

CONFESSIONS OF A LIVEBOARD VIRGIN

: H. E. SAWYER

> I'VE ALWAYS SAID I'D NEVER GO BACK TO EGYPT, EVEN IF YOU PAID ME. NO, NOT EVEN THAT MUCH. NOT DOUBLE.

The omnipresent hawking, plagues of tourists and the ignominy of roaring diarrhoea on the banks of the Nile. I spent quality time crouched behind a 'bush' that hadn't borne leaves since Moses passed this way, much to the amusement of the patient felucca crew. I'm sure they could see me. My Day-Glo purple fleece merely compounded my humiliation. So much for attempting to combine learning to scuba dive with a bit of 'culture' on the side.

The 'Nightmare of Sharm' brought daily pandemonium at the dock, rammed moorings, overcrowded dives, boom-box aerobics, and a nightly table for one. Head in hands I asked myself: what on earth possessed me to come here?

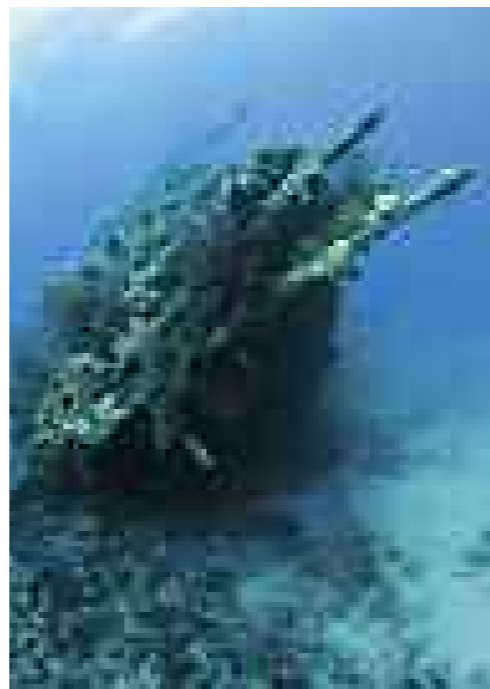
Egypt was Package Holiday Hell – probably snobbish of me – but I hated it for being the closest warm water diving to the UK. My preferred stamping ground was from the Philippines east; maybe I only got to dive once a year, but what dives they were! Quality rather than quantity. The Red Sea Riviera was a quick cheap winter fling and about as satisfying.

But then I saw Ken Sutherland's portfolio of the Egyptian wrecks at the British Society of Underwater Photographers, and his "Oh-My-God!" portrait of the *Giannis D*. I simply had to shoot that wreck, so I was going to eat my words and return.

But to access these wrecks I'd have to overcome my neurosis and take a liveboard for the first time. The thought of being trapped 24/7 on a boat for a week with a large group of hard-core seen-it-done-it divers intimidated me. They were strangers; I loved my solace and The Smiths. This lot were probably stadium rock, possibly U2. What would we have in common once we'd dried off? The luxurious vessel had only three decks and was only 36 metres long. I couldn't hide in the ensuite indefinitely, because I was sharing a cabin with someone. I was going to have to socialise.

I'd never belonged to a dive club, so had never joined organised trips, preferring to make my own way to some remote dive shop in the back of beyond, happy to buddy up with Mr. Whoever for a transient friendship: "If anything goes wrong, we'll save each other, OK? Great. Sorry? What was your name again?"

I'd also heard stories of single divers being picked on by bullying groups on liveboards due to the heady cocktail of

