

WHAT INSTRUCTORS DO ON THEIR HOLIDAYS



540 nautical miles, 11 nationalities, five wrecks, four types of shark, 28° water, three square meals a day. A full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it's hot and we're wearing sunglasses! **CATH**

BATES presents six days in the life of a gaggle of Sharm diving instructors, taking a busman's holiday in search of some serious technical diving!

JOHN BANTIN

TALA ISN'T THE PRETTIEST liveboard, but it is certainly the best-equipped when it comes to choosing a vessel for a tec safari.

Red Sea Explorers is owned by Faisal Khalaf, a young Lebanese entrepreneur whose dive-shop is strategically visible from where his 37m liveboard is berthed in Hurghada.

Faisal knows the southern Red Sea extensively; is a phenomenal technical diver; and knows that chaps like us need thrills, spills and fully charged scooters!

My mentor and good friend Leigh Cunningham and rebreather guru Alin Ardelean organised our week, with the aim of seeing as many of the South's prime dive sites as possible from a deeper perspective.

Leigh was also intent on exploring the rarely dived steel steamship *ss Maidan*.

Plotting our itinerary, it was clear that we would be sailing every night. Faisal's crew would develop a vampiric nocturnal existence to ensure that the gas in our rebreather tanks, twin-sets, stages and bail-out bottles would be blended, ready for analysis at sunrise.

AFTER THE EXPECTED first-day gear checks, we sailed for 10 hours from Safaga to Elphinstone. This 450m-long reef has a stepped southern plateau. Beginning at 55m, a 10m-high tunnel connects the eastern and western walls.

Unlike other famous arches such as Dahab's Blue Hole, this one can be captured in a single shot with a wide-angle lens. It's like being under an aquatic footbridge.

The Sarcophagus is a large coffin-shaped rock. Soft corals adorn the top, mimicking wreaths; long, superfluous whips sprout up from the bottom.

A 20-minute bottom time is sufficient if you can drop onto the arch from a boat moored over the plateau on the eastern side. *Tala* was moored on the west side, so scooters were necessary with the day's current.

The boat operates a DIR philosophy of low ENDS [equivalent narcotic depths], so Faisal recommends trimix 21/35 for this dive (he is, however, open to suggestion should you require a specific gas).

On deco the current splits over the plateau, so you will be hard-pressed to get bored. From 15m up, my team was frequented by two oceanic whitetips.

One swam almost vertically to the surface, its pilotfish desperately trying to hang on as if they were going down on the bow of the *Titanic*!

Zabargad is the mother of Rocky Island. These two volcanic islands have claimed ships passing at night because of the dense fog that presents frequently around the mountains.

The *ss Maidan* sits on the outer south-western side of Rocky Island. The top of the wreck is in 80m, the aft at 90m.

The bow hangs over the reef in 115m of blue, blue water. She was returning from Calcutta on the eastern trade route when she went down in June 1923.

I was super-impressed by the support we were given on this, our most complicated dive of the week. The surface team took our plans and co-ordinated the support divers, executing the task as professionally as a behind-the-scenes team on a Moon landing.

The rebreather team dived before breakfast, and in-water support was provided at intervals from 40-6m, every detail scrupulously written on a large whiteboard.

Our open-circuit team had planned a 20-minute bottom time at an average depth of 90m.

We took trimix 12/60 in our back gas, a 12/60 bottom stage, 21/35 deep travel, 50% and O₂ for deco. The dive was executed using 3:1 ratio decompression and Deco Planner software.

What struck me on approach was the sheer size of the rusty beast. The *Maidan* was once 152m long. Even while carrying four 12-litre stages the wreck was easy to penetrate, and its location on a sloping plateau meant food for corals, which adorn the superstructure.

