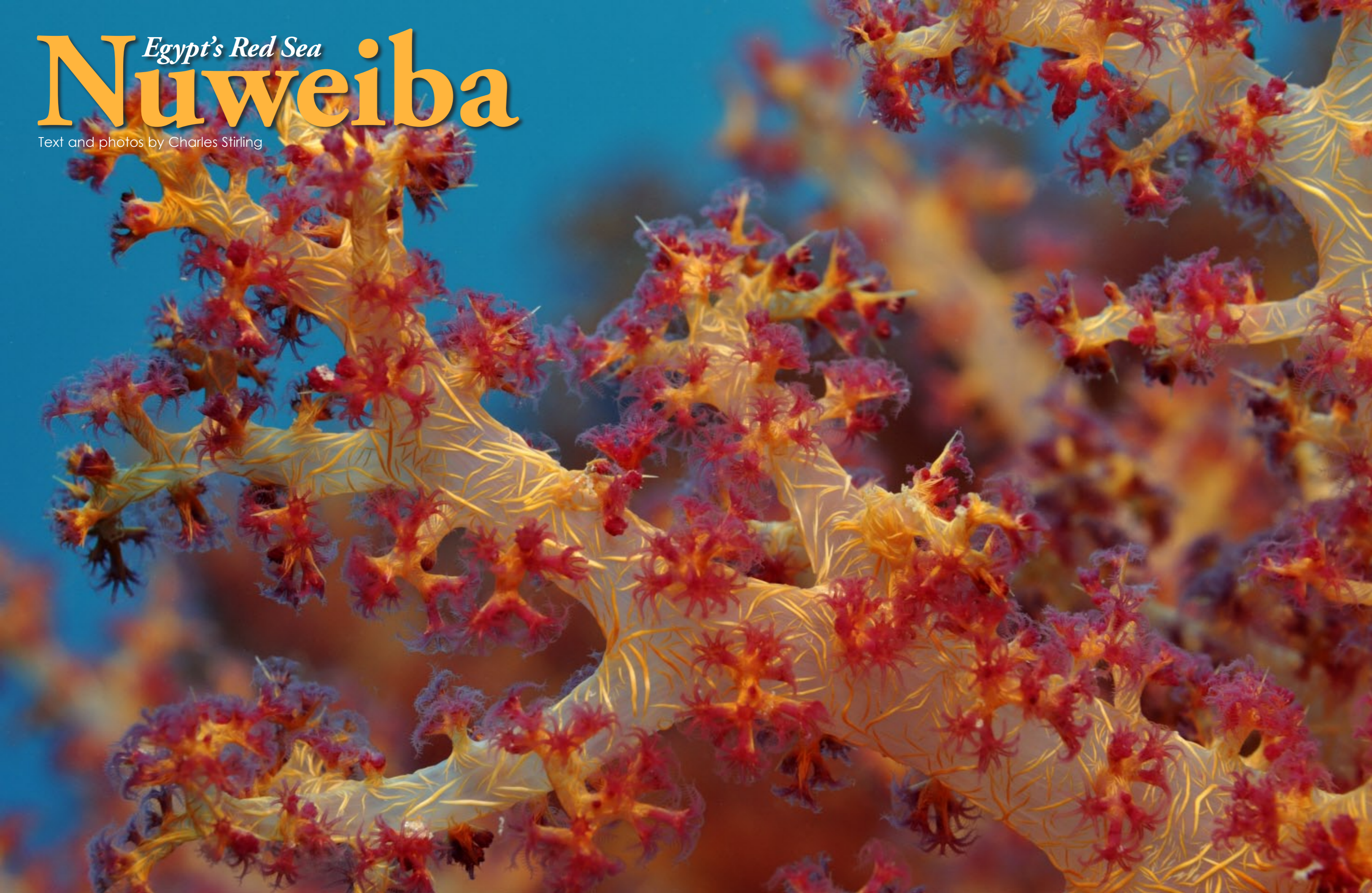


Egypt's Red Sea Nuweiba

Text and photos by Charles Stirling





The Sinkers mooring buoy Nuweiba (left); It can be very relaxing sitting on the beach in Nuweiba (above); Yellowtail tang fish (below)
PREVIOUS PAGE: Polyps of soft coral, *Dendronephthya* sp.

