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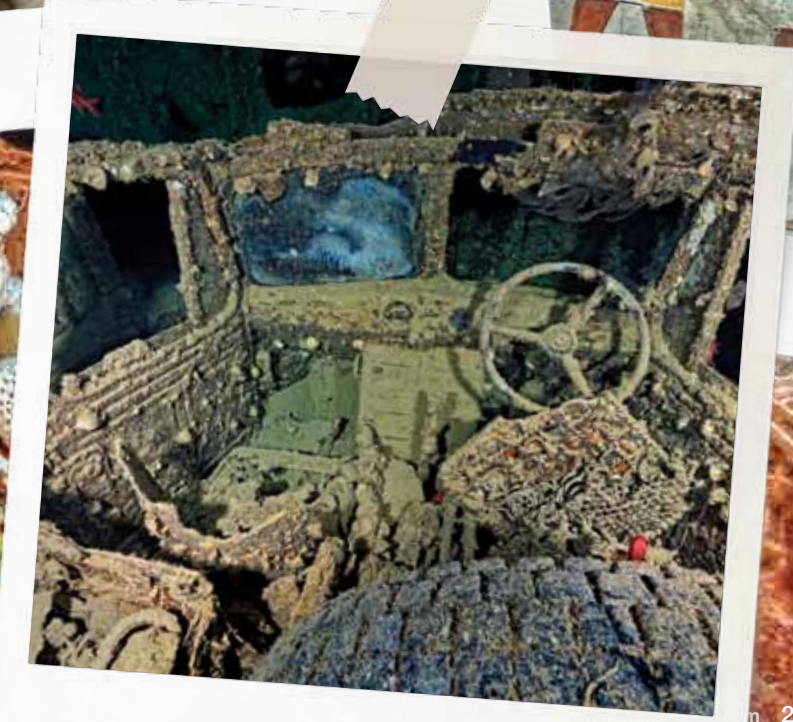
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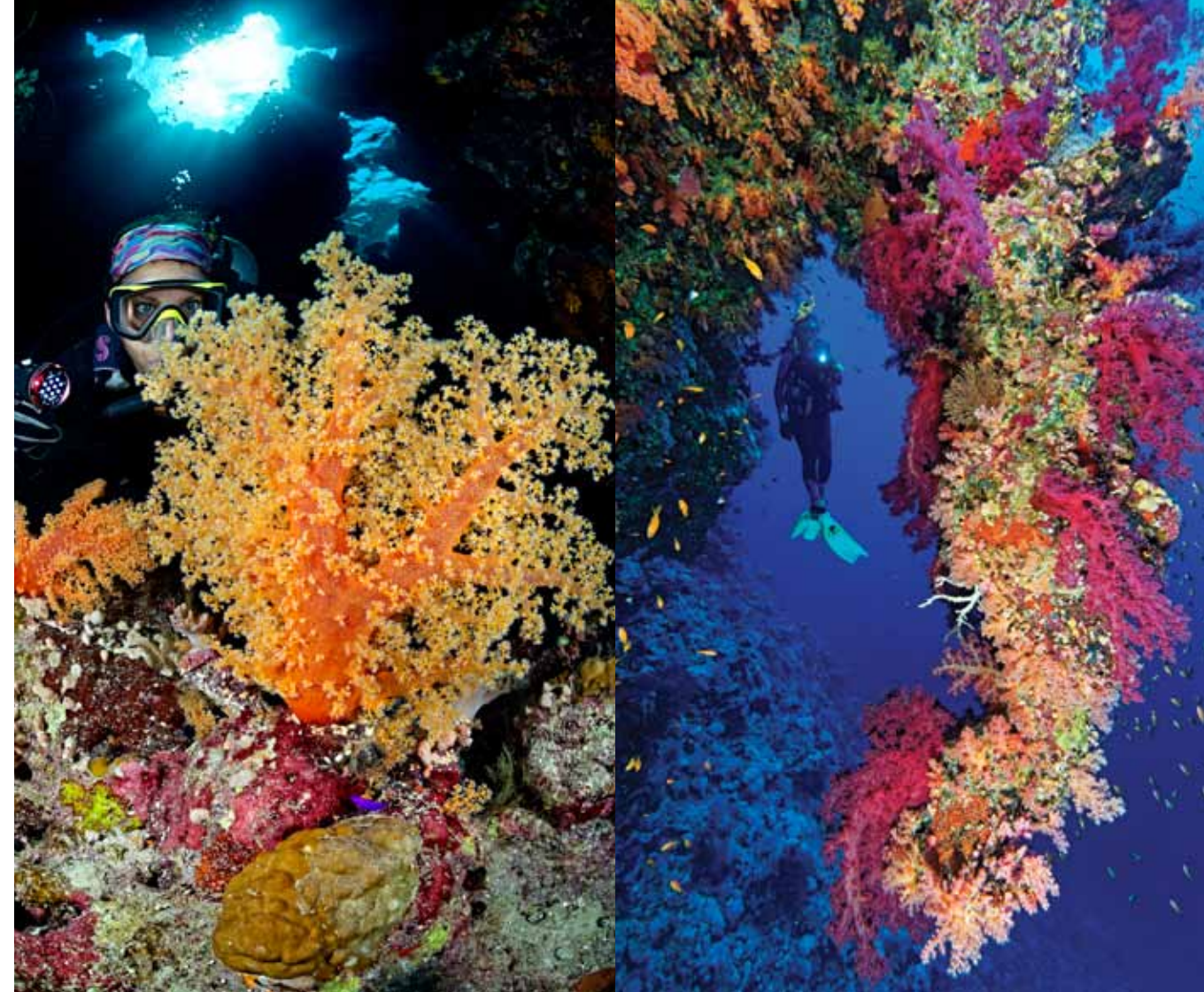
MONUMENTAL EGYPT

