

Text and photos by Lawson Wood

Soma Bay

Diving the Egyptian Red Sea





Diver with anthias and soft corals on reef in Soma Bay. PREVIOUS PAGE: Giant clam and hard corals on the wreck of the MV *Salem Express* in the Red Sea



Kite surfers in Soma Bay, with sandy beaches and panoramic views of desert mountains (above); Dusky sweepers or hatchetfish with sea fans (right)

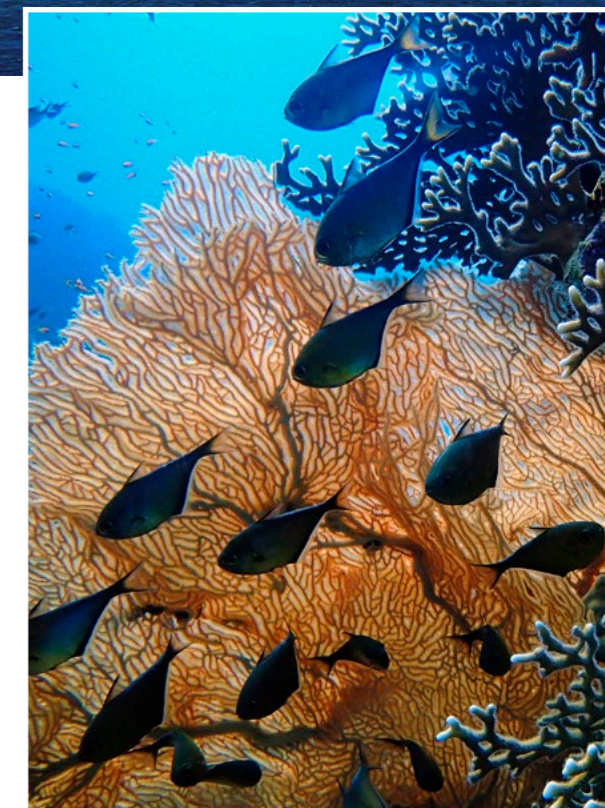
I first visited the Red Sea as part of a marine biological expedition with Dr Paul Cragg back in 1973. After having run safaris out of Israel and ending up living there for several years working on the legendary liveaboard dive boats *Lady Jenny III* and *Lady Jenny V*, my love for the Red Sea has never diminished. Now, some 45 years later, a return trip to the Red Sea was increasing my heartbeat in anticipation.

That first frisson of excitement came at 20,000ft when the plane taking my wife and me to the region started to descend, flying over the Red Sea Mountains of Upper Egypt, and I could see the shores of the Red Sea

beckoning. The route of the Thomas Cook Airbus to Hurghada took us directly over Ras Abu Soma, the destination of our dive resort. Hurghada Airport is big and efficient, and well used to large numbers of tourists. Visa payment, customs and luggage collection is straightforward, and the various resorts, travel companies and dive businesses all have representatives waiting at the gate to collect you. Do not be put off by their rather aggressive stances in trying to nab your custom; just make sure that your transport is ready and waiting for you in advance.

Dive resort and operator

Our hotel for the week was The Breakers Diving & Surfing Lodge at Soma Bay, the only dedicated diving and kite surfing resort in the Middle East. The Breakers has over 170 staff (mainly Egyptian), and food served here inevitably has the Egyptian slant of flavours, but there were plenty of other



dishes too, including Asian cuisine, fried fish and burgers. There were also a couple of bars and roof-top areas for chilling and après dive chatter.

The Breakers' two large dive boats were used for half and full days of diving. The dive boats each had a large saloon, in which divers could hang



Reef diving at Safaga (above); The dive centre has diving and underwater camera equipment stations right on the beach (right).



The author off to plumb the Red Sea depths (above); Windsurfing in Soma Bay (right)

out, check cameras and enjoy a buffet lunch when on a full day out. Dive sites were around a 30- to 90-minute ride from the marina, and a full dive briefing was always provided whether one was diving independently or with a guide. For those who have done some of these dives before, it is always a good idea to listen in, as there are always seasonal vagaries of the critters one can find here.

The diving part of the resort is owned and operated by Orca Dive Clubs, which has several resorts in Egypt as well as in Mauritius, Flores, Bali and Sardinia. With the latest equipment, multilingual staff and a great house reef opposite the dive centre, what more could one ask for? Large dive boats to explore the offshore reefs and wrecks? Oh,

yes, they have those too.

