Postcards from Shark Reef

It’s probably the most popular scenic dive site out of Sharm El Sheikh, but when’s the best time to go and what can you expect to see? Charlotte Boan finds out.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: speedy giant trevallies patrol the reef in large schools in order to feed and hunt their prey.

GENERAL GIANT: the whale shark is among several species of shark encountered at Ras Mohammed.
LOTEC AT the tip of the Sinai’s golden desert and descending to the deepest channels of the Red Sea, Shark Reef and Yolanda Reef reserve a special place in many logbooks. Shark and Yolanda are the two peaks of a single coral mount, which meet at a saddle in the reef at around 25m and run to the deep blue beyond 800m. The highlight of Ras Mohammed Marine Park near Egypt’s Sharm El Sheikh, Shark and Yolanda was this year voted DIVE readers’ favourite Red Sea dive in an online poll.

What makes this deep current-fuelled site so special is its unpredictability. Countless tales recounted by those who have dived in the right place on the right dive have included stories of dolphins, manta rays and sailfish, as well as oceanic whitetip, blacktip, whale, hammerhead, guitar and even tiger sharks. And while these encounters are far from guaranteed and require a large dose of luck, a dive here always serves up a vibrant display of marine life.

A popular dive for underwater photographers, Shark and Yolanda has featured in winning images in a host of competitions, including the highly prestigious Wildlife Photographer of the Year, Antibes’ World Festival of Underwater Photos and BBC Photographer of the Year.

Shark Reef’s vertical wall is the eastern most part, while Yolanda’s coral garden lies to the west. It is here that the Yolanda, a Cyprian freighter, hit the reef and deposited its cargo in 1980. The wreck now rests at depths of more than 200m, but its famous cargo of toilets and baths remain scattered along the top of the reef at accessible depths of around 10m.

The seasons of Shark and Yolanda bring many scenic changes. The relaxed winter months tend to attract the best visibility and vibrant coral colour. At this time, expect to see lots of blue-spotted stingrays and giant morays, as well as the regulars, such as anthias, jacks, scorpionfish, stonefish and what is perhaps the most photographed...
Napoleon wrasse in the world. Spring – the turtle mating season – sees the big stuff start to move in, with schools of jacks, trevallies, bannerfish and the odd whitetip reef shark cruising the blue.

But it’s the summer months between May and September when the real action happens. At this time, you will find a profusion of life on the reef, from baby clownfish, sweetlips and trevally to different species of pufferfish and angelfish. Meanwhile, in the blue, you will be surrounded by a sprawling mass of schooling fish. Hundreds of batfish, barracuda, red snapper, Bohar snapper, trevallies and rays gather here as if taking part in a ballet of the deep. These schools graciously circle divers who venture a few metres from the reef wall. And it is the summer when divers should keep one eye on the surrounding water, as chances are highest of meeting Shark and Yolanda’s special oceanic visitors.

• Special thanks to Camel Dive Club (www.cameldive.com) for its help with this feature. Check out video clips of Shark Reef at www.divemagazine.co.uk/sharkreef.