The Red Sea is a fabulous area for diving, so it naturally attracts rather a lot of divers, and under normal circumstances, let's say, "It's busy". Popular locations may have 10, 15, 20 or more dive boats each with 20 or more divers aboard. I've dived pinnacles with maybe a hundred others all circling around in a confused layered fashion. More secluded sites with maybe just those from your own boat often means a liveaboard and lots of cruising. To find seclusion, special locations need to be found. One of these is Nuweiba, up in the Northern Sinai Gulf of Aqaba beyond Sharm el-Sheikh between Dahab and Taba.

Nuweiba is a natural oasis, it spreads over about 40km of gently sloping flood plane surrounded by the majestic Sinai mountains inland and the Gulf. It isn't primarily a tourist centre but has grown due to its ferry port with connections

to Jordan. Much of its coastline has fringing coral barrier reefs with coral gardens, reef walls and pinnacles.

On my visit, the town had three dive centres, each having their own distinct ambiance but all were relaxed, friendly, well run, professional and held safety

highly. Diving predominantly starts from a sandy beach over a gently sloping seabed to the area of interest. One centre, Scuba-College Nuweiba, also runs a dive boat to reasonably near sites. All offer nitrox.

So, what diver would chose this





Pipefish, in sea grass (above); Reef, this one at Sha'Ab Elaria, Nuweiba (right)



location over the many other good options in the Red Sea?

- **Beginners.** With little or no current and easy beach entries, it's an excellent training location. The

occupation in the 1970's both have good marine life associated and are well worth a visit even if they are not in the world's "must do" list.

The Sinkers site is a large, totally submerged mooring buoy, held down by a pair of big heavy growth-covered chains populated by hard and soft corals, shrimps, sponges, anemones and of lots of fish circling.

The Pipeline site has a pair of desalination plant discharge pipes not used in over 30 years, so they are covered in soft and hard corals with numerous species of fish calling the area home. It was a great place to find many tiny pipefish and the occasional torpedo ray on the sand around the pipes with scorpion fish, antheas, fairy basslets, batfish up on the pipes. The end areas of the pipes are used as cleaning stations, so large jacks and snappers visit for the attention of cleaner shrimp and wrasse.

Light metal

For those metal junkies wanting

training can start at entry level right through to technical with shallow sites to some at 100-metre depths nearby.

- Underwater photographers like the wide range of critters and possibility of re-diving sites they can get to know well.
- Divers with non-diving families like it, as swimming and snorkelling are excellent with good beaches, and it has easy access to desert attractions.
- Any diver wanting independent buddy dives in place of guided groups.

It's not the location for extensive nightclubbing, or heavy duty shopping trips, nor the wreck junky.

Heavy metal

No ship wrecks here—instead, The Sinkers and Pipeline sites offer some rusty metal for those who must have it. These two structures, left after the Israeli

man-made artefacts, just off the Scuba-College beach at 6m, is a jeep. Not thought of as anything special by anyone there, but really quite fun. It has a pair of undulated

morays under a wheel, hawkfish swimming over, lionfish in front and numerous other critters. It makes an especially good night dive. The piers at the Hilton and Nuweiba Town also give good



Bluegreen chromis fish, *Chromis viridis*, on *Acropora lamarcki* coral (above); Gray moray eels, *Gymnothorax griseus*, were reasonably common (top left)





Broad-banded pipefish on hard encrusting coral; The Jeep (above)

hard and soft corals are in good condition with all the species generally found in the Red Sea. The wide mix of coral gardens, valleys, pinnacles, ergs and tables with areas of sea grass, rocks and sand, probably gives more diversity than nearly any other single location.

