



PLUNGING A METRE
BELOW THE SURFACE IN
SEARCH OF NEMO IS ONE
THING, BUT TRAINING
AS A DIVER TAKES BEING
COMFORTABLE IN THE BIG
BLUE TO A WHOLE NEW
LEVEL. **MARIE CLELAND**
PUT HER FEAR BEHIND HER
IN SEARCH OF THE NEXT
BIG ADVENTURE

DIVE ANOTHER DAY



ADOLFO MACIOCCO





Clockwise from here, with instructor Sam Ryan, learning how to equalise on the descent; in Egypt, you can have close encounters with amazing wildlife while you're still learning; training in the pool; snorkelling one of the "gardens" near Na'ama Bay



SLIPPING OFF THE PIER IN ONE SMOOTH

motion I felt the deep blue water envelop me, heavy tanks becoming weightless, unwieldy fins gliding me away from shore. Catching glimpses of neon colours darting beneath me, I descended into the blue. No sign of the ocean floor, no sight of the reef around me. I was in the Blue Hole in Egypt's Red Sea, a 70m-wide natural hole in the coral table that has become one of the area's most famous attractions; I was about to find out why. Following my guide across the abyss, we reached a shelf bursting with coral and

a rainbow of sealife, reds like velvet, blues electric. A week ago, I could only dream of this moment. Having gradually overcome my fear of open water as a young adult (yes, *Jaws* had a lot to answer for), I had taken up water sports such as surfing and snorkelling. Finally this summer I made the leap to donning scuba gear, wanting to embark on a new adventure. Now, I was a fully fledged diver embarking on my first real excursion into the great unknown.

The journey began in Sharm El Sheikh, the best diving destination in spitting distance of Europe, where I enrolled in a dive course with Camel Dive (*cameldive.com*). "They're consistently voted the best



dive company in the Red Sea," my dive doctor had told me excitedly as I passed my medical in London. I was relieved to hear this as I had experienced the worst kind of cowboy operators on a snorkelling trip in Egypt once before, so I was keen to try the other end of the spectrum, one of the top-quality companies. With a hint of jealousy the doctor wished me well with my training, his look of yearning a precursor of the "bug" I too was about to catch.

THE PADI OPEN water diver is the standard entry-level course. While it comprises some mind-bending (though actually quite straightforward) theory, and some skill-work in a specially designed pool, by the afternoon of day one I was getting my first taster of diving in the sea. On land I was finding it tricky getting acquainted with all my bulky new gear, and sounding decidedly Darth Vader-ish when trying out my breathing regulator, but that first time diving from Na'ama Bay was a revelation. "I'm doing this, I'm really doing it," I



WE REACHED A SHELF BURSTING WITH CORAL AND A RAINBOW OF SEALIFE

buzzed out as a puffer fish darted off to avoid my clumsy swimming. "I'm so in control," I quietly congratulated myself, whizzing past a coral pillar chasing multi-coloured parrot fish, only to find back on the surface that I'd used up all my air taking things way too fast.

And then disaster struck. It wasn't a panic attack like I had been *convinced* I was going to experience on having to flood my mask with water, or take out my regulator, both skills you have to pass to qualify. Nope, those were a doddle. In the end it was a tiny part of my anatomy that let me down: my eardrums. In the second session out in the bay, I descended too quickly and didn't "equalise" properly, which means I failed to let out the built-up air that naturally accumulates in the ear when it's surrounded by the pressure of the water. To equalise, you use a nifty little technique called the valsalva manoeuvre, which is simply pinching your nostrils closed and blowing into them. But, distracted by the >



CLEANING UP THE RED SEA'S DIVE SITES

While Egypt is renowned worldwide for its superb diving, the industry was unregulated for many years and cowboy operators were left to flourish. Some visitors to the region going on snorkelling or diving trips suffered from sub-standard experiences and the underwater environment succumbed to irresponsible practices.

