Great expectations
Holiday like you're in a classic novel

Underwater love
From desert to deep in Egypt

Poker face
Gambling tips for rookies

MISCHA FRAMED
HOW A NORTHERN SNAPPER EXPOSED THE STARS
FROM THE **DESERTE** TO THE **DEEP**
IF YOU CAN’T DECIDE WHETHER YOU WANT SAND UNDERFOOT IN THE DESERT OR UNDER FLIPPER IN THE RED SEA, WHY NOT BE GREEDY AND HAVE BOTH IN SHARM EL SHEIKH?  TEXT HEIDI FULLER-LOVE
Mention Sharm el Sheikh in a crowded bar and the conversation inevitably turns to great-if-you-haggle shopping. But this buzzing resort on the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula has much more to offer. Sharm the Egyptian charmer also boasts some of the best diving in the world.

The Red Sea is the closest tropical sea to Europe, and famous bods that have been spotted diving here include Paris Hilton, Tony Blair, Torchwood star John Barrowman and Coronation Street’s Samia Smith. “Sharm is a diver’s paradise – you’ve got hard and soft coral, manta rays, turtles, moray eels, dolphins, reef and pelagic sharks, and the SS Thistlegorm, a world-famous wreck packed with the rolling stock it was carrying when it was sunk in 1941,” says Ian, one of the Camel Dive Club’s instructors. Ian has the unenviable task of coaching me through the Padi Open Water Diver course that will transform me from a moron in pink flippers to a competent scuba diver in just four days.

I’m such a sprat that I thought we’d strap on flippers and a bottle then dive straight in. Instead we sit in a cool classroom and soak up some vital theory before heading out to flipp about in the Camel Dive Club’s sparkling pool.

The lean-limbed beauties pouting their way through the Bond flicks might have made wetsuits seem glam, but it’s tough to feel sexy in skin-tight rubber when you’ve got a hangover from your night out at Na’ama Bay. Battling with a migraine wrought by Sharm’s equivalent of Sunset Strip, I struggle into my marine-themed bondage gear and get to know my fellow divers. Firm friends by the time we hit the deep end, we flounder together all morning, learning to clear masks, retrieve regulators and make ourselves neutrally buoyant.

Scrambling out of my wetsuit later that day, I join Boston journalist Martha, Jim the Brummie accountant and Matt, the muscled gym teacher from Southsea, pile into a jeep and set off for a two-hour trip into the desert. After a thrilling ride through lunar landscapes dotted with Bedouin encampments, we reach St Catherine’s, the stunning 6th-century monastery where God first spoke to Moses. Parched after our tour of this hallowed...

**TOP TIPS**

- **Take a medical exam before diving**
  You don’t need to be the Muscles From Brussels, but you will need to be reasonably fit.
- **Don’t mess around**
  Diving is perfectly safe if you dive responsibly, but there’s a real risk of serious injury if you play games.
- **Use the regulator to breathe**
  By holding your breath as you ascend/descend you can seriously damage your lungs.
- **Always stay calm**
  Whether it’s moray eels or sharks, there’s plenty of fauna in the Red Sea to spook a novice, so come prepared.

**HOT WINTER DIVE SITES**

- **Larnaca**
  Fine diving off the east coast of Cyprus. The Zenobia is one of the biggest wrecks in the Mediterranean.
- **Almería**
  The natural marine park of Cabo de Gata is a divers’ paradise where winter temperatures rarely fall below 20˚C.

**RED SEA READS**

Packed with colourful pictures, Rik Vercoe’s Sharm el Sheikh Diving Guide (www.travellingdiver.com) gives detailed info about the top sites.
site, we head for the fishing village of Dahab and sip Sakara beers as the sun sets on a gaggle of Bedouins plodding into town on spitting camels.

Occupying an area of granite mountains and sand dunes on a slender peninsula at the southernmost tip of the Sinai, Ras Mohammed National Park was designated a conservation area in 1983. Accessible both by land and sea, this vast nature reserve has dozens of fab diving sites – most of them within easy reach of Sharm el Sheikh. For us novices, however, the spectacular coral wall at Shark Reef, the glassfish-filled Jackfish Alley, and the grey reef sharks, hammerheads and huge Napoleon wrasse of Ras Za’atar will have to wait. Instead, the next afternoon is spent puttering around Na’ama Bay practising all the skills we’ve mastered in confined water.

Plunging into the eerie depths, we practise making controlled emergency ascents without an air supply, retrieving and refastening our weight belts, and get used to the weird feeling of frollocking about on the sea bed.

In Na’ama that night, the two long promenades packed with restaurants tempt us with everything from Thai to Russian food, but Martha wants to “go local”. On the panoramic terrace of Abou El Sid, a local favourite hidden away above the Hard Rock Café, we sup on molokheya soup, a local speciality. “It tastes like creamy spinach mixed with the tiniest, tenderest chunks of chicken,” Martha says.

A light and spicy koshari, made with lentils, rice and chickpeas, comes next, followed by om ali, a sinfully creamy pudding laced with toasted nuts and spices. Puffing on shisha pipes, we sit back like funnel-fed pachas to digest our dinner and admire the views over the Red Sea, which stretches out to the horizon like a magic carpet.

On our last day we head out into the bay for the big one, our first real dive. My heart beats faster as our boat putters us out to Near Garden, a coral-dotted reef scattered across a sandy plateau where thousands of fish come to feed. As we dive deeper and deeper it’s like entering a marine-themed screensaver. The contrast between the arid landscape above the water and the spectacular explosion of life beneath the waves is dazzling, and shoals of striped anemonefish flutter past. There’s so much to look at I’m gawping through my mask like a blowfish – lucky Bond can’t see me now! When I pop up out of the water at the end, Ian tells me that I’ve earned a licence to dive anywhere I like to a depth of 18 metres. The world is my oyster.

GO STAY
Budg-it: at the comfortable Falcon Hills hotel, which has its own onsite diving school and is five minutes (free) shuttle bus from Na’ama Bay (www.falcon-hotels.com).
Blow it: at the Grand Rotana Resort & Spa, a state-of-the-art sleepery set in some tropical gardens overlooking Shark’s Bay (www.rotana.com).

GO DIVE
Novice divers will receive plenty of TLC at the Camel Dive Club (www.cameldive.com). In business since 1986, it’s one of the Red Sea Riviera’s best.

GO PLAY
Need a place to chill out? Head to the -5°C Ice Bar in the Soho Square entertainment centre (www.soho-sharm.com), or skate a few laps around the kiddie-friendly ice rink. Those looking for less literal leisure pursuits can enjoy the centre’s full spectrum of shops, attractions and restaurants, from sushi to steak.