Five days in Sharm: Camel Dive

Likeable Red Sea operator offers an upmarket service

Author: Pat
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Jackfish Alley with Camel Dive

The national park dive

Smooth operator Camel offers a full spectrum of facilities to visiting divers.

Chaik-white hotels, bustling restaurants and lively nightclubs: from the promenade at Naama Bay, it's almost hard to imagine this was once a desolate stretch of coastal desert. We're not talking pre-history, either: as recently as the mid-1980s, a forward-thinking Egyptian called Hesham was struck by the beauty of the coral reefs in the South Sinai and founded a diving centre on the beach.

The Camel Dive centre was little more than a shack back then, but today it is one of the most well known operations. Even since those early days Camel’s unique selling point has been the associated bar, restaurant and hotel. In 2012 there are many imitators in Egypt and beyond, but it’s always been the way at Camel.
Camel feels Egyptian

Whilst the European influence permeates throughout the Sinai, Camel feels undeniably Egyptian. Even so the group headed to the boat ‘Wasser’ today includes Rod (Brazilian), Pibi (Italian), Anya (Russian), Amr (Egyptian), and more. In relative terms, it’s a quiet day at the centre with eight staff on leave, presenting the perfect excuse to go diving.

Also here to buddy up is Claire Mucklow, one-time instructor at Camel who takes care of the marketing these days. Warm and friendly, she clearly loves this line of work, even if it feels a long way from her native Isle of Wight. Sharm is a melting pot of cultures: “It’s a small community here,” Claire says, “…with a mix of people passing through: some working the seasons, others settling year-round. It is so diverse, it’s a nice life.”

An army of some 200 employees keep the operation running smoothly during peak times, although all operators talk of reduced tourist numbers since the revolution. At the Camel HQ they’re seemingly all at work, booking divers in, dispensing kit and loading boxes into vans, all centred under Camel’s stylish courtyard area beneath a tarpaulin.

Claire explains that Camel aims to offer an upmarket diving experience that still represents value for money. Divers can book a complete package of hotel (with pool for training and relaxation of course), access to the dive centre and leisure facilities and all their diving. If you’re a lazy sod – and let’s face it, most of us are – it doesn’t get much easier.

Today we’re heading to Ras Mohammed National Park, the world famous headland off Sharm’s southwestern tip. It’s a relief to leave the 40-degree august heat behind, and the mercury drops to more like 35 out at sea. Well, at least you don’t get cold during intervals…

The skipper backs the boat up and drops us in on Shark and Yolanda Reef. It’s a classic site with a reef wall on one side (dependent on current, of which there isn’t much today) and a drop to infinity on the other. Camel staff outnumber guests today by about 2-to-1, and it’s a treat to watch instructors horsing about in their element, clearly filled with glee. Huge schools of big silvery Jacks and Trevally circle above, as do Barracuda. Easiest way to tell if something is coming is to watch the Fusiliers: a sudden dash in one direction will pinpoint the source of a predator. Deep blue swims just don’t happen like this in the UK. It’s ace to be in suspended animation once again.

First dive ends up on the Yolanda plateau, with the wreck as broken up as ever, and the toilets where I last left them. The remnants of the captain’s BMW still lie on top of the metalwork, most of which now lies down at 150-metres or so. A free-swimming Giant Moray saunters away, the animal itself being commonplace but rarely venturing out of holes in the reef.

Ras Mo is Camel’s home turf, and the boat is often found taking guests out here. Trips also run daily to Tiran Island (reefs often populated with large schools of sharks). In common with almost every dive centre in the Red Sea, Camel also caters for wreckheads with trips to the Dunraven and Thistlegorm, amongst others.

Aware of the pressure tourism places on the sea, Camel is keen to be environmentally responsible. The company has one instructor dedicated to this cause and offers reef clean up trips, takes part in monitoring of big species and even has an eco commitment back at base – the pool is solar heated, for example.

After a day of diving, the return to the Camel centre offers a chance to chill with a beer and reflect. Upstairs here, with its roof terrace Shisha pipes, quality fittings and laid back staff the Camel Bar is one of the coolest joints of any holiday destination you’re likely to find. Even so, for the future there are plans to redevelop the bar and restaurant, no doubt building on the success of the past 26 years.

So why should you choose Camel? Claire thinks for a minute: “Because we sell home made ice cream!” Not many dive operators can say that.

The Camel Dive Club, Bar, Restaurant and Hotel is based in Naama Bay, Sharm El Sheikh.
Five Days in Sharm: Camel Dive

Bustling centre is a bona fide dive training academy in Sharm centre

Five Days in Sharm: Werner Lau

Technical courses taught right in the centre of Sharm

Five days in Sharm: Elite Diving

British feel marks out popular Red Sea operator

Five days in Sharm: Sharks Bay Umbi Village

Secluded hamlet shows off the sleepy side of Sharm