

## EGYPT – OCTOBER 2004

### **Memories of a bygone expedition to Egypt, back in October 2004... involving Chantal W, Christophe F & Christophe W, Claude G, Françoise R, Jean-Pierre W, Jean-Pol W, Julien W, Marc J, Patrick J, Pierre G, Sandrine R, Tania G, Tania J and myself**

We set out on our journey from Geneva to the land of the Pharaohs at 3 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. Unaccountably, the Egyptians were in a hurry that day: we were hustled onto the plane and airborne ahead of schedule; our meal, which was neither lunch nor dinner but dished out at tea-time, was served and cleared away in next to no time; even darkness seemed to come early, engulfing us before we reached the land of Egypt. We lost altitude progressively over the mountainous desert, circled Hurghada, a tiara of twinkling diamonds in a sea of darkness, before landing in the evening warmth at an airport we had all to ourselves. And then again, by some stroke of oriental magic, visa stamps were issued, stuck and certified at lightening speed, police and luggage checks were cleared in an eye beat, and the bustling throng of enthusiastic porters speedily left behind... In less than half an hour, our little group found itself on board a minibus piled top heavy with treasured possessions and diving equipment. We couldn't get over the expedite efficiency of the airport's authorities!

Upon each of our yearly pilgrimages, we never fail to be amazed at the speed at which the city grows, festooned with a network of roads, avenues and motorways any Swiss motorist would die for, though some of the driving habits of the locals remain quite astounding. For most of the 70 km between Hurghada and Safaga, hotels stand shoulder to shoulder in a blaze of light on both sides of the state of the arts motorway lined with budding palm trees. Then, little by little, darkness takes over leaving the upturned moon to light a silvery path across the sea and outline the hills barring the western horizon. The road grows narrower, the villages smaller and further apart. And, as the hours tick by, always the same scenes: the glow of neon lights from within the tiled or carpeted mosques, steeples and palm trees strung with green lamp bulbs, greengrocers' stalls piled high with fruit and vegetables regardless of the hour of day, men smoking their hookahs on the sidewalks or relaxing in front of the café's TV set, small children playing by the wayside... and not a woman to be seen anywhere.

A couple of hours into our journey, our chauffeur stopped at an open-air eating-place intent on obtaining a permit from the local authorities allowing us to travel further south. This palaver afforded us the luxury of stretching our legs and a taste of Egyptian night-life, village-style. Though it appeared the document was not to be had, on we travelled into the night. Our trusted chauffeur, we remarked, had the curious habit of flashing the bus headlights repeatedly in the eyes of the few on-coming vehicles before switching them off completely, seemingly resorting to invisibility in the hopes of avoiding a likely collision with the dazzled drivers ... or simply for reasons of economy. We interpreted this to be an Egyptian regulation until we realized our minibus lacked part of its headlights!

Shortly before midnight we unexpectedly reached Marsa Galeb, a modern port north of Marsa Alam, where our most elegant motor ship, the Dive One, awaited us, all white and sparkling. As soon as it was politely possible, we headed for our comfortable staterooms, fully equipped with en-suite bathrooms, and tucked up for as good a night's sleep as we could muster! The ship's engines came to life at 4 AM but we slept on until the bell summoned us to breakfast at 8 o'clock. What a sight we were after our short night's sleep! The teenage

members of the group didn't seem to know whether they were standing on the heads or their feet!

From that moment on, our days were entirely devoted to diving, sunbathing, reading, eating and sleeping. We had a long way to travel to reach St. John's reef, our destination, and many hours were spent plying the blue waters of the Red Sea. Surprisingly, for the first few days, the sea was as peaceful as a pond, and the high level of humidity gathered and rose in clouds to blot out the sky and shade us from the sun. But this unusual state of affairs did not last. In due course the wind returned, the waves reappeared, the skies were swept clear and the sun shone jauntily upon the surface of the underwater world!

Appearances can be deceptive. The hazy banks of the Red Sea are as barren as the Gobi desert, for as far as the eye can reach. But under the blue surface of its waters, where the reefs rise up in circles, towers, and crescents towards the light, the profusion of life, colour, shapes and textures has to be seen to be believed. On our first dive we encountered shoals of fish, each in their own habitat, the timid and the brave, the flashy and the drab, the lethargic and the energetic... their shapes and colours well in tune with their moods and environment: the big mournful-eyed squirrel fish lurking in dark corners, the massive Hump head wrasse better known as Napoléon moseying along in open water, the solitary barracuda keeping an eye on things, the spotted rays diligently vacuuming the seabed, the rivers of lined and spotted yellow-tailed Sweetlips, the mimetic and deadly stone fish poised in ambush... There was no doubt, we had plunged head first into an opulent aquarium! The rest of the day was spent basking in the sun, as we travelled south along the same reef until we lost sight of land and all notion of time. When the sun finally dipped down into the haze of the western horizon, and the haunting sound of Joanna's chanter wafted down from the upper deck, some of us jumped back into the warm black waters for a night-life tour of the reef. In that starless darkness, all is void outside the beam of our powerful torches, but within that shaft of light, the reef is on show. In its nooks and crannies, big fish and small wedge themselves like hidden Easter eggs, intent on a peaceful night's sleep. On this particular expedition we encountered what seemed to be small bushes, some feathery, others gracefully curling and uncurling their leafless golden branches in the current. A closer look revealed a number of little roots allowing the bushes to walk about or perch on an available finger, like a bird! Should an unidentified large object such as ourselves approach them, their excessive timidity would have them go flat and motionless as if carpeting the ground. These feather stars known as crinoids, appeared in the sea 500 million years ago! While inspecting these magical creatures, a three foot eel on its nightly prow, slithered across open water, something it would never have been seen doing during the day!