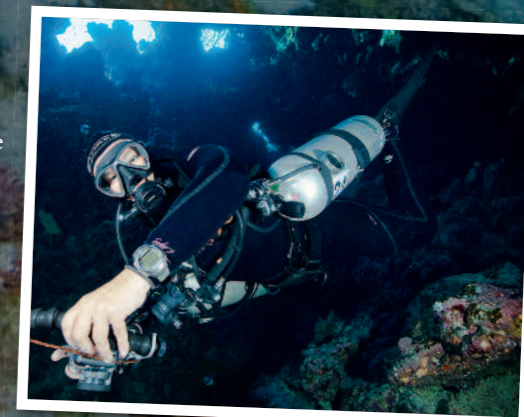
PILOTING SUEX AND DIVE X scooters, we zipped through the crew's quarters (where antelope horns can be seen), through the first cargo hold (elephant tusks) into the boiler-room and out over the funnel.

At 12m, a group of single-tank divers came to relieve us of our bottom stage and deep travel. This meant that we were unhindered to enjoy the 40-minute 6m stop and explore overhangs and shelves along the reef wall.

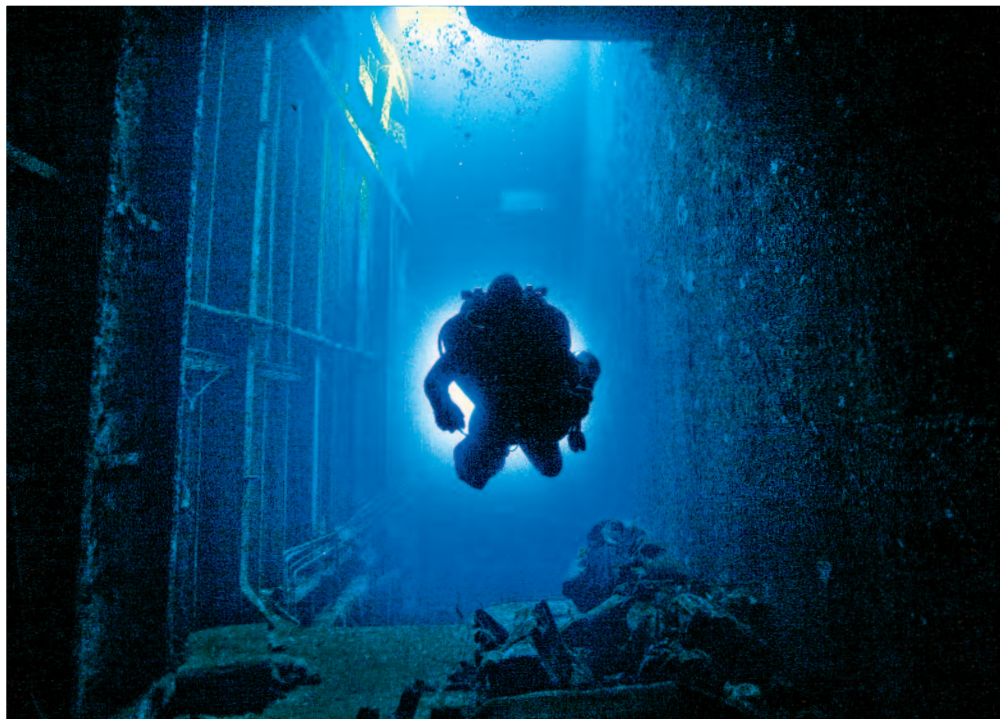
Fury Shoal is south-east of Hamata. 🐡

Pictured: One of the shallower wrecks dived – the *Aida*.

Right: Cath at Fury Shoals.



LEIGH CUNNINGHAM



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Within it are 20 bank reefs covering an 18-mile distance. At Sha'ab Claudia there is an extensive hidden cavern system.

The photographers on board voted for this area over diving Daedalus Reef, and what a great place to off-gas after yesterday's immense deep dive it turned out to be. I chose to go side-mount with my X-Deep Stealth rig, and my computer never crept below 10m.