All levels of divers are catered for, from beginner snorkellers and try-divers all the way to mixed-gas and rebreather divers. Many come to increase their diving or training skills, and for underwater photographers like myself, it is the perfect base for exploring the northern Red Sea reefs off the African mainland.

Diving

Over 100km north of Marsa Alam, a number of the dive sites between Sharm el-Sheikh and Marsa Alam were really only accessible by liveaboard dive boats. Nowadays, Panorama Reef, the wreck of the *Salem Express*, and a number of other dive sites around Safaga and the Soma Bay headland, are easily reached. These dive sites



were the focus for our trip.

Once the dive shop paperwork was completed, there was a week's chart on the wall for us to consider, listing full- or half-day dive boats, RIB dives and space to plan our shore diving off the house reef. We just had to put our names down for whatever boat trip we wanted, and always made sure to remove our names if we changed our minds.

The house reef was reached along a 420m pier with two platforms and plenty of ladders to aid entry and exit. Transport was provided by converted electric golf carts, which could transport you, your buddy and all your dive gear and camera equipment. This style of diving, of course, allows you and your buddy to spend extended time



in the water.

The following is just a small example of the superb diving to be found along this stretch of coastline, far from the maddening crowd. ■

LODGING

Located about 45 minutes' drive south of Hurghada Airport, Soma Bay is the name of the entire headland resort area. There are currently five major hotels here, with plans for more. These include The Breakers Dive & Surf Lodge, Robinson Club (which is German owned and operated, and a bit like a family "Club Med"), Sheraton, Westin, and Kempinski. Each resort has an entirely different look, layout and feel, but our host for the week was the superb Breakers, the dedicated diving and kite surfing resort. You should note, however, that the Westin in Soma Bay has one of the largest spas in the world, with an amazing saltwater hydrotherapy pool—it's like something out of an ancient Byzantine palace. ■





Endemic Red Sea or twoband anemonefish (left); Arabian Picasso triggerfish with bluestreak cleaner wrasse (right)



Jewel fairy basslet or sea goldie

The House Reef. By far, this was probably the most-dived site, and there were countless "ferry" trips up and down the pier every day, transporting divers and their gear. Most notable at this site were those early-morning dives and early-evening dives when the juxtaposition of daytime critters and nighttime denizens shared the reef. Cleaning stations were doing a roaring trade, and both predators and prey lined up to be cleaned of parasites with no thought of "breaking the rules." Dolphins came into the pier area too and were seen regularly.

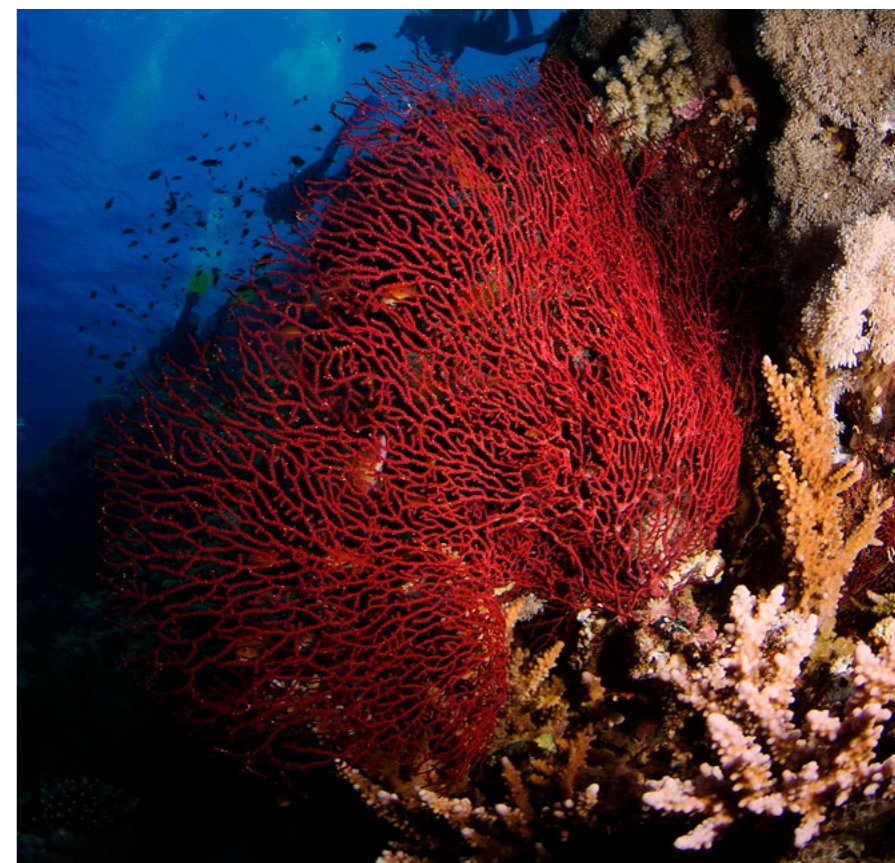
Predominated by small hard corals, this was a steeply sloping reef that descended to around 18m (60ft) before dropping steeply and even vertically in

