

Diving disabled in the Red Sea

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New DH contributor, Vanessa Haarhoff talks about her recent scuba diving holiday to the beautiful Red Sea resort of Sharm El-Sheikh.

I have always wanted to scuba dive, but being paralysed from the shoulders down made me think twice about the logistics. The Red Sea flagged up on the radar as a good place to start because of its amazing blue warm waters and beautiful undersea life, not to mention the much talked about accessible Camel Dive Club based in Na'ama Bay, Sharm el Sheikh. The rumblings of the Arab Spring seemed to have quietened down, so with all this in mind, I trundled off to Egypt with my travel buddy to see if this deep sea business was possible.

As we landed from a cold English July, we were welcomed by a comfortable 42 degrees of the South Sinai Desert. The scenery was rugged but totally beautiful especially when the sun set turned the Sinai Mountains a light camel colour into an array of mauves on my first evening there. The experience was made all the more better from the hotel's rooftop restaurant which supplied wonderful views of mountain and sea, cold Sakara's (tasty local beer), the scent of sheesha smoke drifting through the air and the welcoming hospitality of the Egyptians. I have never been one for the bright lights and glitzy entertainment which litters the streets of Sharm, but somehow I was able to switch off and enjoy the awesome natural surroundings.

Diving began with two instructors the first day in a pool to see whether I could handle breathing underwater, equalizing my ear pressure, clearing my mask from water leakage, inflating and deflating my buoyancy control device (BCD) as well as recovering my respirator if necessary. Sounds daunting, doesn't it? Especially if one has limited ability in one's arms and diminished breathing capacity. Well it was, but the fact that there were two professionals people supporting me every step of the way gave me the confidence to achieve the tasks required to hit the real deep blue sea.

The feeling of freedom and weightless in the turquoise water definitely appealed to me and drove me to do at least eight dives in the seven days that I had booked to stay. Every day the boats would collect an array of keen divers, each of different dive qualifications and abilities and take them to different reefs. The crew were like ducks to water when it came to lifting my wheelchair from land to deck and I could tell they were used to helping divers of all abilities when they had to get me into a dry suit at least twice a day, carry me to the back of the boat, put my oxygen tank on and tog me up for a plunge.

The water takes the breath from your lungs at first and the idea of breathing through your mouth and not your nose is a foreign concept that at first made me panic. The trick was to calm down and go with it.

After getting comfortable in this world, the next thing I knew I was sitting on the floor of the Red Sea and rubbing white coral sand in my face surrounded by an array of tropical fish, the odd sting ray, octopus and a hammerhead. It was an incredible feeling and a far cry from ten years earlier when I had been lying in an intensive care unit on a ventilator after a bad car accident, where the closest I could ever imagine being to this moment, was a poster my father had stuck up on the ceiling of a dolphin in the sea.

Tips for divers, disabled or not in Sharm el Sheikh

How to get there: Most UK airports have airlines (easyJet) 6 hour flight into Sharm el Sheikh

Where to stay and who to dive with: Camel Hotel and Dive Club: www.cameldive.com

Diving equipment: Can be hired through the centre

UK disabled travel advisor: Larnie Ball. www.bridgingthegap-coaching.com

By Vanessa Haarhoff

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