Large porites corals fringe the maze of easy-to-enter caverns, while natural light made for some photographs in "beam me up, Scotty" style.

During the afternoon and overnight we made a 15-hour crossing to the Brothers. Big Brother island is about 400m long and rises from 800m.

The early-morning dive on the southeastern tip was exhilarating. To come eye to eye with two thresher sharks shaking their elongated booties before breakfast is – suffice to say – very cool.

This was followed after a lengthy surface interval by a more historical dive on the northern tip. The 130m wooden cargo ship *Numidia* was on her second voyage through the Suez Canal to Calcutta, carrying equipment for the Indian railway, and went keel-down on the sloping reef in July, 1901.

Leigh, armed with camera and scooter, spent three hours exploring both the *Aida* and the *Numidia* wrecks.

My buddy and I chose a 60m dive on the latter, running on Suunto TX computers with deep stops.

Its railings and the slanted mast are draped in colourful sponges and dark green cup corals. It is easy to penetrate, although you need to take care as you ascend through sideways door frames.

This is a perfect multi-level dive. Natural light from above streams down, illuminating the superstructure all the way to the stern at 80m. No safari-boat ever ties onto this wreck, and even the davits are rigidly intact.

Coming closer towards Safaga after another overnight sail, we began to pick up signals again on our phones, and heard the news that there were clashes around the presidential palace in Cairo.

Egyptian leader Mohamed Morsi was trying to speed through proposed changes to the constitution to grow his power base, but his referendum had not been met with joy by many Egyptian people, and Tahrir Square was once again the scene of unrest.

From a political perspective I found it ironic that today we would be diving the tragic *Salem Express*.

THE SALEM LINE had a track record of navigational errors at sea. Rumour has it that it was never held accountable for the 1200-plus deaths on this voyage, because of its links to the Mubarak regime.

The *Salem Express* rests on its starboard side. A massive hole was ripped open in its hull when it hit Hyndman Reef in December, 1991. This was a relatively shallow deco dive. We took twin nitrox 32, a 50% stage and ran the plan on a D9 – 117 minutes in all.

It is hard to contemplate the fear and helplessness that was thrust on the passengers on that day. Many were deep in the ship's holds, packed on the upper decks and in corridors. They didn't stand a chance as the water engulfed the decks and pushed out the bow door.

The *Salem Express* went down in just 10 minutes. Life-boats sit awkwardly on the

Above: Cath Bates dives the tragic *Salem Express*.

Below: On a deco stop at Big Brother.

seabed; plastic life-raft boxes are strewn about; overalls are laid out on rocks like tomorrow's work outfit on a stool; there is a muted old radio; and many suitcases have been thrown open unwillingly.

The cafeteria, on its side, is like a giant checkerboard – table-legs are resting horizontally on square pieces of linoleum. Natural light and the stream of torch-beams give the wreck an air of science fiction, yet I felt as if I was an actor in a ghost story.

Many, many civilians and pilgrims died there; the kind of people that live in my street, who drive the buses I take daily, who work in the market where I buy my vegetables, who man the checkpoints I pass on my way to work.

These were innocent Egyptians, Saudis and other god-fearing Arabs who will have strived – as we do today – to live in a peaceful and fair country.

It was a tough way to end the week, but also an experience to remind us that many of the underwater museums we visit as divers contain stories that will never be told: the stories of the people who didn't make it or don't talk about it.

The captain of the *Salem Express* went down with his ship. He closed the door to the bridge and on his people.

BACK ON TALA, THE MOOD was subdued, but we raised a few tins of Sakara later in the evening to the beautiful sites we had been privileged to see on this epic week.

"Cheers!", "Salut!", "Skal!", "Fee Sihetak!", "Slainte!", "Noroc!", "Keskun!" and "Proost!" rang around the upper deck. And with that we also toasted the good people of this utterly amazing country, and the tourists we hope to have visiting it in 2013.



LEIGH CUNNINGHAM