El Gouna 2007

Neil and I have just returned from a week's holiday scuba-diving in the Red Sea, based in El Gouna (http://www.elgouna.com/). We booked with Tony Backhurst Travel and stayed at the Mövenpick Hotel (http://www.moevenpick-hotels.com/hotels/El_Gouna/). The dive centre was located at the southern end of the hotel and run by Divetribe (http://www.divetribe.com/). Our room was at the furthest point from this, so we had a 15 minute walk to the dive centre each day, but it was quite pleasant strolling through the grounds. The hotel and leisure complex is huge, so much so that they offer a 2-hour orientation tour of it each evening. If you have Google-Earth installed have a look for yourself.

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We flew British Airways from Gatwick to Hurghada and the plane was less than half full, so I managed to get 3 seats in a row and have a small doze. We took off on time and arrived at Hurghada in the mid-afternoon. Agents for Tony Backhurst met us, handed us our visa stamps (£15 each) and escorted us to the bus with about 15 others. All of these were either staying at hotels in Hurghada or on a scuba-diving livaboard, so we had the coach to ourselves for the half-hour journey from dropping the guys off in Hurghada to arriving at our hotel in El Gouna. Having seen Hurghada, I am glad we opted to go to El Gouna.



When we arrived at the Mövenpick our luggage was put on a small golf cart and both it and we were transported to our room. This was in a square single-storey villa, with one room in each corner of the square and a communal "sitting room" and kitchen. A communal terrace made of decking jutted out into one of the many canals and a set of steps led down to a pedalo and kayak. We really didn't have time the whole holiday to make use of these. The only downside was that one of the other rooms was taken by a couple of guys from Poland and they invited ten or more of their mates round for a vodka-bingeing session on the terrace until 4 o'clock in the morning on several occasions. The only other major problem was that I went down with a bout of the Pharaoh's revenge and had to stay in bed for a whole day. When he got back from diving Neil got me some pills from the Pharmacy downtown and Tanya at the Dive Tribe rescheduled my day's diving to Thursday.



The Dive Tribe had left instructions for us that indicated they were expecting us to dive the next day (Friday), so we phoned early on Friday to explain that we had not expected to dive that day and wanted to start our 5-day diving package on the Saturday. Tanya was very accommodating and agreed to this. So we had Friday to lounge around on the beach. We did some snorkelling, though this was not as convenient as at Naama Bay, or Taba Heights where we had been to before. Nevertheless it was enjoyable. You can walk out into the sea for several hundred metres without the water level getting much higher than your waist. Mid-morning we called the bell captain to send a golf cart to transport us and our gear to the diving centre, where we signed in, showed our certifications and hired our wet-suits.

On Saturday we had breakfast early (7am) and set off for the dive centre. We were transported to the Abydos Marina in a small boat and got on board the Abydos 3, which is quite big for a dive boat. We had a minor panic when we noted that our nitrox scuba tanks had DIN sockets, until the dive guide pointed us to an allen key and the box of adapters that would enable the international A-clamp fittings on our regulators to be used. Before we knew it everyone else had arrived and we were underway to the first dive site. Neil had particular trouble with connecting his regulators to the scuba tanks as his A-clamp really only fits the Sherwood type of tank and these are not too common, this was a particular problem in one instance, where there were only two such tanks filled with nitrox and one of them had a leaking valve. In that case he had to borrow Sayeed's (the dive guide) spare set of regs. He's thinking of replacing the connector with a DIN connector, or at least getting an A-clamp that will accept different types of tank valves.





The people on the boat were very pleasant. The captain was dressed as if for an arctic expedition, with woolly hat and thick coat, while most of the divers were soaking up the sun. When we arrived at the dive site the guide, Laure gave the briefing, then we kitted up, did our buddy checks and with the usual giant stride we were in the water. Both Neil and I had to get extra weights (the Red Sea is very salty) and after a little difficulty we managed to descend. For a list of the dive sites we visited on the holiday see the table below.



