



Turtle News

Issue 19

March
2007

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Forthcoming Trips and Holi- days

- Manado, Indonesia
25th May - 10th June.
One or two weeks of
the best reef diving
in the world! From
£1300
- Mastaba, "The Sanctu-
ary" apartments,
Hurghada. April - con-
tact Ray at the cen-
tre
- The Brothers Islands
and the Elphinstone,
Red Sea liveaboard.
5th October
- Regular Rib Week-
ends. Check the web-
site for dates
- Regular Mid-week
Diving from Brighton
and Eastbourne.
Check the website
for dates
- Galapagos, November/
December 2008. Live-
aboard and land
based. Approx £3500

Picnic in Palau



Having bid farewell at Guam Airport to the unfortunate five who were on their way back to London, we were on our way to Palau. The 307 islands of Palau can, with a keen eye, be seen in an atlas surrounded by miles of blue. They consist of a mixture of volcanic rock and porous limestone, creating exactly the right foundation for extensive coral reefs and tunnelling cave systems. We stepped off the plane to be greeted with fragrant garlands of flowers. Looking more as if we were on a Hawaiian Island, we piled into yet another minibus to be driven to our accommodation for the week. Still shell shocked, early the following morning we

started the pattern for our week in Palau, being driven to the "Fish 'n Fins" dive centre. Waiting for us was a cooked breakfast and importantly, lots of coffee. Having eaten our fill, it was time to sort out the dive kit. Within minutes the quayside looked as if we were setting up a dive shop, as second stages were re-rigged, back plates changed, harnesses adjusted and photo equipment set up. Other divers arrived and departed on their boats whilst this continued. A couple of hours later, as the only boat left, we were on our way to the dive site. Shane, our guide for the week, was rather taken aback with our negative response when he sug-

gested our check-out dive could be a wreck. On being informed we had spent the last 2 weeks in Truk, a reef dive was chosen-Siaes Tunnel. On our way we were suddenly joined by dolphins. They played in our bow wave, putting on a show with incredible jumps. The dive was a chilled out affair, with the tunnel being more like a double ended cave. Beautiful corals hung from the roof, and a pair of white tipped reef sharks were lying on the sandy floor. Disturbed by our approach, they swam away lazily. Exiting the tunnel, we swam along the reef wall, being dazzled by the corals and colourful fish.

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It had now approached lunchtime. Packed lunches had been provided for us all. What we hadn't realised was just how stunning our picnic spot would be. We motored to one of the deserted "Robinson Crusoe" islands that were dotted about, and enjoyed our meal in the shade of palm trees in the most idyllic setting. Somehow English diving would never be the same!



Having relaxed over lunch, our second dive was Siales Corner. White tipped reef sharks and shoals of jacks and barracuda were to be found all around. Towards the end of the dive, and more in the shallows, we came across several morays. It was then back to the dive centre where a well deserved beer was waiting on ice!

The dawn of the new day saw us off to two world renowned sites- Blue Corner and Blue Hole. Blue Corner is situated on the edge of a shallow plateau and is washed by powerful currents that create an incredible food chain. This in turn attracts the big pelagics. With the current running, we followed the reef to the corner and hooked in. Once attached, we could hang back and watch the show in front of us. Along with the white tipped reef sharks, grey reef sharks cruised by. A black tipped shark even swam past! In addition there were king mackerel, giant and blue fin trevallies, and dog tooth tuna shoaling around. Away from the drop off, the back reef was home to large Napoleon wrasse, lion fish and the ubiquitous clownfish.

Climbing back into the boat, Kirsty was getting into a bit of a flap. Our skipper for the week then coined the catch phrase that stuck with us during our time in Palau- "Jesus Christ, Lady!" rang out from his lips, causing the rest of us to collapse in fits of hysterical laughter. From then on, when anything went slightly awry, the same phrase would be uttered by all!

Just north of Blue Corner are several large holes in the flat surface of the reef. After lunch, we swam over the reef and descended into a large tube decorated with wonderful corals, and emerged into an open cavern. Sunlight dappled the jumbled rocks on the floor beneath, and gave a halo effect to the divers descending above us. At the very back of the Blue Hole is the entrance to the Temple of Doom- this vast cavern

stretches back more than 100m into the reef! As the name suggests, this a dive for more experienced divers, because once through the confined entrance, there is no direct access to the surface! However, local dive guides have laid a line to follow so that, as long as you are sensible, it is possible to have a look. That said, all that could be seen was rock and darkness- not as enticing as the rest of the dramatic reef. Having explored the cave, we exited through a hole in the wall, and continued along the reef.

