



The Golden **TRIANGLE**

A world-class shipwreck, vibrant marine life and stunning corals, combined with majestic hidden cities and mind-blowing desert vistas, make Jordan the 'trip of a lifetime', according to

ROSE AND UDO KEFRIG

Text by ROSE KEFRIG and photographs by UDO KEFRIG - TEAM OCEANPICS.DE

The founder and manager of the Red Sea Dive Centre, Mohammed Al-Momany, and his guest Udo Kefrig drive up to the beach and park the battered old minibus directly on the golden sand. Within a few minutes they have changed into their dive gear and are ready to have a blast! Although tourism is still in its infancy, divers are keen to explore the riches the underwater world of Jordan has to offer. It is only a 200-metre swim from the beach to the photogenic wreck of the Cedar Pride.

Aqaba's most-photographed shipwreck has a story to tell. It is 4 August 1982. According to a witness on the scene, the fire starts unexpectedly, probably caused by a faulty gas connection in the galley. Thick, black smoke starts to pour out of the kitchen. Quickly, the fire spreads to other areas of the ship until it reaches the engine room. Flames shoot in the air. In no time at all it reaches the bridge. Hungry flames start to lick their way from deep within the ship's belly, swallowing everything it comes into contact with. Two crewmen lose their lives in the destruction.

A three-year conflict follows. Nobody wants to take responsibility for what should happen with the burnt-out ship. That is until the King of Jordan, Abdullah II, decides her fate. As a keen diver, he suggests sinking the Cedar Pride close to shore, in shallow water. He says that it would be a good idea to add another attraction and to introduce an artificial biotope for marine life to the area. In close co-operation with the Jordanian Navy, a suitable resting place is found. It becomes a dive site blessed with year-round good visibility, low wind and current conditions, and a depth between 9-30m. Resting on her portside, with the bow facing north, the wreck is a colourful display of coral and home to many fish.

After the dive with Udo, Mohammed says farewell with the words: "Never remove anything from the sea, apart from food for the soul, comfort for your heart and inspiration for the soul". That was back in 1995!

Nearly 20 years later, Udo is back and I am going with him to the Kingdom of Jordan. It is my first visit to Aqaba and times have changed. Tourism has outgrown its infancy. Sun worshippers, families and divers, those who wish to combine culture and watersports, have found in Jordan the perfect destination. Located on the Red Sea coast, with a water temperature of around 20 degrees C in winter and 27 degrees C during summer, the destination has everything which lets a diver's heart beat a little faster: suitable accommodation, quad biking through the desert, top dive centres, fantastic beaches and a fascinating, intact underwater world. From low budget to five-star resorts, the duty-free



The Cedar Pride is a fabulous wreck dive



Lionfish provide a splash of colour on the reef



The anti-aircraft gun is part of a scientific survey

Topside attractions

Jordan is blessed with a whole host of land-based attractions, and one of the must-visit locations is the 74,000-hectare Wadi Rum, made famous through its connections with Lawrence of Arabia, which was added to the World Heritage List of UNESCO in 2011. Heading out into the desert east of Aqaba, the first magnificent view of Wadi Rum is the 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom' and it takes my breath away. When you plan this tour, you must consider spending a night or two in a Bedouin camp. It is a highlight for adults and children to spend time in the desert, listen to the tale of Lawrence of Arabia, sleep in a real Bedouin Tent, enjoy traditional food and relax the evenings by the campfire, explore the desert on a camel's back, and finally, watch the stars under the crystal-clear sky. Let the kids explain that to their school friends!

The other must-see is the Nabatean City of Petra, which UNESCO also declared a World Heritage Site. This city of ornate rock, often regarded as the eighth Wonder of this World, lies in the heart of the Shara Mountains and played a vital part in the major trading route connecting ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. With its bizarre rock formation and ever-changing colour, it remains a place of magic, especially at night, when it is ablaze with a thousand candles.

120,000-inhabitant metropole is tailored precisely to the visitor. Aqaba plays host to modern restaurants, fast food chains and countless shops. Then there are the smells of freshly-ground spices at the market, where you can get pure cinnamon, cumin and coriander, just to name a few. It is a real experience and a pleasure to watch the local vendor from Al-Baba Spices trying to invite the tourists to drink tea with him. The market sellers are not overwhelming and will offer a friendly 'thank you and welcome to our beautiful city' even if you don't take up their offer and simply walk by. But who can resist the amount of fresh nuts, spices and coffee on offer?

