

An underwater photograph showing a diver on the left side of the frame, illuminated by a light. The diver is positioned near a large, dark, and heavily encrusted structure, likely a shipwreck. The structure is covered in coral and other marine life. The background is a deep blue, slightly hazy water. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the diver's light providing a focal point of brightness.

Spoilt for **CHOICE**

One trip, seven dive centres. **ROSE AND UDO KEFRIG**
give several good reasons why you
should visit Egypt

Photographs by UDO KEFRIG/TEAM OCEANPICS.DE

Boarding for another dive day



The Thistlegorm is alive with soft corals



Giannis D



It all began nearly 25 years ago when Volker Clausen opened his first Orca Dive Club in Hurghada. He was already a pioneer of the sport and it wasn't long before further dive centres opened, and not only in Egypt. The casual atmosphere, high quality service and excellent diving had divers flocking to exotic destinations like Mauritius, Bali, Cape Verde and Flores. Volker and his team constantly look at ways to improve their facilities and to make their customers happy. When we received a call from him inviting us to go diving, we jumped at the chance. However, there was a catch. We had to visit and dive at all seven Orca Dive Centres during a 14-day stay. The challenge was on! With our dive gear packed in a flash, it wasn't long before the plane touched down at Hurghada Airport and we were greeted by Volker himself. With a big grin on his face, he replied to our greeting: "Let's see if we can pull this off!"

PEACE AND SERENITY AT CORAL GARDEN

Our first stop was 25km south of Safage. Nestled within the grounds of the Coral Garden Resort are 39 rooms. Some apartments are in the main building, others are spacious bungalows overlooking Gassous Bay. It is very quiet. The location is fantastic. Directly on the 600-metre-long sandy beach is the dive centre. With an easy beach entry into the warm water, it offers great snorkelling opportunities, as well as access to an incredible house reef teeming with fish. Even the bar is situated on the beach - great for your 'sundowner'. Forget large crowds, your mobile phone, and your watch; this is Egypt with a chilled-out Caribbean flair! If you are seeking peace and quiet, this is the perfect dive spot. You can start your dive at any time directly from the beach. Dive sites range from beginner to boat dives.

We only had 48 hours to explore the riches of the underwater world at this site, so we dived right in to the house reef. Only a few metres in and the first reef blocks come into sight, and that's when the action starts - it's like being in a big aquarium. You can admire scorpionfish, octopus, coral catfish and cylinder anemones with transparent shrimps. Our dive continued toward the Northern Reef, which slopes down to 35m. It runs along the north side of the bay in terrace-like protrusions with occasional small ledges. The reef is known for its variety of corals, especially fan and table corals. Hiding in a crevice, a beautiful moray eel displays its open mouth, while another swims right by. Soon 94 minutes have passed and slowly we make our way back to the exit point.

Our evening meal is taken in the restaurant overlooking the bay. The atmosphere is quiet, no loud music, just friendly staff and simple, good food. The rest of the evening is spent around the beach bar chatting. It is a small, serene getaway for the discerning diver, but if you wish to be entertained, need childcare, all inclusive and chocolate massages, then check into the Coral Sun Beach Hotel, which is located only a short stroll up the beach and offers superb facilities for the whole family. Your dives are still taken at Orca.

One last breakfast and the rest of our time was spent throwing our dive gear back into suitcases and preparing to head for the next destination 342km away in Hamata...

Buggy at Breakers



ALL IN AT WADI LAHMY AZUR

Punctually at 1.15am, we were picked up and driven to Hamata. It was a long, four-and-a-half hour drive but the road was well constructed. At the all-inclusive Wadi Lahmy Azur hotel, we were welcomed with sweet, cold Karkade tea the moment we stepped through the door. The hotel has a private beach, and every room has a balcony or terrace. The first shock arrived at dinner. We casually strolled into the restaurant and felt grossly underdressed in shorts and T-shirts - there is a dress code for the hotel's bars, and the restaurants are smart casual.

Diving takes place at the house reef, or from two modern boats that visit 16 dive sites. The entry to the house reef is simple - walk down a jetty and then either jump in or walk down the ladder. A word of warning: it got a little crowded at times due to snorkelers and divers wishing to enter and exit. The large house reef is magnificent. From the moment you enter you are surrounded by fish. Our time is limited, but we manage to jump on the boat go to Sha'ab Claudio and Abu Galawa. It is fish soup heaven - schools of fish, Napoleon, caves to swim in and out of, as well as plenty of hard corals.

