

# AWAY FROM THE *madding crowds*

Hidden away south of Safaga is an oasis of calm and quiet, a retreat from the rat race of modern society. Rose Kefrig took the opportunity to dive and relax in this charming bay

Photographs by UDO KEFRIG/TEAM OCEANPICS.DE





CCR divers preparing for the water



The Coral Garden resort



Crocodilefish



The house reef is home to many species of fish



The entrance to a cavern

Not so long ago, 26 kilometres south of Safaga, an uninhabited coastline stretched far across Gassous Bay. Only fishermen, like Ali, knew of this half-moon-shaped bay and its beautiful reef. The old man would cast his net from a tiny boat in the morning and return to shore in the evening. The bay not only provided him with protection from high winds and waves, but it also had a flat sandy beach, where he would anchor and go ashore. The only road stretched towards the south in the direction of El Quseir and Marsa Alam, and back then was little more than a rather crudely constructed stone highway and the only transport link for the fishermen to return their daily catch to the local market.

But times have changed; slowly, tourism snaked its way south, bringing a continuous change to the coastal area along the shores of the Red Sea. The once-basic highway gave way to an extensive and advanced transportation system, and instead of fishing, Ali now has a good knowledge of all the

hotels stretching along the north and south coast. He graciously accepted our offer of a little bak-shheesh, nips at his black sugary tea and says: "They sprouted like mushrooms out of the soil, bringing the 'flavour' of a new era, increasing dive tourism in this once-quiet bay". He points to the clearly visible, low-priced, three-star Coral Garden Resort with its one-storey bungalows. It sits on a clean, 600-metre-long stretch of sand which is primarily for divers and families. The 39 basic, well-equipped bungalows are maintained with all the comfort you would expect, and were completely renovated in 2013. Here, every diver can feel totally safe under the guidance of the qualified teaching staff of the Orca Dive Centre, without currents, stress or the hectic pace of modern life. It is a near-perfect training place for every qualification. Additional courses can be added at any time. Snorkelers may even spot the odd dolphin playing near Gassous Bay. For qualified divers, nitrox (EAN 32) is free of charge and all equipment is serviced on a regular basis. The Orca Dive Club Coral





Massive cabbage coral



Garden runs under the professional eye of Tom Freibote, who joined the team in 2012. He knows the bay like the back of his hand. From novice to highly qualified, nitrox diving and rebreathers, sidemount and scooter instructor, his special teaching abilities, qualifications, enthusiasm and helpfulness are always in demand. The excellent diving and the house reef persuaded him to stay. He carefully peels an apple as he tells us: "It is not everyday you find such an outstanding, protected reef which is full of marine life. Here, I can dive up to four times a day and still find new and fascinating things to explore. The structure of the reef is appealing to beginners and dive veterans. The underwater topography of the Gassous Bay house reef in is varied and fascinating and consists of two sections: the North Reef and the South Reef, which are at both ends of the bay. The northern section drops in small stages, gently sloping to 32m. It is interrupted only by numerous overhangs, arches and projections. The sandy bottom descends to between 25-30m before it, again, slowly descends to a much-greater depth, only interrupted by coral blocks, and the slight, ever-changing currents along the sloping wall. This is the realm of rays, and other loners of the open sea. The reef environment consists of a multiplicity of corals; the sandy seabed is particularly crowded

"The sheer, steep wall section in the upper reef alternates in depth and is interspersed with rock, hard corals and fan corals, which partly overhang and grow in small holes"



by fan and table corals and home to hedgehogfish, moray eels and is crammed with juvenile fish. It is amazing how a multitude of glassfish can look like silvery bubbles in a large champagne glass. Here, it is worthwhile observing the activities and soaking up the outstanding serenity of the area."

If you're a morning person, it's an awesome sight to watch the reef bass on their daily raid for food. Even the scurrilous cleaner shrimp, sharing residential housing accommodation, are worth a visit. The whole place just pumps the dive vibe, but after diving there is not much to do and the evenings are spent playing chess or relaxing.

The Coral Garden Resort is a typical diver's destination. Although there is a playground offered for children within the resort, this department is still somewhat lacking. Further facilities are at present not available and as such, local conditions may not be suitable for families with small children. However, the bay is perfect for older children wishing to learn how to dive, and the





## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...



### GASSOUS BAY, EGYPT

#### WHERE IS IT

Gassous Bay lies some 22km south of Safaga, about an hour's drive from the airport in Hurghada.

#### HOW TO GET THERE

There are numerous charter flights into Hurghada from the UK.

#### WHEN TO VISIT

You can dive in Egypt all year round, though it gets very hot in the summer months.

"The south flank of the reef is inhabited by barracuda, mackerel shoals and bass that dominate this territory"

#### ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

You can get a visa on arrival at the airport for £10-£15.

#### CURRENCY

Egyptian pound (£1 = LE11.5).

#### WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

The Coral Garden Resort is quiet and away from the nightlife of Hurghada, leaving you to chill out with your fellow divers and a cool beer and discuss the day's activities, and plan your adventures for the next day.

#### THE LOCAL BREW

Sakara Gold lager.

#### VERDICT

Gassous Bay offers some pristine shore diving, as well as easy access to some of the more-famous Safaga reefs and wrecks, in a quiet, laid-back environment. Perfect for getting away from the rat race for a week.



Pristine table coral

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nearby Coral Sun Beach is perfect for smaller guests. It has its own mini-pool and baby-sitting service on request while the parents can enjoy a leisurely dive.

For one diver, this poses no problem. He is here on his own and joins us at the table. Steven Scally chats enthusiastically about this top destination, which he purposefully chose to experience the diversity of colour. With more than 100 dives under his belt, he speaks highly of the dive centre and his adventures underwater. For him, it is a dream he will never forget. He told us: "The underwater world is an exciting place to be and this place is so easily accessible that, although I have not been around the world to dive, I have found Gassous Bay to be the most-colourful, stress-free and easiest of them all. I will return even after 1,000 dives". He keeps his gaze fixed on the sea as he speaks. "The southerly section is a little rougher and more fissured the closer you approach the open sea. The sheer, steep wall section in the upper reef alternates in depth and is interspersed with rock, hard corals and fan corals, which partly overhang and grow in small holes. The south flank of the reef is inhabited by barracuda, mackerel shoals and bass that dominate this territory. A particularly enchanting sea-meadow in an otherwise sandy environment is near the entry to the dive centre". He pauses and pulls out a small object from his pocket. "Look, it is possible to dive with a magnifying glass, and discover many small creatures hiding in the crevices. A trained eye will discover even seahorses".

Steve is here for two weeks and views the daily



Lionfish

travel plans to the famous reefs such as Panorama Reef, Sha'ab Sheer, Tobia Arba, Abu Kafan and the wrecks of the Salem Express, the Al Kahfain or the El Arish/El Tor.

Ali has also known the sea inhabitants of this serene bay for many decades, although not as a diver, but as a fisherman. His weather-beaten face looks sad as he explains that he can no longer be observed throwing his nets from the boat at Gassous Bay, as the Ministry of Fishing, based in Cairo, recognised the need to protect the underwater environment and it is no longer allowed to be fished. He understands that this is advantageous to nature and divers. However, he hopes the future will be secured for his children, and a better time will arrive and reduce the prospect of hard times with jobs in the tourism industry and dive centres like the Orca Dive Club at the Coral Garden Resort. ■