

## Marsa & St Johns 2004

This marked a further significant change in our annual diving holidays. Ken Blay, Richard Vivian and myself had established a good rapport in South Africa (see elsewhere on the site) and decided that we should try a live-aboard for our diving this year. For me this would be a first experience (other than 1-2 night trips) whereas Ken and Richard had both tried and enjoyed liveaboards in the Red Sea and elsewhere. Anyway we duly booked a week on board MV Blue Pearl departing from Port Ghalib near Marsa Alam for November 2004. We picked the boat specifically as it was new and had an excellent specification. We also wanted to try the relatively unspoilt waters in the deep South of the Egyptian Red Sea around St Johns Reef. By now there were direct flights from Gatwick to Marsa Alam so flight and transfer (10km) were easy. The euphoria went when we got to the jetty to find that we were now on Sea Whisper, Blue Pearl having been given to a party of Germans. Even more annoying was that she was moored just down the jetty so we actually went on board for a visit. Blue Pearl was everything we expected and poor old Sea Whisper compared badly especially as we were allocated to a 3 man cabin smaller than the 2 berth cabins on BP. However, there is little that you can do at that point other than register your dissatisfaction with the tour operator. There is no point taking issue with the crew or the dive guides, all that does is poison the atmosphere for the whole week, something that one or two of our fellow passengers failed to appreciate. Force Majeur on the boat aside we did have an excellent week visiting sites at St Johns and Fury Shoal which were new to us and totally unspoilt. With live-boards you get at least 3 and often 4 dives a day and we all thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience. There were many interesting sights but perhaps the most memorable were the free swimming Morays at Shaab Claudia and Kens attempt to feed one with a piece of fish which resulted in the poor Moray almost choking to death. Despite the hiccups over the boat (which were resolved satisfactorily once back in the UK) we had a wonderful time and decided that live-aboards would be the way to go in future. Incidentally, this was my first Red Sea trip with my recently acquired Olympus C750 digital camera and housing. Whilst they do have some drawbacks and rarely give the same ultimate quality of a film camera, the benefits far outweigh the problems for indifferent photographers like me. Firstly the cameras are pretty damn clever over focus and exposure and secondly, you can blast away without worrying overmuch about running out of film (or the cost of processing). All the rubbish can be deleted back on the boat and the cards can be emptied onto a laptop or suchlike and freed up for the next dive. Plus you can take video, low grade admittedly but still a giant step forward for certain types of photography. Best £400 or so I ever spent.

Addendum: despite doing Red Sea liveaboards regularly for the next 10 years we never did get to travel on the Blue Pearl!

We did 19 dives in total at the following sites:

Abu Dabkar – 16M	Elphinstone – 25M	Shab Marsa Alam – 19M
Cave Reef St Johns – 18M	Abu Bascalla – 15M	Habibi Ali – 29M
Small Gota St Johns – 25M	Big Bota – 24M	Sirnaka Island – 22M
Shaab Maksur (Fury) – 31M	Shaab Claudia – 21M	Wadi Gimal – 11M
El Shouna – 17M	Port Ghalib - 23M	

If you click on any pictures which have a black border, you can link to a video clip. These are being added slowly as they take a long time to prepare



Brown Puffer Fish, very angry, note the spikes on his back



Bannerfish



Two Batfish hiding under a large coral.



Napolean Wrasse showing how big a mouth he has.



Bluespot hiding under a coral umbrella



Yellow Butterfly fish



Clownfish with 2 small babies



Crocodile fish



Nice multicoloured corals



Crown of Thorns starfish, they devastate the coral if allowed to thrive in large numbers



Contrary to appearances, Mohammed is not water skiing, he is actually standing on Elphinstone Reef attaching the boats



Featherstar anemone

mooring lines. Not my choice of a job



Funny little flatfish hard to see on a sandy bottom



Moray swimming free at Shab Claudia



Two Lionfish hunting at night in the light of our torches. You can see the little green chappy they are after - bottom right



Left to Right, Me, Ken and Richard



More lionfish of a different variety



Closeup of the other type of Lionfish



Another variety of Sea Cucumber.



Close up of a Moray, another benefit of the C750, it has a superb telephoto lens.



Biggish Napoleon Wrasse



Pufferfish at night asleep on a rock (well he was until we arrived)



Sunset on way back from Dolphin House Reef



Closeup of a Blue Triggerfish. Amazing colours which you never see at a distance.



Another pufferfish curled up asleep



A Squirrelfish at night trying to hide in the coral.



Dive group swimming into the cave system at St Johns



Taken from the water whilst waiting for Ken and Richard to finish kitting up.  
Note that everyone else has gone!



Port Ghalib Marina near Marsa Alam. This was November 2004. In July 2006 we stayed at a huge hotel which now stands where you can see sand a rock in the background.



Dining room of the Sea Whisper. Not sure if Richard is dancing or not.



Our dive group at the end of the week, plus most of the crew



Pool and some of the rooms at the hotel where we stayed the last night



Hotel Beach



Our room is in the background.