



An Oasis of **SERENITY**

Do you wish to relax, spend some time in the slow lane and still manage to enjoy outstanding dive adventures right in front of your hotel door? **ROSE KEFRIG** knows of a good address in the southern Red Sea...

Photographs by UDO KEFRIG/TEAM OCEANPICS.DE



Heading off on a house reef adventure

A distinct murmur runs through the fully occupied plane. You can feel the tension rising. Two seats in front, a young family prepares for landing. We are flying over the Egyptian desert toward the coast of Marsa Alam. The clouds, which a few minutes ago looked like fluffy, white sheep in the afternoon sun, have pushed together and turned an uncanny yellow. Distant lightning bolts flash across the sky. Never before has Egypt seemed so threatening. Does it herald a sandstorm, an apocalypse, or maybe another warning for the many tourists and divers who wish to travel to the 'Land of the Pharaohs'? My mind wanders back to Facebook. Friends had bombarded us with questions: 'Why would you want to go there?' 'Do you think it is safe to travel to a crisis-ridden country?' Yes, it's precisely what we want! We have a loving, long-distance relationship with this beautiful country. Over the years we have travelled to various dive destinations in Egypt. We have learned to love and appreciate the people, the landscape, and the desert. As divers we are in complete awe of a magnificent and tropical wonder underwater, second to none.

What spiritual tranquillity!

Accompanied by heavy wind, the aircraft touches down. As the door to the plane finally opens, a storm erupts outside. Lightning explodes and torrential rain falls in grey sheets from the sky. The parched ground greedily soaks up any drop of rain offered. Tomorrow the desert will bloom. It is nice to see the arrival hall busy. Half an hour later we are met by the English-speaking guest manager of the Oasis Dive Resort, Ashraf. He has our entry visas ready and hurries us through customs. With luggage quickly stowed away in the waiting car, he speeds along the Red Sea coast. To the north, as well as the south of Marsa Alam, hotels sprout out of the ground, many with their own dive centres. However, only 25 minutes south of the airport of Marsa Alam is a wonderful little 'Oasis'. It is an intimate, quiet hotel for divers and watersports enthusiasts set in tranquil grounds. Nevertheless, it stands out from all the other places, as the word 'no' plays a big role. The concept of the hotel is based around diving, serenity and relaxation. Do you wish to be entertained by animation teams, all-inclusive bars and restaurants, and have TVs and radios in your room? Sorry, no-can-do - non-existent! Instead, only half-board is offered and all you can do is sit back and enjoy the simple, international kitchen with an Arabic flair. At lunchtime, the restaurant offers snacks or larger meals at affordable prices. A popular choice on the menu seems to be grilled camel meat. A few bites were all it took for me to push my plate away and consign camel meat to the 'done it, never have to do it again' category. The rooms are basic but clean. Built in typical Nubian style, the 50 bungalows have their own, individual ambience and the terrace offers beautiful views across the glistening sea. It is perfect for those wishing to avoid the perils of mass tourism and who simply appreciate seclusion and diving.



Vibrant soft coral



Turtle feeding on seagrass

Always an open ear!

Since 2005, the Oasis Dive Centre at Marsa Alam has been run successfully as a joint venture by Werner Lau and Rolf Schmidt from Sinai Divers. It was also a good choice for two special people. Ilona and Roland Lewin took on the challenge to run the dive centre for this popular hotel. With their warm-hearted, open and often hilarious ways, every diver is made to feel special. From novice scuba divers to advanced, everyone is well cared for.

To 'dive' for

The well-known offshore dive sites of Sha'ab Marsa Alam, Elphinstone Reef und Sha'ab Samadai are easily reached with dayboat trips. On the other hand, the coastal reef offers countless dive sites right in front of your doorstep and entry into a unique and diverse underwater world. A minibus is used to ferry the divers to the secluded sites a little further away. There is something for everyone, and we have a dive planned at the wreck of the Hamada. With a length of 65 metres and a breadth of 11 metres, she is not particularly large, but worth a visit. It's a long drive through the desert, and despite the rain, the landscape is dry and bleak. Our equipment has already been transported by pick-up to the secluded dive site. Carpets have been rolled out and our gear has been unloaded. After the briefing and gear-donning, we take giant strides into the water to escape the heat of the fierce sun. The entry point to the shipwreck of this small coastal cargo vessel lies only a few metres away. Fate struck on 29 June 1993 as the vessel was on her way from Jeddah to Suez. Fully loaded with styrodur-plastic granules and other synthetic material - which are still visible above and underwater - she apparently struck an unknown object before she came to rest on the seabed. There are many mysterious stories surrounding her final resting place, however, our guide explains that the captain apparently tried to take a short cut during a storm. She now lies on her starboard side in two sections and is home to a wealth of fish. Bags of polythene granules can still be seen in the cargo hold and are often washed up onto the beach. It is a beautiful, bewitching place and not just for 'wreckies'. Laying in a max depth of 20m, it is suitable for divers of all categories. With a dive guide it is an excellent first wreck dive. Even for photographers she makes a fine subject as she is covered with soft and hard corals.

"After the briefing and gear-donning, we take giant strides into the water to escape the heat of the fierce sun"



Gigantic seafans



“Built in typical Nubian style, the 50 bungalows have their own, individual ambience and the terrace offers beautiful views across the glistening sea”

The Hamada wreck is covered in life



Pristine hard corals



House reef

Shark and manta sightings are not unusual. It is not rare to see dolphins or turtles cavort in front of the splendid house reef. The shallow part is at 12m, excellent for beginners and perfect for macro photography. However, occasionally it is to be expected that wind and wave conditions make an entry or exit impossible. “Diving is then prohibited, but we have so many other dive sites to choose from that you will be spoilt for choice,” said Roland and Ilona. Sites like Marsa Abu Dabab in the north and south, with lush green sea grass, are home to green turtles, a dugong and rays. Enchanting hard coral reefs are just as fascinating as Ras Samadai, with a labyrinth of tight canyons. Further highlights include daily boat trips to Sha’ab Marsa Alam, where Napoleons are regular visitors. At the south-easterly outer reef, enthralling encounters with white- and black-tip reef sharks are a notch in your logbook. It is obvious that diving at the Oasis Resort plays a clearly decisive role. Most guests are divers, but you are given as much freedom to explore the area as you wish. Briefings are held in English and depending upon experience, you may wish to dive with your buddy or a guide. In addition to daytrips and treatments at the Wellness Spa at the hotel, check out the Bedouin Tent, enjoy a shisha and watch the stars on a clear night. Just retreat, relax and regenerate from the stress of everyday life. It is a true haven, a real ‘Oasis’ of well-being for body, spirit and mind. ■

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW MARSA ALAM, EGYPT



HOW TO GET THERE

There are direct flights from London to both Marsa Alam and Hurghada. The transfer from Marsa Alam to Oasis takes about 30 minutes, and from Hurghada about four hours.

WHEN TO VISIT

Egypt is a year-round travel destination.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

All visitors must have a valid passport with at least six months left on it. The visitor’s permit/visa can be obtained at the airport on arrival for a fee of approximately 25 Euro.

CURRENCY

Egyptian pound (LE). (£1 = LE12.05).

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

The kitchen is a fusion of Egyptian and European cooking. Meals are taken buffet-style or a la carte in the restaurant or open terrace.

VERDICT

The Oasis is situated in south Egypt, about 20km north of the small village of Marsa Alam. It lies directly on the coast of the Red Sea, on a long, sweeping beach. It is perfect for those seeking peace and tranquillity, and stunning diving on tap.