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT JOHNSON

Is Egypt *the* explorers' paradise? Unparalleled cultural and aquatic diversity make this one itinerary you'll never forget

Main image: Lauren Johnson takes in the splendor of the Red Sea's soft corals, hard corals, and abundance of marine life. Right: Inside the SS *Thistlegorm*, one of the most popular and famous wrecks in the world, and a staple of the Red Sea experience





Looking out over the armada of nine other liveboards surrounding Little Brother Island, a tiny sliver of barren rock in the Central Egyptian Red Sea, I think, "This is nuts! How are we going to be able to get away from all the other divers?" I shake my head, look at Lauren and nod, and we jump together into another world.

As we start our descent, Lauren points behind me to a 6-foot (1.8m) oceanic whitetip shark cruising just under the surface. My initial impulse is to close within shooting range of the patrolling sentinel, but reluctantly I decide to stick with the plan and turn my back. We drop along a steep wall adorned with brightly-hued stalks of yellow and red soft corals. Swarms of neon orange scalefin anthias rhythmically dart to, and then slowly emerge from, the shelter of the reef. The scene is both surreal and exquisitely beautiful, but my thoughts keep drifting back to the oceanic overhead.

After composing a series of images of Lauren posing behind broad, pale orange sea fans between 80 feet and 110 feet (24.5m - 33.5m), we begin our gradual ascent to the shallows. I scan the surface around the yacht and am amazed: there are no other divers in sight. I am also disheartened not to see any sharks. A small, shiny school of blackfin barracuda catches our attention at 40 feet (12.2m), so we swim over to take a look.

Suddenly, the school splits and a flash bursts through the middle of it. I totally miss the shot while watching the startled barracuda hurriedly regroup and then quickly turn to track the mischievous streak. I find not one, but four oceanic whitetip sharks meandering behind us. Two of the sharks have attendant black and white striped pilot fish that look like escapees from an aquatic

A three and a half-hour drive east from Hurghada to Luxor transforms us from divers to Egyptologists

Left: The Sphinx of Giza - a mythical creature with the body of a lion and the head of a human. Above: Soft corals and caverns make a great photo op

prison. The sharks alternately cruise in for a closer look, as if wanting to check our dive cards, and then circle back out into the blue. The curious sharks stay with us throughout a prolonged and thrilling safety stop that has Lauren signaling that she is hungry and me wondering how quickly I can get my tank refilled so I can continue diving like an Egyptian.

Beware the Groupies

Twelve hours after checking into the Sunrise Marina Resort, Port Ghalib Harbor, we are assembling our gear on an Emperor Divers yacht and headed to the shallow water bay of Marsa Mubarak to look for dugongs.