many places. The more vertical sections had large black coral trees, which hid small schools of glassfish and hatchetfish. Curiously, there were many large bigeye snapper out in the open, when they are usually well secreted away under overhangs. There were a few huge stonefish on this reef, one hiding under the sand, but the other was so well overgrown with algae that it was virtually "invisible" amidst the corals and algae beds. Small mushroom corals littered the reef and there were some huge sections of lettuce coral.

The ubiquitous anemonefish, or clownfish, dotted around large anemones. As we moved to the north, towards the headland and opposite the light-house, we found the same type

of anemone, which fluoresces red underwater, yet only shows green with normal white light flash. Once you get to the 30m (100ft) range, you will find the lyretail angelfish (*Genicanthus caudovittatus*). With the male and female sporting completely different colours, the lyretail angelfish feed on planktonic critters in open water near the reef. Dolphins are seen very regularly here as well as large barracuda and schools of trevally and other large open-water fish, so always keep casting your eye out into the blue.

Panorama Reef. I first dived Panorama Reef back in 1985 while working on the *Lady Jenny V*. Principally here to seek shelter for the boat one night, we found



Large sea fan



Soma Bay

Endemic Fridman's dottyback, *Pseudochromis fridmani* (above); Endemic Abudjubbe's wrasse, *Cheilinus abudjubbe* (left)



Endemic Redback butterflyfish (*Chaetodon paucifasciatus*)

that this large circular reef, with its two shallow platforms, was so good that we stayed the next day too and explored all around the reef as the sun moved around and illuminated the soft coral gardens and gorgonian forests.

Over 33 years later, I set off from the Soma Bay Marina on a full-day excursion to this reef and I had mixed emotions as my buddy Waleed and I dived the wall and east platform in the morning. This reef so reminded me of Jackson Reef up in the Straits of Tiran with its soft corals teeming with orange anthias and staggering amounts of angelfish and butterflyfish.

