SHARM IS A DIVER'S PARADISE

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By Sunday Express reporter

WE WERE trundling along on a pleasant dive on one of the reefs near Sharm El Sheikh in the Red Sea when the manta glided up from the depths. At nearly three metres, it is a big and wonderful beast, an aquatic stealth bomber that moved effortlessly through the ocean and soon disappeared from view.

The five other divers who made up our small party on a day-boat out of Sharm beamed at each other. Fifteen minutes later another giant swept into view.

This one twisted and turned like an Arabian flying carpet soaring over the reef. Amazing. Five minutes later yet another arrived and seemed to want to hang out with us, tickled by our bubbles as it swept over our heads.

This was a dive to remember. Three mantas in one dive, just five minutes from the main bustling drag of Sharm, which in the past decade has grown into a vast tourist honey-pot full of five-star hotels, bars, mega clubs and packed restaurants.

As we chugged into port, with the now bearable sun slowly dipping, I realised I had been diving around Sharm for more than 20 years. Way back when there were only a couple of hotels behind in the desert.

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The dive centre is the place to come if you want to learn to dive. Sharm certifies more divers than anywhere else in the world.

You can do the full open-water course including classroom lectures, pool dives and open ocean dives in five days or you could do the theory and pool element at your leisure in the UK and just finish off the open-water part in the warm and colourful Red Sea.

The day after the manta encounter, we headed for Ras Mohammed. This headland juts into the Red Sea where it is joined by the Gulf of Aqaba.

The deep swirling currents attract a staggering array of life and the reefs are some of the most beautiful going.

The current was slight, we ventured out into the blue and were surrounded by a school of silver jacks about a metre in size, the light bouncing off their gunmetal sides.

As we returned to the reef we were engulfed by thousands upon thousands of pastel pink and pale blue juvenile parrotfish, which only aggregate for a week each year before maturing and dispersing.

They rushed here and there in a vast synchronised pack as predators feasted on them. Another special dive. Unforgettable.

GETTING THERE

Camel Dive Club & Hotel (dialling from UK 00 20 69 360 0700/cameldive.com) offers seven nights in Sharm El Sheikh from £324pp (two sharing), B&B.

Price includes airport transfers and three days’ guided diving with two dives per day. easyJet (0843 104 5000/easyjet.com) offers return flights to Sharm El Sheikh from Gatwick, Luton and Manchester from £212 return.

Egyptian State Tourist Office: 020 7493 5283/egypt.travel