Taki Man, our designated guide for the day and a local legend in the diving community, says, "It is often difficult to spot a dugong from the main boat, so I prefer to go out in the RIB [rigid-inflatable boat] and search. You can stay here, but please be prepared to join me when the RIB returns. You see all the snorkelers? They are looking for the dugong, too." We agree and eagerly begin a vigil that lasts a

couple of hours. Just when I start to think the dugongs must have a chosen a different bay today, I notice Taki waving his arms and the RIB headed our way.

A few minutes later, we are chilling beside a 10-foot (3m) hungry dugong. It messily churns the sand while vacuuming sea grass to satisfy its major case of munchies. The pervasive sand cloud surrounding the dugong does not dissipate because there is no discernible current to disperse it. I quickly learn the best times to try to photograph this cute marine mammal is when it is either surfacing to start a new breath cycle or as soon as it returns to bottom.

To further complicate the shoot, other divers and a flotilla of snorkelers join the party. The experience is both incredibly enjoyable and utterly frustrating. Strangely, the dugong does not seem to mind the snorkelers. While I wish they would leave posthaste, the adorable dugong surfaces right in the middle of them as if it is rock star and the snorkelers are its

The Thistlegorm has suffered some wear and tear since I first visited her in late 90s, but then again, so have I

groupies. The dugong eventually heads out to sea, and we are doubly blessed with an enormous and equally ravenous green sea turtle that is mowing sea grass at 15 feet (4.6m). Best of all, it has no groupies, though it does sport a few remoras. Mission accomplished, the Emperor Divers crew returns us to Port Ghalib Harbor, only two berths away from our next stop, the *Red Sea Aggressor I* (RSA1).

Big Buck Teeth

An overnight cruise aboard the 120-foot (36.6m) RSA1 carries us 80 miles (127 km) north from Marsa Alam to the Brother Islands or El Akhawein ("Brothers" in Egyptian). Designated as natural protectorates (marine parks) by the Egyptian government in 1983, these two small, rocky islands, known as Big

Left: Soft coral at 80 feet (24m) - not bad viz either! Right: The titan triggerfish complete with a set of knashers designed for crunching through hard shells and corals

and Little, are the tops of undersea mountains separated by about a mile (1.6km) of water and located 40 miles (67km) east from the port town of El Quseir. The Brothers' isolated location and healthy marine ecosystem attract a variety of pelagics, such as oceanics, scalloped hammerhead sharks, thresher sharks, tiger sharks, and mantas.

Big Brother sports a Victorian-style brown stone lighthouse that was built by the British in 1883. The lighthouse did not save the *Numidia*, a 475-foot (145m) British cargo ship, when it ran aground in 1901, but it certainly enhances the pre and post-dive ambiance. We drop on the northwest plateau, up-current of the *Numidia* and quickly descend lest the stiff current push us past our mark. The wreck lies vertically, from the broken remains in front of the bridge at 30 feet (9m) to the stern at 265 feet (80m). Reaching the wreck around 110 feet (34m), we work progressively shallower as we document the exposed coral-encrusted structures.

The highlight of the dive occurs as



we are off-gassing in the shallows. Two large titan triggerfish appear to alternate between courting and nesting. When one decides to charge us, Lauren makes a quick exit stage right while I stand my ground. The ensuing dance of the titan mouthing the dome port on my Aquatica housing and me making sure the dome remains between us while I simultaneously attempt to compose shots, ranks as one of the most unusual and exhilarating animal encounters of my career.

The Ghost of Daedalus

Daedalus, a 12-hour crossing southeast from The Brothers, is very similar to Big Brother Island: it is remote (barely a speck on the map), home to a snazzy lighthouse, and part of the Egyptian Marine Park system. Sharks, particularly oceanic whitetips and scalloped hammerheads, are the big draw here. We drift out in the blue off the east side of the island for the first thirty minutes of the dive in search of pelagics. We spot twenty or so hammers, but they are well below us

around 130 feet (40m).

During our dive at Anemone City along the western flank, Lauren animatedly points to a shimmering cloud of golden sweepers spilling out of a small cave at 45 feet (14 m). I carefully make my way inside the opening and behind the nervous fish in order to photograph Lauren being ringed by the sweepers as she, too, enters the cave. Just before we end the shoot, I notice something fluttering against the wall to my left. I am shocked to find a 6 inch (16cm) ornate ghost pipefish. Back aboard the RSA1, Mahmoud Abdella, our esteemed cruise director, who has spent most of his life working on or in the Red Sea, proclaims, "That is a new one on me. I never dreamed ornate ghost pipefish lived here. But, the Red Sea, she always surprises me."