The Scuba-College southern house reef starting at the waters edge and dropping to 40m or more is an example. Up at the shore in less than a metre just the variety of stonefish is phenomenal, red, green, blue. Down at the deeper end various pinnacles intersperse with walls to give great topography. At the Hilton house reef of Abu Lou Lou the whole reef acts as a series of cleaning stations and attracts underwater photographers for multiple trips a year, year after year as the photos from it win so many contests.



Nuweiba

Scalefin anthias (above) on Dendronephthya soft coral; Stargazer fish (left) buried in sand; Stonefish (far left)



backdrops. The Hilton pier showed off lots of needlefish hunting in swarms of smaller fish.

Corals sea beds and sand

What attracts the dedicated diver to Nuweiba is, of course, the abundant marine life associated with reefs. The





LEFT TO RIGHT: Long-arm cleaner shrimp on sea anemone. Excellent macro life here; Diver and anthias on coral head; Thorny seahorse

multitude of other fish and invertebrates.

Dives can be very local, i.e. just a 100-metre walk. House reef diving is good

to great, and can easily occupy a few weeks. Other sites are a few minutes drive, and all three dive centres have this as part of their itinerary along with longer drives down to Ras Mumlah, which is part of the Ras Abu Galum National Protectorate. Ras Mumlah is maybe better known from the long coastal camel trek from Dahab, but it's on the correct side of the mountains for an easier 4X4 journey from Nuweiba. Sites here offer stunning wall dives, beautiful soft and hard corals and technical diving depths.

A difference in ambiance

Sarah, from African Divers Nuweiba, with her well-trained eyes, was invaluable in pointing out frog fish, the sea moths and other unusual critters. This is the advantage of guided dives with a



dive master showing what to see. With Emperor Divers, based out of the Coral Hilton, guided dives are the norm, but independent buddy



Sea moth, or little dragonfish, on sandy seabed

With a sandy beach as the normal entry in Nuweiba, it's worth looking at that sand while swimming out to 'the site'. It can be surprising what might show itself. The thornback cowfish hunting for morsels, the elusive

sea moth, flounder, stargazer, sand dollars, rays, even the mimic octopus, which isn't supposed to be in the Red Sea, may be found. Often next to the sand will be sea grass beds where you might see ghost pipefish, sea horses and a

Male "Panther flounder" on sandy seabed (left)

Nuweiba



which made prepping equipment a pleasure. It also attracts couples with the extra space, along with families, but won't have the range of facilities of the much larger Hilton. Middle priced. The beach in front gently



dives on the house reef may be permitted for experienced divers. With Scuba-College based out of the Nuweiba Village Resort, the emphasis really is on buddy diving even from the boat, but guided dives can be arranged. Their popular night dives are also guided. Here, Petra and Mike both emphasize that what they want to see are divers who trained up to be confident and self sufficient. The above starts to point out those different ambiances offered by dive operators while other aspects come from the associated hotels.

All of the centres will collect divers from any of the local hotels, but it's often easier being at the associated hotel.

African Divers is located adjacent to the Swisscare Nuweiba Resort Hotel, though it also uses other accommodations. The Swisscare rooms were all doubles, and for photographers, the setup was one of the best with desks, lights, chairs

slopes seaward, and for a long way, which makes the swimming excellent but pushes divers to use transport for the drive to their house reef. This in turn emphasizes group diving, but they have free unguided house reef diving with dive packages. The

LEFT TO RIGHT: Yellow boxfish; Gray moray eel and undulated moray; Porcupinefish—yellow spotted burrfish; Loading the boat for a dive at Scuba College



COUNTER-CLOCKWISE: Shore diving; Wall dive; The Sinkers mooring buoy Nuweiba; Technical diving is possible from Nuweiba, this on trip to Ras Abu Gallum

Nuweiba

Swisscare hotel is located on a beach side local road with other smaller hotels midway between the port and town centre, so it's a long walk to either.