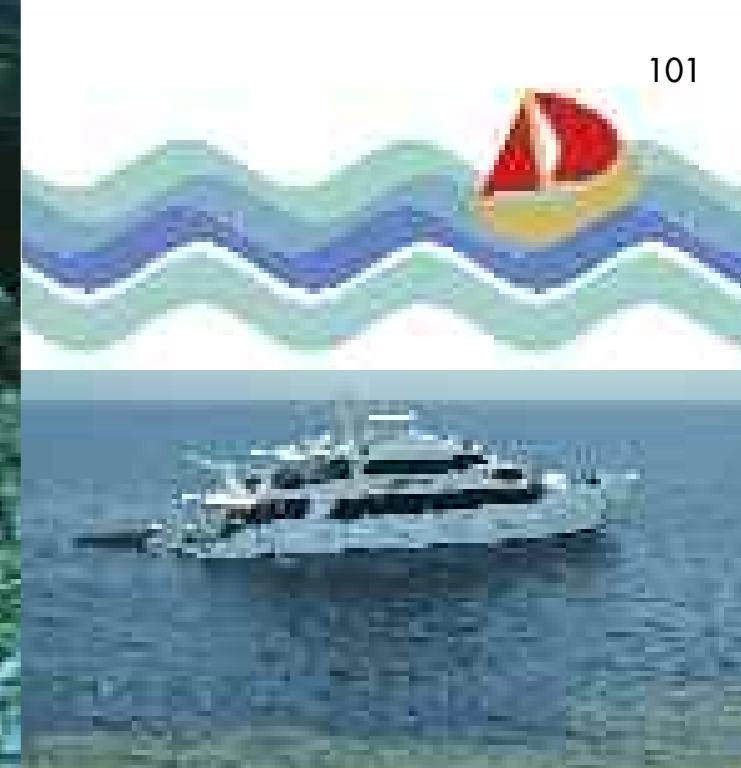


Clockwise from above:
The bow of the Carnatic.

Ladder leading towards the stern of the *Giannis D*.

Hurricane liveboard.

Bridge of the *Giannis D*, one of the most photogenic wrecks in the Red Sea





Top: Locomotive tender from the wreck of the Thistlegorm

Above: The distinctive rudder and stern of the Carnatic.

Right: Bollards and winches.

underline your diving credibility. You are on a liveaboard, after all.

- Revise *Python* lore; "Tis but a scratch!" – check.
- Name-drop new friend and Red Sea wreck diving icon Ned Middleton – check. OK, so I lied about underlining your diving credibility too hard...

Hurghada. It's a dump, isn't it? Never been? Well take my word for it. Once upon a time a small fishing village minding its own business, it has morphed into a monstrous 40 kilometres of detritus, like a high water mark on the edge of the desert. And the international airport is a mad bazaar full of tat, with point-blank eateries and a runway thrown in. We spend so much time spent banging on

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machismo, testosterone, Nitrox and neoprene – and that was just the women. British divers in Egypt seemed to spend their spare time bemoaning the demise of the birch, driving motorbikes too fast, or wielding some kind of lethal weapon with telescopic sights. Anecdotes tended to end in twisted metal, mutilation, scars, surgery, near death, certain death, and actual death.

Join 20 plus sharks as they feed? Don't mind if I do. Join 20 plus divers on a boat for a week? Do I look insane?!

So despite all the recommendations and habitual awards, I wasn't entirely convinced I'd have that "wonderful time" aboard *Hurricane* for the Brothers' Wreck Special that Scuba Travel promised.

Preparation had to be meticulous if I was going to blend in:

- Dive T-shirts from long haul destinations – check.
- 'Street' design T-shirts – check. Don't want to look like you're trying too hard to

about wreck conservation and our impact on the marine environment, yet there's never the self awareness to look over our shoulder to see just what our presence has already done. Dive these wrecks now, because against time, tide and cheap tourism, they don't stand a chance.

It was a full boat of course, 22 divers. Brits from the Shetlands to the Home Counties, four lads from Ireland, plus Mats, a friendly bear of a Swede with a honey-pot smile and impeccable English. It transpired Mats was worried the boat would be full of Germans. He couldn't speak German. Not for the first time I appreciated how fortunate we were that most of the world speaks our lingo.

I shared with Kevin from Wakefield. It was his first liveaboard too, and although he was a Northerner and I was from "that London", full marks to Scuba Travel, who paired off single divers of similar experience and interests. Kevin was keen to try out the underwater compact he

recently acquired from eBay. He was also the nicest bloke you could wish to share with. And although he owned a motorbike and read real life survival books (*How I Conquered Everest by Drinking My Own Urine*), he didn't appear to want to shoot anything other than photos. I did apologise to him for my snoring in advance.

The fact is, all the people on '*Hurricane*' were great. The captain, crew, and guides, that might go without saying on an award winning liveaboard, but it gets the votes for a reason. There's a relaxed atmosphere aboard which sets the tone. True, everyone is going to get on better with some people than others, as you would in the street where you live, but that's only to be expected.



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There was a healthy hubbub when we ate, and always space when you needed a bit of quiet time. You can find a lot of both just looking out at the horizon. And the pod of dolphin who rode the bow as we left The Brothers gave us all a special shared moment.

As for the wrecks? I suggest you go see them for yourself. Don't worry, you won't end up sharing with a neurotic Londoner, because I'm never going back. Probably.