

finning for **THE MASSES**

The Camel Dive Club is still celebrating its 20th year in business at Na'ama Bay – and how things have changed! As the dance beats throb through the night, **John Bantin uses Camel as his base and takes to the day-boats**

SCUBA DIVING IS A YOUNG BUSINESS.

The pioneers of diving in the Red Sea are mostly still around and have all seen a dramatic change in Egypt. Na'ama Bay, for example, the holiday resort near Sharm el Sheikh, was nothing more than a dustbowl with one inauspicious hotel as recently as 25 years ago. It was not in the middle of nowhere – it was at the end of nowhere.

A few intrepid Europeans and Israelis set up very basic diving services, either camping on the shore or with ill-supplied liveaboard boats. Often the customers, who flew to Israel and then made their way the 150 miles or so by Bedouin taxi, brought with them essential supplies that would keep things running for the time they were there – once the parts had been fitted. It was hardship posting.

The best facilities were to be had in the MFO (Military Forces & Observers) base set up to monitor the peace agreement of the Camp David meeting of 1979, which officially ended hostilities between Egypt and Israel. The base is still there, and it occupies a very valuable bit of seafloor real estate. Literally, watch this space!

Hesham Gabr was an equally intrepid young man from Cairo, who came to

Na'ama Bay in 1986 at a time when Egyptians were just as foreign in the Bedouin territory of the Sinai.

He built a little dive camp with an air-filling station in the middle of the desert, to serve those who would shore-dive the sites such as Ras Umm Sid and the Tower and, of course, Ras Mohammed.

He walked barefoot, and the set-up was quite bohemian. Fresh water was shipped in by truck. Hesham was well-educated and became a well-travelled man. Mixing with Europeans, he soon had family in Switzerland, too.

Na'ama Bay has evolved since that time. Today, it is a night-clubbing destination on a par with Ayia Napa, Ibiza and Benidorm.

Never mind the diving, the place is alive all night to the throb of dance beats and the flash of neon lights. Eastern Europeans, and especially young Russians, have discovered the place and come here to have a good time.

Even the departure lounge at the nearby Ras Nasrani airport throbs to ghetto-blasters and the wild screeches of scantily clad young women, constantly fuelled on mugs of neat vodka, making 🍷





Main picture and insert:
A PADI Staff Instructor
helps out on an Instructor
Development Course in
Camel's huge pool.

the most of every last minute of their good time in Egypt.

There seem to be two distinct groups of people taking holidays in Na'ama Bay now. They are either traditional diving vacationers or young people wearing too-tight jeans, too-short tops, and with too much cleavage – and that's only the men!

Hesham told me that whereas some of his contemporaries did not like the changes that were happening around them, and had moved on to pastures new, he had decided to stay with it and evolve with what was rapidly becoming a full-sized town.

Twenty years after he first set up in business, he has a dive centre and hotel, with several restaurants, shops and the famous Camel rooftop bar, occupying a prime part of central Na'ama Bay.

His enterprise employs more than 100 people, and that includes around 35 multilingual dive guides.

Hesham has attempted to provide every feature and service that a visiting diver is likely to demand, so that they have no need to leave the premises when they return from diving. Facilities includes a huge deep swimming pool, where not only do many new divers (from eight years old) first blow bubbles, but from which Instructor Development Courses are regularly run.

Of course, you can simply choose to sunbathe, read a book and be entertained by the passing show. Camel Dive Club also has five other locations in the Sharm el Sheikh area.

Shore-diving around Na'ama Bay is virtually impossible now, because every available bit of shoreline is occupied by bustling resort hotels. The sounds of Italian "animation" echoes where once only the gentle lap of the sea could be heard. Each day, a number of dive boats leave the nearby jetty for local dive sites,



the Straits of Tiran with its four reefs named after Commander Moresby's Victorian cartographers, and the Ras Mohammed National Park.

Na'ama Bay is no longer at the end of nowhere. In fact you could be forgiven for thinking it was now the centre of the universe. It is a full-blown holiday resort with daily flights from all over Europe, including the UK.

A VISITOR IN THOSE EARLY YEARS,

I have since dived most of the dive-sites from liveboards, but I had not stayed on the land and dived by day-boat for a long time. I was intrigued to make comparisons with how it used to be.

The walk to the jetty was onerous when carrying a heavy camera rig, and we had to wait to get official permission to board our boat each day. Blame that on the terrorists.

A lot of boats go out fully loaded with divers. The first thing that struck me was the sheer numbers of day-boats that can now visit one site concurrently.

Though only three are allowed to use a mooring at any one time, I counted 14 vessels moored side by side one day at



Jackson Reef, onboard music blaring.

Some carried snorkellers and poorly swimming sunbathers who entered the water clad in unattractive lifejackets. Some of the passengers were divers.

A conservative estimate of 15 people in the water from each of 14 boats indicates the dimension of the confusion of bodies in the sea. At times there seemed to be more people fluttering their fins than there were anthias.