Neon orange scalefin anthias rhythmically dart to, and then slowly emerge from, the shelter of the reef

Not only does the Red Sea have impressive soft and hard corals, but fish numbers are also high. Along with the shipwrecks, the Red Sea is one of the most diverse tropical destinations you can vacate to

Living Museums

The Suez Canal is the only conduit between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. When it opened in 1869, the man-made waterway ushered in a new era for shipping. Of course, the potential for shipwrecks also increased exponentially and that potential was realized during WWII. Now the Red Sea, especially in the north, is to shipwrecks what the Valley of the Kings is to pharaohs. Both are fascinating, living monuments to Egypt's unique placement in humanity's history.

During one of the most thorough dive briefings we have attended, Adel El Beialy, the *Red Sea Aggressor II's* cruise director and an expert on the wreck of the SS *Thistlegorm*, points to the numerous other liveboards moored above that famous wreck and says, "You will have plenty of company, so be patient, take your time and enjoy what might be your best dive ever." With his words echoing in my mind, we leave a conga line of chaos by carefully swimming over 78-year-old Norton 16H motorcycles lying against one



The wreck of the *Giannis D*, the Japanese cargo ship ran aground at full speed in 1983. Though no lives were lost, the ship was written off and remained stranded before being broken in half by a storm. The wreck is now one of the most visited and photographed in the Red Sea

"EACH OF THE OTHER SHIPWRECKS WE VISIT ADDS TO MY DEEPENING REGRET FOR STAYING AWAY FROM THESE WONDERFUL SITES FOR SO LONG"



another in the bed of a Fordson truck and then waiting patiently until the coast, and visibility, clears. The hawksbill turtle sleeping soundly with its head hidden amongst scattered debris to our left apparently does not mind the chaos—or our presence, for that matter.

The SS *Thistlegorm*, a British armed merchant navy supply ship that was sunk by German bombers on October 6, 1941, is photogenic and impressive when surveyed from the outside, but its interior treasures set it apart from all other wrecks we have encountered. Penetrating its holds is the equivalent of exploring a sunken WWII museum. The *Thistlegorm* has suffered some wear and tear since I first visited her in late 90s, but then again, so have I.

Each of the other shipwrecks we visit adds to my deepening regret for staying away from these wonderful sites for so long. But the wreck I envy the most from a marine life perspective is also the most basic and deteriorated wreck on the itinerary: the Barge Wreck off Bluff Point, Gubal Island. It is the skeletal

hull of a barge that lies in the shallows, surrounded by small coral heads. As soon as we reach the stern, I see two crocodile flatheads lying in the sand beside one another, while Lauren sees her first stonefish of the trip. There are tasseled scorpionfish, numerous moray species, and the typical other reef inhabitants, all densely populated in a condensed space.

Living Reefs

The reefs in the north are every bit as colourful and vibrant as those in the south, if not more so. Over 1,100 species of fish, almost 20% of which are endemic, are found in the Red Sea and most seem to be present here. The hard and soft corals are truly exceptional and readily on display during dives at Beacon Rock, Jackfish Alley, Jackson Reef, and Thomas Reef.

The ensuing dance ranks as one of the most unusual and exhilarating animal encounters of my career

Top left: The *Aggressor Nile Queen*. Above left: The wreck of the *Chrisoula K* in the Red Sea, complete with cargo. Centre: an Egyptian dugong feeds on seagrass

On our drift dive from Shark Reef to Yolanda Reef to Satellite reef in Ras Muhammad, we spend most of our time with a feeding hawksbill turtle. Comical batfish swim back and forth through our bubbles as we swim over a collection of discarded porcelain commodes that were dumped here when the *Yolanda (Jolanda)* sank in 1980. The incongruity of radiant strands of red soft coral growing beside the porcelain commodes is striking.

Lauren begs out of the night dive at Gordon Reef, so I ask our California friends, Keith Strange and Linda Griffith, if I can tag along with them. Keith kindly agrees, but reminds me, “You still owe me a Spanish dancer, so let’s look for one.”

