





Licence to dive

On her first underwater adventure, Alison Ledger and three friends sign up for a PADI course that turns out to be an utterly exhilarating experience

➔ Silently, the four of us gathered around the buoy and slipped into the tepid waters of the Red Sea for our first open water dive. My hand clenched the seaweed-covered chain that would guide us to the seabed – a destination that seemed miles deeper than just 10 metres. Not only was I clutching on, but biting my regulator. Yep, I certainly wasn't relaxed. In fact I was quietly petrified.

Echoes of my mum's voice uttering the word claustrophobia drifted through my mind – it was something my gung-ho attitude hadn't contemplated. Now, as I battled to keep a cool head, I understood her worry when I said I'd do a PADI course while in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt.

So there I was, after two days of confined water dives and classroom sessions – I made an excited yet nervous leap off the boat into the open water.

Breathe, Alison, I had to remind myself. I hadn't been breathing. It's amazing how easy it is to forget to do something that is so natural above the surface. Sounds silly I know, but wait until you're there, you will do the same!

The pain increased in my ears as we descended. Equalising the pressure appeared to be a problem only I was experiencing as I watched my friends reach the bottom. Through hand signals I told Ayman, our instructor, that I was struggling. He didn't seem fazed, but then again, after seven years of teaching, I'm sure he was used to first-timers like me.

The pain eased as I inflated my jacket a little, and rose up in the water. Then slowly my ears grew accustomed to the new environment.

Equalisation problems are often psychological and, I confess, I was probably a victim of this.

As I gradually became less focused on my breathing and my equipment, I began to notice everything around me. A blue-spotted ray hid beneath a rock, which is where I would have been if I'd seen the jagged jaws of a moray eel a little sooner.

I felt light years from my world back home. Nemos flitted past (which yes, I had recognised from the Disney movie) and other exotic fish, which yes, I would be able to

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Getting there

BA, Excel, Monarch, Britannia and Thomas Cook operate direct flights to Sharm for around £300. Flying time is approx. five hours.

Getting around

Camel is a five-minute stroll to either of its two beaches, and is in the heart of Na'ama Bay. A short trip by cab into Old Sharm costs about £2, but be sure to haggle.

Accommodation

Alison stayed at Camel Dive Club, where rooms range from £15-£62 per person per night, which includes breakfast, service and taxes. www.cameldive.com

Activities

An Open Water Diver PADI course costs approx £215, although Camel has a selection of special offers where you can stay for seven nights and complete the course for a total of £315. There are a range of try-dives and more advanced courses available. You need to be in reasonable health and fitness, with an ability to swim and feel relaxed in the water.



The minimum age requirement is 10 years.

More information

Take a short trip to Cairo and Luxor by plane, or try quad-biking and horse-riding in the desert. There are also day trips available to Mount Sinai and one of the world's oldest monasteries, St. Catherine's. If you're feeling more active, then visit the water park or try bungee jumping or paintballing. See www.gotoegypt.org, www.sharmguide.com

Pictures (clockwise from top left): Alison learns to use the regulator; Sharm shines by night; first attempt at underwater photography – a moray eel; Alison with the group and the instructor, Ayman.

name if Disney had also made them into cartoon characters. Apparently, we might have glimpsed whale sharks, turtles and mantra rays, too, if we had been diving after March.

Ayman spotted an octopus and gestured us forward. However, the tentacled creature knew better than to stick around for four first-time divers, prone to creating sandstorms as we wobbled and waved about, and not having a clue how to stand with flippers.

In less than thirty minutes, we began to ascend. I was astonished that it took only seconds, and almost embarrassed at my claustrophobia at the beginning, as we had been so close to the surface the entire time. As my head emerged from the water, I pulled off my mask, relieved to breathe normally again, and eager to tell my friends an excited, babbled version of my experience.

The first day of diving was tiring and overwhelming, and after a stroll along Na'ama Bay's streets, compact with restaurants, shops, shisha cafés and Arabian bazaars, the evening ended with a peppermint tea in a Bedouin-style bar along the seafront promenade.

That night we resisted our usual order of G&Ts in Camel's roof bar as we had an early dive the next morning. On this second sea-life safari, we would have to complete the drills we had learned in the pool, such as emergency ascents, mask clearance and surface snorkelling, amongst others.

Fear disappears

With each dive, our confidence grew, and when our fourth and final experience took us 18 metres down, I truly loved every second. This reef was more vibrant in colour than the first one, and as I

sailed over the reef it suddenly dropped away into darkness.

When the air in my tank ran low, I was reluctant to tell Ayman. I wasn't ready to return, I wanted to capture as much sea-life as possible with my underwater camera. Time had passed too quickly.

Later, on the boat, we took our exam and passed. Yet our elation at qualifying was dampened by the realisation that our adventure was over: tomorrow Ayman would be taking another group to the sea.

On our last morning in Sharm, it felt wrong not to be diving. Instead, we hired quad bikes and rode off into the Sahara, creating sandstorms once more, but of a different kind. As enjoyable as this was, the heart rate barely picked up – it simply was never going to come close to the thrill of diving. ●