



Ras Mohammad – A Lesson in Vertigo by Peter Pinnock



Heights have never bothered me. I have peered over the edge of the tallest mountains and with a massive leap of faith jumped out of a perfectly healthy airplane without being bothered by the distance to the ground. Strange then that the first time I should experienced vertigo was underwater – at Ras Mohammed.

The Sinai Peninsula separates Africa and Asia, thrusting like a prehistoric finger south into the Red Sea. The Gulf of Aqaba flows down its east coast and the Gulf of Suez sweeps up the west coast. At the very tip of the continent the two oceanic giants converge, flex their muscles and indulge in a bit of arm wrestling. Host to the feud is one of the Red Sea's richest dive

sites: Ras Mohammed.

I will never forget my first experience of diving Ras Mohammed. It's underwater cliff face plummets vertically into the unknown depths. Drifting away from the edge of the reef into the deep blue realm was a nerve-wrenching experience. Looking down, the reef vanished into suicidally deep water. Your head spins and quickly you fin back to the safety of the drop-off. A lost diver could never be recovered here.



In blue water like this it is the easiest thing to loose track of time and depth - a diver needs to pay very careful attention to his diving profile.

Now I am returning. Flying high above Africa in the cabin of a dimly lit 747 I could not sleep. I dreamt of schools of barracuda and giant Napoleon wrasse. Far below me the lights of Africa twinkled like the lights on a Christmas tree.



A day later on a cool winter's morning we slipped out of Sharm El Sheikh harbour. The throbbing of the boat's diesel engines cut through the crisp morning air. We headed south along the Sinai Peninsula toward Ras Mohammed, a speck on the distant horizon. Egypt is a land of contrasts. The new mixes with the ancient, old traditions are practised alongside the modern and the barren desert landscapes give little hint of the wealth of marine life lying just below the surface. On the tip of the Sinai, the barren khaki slopes of Shark Observatory towering above Ras Mohammed are bleak and uninviting. The vertical cliff face plunging into the sea below gives some indication of the underwater topography we are about to experience.

We don our wet suits and walked like frogs to the stern of the boat - then step off the edge of Africa. Breathing compressed air we descended to the reef below. Ras Mohammed has several dive sites, most of which can be visited in one dive. We start at Anemone City, a patch of reef blanketed by enormous anemones undulating in the current. Hovering above the anemones are swarms of clown fish and juvenile domino fish.



Approaching closer they take refuge in the stinging tentacles of the anemone. This is one of nature's many fascinating symbiotic interactions between reef organisms that are obligatory for the existence of the animals involved. The clown fish gains protection from larger fish that would receive a sting from the anemone and in turn the anemone feeds on the clown fish's leftovers. With the light from a torch we look for the eggs of



the clown fish that are laid under the anemone. Instead we startle a pair of translucent glass shrimps that quickly claw their way to safety.



Ras Mohammed is well known for currents, particularly in the summer months. Gently tugging at us, the current pulls us over a sandy ledge that fades away into the depths. In front of us looms the most spectacular dive site at Ras Mohammed - Shark Reef. From a distance the reef seems to shimmer with life. Reaching the vertical reef face I dive deeper, beckoned by the void I fall into the blue depths. The wall became a blur as I pass by, going ever deeper. Free falling to fifty meters I stop my descent at a huge gorgonian coral, it's branches extended against the current like an enormous oriental fan. A tiny goby has made the gorgonian his home. Perfectly camouflaged, it darts up and down the spines of its host. Looking up, the sun is a bright dot on the distant blue surface. I can feel my heart pounding

and have to force dense air into my lungs. My bubbles sound like crystal champagne glasses breaking as they rush for the surface.

A school of barracuda appear out of the open water, their silvery streamlined shapes forcing them effortlessly into the current. Leaving the reef face we swim out toward the barracuda. They gather together in a flourish of motion, dissolve and then gather again. Slowly they perform large sweeping pirouettes, oblivious of their strange audience. Soon they disappeared - on a mission to nowhere. We are left suspended - alone in an azure ocean. The sea floor lies hundreds of meters below us. Descending deeper, vertigo and the pressure from the water above starts to play games with my mind. I become dizzy and my head starts to spin. Instinctively we return to the reef face and begin our slow ascent to the surface.



Ras Mohammed is far more than a spectacular wall dive. The abundance and richness of the reef is often missed by making the mistake of diving too deep. The shallow waters ooze with life and colour as the occupants of the coral reef go about their daily business



of feeding and fighting for space. A napoleon wrasse joins us - as if to keep a secret rendezvous. His chameleon eyes never leave us. A suckerfish - best described as the hitchhiker of the open ocean- clings to its host. Firmly attached by the sucker on its forehead, the remora waits patiently for the wrasse to feed so that it may devour any leftovers. Blizzards of silvery kingfish patrol the open waters,



swooping in to capture their prey with the stealth and speed of a Samurai warrior. Hanging and drifting with the current we pass through schools of brightly coloured goldies swarming above the reef. When we come too close they converged into the reef's nooks and crannies, emerging in unison moments later. Soft corals bloom in an array of colour like underwater broccoli painted by Disneyland. Their tiny mouths are open to extract nutrients from the water. We pause at a cleaning station to watch as an Emperor Angelfish hovers patiently as a cleaner wrasse scours its body removing bits of damaged skin and parasites. The exquisitely coloured angelfish leaves, well groomed and ready for a mate.



Propelled by the current we glide like soaring birds, using only our fins to steer ourselves. Eventually we are sucked over Jolanda Reef. The reef takes its name from a freighter that ran aground in 1980. The abyss has since swallowed the wreck, but on the reef you can still see its cargo - a bizarre conglomeration of toilets and baths. I smile quietly to myself. One of the Red Sea's finest dive sites is littered with nothing less than toilet seats!

All too soon we run out of air and it is time to leave. We surface onto a corrugated sea. I look around. To our east the low winter sun casts long shadows over the Sinai Mountains. On the shimmering horizon to the west lies Africa and below our fins, Ras Mohammed, one of the Red Sea's finest dive sites. Just beware of vertigo!



Climate

The climate remains dry all year round with June to September being the hottest months. Temperatures peak above 40°C in summer. Egypt gets cold in winter! Temperatures can drop below 15°C between December and February.

Currency

The local currency is the Egyptian Pound. Keep lots of small change for tipping – it is a well-practiced custom.

Language

Arabic is spoken throughout Egypt. Communicating in English is generally not a problem.

Health

Drink and brush your teeth only with bottled water. Wash any fresh produce bought at markets thoroughly.

Diving





Ras Mohammed can be dived all year round but visibility is generally better in the Northern Hemisphere summer months.

Qualifications

An advanced openwater certificate is recommended.

When to go

The best time to dive the Red Sea is during the northern hemisphere summer months (June to September). Because this is peak holiday season, the resorts can be exceptionally busy. Strong winter winds from December to January often affect visibility and water temperature drops to 22°C.

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