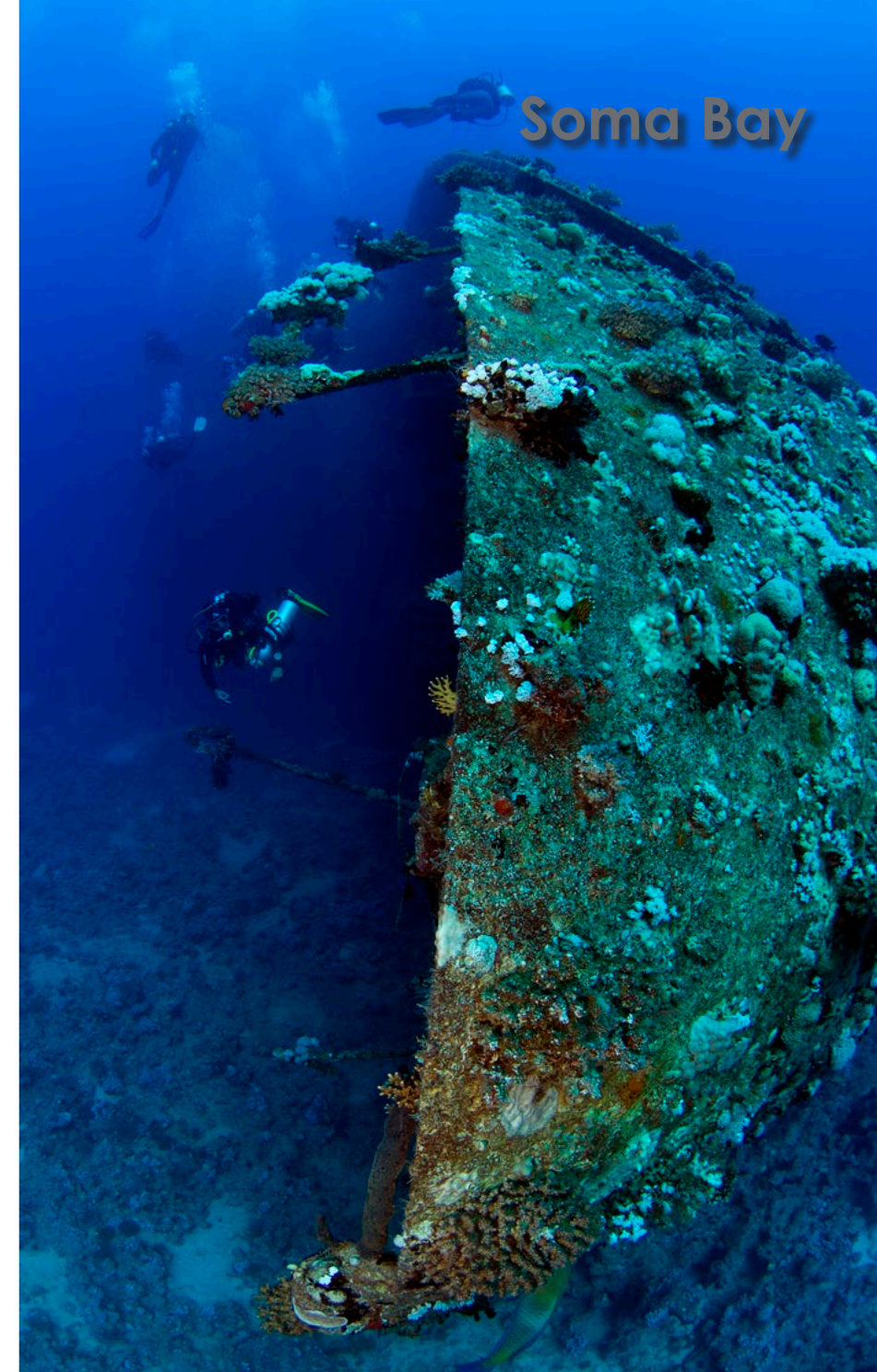
We were on the sheltered side of the reef, away from the current, so there were much fewer sea

fans here than we found later on our second dive in the afternoon, which was a drift dive on the western plateau. I forgot how strong the current was. Skimming over and around the huge stands of gorgonian sea fans that stretched out into the current was fun, but it was difficult to stop and take photographs.

As we approached the bottom corner of the reef, the current virtually stopped, and there were huge numbers of glassfish, lionfish, crocodilefish and all the usual suspects that one would normally find on a Red Sea reef. Panorama Reef also had a large anemone garden with dozens of large anemones, huge numbers of clownfish as well as hundreds of threespot dascyllus (*Dascyllus trimaculatus*).

Gabir Soraya. Only 30 minutes from the marina, this shallow reef comprised a large elongated reef with several small satellite coral ergs, or coral heads, to the south. At only 15m (50ft) maximum depth, the central sandy plain had a small group of garden eels. The narrow passages between the coral heads had small red sea fans and plenty of fire coral as usual, but the schools of butterflyfish and angelfish were a surprise as these fish are normally only found singularly or in pairs.

Sha'b Shear. This rather blind reef was also just a short boat ride from the marina. The dive boat anchored in a coral amphitheatre with large coral outcrops all of the way around, interspaced with narrow



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THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the MV *Salem Express* built in 1964, which sank in the Red Sea in 1991. Over 470 people lost their lives in the shipwreck, which occurred during a massive storm.



canyons filled with anthias and chromis. There were numerous bits of wreckage around these reefs, including a small unknown ferry in this location that was well

broken up (rumour has it that this was an insurance job—like so many others). One of the coral heads had a circular tunnel that ran through the reef from the seabed, rising to around 5m. On exiting, we found a large school of yellowtail barracuda (*Sphyraena flavicauda*) and numerous groups of sweetlips, butterflyfish and angelfish. This part of Soma Bay was littered with small coral heads, which stretched in a

huge arc to the north and south. It was these shallow coral heads that became almost invisible to shipping late in the afternoon when the sea was calm and the sun was low.

Tobia Soraya. Around a 30-minute boat trip from the marina, this reef was really a group of small coral heads that were randomly spaced out on a 15m (50ft) sand sea bed. After a lengthy swim around the outside of the reef, our guide Waleed brought us to a coral head that was simply covered in gorgonian sea fans and filled with longnose hawkfish (*Oxycirrhites typus*), glassy sweepers, hatchetfish and hundreds of cardinalfish. There was also a huge stellate pufferfish (*Arothron stellatus*),

which was apparently resident on this reef.