Something for everyone

Whether you are single, with a group or with your family, the dive resorts and hotels have everything to suit your situation and budget. If you wish to be entertained, wined and dined, the five-star Mövenpick Resort and Spa Tala Bay Aqaba, together with Sinai Divers, is a good family choice. The resort is only 15 minutes from the town centre and 25 minutes from the international Airport King Hussein. Only a few minutes away is the Radisson Blu, with beach club, apartments and a small marina. There, directly on the beach is the international-speaking dive centre Extra Divers. Under the guidance of Mike Cristiani and

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his girlfriend Silvia, you are assured of a very warm, English-spoken welcome. Among the guests are Mandy and Derek from Leeds. They are on a roundtrip through Jordan and have taken time out to enjoy the local house reef. The entry and exit into the Red Sea is reached from the main beach and has clear, calm swimming pool conditions. Who says you can't dive the pier? Among wallets, watches and phones, soft and hard coral have taken hold on the rusty structure. It is perfect for children and beginners. Carry on diving and you reach Magic Block - here, fish life explodes. Before you know it, 70 minutes have passed as you try and take in all the different species of marine life which seem to gather in one place. Here you find everything from moray eels, sea-horses, lionfish and frogfish - the memory card on your camera is soon full. But it would be unfair not to mention the local dive centres. The Sindbad Dive Club is situated at the Berenice Beach Club. It belongs to the five-star Dive Resort of the Sindbad Group and shines with every comfort and special ambience. Under the professional guidance of Khaled Kenawy it is a perfect place to continue your dive training.



Anthias hover over the reef



Cedar Pride crow's nest



Soft corals adorn the shipwreck



Coral nursery

“Red corals hang like fat grapes and if you look a little closer, you find plenty of macro-life among the fine display”

Back to the Pride

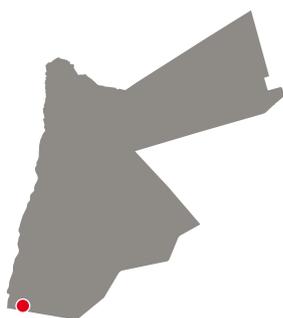
It is our pleasure to dive with Silvia and Khaled at the wreck of the Cedar Pride. What a treat! A lot has changed in 20 years and she does her name proud. She still lies on her side and is richly covered in soft and hard coral, but the crow's-nest is the best part. Red corals hang like fat grapes and if you look a little closer, you find plenty of macro-life among the fine display. With more than 27 dive sites, nearly 500 fish species, 127 types of hard coral and 300 different types of soft coral (that scientists have counted) in the Gulf of Aqaba, it is already enough to see. With this first-class diving, the local Jordanian dive centres are not to be underrated. Most of them have their own little, family-friendly resorts and offer childminding while you enjoy your dive. Remember the Red Sea Dive Centre? It is still there. The same bus Udo and Mohamed used to drive to the dive site nearly 20 years ago is waiting for divers. Today, it is his son Abdullah who greets us with a warm welcome. A few hundred metres further are the Aqaba Adventure Divers, with own hotel and shuttle service to town and dive sites.

Conclusion

Regarding the diving, do your homework. Those hoping to get an adrenaline kick by coming face-to-face with shark or manta ray will be disappointed. Here, due to low current conditions, there is not enough food available for these pelagics to survive, but on the other hand, this makes Aqaba an excellent dive location for beginners, families and those wishing to continue dive training. Experienced underwater photographers will particularly enjoy the swimming-pool-like conditions.

To sum up, a stay in Aqaba is not only for divers, but offers the whole family a trip of a lifetime. Jordan is a welcoming country, with hospitable people and great diving. It is an unforgettable trip to the Golden Triangle. ■

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW JORDAN, MIDDLE EAST



HOW TO GET THERE

There are flights from all major UK airports with Turkish Airlines to Amman and Aqaba. The possibility exists to travel via ferry or speedboat from Taba and Nuweiba to Aqaba.

WHEN TO VISIT

It is a year-round travel destination, but ideal times are March to October.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

British citizens need a valid passport with six months left to expiry. A visa will be issued at the Queen Alia International and King Hussein International Airport.

CURRENCY

Dinar (£1 = 1.11JD).

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

A wealth of good restaurants and cafes in the city offer fresh local cuisine.

VERDICT

Aqaba is the ideal place for a combined holiday for divers, non-divers and the whole family. With its laid-back atmosphere, culture, rich history, duty-free shopping and diving, the city of Aqaba is a must on the holiday list. It is a perfect base from which to visit Petra, Wadi Rum, the Dead Sea and much more.