The diving was very good, although there were two incidents that were not too pleasant. On the Wednesday the dive site was the Rosalie Moller, a 108-metre, 4,000 ton cargo ship built in Glasgow in 1910. She was carrying over 4,500 tons of Welsh coal to Alexandria (via the cape of good hope) when two Heinkel HE-111s sank her just after midnight on 8th October 1941, with the loss of two crewmen. this was just two days after two similar planes sank the Thistlegorm. The ship lies flat, upright in 50 metres of water at the bows, with the deck just below 30 metres. For a very good description of this and the other wrecks I would recommend visiting the http://touregypt.net/vdc/divesite.htm webpage.

The briefing stated that we would go down the shot-line that would be connected to the mast, which we should reach at 17 metres depth; however the shot-line was actually tied to the stern of the boat in 30 metres of water! Neil nearly lost one of his fins on the way down and had to hang upside down while Lee tried to re-fasten his strap. I was just below him worried that he had cramp! Some divers grabbed the shot-line on the surface and were badly buffeted from side to side because of the waves that were quite strong. The visibility was very poor and we had very little no-deco time by the time we got to see the ship. We were disorientated by being at the stern instead of in the middle and with the poor visibility and Neil faffing about trying to ensure he didn't exceed his no-deco time he forgot to keep an eye on his depth. Eventually he reached the surface, thankfully without exceeding ascent rate limits, but without making a safety stop at 5 metres. Lee and I were worried until we eventually saw him on the surface above us. All in all it was not a very pleasant experience. Half a dozen divers declined to go down on the second dive, but this time we stayed close to Horace, the guide, and it was a much better experience.



The other incident was on the Monday. On coming up from the first dive of the day we found that one of the novice divers had had a problem. At first it appeared that she had panicked at a depth of about 10 or 15 metres and had bolted for the surface while holding her breath. She had been coughing blood and was on oxygen when we saw her. A rescue boat was summoned and it took back to hospital in El Gouna, for a spell in the recompression chamber. Neil spoke with her daughter a few days later and it transpired that while she was in hospital it was found that she had in fact had a minor heart attack and it was this that caused the panic attack. She was doing well and was kept in hospital for two days before returning to Holland for treatment.

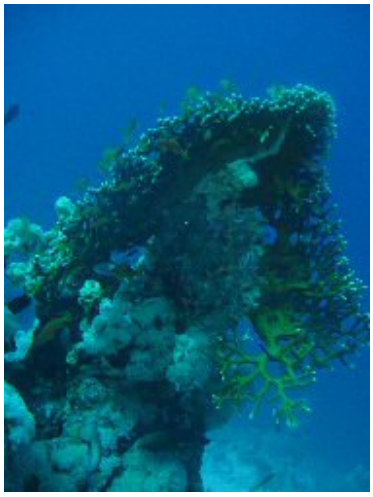


We dived another wreck, the Giannis D, a 100-metre 3,000-ton cargo ship built in Japan under the original name the Shoyo Maru. She was on her way from Croatia to Jeddah with a cargo of softwood when, travelling at full speed on 19th April 1983 she hit the Sha'b Abu Nuhas, which is a coral plateau just below the water on the edge of the Straits of Gobal. Thankfully there were no casualties. The wreck has broken into three sections, bows, midship and stern and lies in water from 4 metres depth to 25 metres, so it is suitable for all levels of divers. There is a bathtub and WC on the seabed next to the wreck and lots of fish. This was one of the best dives of the week.

The last day we dived yet another wreck, the Ulysses, a 95-metre 2,000-ton planked iron screw steamer, build in Newcastle in 1871. She was sailing from London to Penang with a cargo of general merchandise when she ran aground on Little Gobal on 16th August 1887. At first the damage didn't appear to be too serious and the captain waited for two days to start offloading his cargo onto other ships that came to help, but all the time the coral was damaging the ship beyond repair and it had to be abandoned on the 6th September. The ship rests at an angle going from just a metre or so below the water down to 27 metres, so again this is a good dive for all abilities. There is a lot of soft coral and fish on this wreck, another brilliant dive



Our second dive of the day was a drift dive along the reef wall next to the wreck. This too was brilliant; there was a huge amount of coral, which were abundant in fish, including blue-spotted rays. There was very little current so it wasn't a problem to stop and spend time searching under huge table corals for fish to photograph. Neil and I buddied and teamed up with (the other) Neil and Simon, who had an SMB (surface marker buoy) so when we surfaced quite a distance from the Abydos 3 we could get ourselves noticed. We had to shoo away another dive boat that kept coming to pick us up, before finally getting on-board ours. As a final dive of the holiday it could not have been bettered and we all were sad to be leaving the next day.



