres, Camel Dive Club, first came to the area at the age of 22 while studying at the University of Cairo. Bored with city life, Hesham was determined to carve a life in diving after spending time underwater at Marsa Alam in the late Seventies. After a friend suggested he explore underwater Sinai, he didn't look back. He swapped his degree from psychology to anthropology to allow him to spend as much time as possible in Sharm El Sheikh. He purchased a plot

with the outside world.' Camel Dive Club consisted of a one-storey stone building as a dive centre and straw huts as hotel accommodation when it was first established in December 1986. As the reputation of dive sites such as Ras Mohammed grew, so did the number of visiting divers. The late Eighties saw the introduction of charter flights from Europe to Sharm El Sheikh and the numbers of visiting divers increased. Camel Dive Club was welcoming up to 80 divers a day at its centre.

'The land was too big for just

major diving agencies, including technical diving. To deal with the increase of new divers, combined with the expansion of hotels and resorts, Hesham's business now has six satellite centres at hotels to the north and south of Na'ama Bay.



'We didn't have a phone line. I used to send messengers out to communicate with the outside world'

Camel Dive Club plans to mark its 20th birthday in style at its party on 7 December this year.

Red Sea Diving College, celebrated its 15th birthday this year. Its manager

Guy Haywood, 47, arrived in Sharm El Sheikh two years before the college was set up in 1989.

'When I arrived there were only two, possibly three hotels, but there was lots of building going on,' recalls Haywood. 'It was a real Wild West frontier town. Everyone knew everyone. The only bar in town was the Inter Galactic pub, where the bus stop outside Pasha now stands.'

Guy spent his first six months living in both a tent and a breezeblock shelter with a rug as a

front door, before moving into a shared apartment. He recalls how limited the food was.

'We lived on a diet of fresh fish and tins of tuna, but there would be a rush if rumour spread about any goodies in the shop,' he says. 'It was quite normal to hear someone say: 'Get down the shop, they've got eggs!'

When the Red Sea Diving College started in 1991, Haywood said it was a mission for everyone to get in and out of the jetty by jeep. 'Today's jetty is much better than it was,' he explains. 'You could only get

two boats at a time on the old one. Everyone would drive on a dirt track to get there, but if you messed up and got stuck in the sand, you blocked everything and nobody was going anywhere.'

Although he says that the increased development in Sharm

has its downsides, such as overcrowding, he believes the diving is still as good as it was when he first arrived.

'There's good and bad, but you can't go through life talking about the good old days, you need to accept change and adapt to it. This is my and my family's home – I could never see myself leaving here.'

Another 20-something Sharm veteran marked its 20th anniversary last year. Set up by Dutch diving pioneer Faisal Eiwess in 1985, Oonas Dive Club has worked over the last two decades to nurture a loyal customer base, preferring to leave expansion and diversification to the larger centres. The centre currently runs four dayboats from Sharm, accommodating on average 20–50 divers a day.

'So much has changed here in the last 21 years, but we made the decision to stay small and offer a more personal approach,' said Oonas Dive Club manager Darren Strachan, who is originally from Scotland. 'About 70 per cent of our guests are return visitors. Sharm has changed a lot over the years, but you can't complain – it's horses for courses, nothing stays the same forever.' ■

CONTACTS

CAMEL DIVE CLUB:
www.cameldive.com

RED SEA DIVING COLLEGE:
www.redseacollege.com

OONAS DIVE CLUB:
www.oonasdiveclub.com

of land on which he built his dive business, in what is now the centre of Na'ama Bay. In the early days Hesham and his multinational staff of instructors lived in tents behind the centre.

'Most diving at the time was shore diving,' explains Hesham. 'We travelled to sites with jeeps pulling trailers with kit in the back. It was difficult to run the business because we didn't have a phone line. I used to send messengers out to communicate

a diving centre, I wanted to focus on *après* diving,' said Hesham. His vision was to create a place where divers could meet, drink and eat under one roof. In 1997 the Camel Hotel was opened. Today, the four-star hotel stands in place of the original straw-hut accommodation, along with two restaurants, a terrace café, and the two most popular bars in Sharm. The dive centre offers diving with all the

Main photograph (opposite): the bustling resort of Sharm El Sheikh as it is today **1** back in the early Nineties the same scene was considerably less developed **2** most of the diving in the early days took place from the shore, using jeeps with trailers to transport divers and equipment

