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# SPORT DIVER

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# BROTHERS IN ARMS



Seacology, one of the world's premier environmental organisations, teamed up with HEPCA to protect a coral reef in Egypt – Mark Evans was there to witness it

Photographs by **MARK EVANS**

**T**he Egyptian Red Sea is a hugely popular dive destination for British divers and I have visited the area over 35 times in the last ten years or so, but I am always looking for another excuse to visit the region as I love the people, the culture and – most of all – the diving. So I had no hesitation in jumping on a plane to Marsa Alam International Airport in November to join a team from US-based non-profit environmental organisation Seacology, which had teamed up with HEPCA to install 25 mooring buoys around the five islands of Wadi El Gemal

Hamata, declared a national park by the Ministry of Environment in 2003.

Seacology funds its worldwide campaigns and projects through donations, a fellows programme and an innovative travel programme, enabling supporters to embark on unique expeditions where they can see the work being done with their funding and enjoy some of the best diving in the world at the same time. To this end, the organisation had chartered Royal Evolution, one of the best liveaboards to ply any ocean, never mind just the Red Sea, and the plan

was to board, get the check dives out of the way, head over to Wadi El Gemal Hamata to meet with HEPCA representatives and see some of the mooring buoys actually being

installed, and then set off on an awesome one-of-a-kind itinerary taking in some of the most-superlative offshore dive sites the Egyptian Red Sea has to offer.

The way the trip was going to pan out was pretty much summed up by our very first dive. By the time we'd got everyone onboard and made our way out to the fringing reef near to Marsa Alam's Port Ghalib, the sun was starting to set. The check-dive was now going to end up being a half-night-dive. Now check-dives the world over tend to be on training reefs, with not a lot to see, and while this

one was conducted on one of the better local dive sites, I'd done it in the days previous while being land-based, so I opted to leave my camera on board and just hop in for a dive with my new American friends so I

could see what they thought of the Red Sea. Big mistake! You'd have thought after so long in this job I would know better, but you live and learn...

We all dropped into the warm water and descended to the reef, which was a mere 8-10m below us. In buddy pairs, we slowly made our way through the colourful coral garden, checking out porcupine pufferfish, giant moray eels, blue-spotted rays and more of the usual reef dwellers, before turning the dive at 30 minutes – as it was starting to get dark – and heading back towards the boat along the reef wall. It was at this point that I found myself at the back of the group, and for some reason glanced behind me.

Approaching along the wall, totally silent, was a two-and-a-half metre male bottlenose dolphin! I quickly got the attention of the divers nearest to me, and we watched in awe as this magnificent creature cruised right through the middle of us. I cursed the fact I didn't have my camera with me. To rub our faces in it even more, the bloody thing played around with our group all the way back to the boat, and at one

**TOP TIP**

Always take your camera with you on every Red

Sea dive – you never know what will turn up!

This Napoleon wrasse was not camera shy in the slightest!