El Gouna itself is quite interesting, it has a downtown area and besides the Abydos harbour, where there is nothing but boats there is also the Abu Tig Marina with boats, shops and restaurants. You can buy a ticket for £1.50 (GB Pounds) that entitles you to unlimited travel on the bus that runs every 20 minutes between the hotel and downtown, the bus that goes to the marina and the one that goes to the Golf course. Between the hours of 9 and 4 you can also use it for the water taxi that travels along the many canals. You can also try one of the Tok-Toks (3-wheeled taxis), for a couple of Egyptian pounds. We had some good meals downtown and at the Marina. I can definitely recommend the veal dish (almost a stroganoff) at the Tamr Henna and any of the dishes at the Oriental Grill, both restaurants in the downtown area.



We met some very nice people while on holiday including (the other) Neil and Simon and John and Sue. (The other) Neil didn't dive the day I was laid low; he was trying to get an early flight back to the UK. Unfortunately his wife had been out riding with their daughter and on trying to get it back into the horse box the horse had backed into the tailgate which hit her, breaking her jaw and snapping her leg in two. Neil was very worried, but could not find an early flight. But then again, as his wife pointed out to him, he couldn't do anything, so he was better carrying on with his diving and coming back on Friday, as planned.

John is a very keen underwater photographer and has some serious kit. He had a digital SLR (EOS-400) with an underwater housing that looked like something out of star-trek! He had a few problems on one day as he had fitted a fisheye lens but one of the strobes would not fire. John kindly offered the use of his laptop for Neil to download the pictures from my underwater camera onto a memory stick he had brought with him. Neil said some of the photos that John had on his laptop were stunning. I've now decided what I would like as my birthday present (and anniversary and Christmas combined) - a better camera for underwater work with a larger LCD so I can actually see what I am pointing at.



Well this is the end of the report. We thoroughly enjoyed the trip and would go to El Gouna again, but not Hurghada, having seen it from the coach window. The hotel room wasn't quite up to its star-rating, but then again we hardly spent any time in it (apart from the one bad day). We didn't give the golf a try. The course was designed by Fred Couples and looks good, but it was already getting hot in the afternoon. The diving was in the main very good and quite varied. The wrecks were very interesting and while the corals and fish are not quite up to the standard of those at Sharm El Sheikh (what other sites are?), they were well worth the trip..



Neil and I are looking forward to getting in a few more dives in Cyprus before our next major diving expedition, which will be Bonaire in October with the Divecrew group we went to the Maldives with last October. Neil's already researching the destination (http://www.infobonnaire.com, http://www.buddydive.com/) on the web and it looks absolutely stunning. Watch this space for the report.



Sue - May 2007

Depth (m)	Time (min)	EANx	Dive
20.7	47	33	Gobal Maha'al (N)
20.1	50	33	Gobal Maha'al (S)
23.5	52	33	Syal Kebila - Octopus, eels, nudibranch
13.7	57	33	Manta Point - Coral, eels, blue-spotted rays
21.0	39	32	Umm Gamer - Huge eels and lots of coral
19.8	44	32	Shabror um gamer - Coral, partial wreck, fish
30	24	28	Rosalie Moller - Very poor viz, not a good dive
30	29	28	Rosalie Moller - Poor viz, much better dive
20.4	48	31	Giannis D - interesting wreck
26.5	56	31	Shabror Syal (blind reef)
11.3	50	32	Dolphin House - Night dive lots Spanish dancers
25.3	46	32	Ulysses - Brilliant wreck dive
18.0	59	32	Little Gobal - Brilliant drift dive



