



Grab Your Fins

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PHOTOS BY ANDREW SLATER AND ERICH REBOUCAS
COURTESY OF CAMEL DIVE CLUB.

Egypt may be best known for its pyramids and other pharaonic paraphernalia, but hidden gems lie in the depths of the Red Sea.

I sink deeper into the Red Sea and the discomfort in my stomach grows every time the swell tosses the mooring line up and down. From five meters below the surface I can see the hulls of the boats, but below me only cold darkness and the odd fish. Despite my queasiness I cling to the line and as I go deeper the tumbling effects of the waves grow fainter. When the massive wreck slowly emerges beneath me different feelings build up in my stomach: excitement and anxiety.

The coastal waters of the Red Sea are famous for their jagged coral reefs and rich marine life. Add a few shipwrecks to the mix and you have some of the best dive sites in the world. In the past two decades, tourism—specifically tourism geared towards divers and snorkelers—has mush-

roomed in the area, with the hub being the resort town of Sharm el-Sheik, near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. Only 30 km away is the legendary Ras Mohammed National Park and further west, deep in the Gulf of Suez, is the SS *Thistlegorm*, arguably one of the most majestic shipwrecks on the world's ocean floor.

The tale of Britain's *Thistlegorm* is extraordinary. A German bomber destroyed the ill-fated ship in October 1941 when it was en route to Egypt to deliver supplies to the British 8th Army, during the North African campaign. Since the Mediterranean was under German control the *Thistlegorm* had to travel around the southern tip of Africa and was destroyed only a short distance from its final destination. The German *Luftwaffe* needed just one bomb to accomplish its task. It



penetrated one of the holds of the ship and detonated its payload of ammunition. The explosion killed nine crewmembers and was so forceful that it launched two railway locomotives stacked on deck into the air.

Located just 30 meters beneath the surface, the *Thistlegorm* was mostly forgotten until the French explorer Jacques Cousteau discovered the wreck in the 1950s after receiving information from the local Bedouins about its position. However, he kept its location a secret, allegedly to unload a significant amount of gold from it—rumors that are almost certainly unfounded. In the 1990s it was rediscovered and since then has become a favorite among scuba divers.

Although it is only 7:30 am, there is increasing commotion on the lower deck of our diving

boat *Schiss*. Fifteen divers and two instructors are busy preparing the equipment for the day's dives. Buoyancy control devices—or BCDs—are strapped to the scuba tanks and the regulators are checked for a steady flow of air. This is a routine procedure for most of the divers, but nonetheless a crucial one, so everybody wants to take care of it themselves.

Claudio, our instructor, briefs us on the dive: twice to the *Thistlegorm*, first around the wreck, then inside it. "It will be a very romantic dive, very sexy," he says in his charming Italian accent, although I'm left wondering how a scuba dive can possibly be sexy. If we bump into divers from another dive club, Claudio tells us not to worry. "Just close their tanks and kick them away." And if we happen to grab the wrong mooring line at