Doug Herst tracks a sabre squirrelfish on the reef

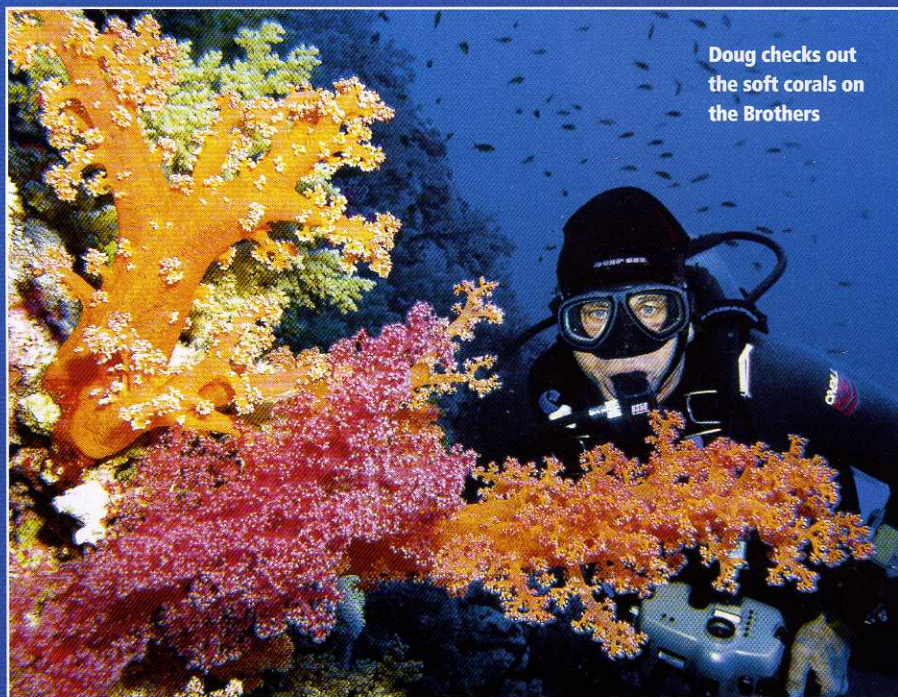


**“ I am afraid the muttered expletives through my regulator can’t be reprinted in a family magazine such as this! ”**

point stopped barely a metre in front of me and gave me a knowing nod, as much to say ‘next time you’ll bring your camera, won’t you?’. I am afraid the muttered expletives through my regulator can’t be reprinted in a family magazine such as this!

The following day was devoted to meeting with Amr Ali, chairman of HEPKA, who gave a presentation about the work of the organisation, before a handful of the Seacology team went diving with the HEPKA divers to try their hand at drilling a mooring into the seabed. After a dive around one of the nearby islands – to see what was being protected – the entire Seacology team was whisked ashore and treated to a night of Bedouin entertainment in Wadi El Gemal national park.

The next morning, the real diving kicked off, with our arrival at one of the top offshore dive sites – the Brothers.



Doug checks out the soft corals on the Brothers



A diver swims through the wreck of the Aida

## The Brothers

The Brothers, or El Akhawan, as they are known in Arabic, are featureless little islands which poke out of the middle of the Red Sea kilometres from anywhere. Big Brother boasts a lighthouse, which was built by the British back in 1880, but otherwise, they nothing to get excited about. However, it is under the water that these sites come alive. The Brothers are pinnacles which rise up from way below recreational diving limits, and as such they are a magnet for marine life. Continually washed by sometimes extremely strong currents, the coral growth is awesome, providing a riot of colour in stark contrast to the barren surface above.

Big Brother has another ace up its sleeve, or two in fact. As well as stunning walls supporting multiple species of marine life, it has two wrecks embedded into its sheer sides. The Numidia is an English freighter which sank in 1901 after striking the northern tip of the island. It now sits vertically on the wall, concreted into place by over 100 years of coral growth. Much of the bow has been destroyed from the constant wave action, but the rest of the vessel is in a remarkably good condition and drops down to around 80m.

Around the western side of Big Brother, you will find the Aida, an Egyptian troop transport which sank in 1957 while trying to secure its mooring. She subsequently broke into two, but the largely intact midships section now lies pointing up the reef between 30-60m. Though she hasn't been down anywhere near as long as the Numidia, she still boasts superb corals.

The wrecks are undoubtedly the major draw on Big Brother, but the south plateau, near to where the liveboards moor up, is covered in marine life and makes a great dive in its own right. The day we did it the Seacology gods were watching over us and we ended up spending the entire dive with no less than four thresher sharks.



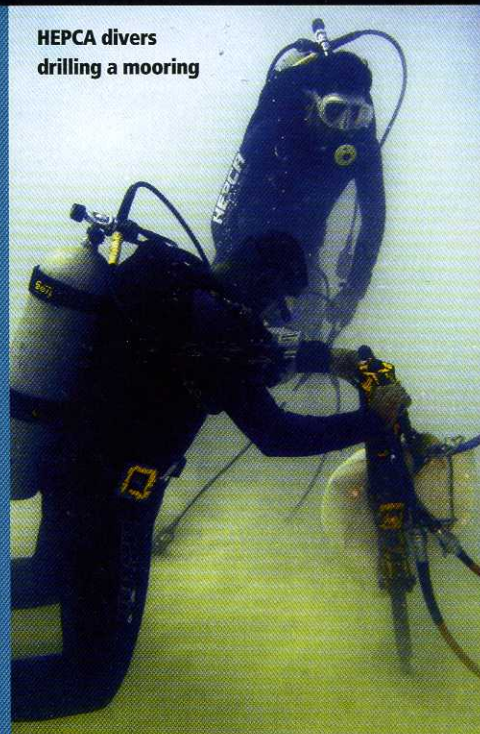
## Guardian of the Red Sea

HEPCA (Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association) is a non-governmental organisation with a mandate for the protection and conservation of the land and marine ecology and the underwater environment of the Red Sea and its coastline.