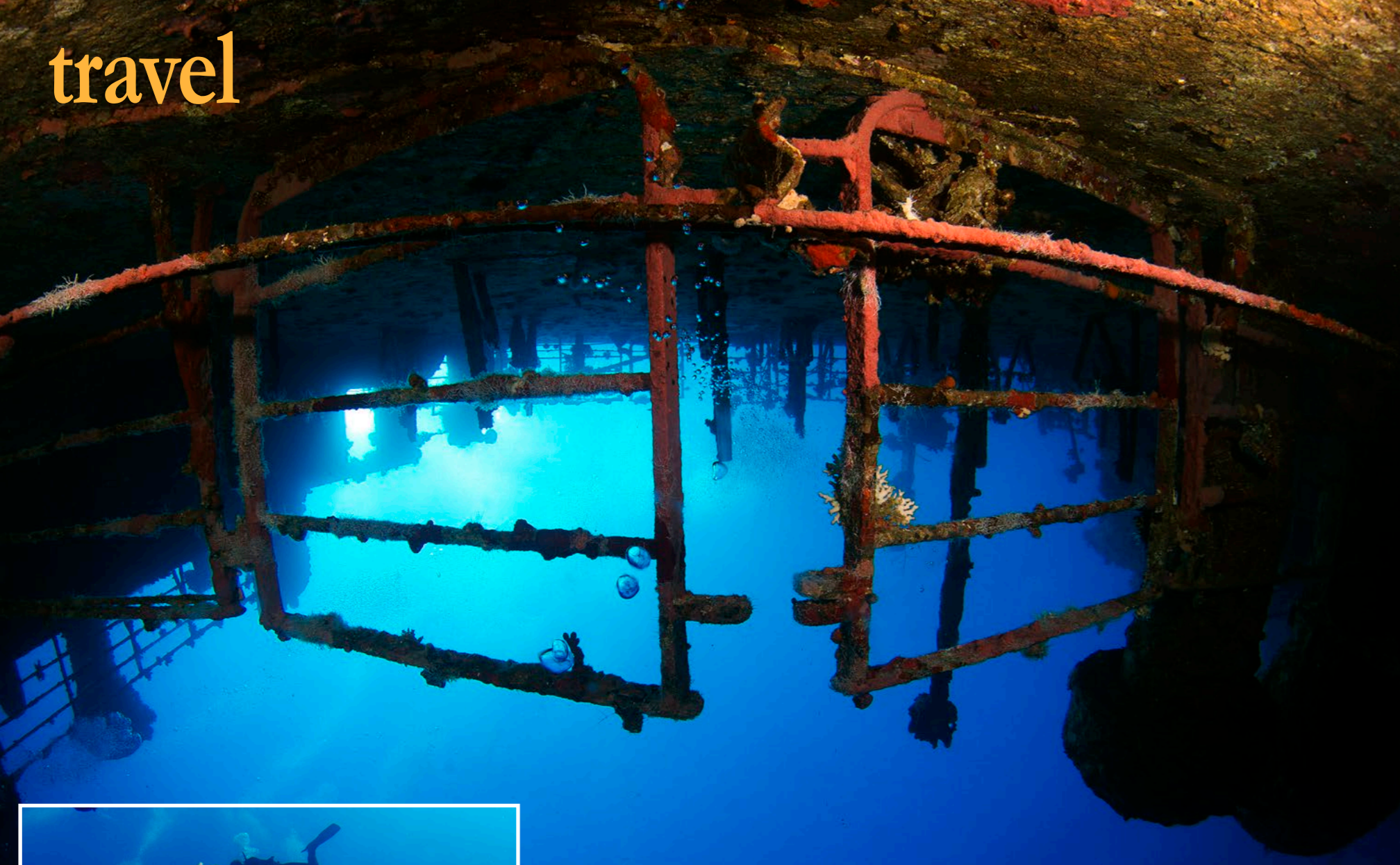
Salem Express. Built in the French shipyards of La Seyne-sur-Mer in 1964, this Ro-Ro ferry was on her way back from Jeddah to Safaga, overloaded with passengers who had been on a pilgrimage to Mecca on 17 December 1991. A massive storm had blown up and at gale force, the ship struck Hyndman Reef where she was holed and quickly sank in the early hours of the morning. Official records state that 470 persons lost their lives, but locally it is widely known that many more were lost as the ship was grossly overcrowded.