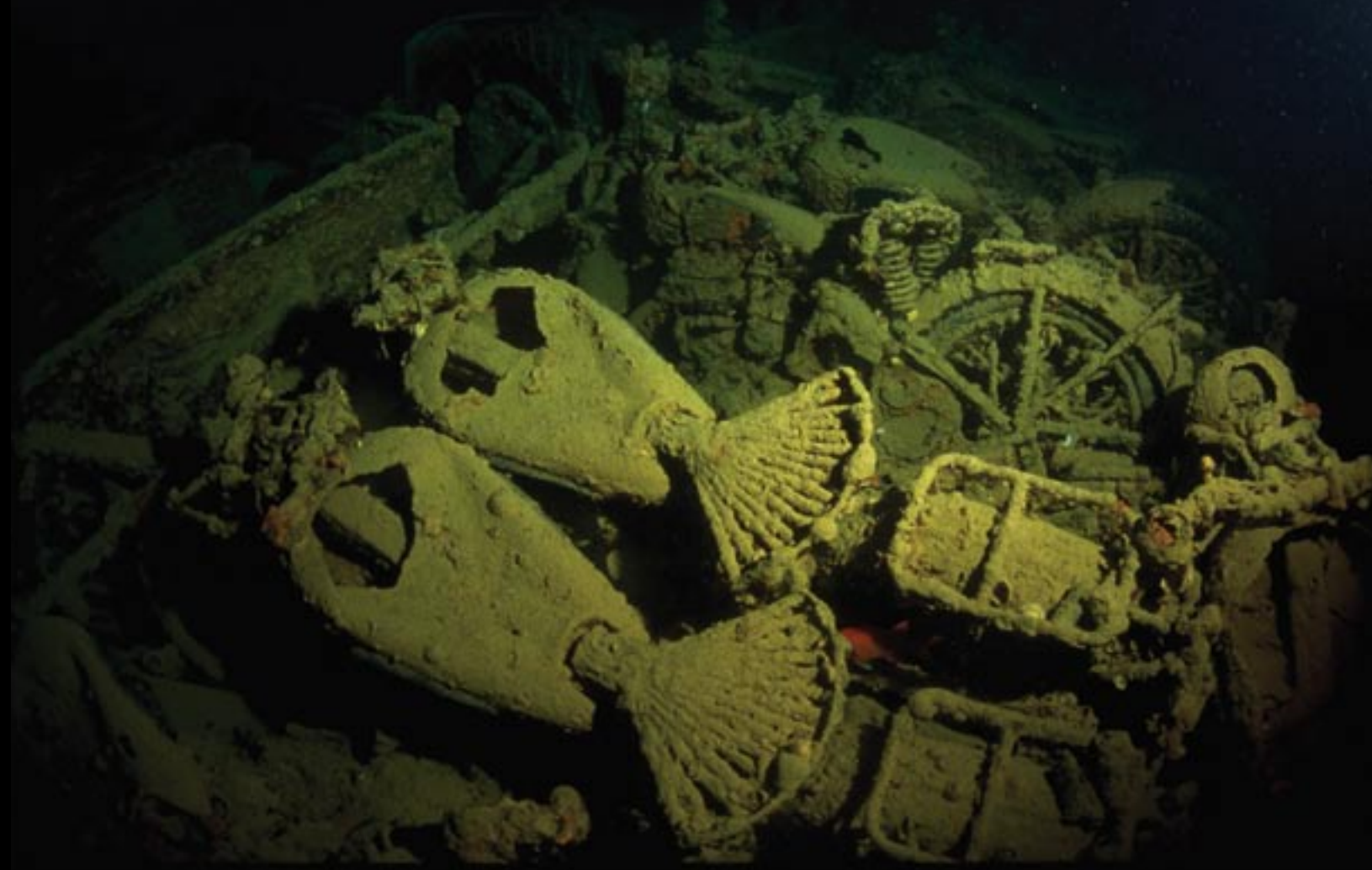


FINDING NEMO

Few dive sites show up as consistently on lists of the world's best as Shark and Yolanda Reef in the Ras Mohammed National Park. Because of Ras's position at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula, where the currents of the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba meet, the diversity of marine life is exceptional. Over 200 species of corals and 1,000 species of fish can be found in area, including lionfish, barracudas, hammerheads and anemofish (think Nemo in *Finding Nemo*).

The two coral reefs rest on a single pinnacle rising 800 meters above the seabed. Drift dives, where the tidal currents transport the divers around the area, is the standard method for exploring the reefs. One route takes you from Shark Reef with its gorgonian corals and scorpionfish, over to the Yolanda Reef, where nesting sea turtles delight onlookers. The reef is named after the Cypriot freighter *Yolanda*, which got stuck on the reef during a bad storm in 1980. A few years later, another storm caused the wreck to fall into the abyss, leaving behind some surprising detritus like bathtubs, shower basins and toilet bowls. Hundreds of toilet bowls.

Camel Dive Club. cameldive.com



the end of the dive and inadvertently climb up on a boat other than *Sehss*, "just go aboard and steal their equipment," he says, albeit tongue-in-cheek. Apparently there's no love between the rivaling dive clubs in Sharm.

"It's dive o'clock, grab your fins!" At this cue, everybody squeezes into their wetsuits, straps on their weight-belts, fins and BCDs, and defogs their masks by spitting in them—all in less than two minutes. Yes, despite all the fancy defog solutions now available, a shot of old-fashioned saliva is still the best. After this little ritual I insert the regulator in my mouth, put one hand on my mask and the other on my weight-belt, and jump into the turquoise sea.

Two black-and-yellow-striped bannerfish stare at me with their curious eyes, while in the distance a school of barracuda swims past. I spot an enormous crocodilefish lying flat on the sandy bottom giving me the evil eye, probably because I saw through its clever camouflage.

According to my depth gauge, I'm 28 meters

underneath the surface of the water. That's almost ten meters deeper than I've ever been before. As I float in near-weightlessness along *Thistlegorm's* hull I see thousands of bubbles that divers are exhaling escape from holes and crevices inside. The aft section of the 128-meter-long wreck—the epicenter of the blast—is destroyed, while the forward section is mainly intact. A lonely locomotive rests a few meters away, now home to moray eels, stingrays and other underwater beasts.

Before entering one of the *Thistlegorm's* holds I take a deep breath in anticipation. The doorway is dark and foreboding—not for claustrophobics. Once my eyes have grown accustomed to the darkness inside I see what resembles an army surplus store more than anything else. The only difference being the exotic fish swimming around the equipment, ranging from rubber boots to armored Bedford trucks.

Some of the cargo looks surprisingly well preserved. The tires of a few Norton motorcycles standing almost upright in a neat row are still

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inflated, and I can read the year stamped on the bottom of enormous artillery shells scattered around the floor of the hold: 1929. "I'd better not touch this," I think to myself. Even the ceilings of the holds amaze me with their mirror-like appearance, caused by bubbles, exhaled by divers, that are trapped underwater to form an air pocket. Those bubbles aren't exactly harmless because the air in them accelerates the erosion of the wreck. As a result there have been calls for a limit to diving at the site, or even an outright ban.

Where oxygen is abundant you never even think about breathing. When you have only 200 bars of air squeezed into a 12-liter scuba tank, inhaling and exhaling sparingly almost becomes an obsession. Despite my best efforts I realize that I've reached the agreed safety limit of 70 bars and all too quickly my instructor gives me the dreaded signal to return to the boat. When my head finally breaks the water I inflate my BCD with what remains of the tank, spit out my mouthpiece and inhale as much fresh air in my lungs as humanly possible. ◻