The organisation has been at the forefront of several campaigns, including a drive to protect sharks in Egyptian waters and raise awareness of the historical shipwrecks in the area, but perhaps its biggest success has been a long-term project to provide and install mooring buoys at key dive sites throughout the Egyptian Red Sea. With more than 1,000 moorings in place, this is by far the largest mooring system in the world.

[www.hepca.com](http://www.hepca.com)

HEPCA divers drilling a mooring





Soft coral on  
Daedalous

Little Brother is like a miniature version of Big Brother. Again, there is immense coral growth all over the sheer walls, but this little island tends to be more-popular with sharks, in particular grey reef sharks. Unfortunately, we'd used up our pelagic sightings on Big Brother and this time around, they failed to put in an appearance. On my last visit I was surrounded by several chunky specimens while hanging in the blue off the northern plateau.

### Daedalous

Daedalous is a huge circular reef which drops away into the depths on all sides and is absolutely smothered in marine life. A lighthouse sits atop the reef, warning boats away from this potential hazard in the middle of one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. It is known as a regular spot for scalloped hammerheads, and so we were looking forward to encountering these peculiar sharks.

Sadly, our luck deserted us completely, and despite completing two dives in their usual haunts, we failed to see a solitary hammerhead. Last time I was here, in August 2007, we had shoals of 11-15 swimming close to us. It just goes to show that you can never predict what nature will deliver up to you.

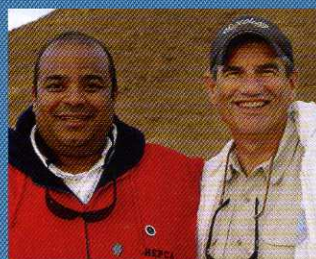


Jacks cruise  
along the  
wall at  
Daedalous

## PROTECTING THE PLANET

Seacology is one of the world's leading non-profit environmental organisations, and it exists with the sole purpose of preserving the highly endangered biodiversity of islands throughout the world. In the last 400 years, the majority of the world's plant and animal extinctions have taken place on islands, leading biologist Dr. Peter J Bryant to call this unprecedented rate of species extinctions 'one of the swiftest and most-profound biological catastrophes in the history of the earth'.

Indigenous people are all too often faced with the dilemma of choosing



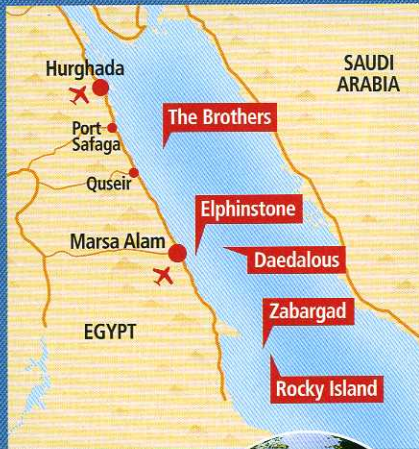
HEPCA's Amr Ali with Duane Silerstein, Seacology exec director

between protecting their precious natural resources, and economic development. Seacology searches for win-win situations where both the local environment is protected and islanders receive some tangible benefit for doing so. In Falealupo, Samoa, Seacology built a

critically needed school in exchange for the establishment of a 30,000-acre forest reserve. In Vuna Village, Fiji, Seacology is constructing a kindergarten in exchange for the establishment of a 4,752-acre forest preserve and two marine protected areas totaling 3,010 acres. [www.seacology.org](http://www.seacology.org)

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

## Offshore marine parks Egypt



### How to get there

There are numerous charter flights direct from the UK into Marsa Alam International Airport, and most liveboards accessing the offshore marine parks leave from nearby Port Ghalib.



