

Watching Sinai



by John Kean

There are an estimated 10,000 people at sea on any given day around the leading resorts of Egypt, but who is watching over them and ensuring that safety rules and regulations are being adhered to?

The world of scuba diving and watersports is largely self-regulatory in that diving instructors and guides have to pass leadership courses and abide by the set standards of their training agencies. If they work for a diving centre then they too will keep a watchful eye over the diving activities conducted through the club. The additional apprentice style method of learning where new professionals are educated in the Red Sea's unique set of aquatic challenges also ensures that newcomers become familiar with their place of work.

However, like any other profession in the world, large numbers of practitioners invariably results in a dilution of quality and to the non-initiated they are not always easy to spot. The transition of Sharm El Sheikh from sleepy little fishing village to world-class diving destination requires more than a minor adjustment to its infrastructure. What began as a handful of diving operators has now grown into nearly two hundred clubs and safari boat operators employing over 1,000 registered diving professionals in the Sinai region alone.

Swimmers, snorkellers and divers arrive with varying levels of experience including new student divers in training going beneath the sea for the first time. Despite its beauty, the Red Sea can become a hostile place and if dive professionals or operators have taken a short-cut when it



comes to safety then they will be ill-equipped to handle or prevent the inevitable emergencies. Visitors are the life blood of the region and deserve our full attention.

Hesham Gabr is chairman and CEO of Camel Dive Club, Sharm's oldest established dive centre. He has long advocated the introduction of a ministerial backed entity solely for diving and watersports activities and now sits on the board of the newly formed CDWS (Chamber of Diving and Watersports).

'During the past 30 days we have closed down 18 unauthorised diving centres. The entry requirements are very clear and they've had many months to put their houses in order and comply.'

The CDWS was formed midway through 2007. Its predecessor was the SSDM, which is now a separate NGO concentrating more on environmental projects. Before the SSDM was the Sharm Diving Union which was set up in the late nineties to address the issues between dive operators and the authorities of the Sinai.



The new Chamber is a dedicated body under the umbrella of the Egyptian Tourist Federation committed to all diving and watersports activities which take place throughout Egypt's coastal waters. It differs from its predecessor which operated as an NGO (Non Governmental Organisation).

Its aims and objectives are both environmental and regulatory, the latter involving it as a steering agent for European Norms and Standards to be introduced in Egypt. Many visitors to the Sinai are well accustomed to these in their homelands.

The European Underwater Federation is made up of the membership of many of the leading dive training agencies of European countries. The CDWS doesn't so much have its own standards but enforces those of the EUF. It achieves this through the supervision of its team of inspectors who also issue technical validity certificates required by the Ministry of Tourism.

The CDWS also technically investigates incidents and accidents and provides recommendations, statistics and data to help minimize these accidents and improve service and safety.

Other CDWS activities include addressing the jetty situation in Sharm el Sheikh to provide short and long term solutions. New moorings, the opening of new dive sites around Tiran Island and the improvement of search and rescue facilities are also on the agenda.

'The biggest contribution we can possibly make is the banning of illegal fishing in the Red Sea', says Hesham. 'It will be an uphill battle but if the CDWS can make progress in the next three years then perhaps we can restore the Red Sea to what it was. We are speaking with the Coast Guard, HEPCA and other bodies to help achieve this aim.'



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