We headed north again toward Marsa Alam; our next stop for two nights was the Concorde Moreen Beach Hotel and Spa...

ONE FOR THE FAMILY

Another world! From the moment you step inside, this hotel envelops you in wonderful service. Situated around 15 minutes from Marsa Alam, in the centre of Abu Dabour Bay, it has it all. A beautiful 800-metre sandy beach, spectacular panoramic views over the Red Sea coast, lush gardens equipped with four fabulous swimming pools... but we were only interested in diving! The dive centre is ideally located a few hundred metres from the beach and is an excellent place for house reef dives, and an ideal starting point for excursions by minibus to the dive sites around Marsa Alam, day trips with the dive boat to Elphinstone Reef, Sha'ab Samadai and Sha'ab Marsa Alam. One of the most-requested dive sites is Elphinstone. It is well known for encounters with oceanic whitetip and hammerhead sharks at the right time of year. The north plateau of this long, thin offshore reef is around 80 metres long and between ten to 25 metres wide. It is covered with colourful soft corals and teeming with life. Clouds of anthia, countless fusiliers, trevally and barracuda surround you.

This time we don't need to pack our suitcase to visit our fourth Orca Dive Club, which is situated only eight minutes transfer time from Marsa Alam Airport. The Orca Dive Club Tulip has been up and running since February 2010. It provides a wide range of interesting dives, ranging from beautiful house reef dives, trips to remote beaches in their minibus, or daily boat trips to various reefs and mini-liveaboard trips in Hamata. The Tulip Hotel is only five kilometres from the Moreen Beach and has a 750-metre-long jetty. Taking into account a 250-metre-long walk from the dive centre to the beach, it makes it a tiresome 1,000 metre journey, but fear not, you are taken by golf cart unless you are super fit and choose to walk! The hotel itself is of moderate standard and offers good, clean accommodation.

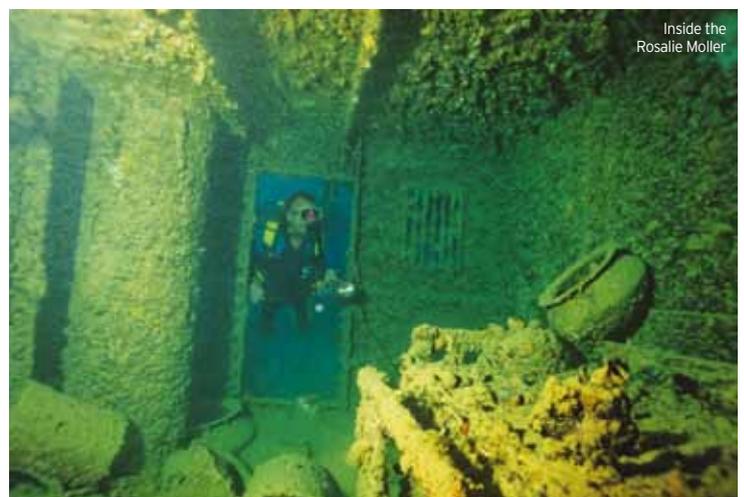
Next on our list was the unique watersports lifestyle hotel The Breakers Diving and Surfing lodge, situated on the beautiful Soma Bay peninsula...

DIVE AND KITE

It's service with a smile at this sporty and upbeat hotel. The choice is yours! Dive, kite, surf, sail, golf or spa? The Breakers Diving and Surfing Lodge offers deluxe kiting and diving facilities. It has a fantastic house reef that stretches from the east to the west of the peninsula and it is packed with diverse marine life from the smallest to the largest and has an abundance of corals. It is a delight for snorkelers and divers of all experience levels. A 420-metre jetty extends directly from the dive club to the



Abu Galawa cave system



Inside the Rosalie Moller

"On the north and south side you will find two long and slim plateaus that are covered in a vibrantly coloured carpet of soft corals, with awesome table corals dotted around"



Large turtle chilling on the seagrass

reef. Electric cars are available for carrying equipment and allowing divers effortless access to the reef. A large turquoise-blue lagoon lies at the front of the reef and provides sheltered waters ideal for training.