### When to go

Egypt is an all-year-round diving destination, but September, October and November are known for oceanic sightings.

“ Seeing no less than four thresher sharks in one dive was simply unbelievable ”

### Entry requirements

A tourist visa, which can be purchased on arrival at the airport. Prices range from £10 to £16, so take some change.



### Currency

Egyptian pounds  
– LE8.40 = £1.



### Where to eat

Port Ghalib now boasts various western chains if you want a change from local food.

### Where to meet

The liveboards moor up directly in front of a TGIs – perfect for an après-trip tittle, such as Sakara Gold lager.



## SPORT DIVER VERDICT

The offshore marine parks nearly always deliver some world-class experiences, and for those who are suitably qualified, they should definitely be on the ‘must-dive’ list



Oceanic whitetip shark in the blue off Elphinstone

### Rocky Island and Zabargad

Rocky Island and its near-neighbour Zabargad lie far to the south of Daedalous, so it is a long sail to get there, but in the past the epic journey has been worth it, with multiple grey reef shark sightings and even manta rays putting in an appearance. This time, they all stayed away, but Rocky – which is very similar underwater to Little Brother, with sheer walls covered in gorgeous soft corals – did allow me to tick off a first. My inaugural encounter with an oceanic whitetip shark.

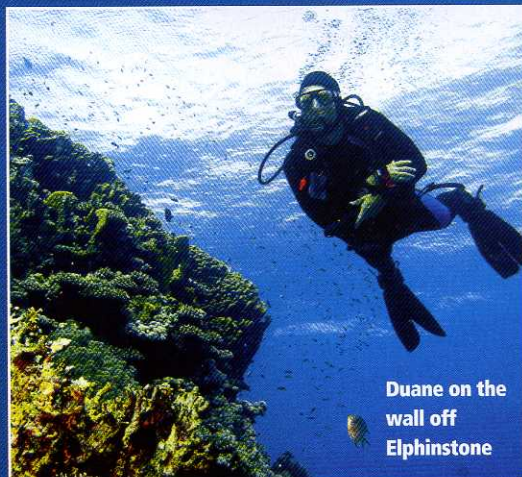
I have seen hundreds of photographs of these majestic sharks, but seeing one in the flesh is a different matter. It just swam so effortlessly, so fluidly – and wouldn’t come within shooting distance!

### Elphinstone

We rounded out our itinerary with a stop-off at Elphinstone. Elphinstone used to be a force to be reckoned with, enjoying legendary status among Red Sea enthusiasts for its sheer walls, strong currents, fantastic coral growth and prolific number of sharks, but then it became accessible by dayboats – you even get big RIBs blasting out from the shore – and the hammerheads, grey reef and silvertip sharks pretty much moved on elsewhere.

However, Elphinstone does have one trump card – oceanic whitetips. These sharks will approach divers closely and repeatedly if they are in the mood, and in September, October and November are generally a staple on the south plateau.

I’d dived Elphinstone from the shore prior to joining the liveboard and we’d failed to see any oceanics, and it looked like we’d be blown out again when myself and my buddy Doug Herst reached the plateau to find several other divers and no sharks. I deployed by DSMB and motioned for Doug to follow me, figuring we would drift with the current and then get picked up by the RIB. The current was really pumping, and I turned to tell Doug we’d surface – and then pointed and yelled at him to turn around to see the two-metre oceanic whitetip shark sat a metre or so behind him! Our luck was back! Any ideas of surfacing went out of the window, and Doug and I enjoyed over ten minutes of repeated close passes by the shark. It would vanish from our sight before reappearing out of the blue and heading straight for us. It would then veer off at the last minute, and repeat the process all over again. It was showing some interest in my DSMB and camera strobe, and we decided to call it a day. However, getting into the RIB with an oceanic whitetip shark hanging around on the other side of the boat was certainly interesting!



Duane on the wall off Elphinstone

### Conclusion

I am a committed fan of Red Sea diving, but for me this trip served as a reminder just how good the diving is in this region. It was also heartening to see a major worldwide organisation like Seacology linking up with HEPCA to help protect Egypt’s delicate underwater environment, which further reinforces how highly regarded across the globe this special sea really is. ■