Forward of the RSAIL’s bow, the light from my Sola 900 illuminates the frown of a massive pink stonefish. When I move to my left to compose a side profile of the stonefish grumpy-looking face, my left hand brushes against what I assume to be a sponge...until it moves. I look down to see the sponge is actually an even larger stonefish and thank God I did not hit one of its

venomous spines. I also feel bad for interrupting their hot date.

Right before it is time to end the dive, I notice a flash of red to my right while sweeping the beam. The “red” turns out to be Keith’s requested Spanish dancer crawling across a coral head at 18 feet (5.5m). We alternate between Keith capturing video footage and me taking shots until the robust nudi starts to “dance” away from the bottom, all the way to the surface.

Cruise Like An Egyptian

Traveling to Egypt to dive without exploring the marvels found on the land is like going to five star restaurant, breathing the intoxicating aromas and then leaving without eating. After numerous trips to Egypt, we have learned the most enjoyable and cost-effective way to tour the one-of-a-kind archeological sites is to combine a Nile River cruise with stays in Abu Simbel and Cairo. Nile cruises were an Egyptian way of life well before Moses’ mother placed him in a basket, put the basket on the Nile, and changed

the course of nations.

A three and a half-hour drive east from Hurghada to Luxor transforms us from divers to would-be Egyptologists and delivers us to the new *Aggressor Nile Queen (NQ)*, a 155 ft (47m) Dahabiya sailing vessel. I am not used to relaxing. I did not know I could even do “relaxing”. However, between visits to ancient temples (in order, Karnak, Luxor, Hatshepsut, Esna, Edfu and Kom Ombo), tombs (Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Nobles) and other world renowned relics (Colossi of Memnon), all there is to do is relax. Even transferring between the NQ and the sites requires little effort, as we ride in tuk tuks, horse carriages, and feluccas. I do not know what to do with myself while cruising. There’s no dive gear to prep, no off-gassing to worry about and no gear to clean. Other guests are on deck either napping on comfy chaise lounges or chatting, playing cards, watching the passing scenery and/or sipping cocktails. Cocktails during the day—outrageous! Decadent. Pharaonic. Just like an Egyptian. []

Top: Lauren spying on a good sized anemonefish
Above: The Tomb of Ramesses III, one of many spectacular historic attractions that make Egypt such a rich and diverse destination

GOOD TO KNOW:

- **Getting there:** International flights typically access the Cairo International Airport. From there, travellers can utilize domestic flights to reach port cities along the Red Sea. The *Red Sea Aggressor I* operates from the Port Ghalib yacht marina near Marsa Alam. The *Red Sea Aggressor II* embarks/disembarks from Hurghada. The *Nile Queen* departs from Luxor.
- **Taxes & Visa Requirements:** The departure tax is \$25 U.S. per person for international flights. Visas are valid for only 30 days from date of issue and also cost \$25 U.S. per person.
- **When to go:** Climate is subtropical. The two primary seasons are hot summer from May to October and mild winter from November to April. Hats, sunglasses and sunblock are essential. Jackets or long sleeves may be appropriate at night in the desert and while on the Red Sea.
- **Dive with:** The *Red Sea Aggressor* and *Red Sea Aggressor II*; *Aggressor Adventure’s Nile Queen* is topside only.
- **More info:** www.aggressor.com
- **Diving Details:** The Red Sea is about 15% saltier than typical ocean water, so you could end up unintentionally bobbing like a cork at the surface if you jump without adding extra weights to your belt or pockets.
- **Water temp:** These vary dramatically by location and season. In general, northern sites in the winter may drop to a chilly 72°F (22°C). Southern sites in the summer can feel like diving in a hot tub with temps in excess of 90°F (32°C).
- **Don’t miss:** St. John’s Island near the Sudanese border and within the Elba National Park. The surrounding reef system lies on the Tropic of Cancer and yields one of the most delightful networks of shallow water caves, mazes, swim-throughs and stunning coral and rock formations in existence.
- **Topside:** No trip to Egypt would be complete without visits to Abu Simbel and Cairo/Giza. The Abu Simbel temple complex is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that features two temples that were originally carved out of a mountain. Cairo is the gateway to the Giza Necropolis, which includes the Great Pyramid of Giza (the only remaining intact member of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World), the Pyramid of Khafre, the Pyramid of Menkaure, and the Great Sphinx of Giza.