Now lying on her starboard side in 30m

(100ft) of water, the *Salem Express* is completely encrusted in small hard corals. All of vessel's parts are accessible for those who wish to explore the ship's interior.

When I first dived the *Salem Express* 25 years ago, two of her lifeboats were on the seabed. Apparently, one has been removed since then, as there was now only one to be seen. Her stern door was now lying on the seabed, creating a huge square opening where divers were able to explore much of the vehicle deck. Both her propellers were intact and made for a superb photographic back-





CURRENCY AND EXCHANGE RATES

With regards to currency, US\$, GB£ and Euros are all accepted, but check the prices of the Visas against the exchange rates. Currently, Visas are US\$20, but if you pay in GB£, they will charge you GB£20. So, try and bring the correct currency, or better still, bring Euros, as most visitors to the resort are German, Swiss or Austrian, with visitors from the United Kingdom being fourth down the list.

Most people opt to pay all accounts on a credit or debit card, but again, currencies may be exchanged a couple of times, adding costs to your final bill. Using American Express, currency will be in Egyptian Pounds, which will again be changed to your home currency. When using credit cards, the transaction may start out in your local currency, but then may be changed into Egyptian Pounds before being converted back to your local currency. Confused? The current exchange rate is pretty poor, so do not buy Egyptian Pounds at home before you go on holiday. ■

Scenes from the wreck of the *Salem Express* (above and top right); Dusky sweeper (*Pempheris adusta*) or hatchetfish on sea fan (right); Divers over reef with anemonefish on anemone (left)

drop as they are covered in small corals and brilliant red encrusting sponge. The ship's funnels had a large "S" on them, but this was getting harder to see due to the corals encrusting the emblem. The ship's bridge was fairly open, and all of the windows were now gone, but her parts were still visible inside.

Her empty davits and railings all hung out into open water, and the seabed was littered with debris, including some children's toys—just another reminder of that terrible tragedy.

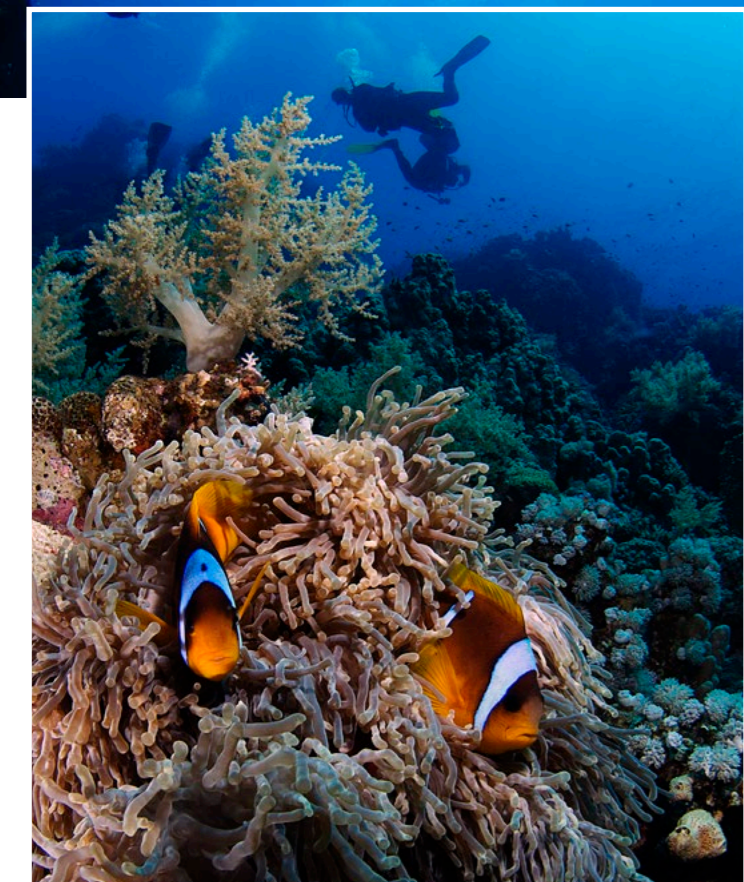
There is still a large amount of controversy about whether divers should be permitted to dive the wreck. The Egyptian Government is still considering whether to ban all diving on the *Salem*

Express. But after such an extended period of time, it hardly seems worth the effort. Rather, divers should be given the option as to whether to dive the ship or not—out of respect for the dead, religious beliefs or just not wanting to be there. Whatever the outcome in the future, diving this wreck should be done with the greatest respect. Divers must not touch anything or disturb any of the remains.