Scuba-College is located on the beach of the Nuweiba Village Resort in amongst their beach huts, billed as Diving Camp. The huts are more primitive than hotel rooms and adequate if you are primarily interested in the diving, but couples often decamped to the hotel proper. Inexpensive. For divers it was a





CLOCKWISE: Main restaurant food at Coral Hilton ; Bedouin guide at entrance to Abu Hamata Canyon; Very narrow gorge of Abu Hamata Canyon; Hawksbill Turtle, *Eretmochelys imbricata*

supremely easy walk the few yards to the dive centre to pick up cylinders, kit up and walk the few metres to start a dive whenever you chose. The camp is close to what exists of the town centre allowing a visit with only a 10-15 minute walk. The main hotel has more

facilities than the camp.

Emperor Divers are probably the largest centre here and do the more usual approach of two dives a day organized around a drive to a shore entry site. What attracts underwater photographers will be the concession allowing unescorted house reef dives. The Coral Hilton is the largest hotel in Nuweiba and sits in large grounds with dispersed accommodation units, so it's a few minutes walk

to the dive centre in the main complex, then a cart to transport gear to the beach. The hotel can offer an all inclusive deal with an excellent range of fabulous food in help yourself fashion, children's play areas, pool and particularly attracts couples and families. It's the most expensive. It's located close to the port area of Nuweiba and some distance from the town centre.

Top side excursions

Nuweiba itself doesn't have a lot of tourist attraction, even to the extent of no taxis, no hustling to sell trinkets, and local shops are expecting to sell to locals. It is in a good position relative to the mountains to offer many Bedouin run desert

excursions in the Sinai or day trips to Jordan or Israel. Popular sites to visit are Mount Saint Catherine and Mount Moses with Saint Catherine Monastery a must do for many. For me, I liked the desert landscape and took off on a 4x4 trip out to more remote areas with fabulous canyons and sleeping on sand dunes under the stars.

The desert trips start on paved

main roads but soon move onto unpaved dirt tracks then cross country using dry river valleys, flood planes, sand dunes, whatever it takes. For larger groups, it may be a few 4x4's travelling together. For mine, it was two of us plus the Bedouin driver and the Bedouin guide with stops to say 'hi' to their families or friends camped out. Then, it was on to Ein Khudra

Nuweiba





Swisscare Nuweiba Resort Hotel (above) with the Sinai mountains as backdrop; Through the desert, Wadi Meghesa (above right)

Oasis, which acts as a hub. This was organized by Sulman Atwa, a local Bedouin friend of Sarah and Daniel of African Divers. Each dive centre and hotel has Bedouin friends to organize trips.

From Ein Khudra Oasis, you could go off on camel treks or eat, sit, relax before going on. I avoided the camel treks—they are hard on the bottom and I've done camels before—so I went on to find a secluded valley for the night

after walking a bit of the White Canyon.

Early next morning, after breakfast and breaking camp, it was off to walk through the little known Abu Hamata canyon with its very tight canyon walls before heading back to Sulman's camp in Tarabeen at the northern end of Nuweiba. A few cups of tea, a good meal and chatting gave a relaxing break in my visit. If you are really adventurous, the guide teaches camel care and riding for that real trip.

Nuweiba is great; it's just not for everyone. Avoid it, if you are the type who wants lots of discos, shopping and crowds. For any diver interested in marine life, I would put it high on my list. For others, it can be a good place to relax and unwind.

Charles Stirling is a dive writer and underwater photographer based in the United Kingdom. ■



LEFT TO RIGHT: Shops in the centre of town; In Nuweiba, it's possible just to relax with your feet up; African Divers Nuweiba dive centre on the beach; A few shops cater for tourists, this one sells carpets (above left); Camping out (above right)