Enter the Chamber of Diving and Watersports (CDWS), established two years ago under the umbrella of the Egyptian Tourist Federation. It's the CDWS' mission to clean up the Red Sea – weed out the illegal companies, support the top-quality operators and encourage the care and protection of the coastal environment so the Red Sea continues to be a world-class destination.

What does this mean for tourists? If you want a fantastic and safe Red Sea diving or snorkelling experience, you can choose from the CDWS' list of registered dive companies (visit cdws.travel). Importantly, the chamber also lists companies to steer clear of.

And if you fall in love with the region's amazing landscapes, and want to give something back, you can help the CDWS make the Red Sea a greener environment. Some keen divers opt to take part in one of the regular clean-up operations to rid the major sites of rubbish. Others do their bit simply by respecting the underwater environment and encouraging other visitors to do the same.

For more about diving in the Red Sea, visit egypt.travel



“WE HAVE A NEW DIVER,” I HEARD THE INSTRUCTOR TELL THE BOAT. I COULDN’T STOP SMILING

underwater world and trying to control my buoyancy and breathing (must remember: calm and continuous), I had left it too late and so, blew even harder to try and clear the pressure. “Ouch!” I thought. “That hurt.” I felt a sharp pain, like someone was poking something into my ear. “OK, don’t panic,” I thought. But the pain wasn’t going away and I was starting to feel like blubbing. Back to the surface, and a “tired diver” tow to shore by the instructor. Off to the doctor, I go.

“What you have is a middle ear barotrauma,” Dr Ahmed told me. “It’s the

most common injury in diving.” By blowing too hard, I had stretched the eardrum, he said. Forty-eight hours’ rest should fix it, and then all going well I could continue the course. I didn’t get to meet Dr Ahmed’s famous colleague, Dr Adel, who has completed more than 17,500 dives. But I did get to check out the decompression chamber, the first in the Red Sea when it arrived back in the 80s – fingers crossed I wouldn’t have to use it any time soon.

Back at Na’ama Bay, I was pragmatic about my situation: I had two days to kill

and I was going to make the most of it. So, I snorkelled in the bay, sunbathed, dined out and riffled through the souvenir shops to fill the time. A return visit to the Doc for a check up, and I had the all clear. Woohoo! Let’s finish this.

In the classroom for a morning, I finished the theory modules and the final exam. But I was itching to get in the water. That afternoon I did my last dive in the bay, and it went swimmingly (excuse the pun). No ear troubles, no fearful flashbacks to the recent injury. Next stop: a day on the boat to finish



Clockwise from here, getting to know the locals, including resident Nemos; a giant stride into the water; the Red Sea is packed with colourful sealife; experienced divers make it look effortless

the course. The sun beating down, the water ludicrously clear, I completed my last two qualifying dives off the reef sites known as the “gardens”. The fish were oblivious to how big a day it was for me. “Nemos” glided in and out of their anemones, a moray eel slithered through the coral landscape back to its cave – no qualms about ruining my elation with a nasty bite if I got too close. And it was over too soon. On the surface, as I inflated my diving jacket, I heard the instructor announce to the boat: “We have a new diver, everyone.” I couldn’t stop smiling.

Which is how I came to be floating effortlessly over the Blue Hole’s coral shelf in Dahab. I had been invited an hour north to experience Sharm’s more laid-back neighbour, where soaring cliffs plunge dramatically into the sea, and a chilled out Bedouin settlement welcomes divers.

With the impenetrable blue before me, I turned right out of the hole, following my guide to explore the coral wall, an unfathomable 200m deep. Relaxing into my diving apparatus, I began to experience the weightlessness that comes with practice and started to tune into the spiritual side of diving. Looking left to try and glimpse whale sharks, which had recently been sighted just five metres from the reef; looking to my right as a mosaic of colours darted around me. It was the most stunning sight I had ever seen. “Diving is a huge privilege,” my instructor had said to me. It was also addictive, and I couldn’t wait to book my next trip.

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