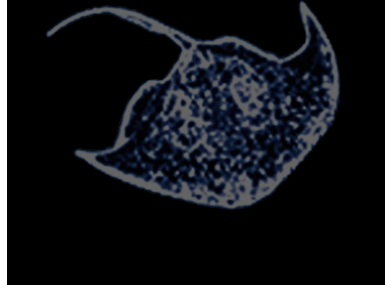
Having run safaris here—living, working and visiting the area innumerable times—visiting the Red Sea always holds a sense of nostalgia for me, and indeed, I often think of it as coming home. Coincidentally, the strapline on The Breakers Diving & Surfing Lodge website is also "Welcome

Home." These Safaga reefs should not be overlooked when considering or planning a Red Sea diving trip. ■

Lawson and Lesley Wood were supported by the Egyptian Tourism Authority; Dan Lion of Holiday Designers; Anna Hollingworth and Harriet Shearer of The Communications Group; Marwa Kachmar from Somabay; Wolfgang Jocham and Waleed Abd Elmaksoud from Orca Diving; and Stephan Reichl from The Breakers Diving & Kite Surfing Lodge. Flights were supplied by Thomas Cook. For more information, please refer to Lawson Wood's book, Underwater Guide to the Red Sea, available at Amazon.com.



fact file



Egypt



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM, STATE.TRAVEL.US, CDC.GOV, CDWC.TRAVEL

History One of the world's great civilisations developed in Egypt, fostered by fertile lands and regularity of the annual Nile River flood, as well as the relative isolation found between the deserts to the east and west. Around 3200 B.C., a unified kingdom evolved, followed by ruling dynasties reigning in Egypt for the next 3,000 years. In 341 B.C., the Persians conquered the last native dynasty. Then came the Greeks, Romans and Byzantines. It was the Arabs who, in the 7th century, introduced Islam and the Arabic language. They reigned over Egypt for the next 600 years. Then, around 1250, the Mamluks, a local military caste, took control and continued to govern after the Ottoman Turks conquered Egypt in 1517. In 1869, Egypt became an important world transportation hub after the Suez Canal was completed, but also accrued a lot of debt. In order to protect its investments, Britain took control of Egypt's government in 1882. However, allegiance to the Ottoman Empire continued, in name only, until 1914. Egypt was partially independent from the United Kingdom by 1922, and in 1952 the country got full sovereignty after the overthrow of the British-backed monarchy. In 1971, the completion of the Aswan High Dam and the creation of Lake Nasser altered the long-held role of the Nile River in the ecology and agriculture of the

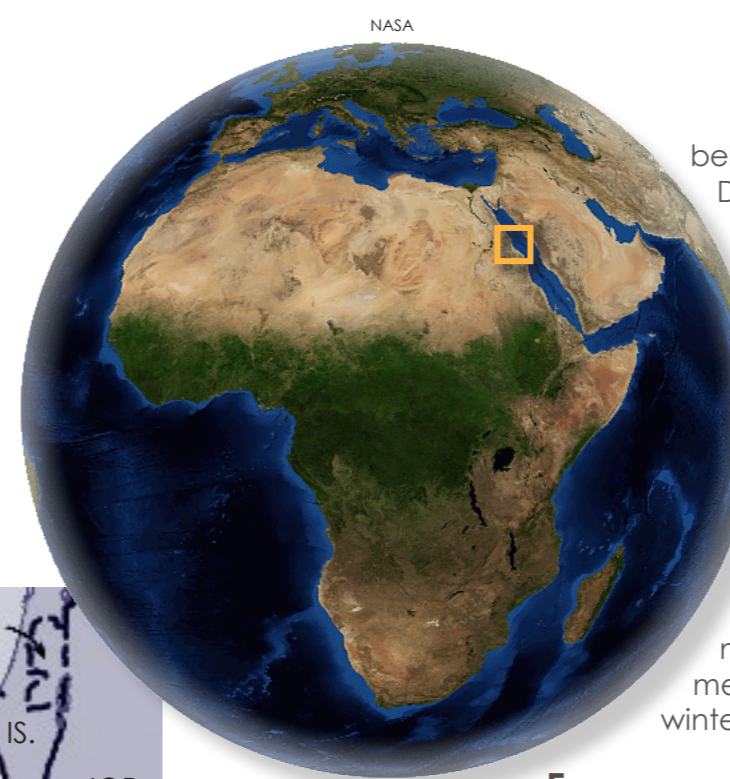
country. Resources were overtaxed and society stressed as the population experienced rapid growth. In addition, there was limited arable land and continued dependence on the Nile. In order to face these challenges, the government implemented economic reform and major increases in investment in physical and communications infrastructure.

