

DAILY NEWS

EGYPT

A KHAWAGA'S TALE: A diving paradise in Hurghada

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The Red Sea scuba diving industry will experience a shakeout in 2009 as the ISO standards come online on March 31, forcing the less professional operators to the surface.

The ISO (International Organization for Standardization) is the world's largest developer and publisher of International Standards and is a network of the national standards institutes of 160 countries, with a Central Secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland, that coordinates the system.

"This will both improve the diving experience in Egypt for tourists and put a halt to price dumping," said Martina Aziz, marketing manager with Ilios Dive Club at the Steigenberger, Al Dau Beach Hotel, in Hurghada.

"How is it possible to have a proper boat and a compressor, trained staff and equipment that is exchanged regularly, at the low prices some operators charge?"

"These new regulations introduced by the Chamber of Diving and Watersports, Egypt, is a fair system that demands that everyone reach the same standard and some who can't have already closed," Aziz said.

Tourism contributes approximately 11 percent of Egypt's gross national product, and scuba diving and water sports are one of the pillars of the industry, without which Egypt would be deprived of a vital source of foreign exchange.

The Chamber of Diving and Watersports (CDWS) was founded in 2007 with a goal to improve quality, safety and standard of services in the industry, as well as to preserve the unique environment of the Red Sea.

If you have ever dove in the Straits of Gubal or the Gulf of Aqaba, you will have seen plenty of evidence of areas which have been overused, resulting in broken corals and scarce marine life, and you could be forgiven for thinking the red desert may be a more appropriate name at times.

Not with standing the traffic, the Red Sea still offers world class diving and the region was voted Destination of the Year in the Diver Awards in Britain this month. Apart from the local, or house reefs, which are most familiar to recreational divers, Egypt also offers many remote diving sites accessible via live-a-board boats or from the southern base of Marsa Alam.

It may be February, but the temperature didn't deter me over the weekend, and just to prove that the Red Sea never gets too cold, I went down in a wetsuit known as a shortie.

The winter sale continues in Hurghada until the end of March, where Ilios Dive Club is offering free use of all equipment and a 20 percent discount for Egyptians and residents.

"People from Cairo should take a new look at Hurghada," Aziz explained to me in the Dive Club located on a pristine beach and dive boats bob in the blue waters at the end of the pier, that Hurghada has had a facelift.

"There is now a pedestrian walk that stretches seven kilometers and the new Marina development which was completed a year ago, hosts a variety of pubs and restaurants with international cuisine, shopping and of course many, many yachts," Aziz said.

"The profile of today's diver is older and has different needs from when he or she was single. They want a good diving experience, but also family options. That is why here at the Steigenberger, divers can mix their sport with golf, the spa and their children are taken care of in the kids club."

Martina Aziz knows her divers, as I fit that profile perfectly I thought, as our boat, Al Dau I, pushed from the pier, and we headed out for Fanadir Reef.

Tarek, my diving guide, lamented the over use of the reef during our briefing and stressed the importance of

not touching the reef and being careful with your fins, as he estimated that of the 60 Hurghada dive sites, 30 percent are damaged.

As the new ISO standards come online, the future of the Red Sea's diving industry can only be more secure, as regulation in an over used environment will inevitably raise prices, it will also raise the standards by which operators conduct their business so they will still have a marine environment to conduct business in.

Or possibly to put it more plainly as Tarek did during our briefing when discussing the marine toilet, "use the basket for the toilet paper, we don't want the Red Sea to be known as the White Sea."

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