Signs of the times: after dinner, computers would be brought out and photos and diving data down-loaded while other members of the gang slipped away discreetly for a dram and a taste of cigar on the upper decks, beneath the stars. Most, however, made for bed to dream of the wonders in store for them down under.

At midnight the captain set sail for our yet distant destination and the ship's bell had us tumbling out of bed even before the sun was up. The early morning drop dive would hopefully afford us a peep at the elusive sharks! All we encountered was a strong current that had us battling to reach the face of the fathomless reef cliff! When peering into the deep blue sea, only an experienced eye can detect the difference in hue between a passing pelagic fish and the blueness of the watery universe. Always a gamble!

At midmorning, on my next dive, as I drifted along in company of the two Tanias, we encountered a couple of tuna fish, a sedate Napoleon half my size, bands of trumpet fish, long and thin... With nothing else in particular to observe, I was captivated by the rays of the sun conjuring up Aurora Borealis reaching down into the blue abyss. Closer to the surface, the colours of the reef and its inhabitants brought to mind a windy autumn day in the garden, a display of yellows, oranges and browns with the coral fish filling in for the leaves as they weaved in and out of the stone bushes in the sea-breeze. Dangerous Reef was our afternoon destination, with no more danger to it than a walk in the park... allowing Joanna to test her ear water-tightness and equilibrium following an unfortunate viral infection that had her off balance before the start of the holiday.

That day, a pod of wandering dolphins had us rushing from the lunch table to watch their antics for a while. Life on board is filled with such small wonders, events which sometimes make the day!

The long afternoons were devoted to sleeping on deck, reading or helping Tania with a patchwork project of some urgency, while Julien, a very special member of our team, in the way of a wandering minstrel, told us of his life, invented stories and composed songs to pass the time of day away!

The next morning we were all on deck at the start of the engines when the sun was still in bed. No one even dared guess what unearthly hour of the day it was! The ship's clock was perpetually at ten past ten... During the first days of the voyage, the young ones complained that their timetable had been inverted: they would be making for bed at an hour when they usually would be devising plans to go out and have fun and would be summoned on deck or to breakfast at the time they would be coming home to bed!

Upon reaching our early morning dive site we were greeted by a school of spinning dolphin which, due to their size, we took for very young specimens, full of joie de vivre. Here we were dropped into the waves like parachutists. Drifting to a depth of a few dozen meters, the current carried us along the face of the cliff, so we could gaze unhindered into the fathomless void hiding creatures of the deep out looking for their breakfast. Unfortunately nothing stirred in the big blue sea that morning; we finally surfaced to be picked up by the ship's dinghy in the middle of the ocean. It was then our turn for breakfast, while the captain moved on to yet another hunting ground, where we couldn't resist the temptation of a snorkelling expedition across the reef top. The midday dive around this lonely tower rising from the depth pulled us down again in search of the wary shark population patrolling the currents far below. This time we did encounter shoals of fish of different types, shapes, colours and descriptions... A hammerhead shark was signalled but I can't say I really saw it; maybe a pair of binoculars would have helped! Nevertheless, around the lunch table later in the day, most divers were delighted to have seen what they saw or thought they saw, while the ship travelled on towards yet another reef which turned out to be an underwater maze. Here we were free to tunnel our way from one watery chamber to another, from one vast cathedral to the next, keeping clear of dead end passageways, gliding among coral boulders and under coral growth reaching up to the restless surface close above. The rays of sunlight piercing the water played on the extraordinary limestone structure of the reef, conjuring up visions of the extravagant lighting that accompanies disco music, though all one could hear was the gurgle of air bubbles rising up in growing circles and parrot fish scraping mouthfuls of grit off the coral.

By Thursday, having lost all notion of time, we were allowed the luxury of a late morning in bed. The first dive of the day had us exploring a Japanese garden in search of two tortoises that reputedly resided there, and an anchor, so encrusted with coral vegetation it has become nearly unrecognisable. We drifted round and about this sunken garden all set about with bonsai type growth, encrusted with corals, overrun by gorgonian of all descriptions...No birds nor butterflies, but little fish to play the part and enhance the colours of this living tableau. No one spotted the tortoises but Joanna and I imagine we traced the outline of an anchor lying at rest... We shall never know for sure.