The Tunisian revolution in 2010 inspired demonstrations and labour strikes in Egypt, leading to the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. National leadership was assumed by the military until 2012 when a new parliament was put in place. Mohamed Morsi was elected president that same year, but violent protests against his government and the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 led to the military intervening again, removing Morsi from power, who was then replaced by interim president Adly Mansour. In a referendum, a new constitution was approved by the voters in 2014, and Abdelfattah el-Sisi was

elected president. He was re-elected in 2018. In 2015, a new parliament was elected, the first since 2012. A national referendum in 2019 led to constitutional amendments permitting: extension of el-Sisi's term in office through 2024, with a possible third term; two consecutive six-year terms for presidents; presidential power to appoint judicial councils heads, re-establishment of an upper legislative house, one or more vice

in half by the Nile valley and delta, Egypt is primarily a vast desert plateau. Lowest point: Qattara Depression -133m. Highest point: Mount Catherine 2,629m. Natural hazards include droughts, earthquakes, flash floods, landslides, dust and sandstorms, as well as hot windstorms occurring in spring. Environmental challenges include urbanisation and wind-blown sands decreasing agricultural lands; increased soil salination

RIGHT: Location of Soma Bay on global map
BELOW: Location of Soma Bay on map of Egypt



presidents, 25% of legislators to be female and reestablishing the military's role as guardian of the nation. Government: republic. Capital: Cairo

Geography Egypt is located in Northern Africa. It borders the Red Sea north of Sudan and the Mediterranean Sea, between Libya and the Gaza Strip. It also includes the Asian Sinai Peninsula. Coastline: 2,450km. Terrain: Cut

below Aswan High Dam; desertification; coral reefs, beaches, marine and aquatic habitats threatened by oil pollution, agricultural pesticides, raw sewage and industrial run-off.

Climate Egypt has a desert climate—hot, dry summers with moderate winters

Economy Nile valley is where most economic activity takes place. Highly centralised during the rule of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's economy opened up significantly under former Presidents El-Sadat and Mubarak. From 2004 to 2008, Cairo pursued economic reforms aggressively in order to attract foreign investment and foster GDP growth. However, living conditions for the average Egyptian stayed poor and exacerbated public discontent despite the increase of economic growth in recent years. Unrest took place in January 2011 and the Egyptian government dramatically increased social spending to ease public dissatisfaction. However, economic growth slowed significantly due to political uncertainty, which reduced government revenues. The hardest hit sectors were tourism, manufacturing and construction. Foreign exchange reserves are being used by the government to support the Egyptian pound.

Population 104,124,440 (July 2020 est.) Ethnic groups: 99.7% (2006 est). Religions: Muslim 90%, Christian 10% (2015 est). Internet users: 39,097,468 or 41.3% (2016 est.)

Currency Egyptian pound (EGP). Exchange rates: 1USD=15.80EGP; 1EUR=17.42EGP; 1GBP=20.73EGP; 1AUD=10.56EGP; 1SGD=11.56EGP

Language Arabic (official), English and French

Health & Safety The US State Department has issued an Egypt Travel Warning for US citizens due to threats from terrorist and violent political opposition groups. Please check with your country's state and health departments well in advance of your trip for updates on required vaccinations, health and safety advisories.

There is an intermediate degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A and typhoid fever; vectorborne disease such as Rift Valley fever; and water contact disease such as schistosomiasis. H5N1 avian influenza has been identified in the country but poses low risk to tourists.

Decompression Chambers

SAFAGA
DECO International
Safaga General Hospital
Emergency Tel: (+2) 012 219 0383

HURGHADA
DECO International
El-Gouna Hospital
Emergency Tel: (+2) 065 3850 0118

Hypermed at Hurghada Airport
Emergency Tel: (+2) 010 218 7550

Naval Hyperbaric Medical Center (NHMC) on El Corniche Rd, Sekala
Emergency Tel: (+2) 065 3449 150

Web sites
Egypt Tourism
www.egypt.travel ■