The wrecks of the *Loullia* and the *Lara* still lie high and dry, although the *Lara* has been extensively salvaged and the *Loullia* was hit and ripped apart by another vessel.

That said, the massive gorgonia fans that bedeck the reefs here are still in perfect condition. Plenty of yellow

Top: Schooling goatfish at Jackson Reef.

Above: Soft corals flourish in the currents at Ras Mohammed.

Below: *Leiloo* squeezed into the boat park in the Straits of Tiran.





Above: The remains of a ship's container at the *Jolande* site. Bottom right: A big brown moray eel seems curiously familiar.

goatfish, escorted by equally bright yellow jacks, hunt in among the swimmers. Big pufferfish loll on the sandy seabed, and the diving seems to be just as good as ever it was.

There were plenty of blue-spotted rays in evidence, and I'm sure the occasional oceanic whitetip shark would be attracted by all the surface splashing from time to time.

At Ras Mohammed the sites are more widely spaced, and unpredictably strong currents also wash the whole area. It was a New Moon when I was there, which made the water rush past even better. This kept the snorkellers at bay (Na'ama Bay!), and spread visiting divers thinly across the area, although I did witness one unfortunate person experiencing an illegal try-dive in these conditions.

RAS MOHAMMED AT SHARK REEF and *Jolande* Reef abuts deep water and so has all the feeling of being an offshore site. The strong currents feed a vibrant growth of colourful soft corals. It's a place where pelagic species are sometimes encountered, too.

The *Jolande* had its bow protruding from the water the first time I dived the wreck. It has since slipped off the reef into extremely deep water.

The containers that spilled from her deck when she collided with the reef have all but disappeared, as have all the wooden crates, but the piles of toilets and baths and general plumbing supplies still bear testimony to that maritime loss of 1982, and many of these are now providing substrate for brightly coloured coral growth.

I noted a hawksbill turtle browsing among the sanitary-ware, and had a very familiar encounter with two friendly Napoleon wrasses, both a male and a female. The two big brown moray eels may well be the same ones I have photographed repeatedly here over the years. This part of Ras Mohammed Marine Park supports my belief that the best dives are tied with strong currents.

Usually, divers enter the water at, say, the steep underwater cliff of the Shark Observatory, swim the gap to Shark Reef and then fight the cross-current of water pouring out from the saddle between that and *Jolande* Reef. The major part of the dive is a wall dive, with the cliff dropping away to something like 800m deep.

It's a good place to encounter a swirling school of barracuda and massed Bohar snappers. By the time most divers have reached the last part of the dive they rarely get a chance to look around this area, other than in the shallows.

We were lucky this time, because the powerful current was flowing in the opposite direction.

We went in each time at the Satellite Reef and drifted down to the *Jolande*

I told a dive guide that I had kissed his girlfriend

wreckage. I had plenty of time to spend photographing the spectacular soft coral arrays to be seen here, and beyond on the 20m shelf of the *Jolande* Reef.

On one occasion, I even took the backwater route in the shallows behind *Jolande* Reef and ducked down into the flow, heading back the other way once I had been washed out across the saddle. It was easy to pick my way between the coral heads, resting in the eddies so formed, though my buddy Ray Sheppard from Camel Divers told me that a video-

equipped guide from another boat made a lot of fuss after being sent racing across the top of my head by the flow, protesting that I was too close to the coral.

It's a pity he assumed I must have been holding on in order to be able to stay there. In fact, using a simple knowledge of water flow over obstructions, I was in my own patch of still water.

Ras Mohammed can be a busy place, too. If you manage to keep still, you will get to meet a lot of divers who rocket by.

Another time, I met a dive-guide with another group who obviously thought she knew me. I thought I knew her too, but when I told another dive-guide on our boat that I had kissed his girlfriend down there, he shocked me by telling me that she wasn't diving that day.

So will the affectionate girl I met at Ras Mohammed in November please reveal her name – or did she think I was someone else, too?

ONCE WE WERE FINISHED THERE, it was simple to ride with everyone else along the side of Shark Reef's wall, and it was a safe place for *Leiloo*, our dive boat, to pick us up once the dive was finished.

Two dives at a distant site, followed by a late-afternoon dive at a local site such as Ras Umm Sid, seems to be the norm for day-boat diving. In the summer, when the days are longer, you might get more time in the water, but remember that many fellow-divers will be keen to get back and change into very different clothes for a long night of clubbing.

It's now diving for the masses, but there are many people who want to do more than dive on holidays abroad. ❏

* *John Bantin travelled at the invitation of Camel Dive Club (www.cameldive.com) and Tony Backhurst Scuba Travel. Camel Dive Club is a PADI 5* Gold Palm IDC Centre and TDI technical diving facility. The Camel Hotel has 30 superior en-suite rooms with wheelchair access. Its Go Diving package, including five days' daily diving, B&B, flights & transfers, costs from £495, www.scuba.co.uk*