By now we were on our way back to base and the wind had picked up and turned the sea into a roller coaster amusement park. The purple range of mountains came into view once again and humidity decreased as we neared the coast. Our route took us past several desert islands inhabited by Robinson Crusoe-style military outposts. We stopped for our second dive of the day above a small conical reef topped with raging waves. Here again, appearances were deceptive. Beneath this foaming witches' cauldron, lay a realm of peace and quiet. We dropped as far as we could into the depth, then spiralled up round the cone fighting the current at times, propelled by it at others, as if riding an invisible merry-go-round, till we came upon a cave seemly filled with liquid glass; a shoal of little glass fish that like to live in very close company, in dark enclosed places, had invited a big dark fish to keep them company, out of harm's way, treating him to a synchronized dance impeccably performed! A short while later I encountered a trumpet fish that couldn't get over the surprise of seeing such an extraordinary apparition! He followed me around at a safe distance for some time, never ceasing to stare at me with his unblinking, curious and expressive eye. By evening we had reached Dolphin Reef. Two dinghy loads of enthusiastic swimmers set out in search of the dolphins that had been spotted but chose not to linger, disappearing into the sunset! I opted for a peaceful swim round the boat, in the transparent, blood warm waters of our night's resting place.

On the night dive, we spotted a cuttlefish with only the tail of the dinner it had just swallowed protruding from its mouth. Elsewhere tiny, jewel-eyed prawns peeped out of their hiding places at us, colourful parrot fish slept soundly, tucked away among the coral, other sleepy fish, dazzled by our torch lights, bumped drunkenly into their surroundings,... We later heard that Claude, to his utmost delight, had spotted and photographed the elusive Spanish dancer... This bright red slug the size of a hand with decorative lacy bushes protruding from its back, flounces through the water at night, with the grace of a flamenco skirt in full swing.

Despite having had our tanks topped up with Nitrox all week, oxygen enriched compressed air which prevents fatigue and other inconveniences of diving, we were all feeling it was perhaps time to head for home to recover from the holidays!

Our next visit was to the outer side of a reef, where the sea is choppy and only a rubber dinghy can be safely used to drop divers. Here we spotted another tortoise, hovering over its feeding grounds like an oversized butterfly; later, we came upon vast patches of white anemones, high-pile latex carpets, waving their tentacles in the underwater breeze. These are home to the clown fish that hide among their stinging hosts' fronds and are always ready to dash out fearlessly in defence of their territory no matter how big the intruder. These touching little fellows come in various sizes of small and in various shades of orange striped with white. The male is small, the female much larger; their faithfulness to each other is legendary throughout the fish world. Would you believe it? Should the female die or disappear, the male will then grow in size, become female and strive to attract another partner to share its

cosy home! And, the bigger the clown fish, the smaller the patch of anemones it chooses to live in!

We enjoyed lunch on the lee side of the reef then took up our positions on the upper decks for what was to be a rough road north. All afternoon the ship pitched and tossed, cutting into the waves and sending spray cascading over the prow and gangways. Some slept, some read, some turned green, some sunbathed, but we were all very careful not to walk about without support, neither think of visiting the lower decks, where seasickness lurked! In view of this difficult progress, we reached our last diving site of the day shortly after sundown. Joanna and I swam out in search of the reef, our torch lights beaming through rather murky water. At night, most of the coral fish may be asleep, but the corals themselves, the gorgonian, the crinoids, the anemones on stalks, are in bloom to catch their meal of the day, feeding on the organic debris wafting in the current. Speaking of current, there was no doubt we had been travelling back north: the warm night sea was laced that evening with icy fingers of cold water seeping through the tangled mass of the reef. We swam from one patch of warmth to another, hastily crossing the cold streams, spying on the timid crabs and garnet-eyed shrimps, on the feathery scorpion fish and the mysterious, minute red worms squirming in the beam of our lights, but travelling cheap on the currents of the big black sea, a tasty morsel for someone's dinner no doubt!

That evening, we were treated to a big white cake for dessert, with DIVE ONE inscribed in large letters across it. We had a most excellent kitchen and dining room staff, headed by Mohamed, who took great care of us all week long, fattening us up dutifully, but perhaps not for Christmas...

Saturday dawned and by this time we had recognized several dive sites visited on the way south. With permission from the captain, I sneaked away for a snorkelling tour of the nearby reef before the ship's bell signalled the departure. One more drop dive along a submerged cliff, followed by a quest for the Long-nosed Hawk fish, a tiny red and white chequered specimen, and our diving days were over for the season. There was packing to do, lunch to be eaten and the crew to thank, before the dinghies took us and all our worldly goods of the week back to land. There followed a long drive back to Hurgada, in daylight this time, during which we were reassured to note the seemingly relaxed attitude of the military staff at the various check-points, despite the alarming reports we had been given on board earlier that week concerning bombings in hotels up north.

We spent the night in a hotel in town, readapting to city life, the noise, the lights, the crowds and the traffic, before making our way to the airport where pandemonium prevailed, as officials were swept off their feet by the hosts of sun-seekers and sea-divers migrating home.

The oriental magic was gone... we were back in real life once again but the enchantment still lingers deep down within each one of us...

Anthea Gutknecht, October 2004