Our dive was scheduled at the Salem Express. The boats leave from the small private marina to whisk you off in spacious luxury to the many fascinating dive sites off Soma Bay. I had mixed feelings about this dive, given the huge loss of life when she sank. At the stern of the ship the two large propellers are intact and covered in coral. It is possible to swim under the stern from the keel to the rear deck. During the deepest part of the dive, at the seabed on the deck side, divers swim over the lifeboats before and under the two funnels. The ship's bridge is a semicircular structure raised from the main deck.

We only had one night left and enjoyed the rest of the evening at the hotel. The food was divine and the atmosphere relaxed. Our list was shrinking, and there were only two dive centres left...

TECHNICAL DIVING AT THE VILLAGE

This location is a little jewel which should really be kept a secret. The Orca Dive Club in Safaga was established in 1995. Now it has undergone refurbishment and the rooms are lovingly decorated. A new restaurant is being built and more is planned for the future. The Orca Village is situated adjacent to the Orca Dive Club Safaga. The bungalows are located around a private, sheltered sandy beach with all necessary amenities. The Village is an ideal choice for divers and dive clubs and for divers with a disability. With its own private jetty directly next to the centre and excellent dive sites in the bay offering calm moorings for the boats, it has become loved by all who visit, allowing you to enjoy a relaxed diving experience, though it also has one of the best-equipped tech facilities in the Red Sea as well.

One dive not to be missed is possibly the best dive site in Safaga: Abu Kafan. The name roughly translates to 'Father of the Abyss', a fitting description for this reef. The southerly lying reef grows out to depths in excess of 600m to rise just below the surface. On the north and south side you will find two long and slim plateaus that are covered in a vibrantly coloured carpet of soft corals, with awesome table corals dotted around.

The north side is best dived in the form of a drift. After jumping into the water you can descend on to the plateau at 25m. Moving in a north easterly direction you arrive at the eastern drop-off, with its majestic fan corals. Frequent encounters with barracuda, turtles, tuna and reef sharks, plus the occasional hammerhead, make this dive one not to be missed.

Unfortunately, all good things come to an end and we headed to our next and last destination - El Gouna...

LUXURIOUS EL GOUNA

El Gouna was built by Egyptian billionaire Samih Sawiris and is set on a cluster of islands surrounded by turquoise blue lagoons, with the mountains on one side and the crystal clear waters of the Red Sea on the other. It quickly developed into a major tourist attraction with its very own style and atmosphere. People often refer to it as the 'Venice of the Red Sea'. This 'city' has everything - shops, restaurants, patisserie, butcher, a church, a mosque, a school, a hospital, a university and a museum, but you can get to any corner of the place by a small shuttle bus, or boat. There is no traffic. Surrounding the beautiful Abu Tig Marina are designer shops, exclusive restaurants, hotels, a beach and, of course, the dive centres. The Orca Dive Club El Gouna is situated within the Turtles Inn, directly at the Abu Tig Marina. The hotel is basic but comfortable. The location is only a short stroll from the dive boats. Of course, guests staying in other hotels are picked up and dropped off by a complimentary shuttle service.

We decided to dive the Rosalie Moller, one of the Red Sea's best wreck dives. She lies at a depth of 50m on a sandy, muddy bottom with a Titanic-like bow. Viewed from the front she looks like a ghost ship, ready to rise from the deep. The foremast boasts a magnificent crow's nest at 22m and is overgrown with soft and hard corals. Take a look out in the blue, where barracuda and mackerel pursue their course.

We had done it! It was a perfect ending to an incredible challenge to visit all the Orca Dive Centres. Divers are spoilt for choice - it's up to you to choose which Orca is for you. www.orca-diveclubs.com



Enjoying a Bedouin dinner

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW EGYPT



GETTING THERE

There are direct flights from London to both Marsa Alam and Hurghada. The transfer from the airport depends on your choice of hotel destination.

WHEN TO GO

Egypt is a year-round travel destination.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

All visitors must have a valid passport with at least six months left on it. A visa can be obtained at the airport on arrival for a fee of US\$25.

CURRENCY

Egyptian Pound (£1 = LE12.05).

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

Meals are taken at the hotel of your choice, either all-inclusive or half-board.

El Gouna has many dining facilities. Insider tip - don't miss a burger at Le Garage.

VERDICT

The Orca Dive Clubs and mentioned hotels are a perfect getaway for the discerning traveller and diver.