Back on the boat, we were offered the opportunity to do a 3rd "dive" for the day- Jellyfish Lake. The warm, brackish lake on the island of Eil Malik is home to an enormous school of over 2 million mastigia jellyfish. Having no predators, they have lost their stinging tentacles. Snorkelling amid this pulsing multitude was a surreal experience. It was impossible to avoid the jellyfish- you were continually bumped as they swam around,



trying to get the best of the sun's rays. The following day we were on the hunt for mantas, or as they are also known in Palau, "devil fish" (the shape of their mouths resembles horns). We made a long run north, and, arriving at a non-descript patch of ocean, settled down on a cleaning station consisting of 3 boulders and a plain of stunted whip coral. Within minutes a manta appeared, gracefully swooping down to the station. In all, 3 individuals visited the site, and we just



sat and marvelled for almost an hour. The second dive consisted of a drift along a craggy channel. Smaller creatures were in evidence this time, with nudibranchs, lion fish and spiny lobsters being abundant. A school of bump head parrotfish passed regally by, before we were all engulfed in a cloud of titan trigger fish- fortunately these toothy brutes only had eyes for each other, as they were involved in their mating rituals!

On our last day of diving, we returned to Blue Corner. With a stronger current running, the pelagics put on more of a show, with up to 50 grey reef sharks and 10 white tips promenading by. Barracuda,

jacks and trevallies also swarmed past. We finished an exhilarating dive by ascending through packed curtains of snappers. Back at the dive centre, the beers helped to ease the necessity of having to wash the gear in preparation for our trip home.

We then had our requisite day off before we could fly. The dive centre offered a day of kayaking around the islands. Four double and four single kayaks



were loaded on to the boat, and we were

transported to a lagoon to try out our canoeing skills! The first trick was to get into them! Neil managed to completely roll his kayak- with Annie already in it! Fortunately she was calm under pressure and managed to hang on to her glasses! Though rather wet, the second attempt was more successful, and at different paces we set off to explore the maze of channels. Our first stop was on the island of Peleliu where we visited a bat filled cave. Walking barefoot over the guano was a squeamish affair, but we were able to see where the Japanese stored their equipment during World War II. The conflict raged through Palau as the Japanese had cut the islands off from the rest of the world, and were using them to store munitions and to launch attacks. Later in the day we saw a Japanese seaplane in the shallows, its engine a little further away. Having spent the morning kayaking, we then visited Rock Island, where the original Polynesian "stone" money was quarried. Given the size of the coins, some well over a metre in diameter, it was a bit difficult to see how they could be used as loose change! After the morning's efforts, it was pleasant to have our final picnic on yet another gloriously deserted beach. In the afternoon we were able to snorkel in the shallows, where we saw the rainbow-coloured Mandarin fish- these tiny fish with their body designs of swirls, squiggles and dots in the most improbable neon colours, look like the drawings of a 5 year old!

All too soon we were aboard the flight home, and the honeycombed islands had become just a fabulous memory!

Article by Diane and Peter Stanning
Pictures by Ant Collins

Guinea Pigs

The 2006 May excursion to Egypt is a rather small affair-just 9 of us with heavy dive bags, gather at Gatwick bright and early in the morning. We are the first group to try out the new apartments at "The Sanctuary" in Hurghada. Obviously Ray and Sarah have been before, as have Neil and Lynda, but the rest of us are told that we are to be the guinea pigs!

We arrive at Hurghada Airport where Ray has organised a bus from the dive centre for the transfer- no Egyptian taxi for us! The bags are put on to the roof, we pile in and off we go. Everyone looks out of the back window to see whose bag will fall off first- nothing has been tied down! 20 minutes later we arrive at Mastaba and all the bags are present and correct- we are off to a good start! We take the luggage up to the first floor apartment, not knowing what to expect. We walk through the door, on to the balcony and the view blows us away- we are all lost for words. The only word I can think of is "Wow!". This view is breathtaking- I could just spend the week staring at it!

The apartment is huge. There's almost enough room to swing a camel if you feel so inclined! Every convenience is here- aircon in all the rooms; large fridge to chill the all important Sakara (and water too!); and a washing machine in case we run out of smalls! We unpack, then hurry out to have a beer and admire the view.

We eventually manage to tear ourselves away, and head into town for dinner, where Ray takes us to his favourite haunt, El Arabi. You will often find Habibi (love you, Ray!) outside in the sand garden, enjoying a Nescaf and a shisha pipe! 9 of us eat a 2 course meal with soft drinks. Our bill is £25- we think this is pretty reasonable!

But we are here to dive. The bus picks us up on Saturday morning at 8.30am. 5 minutes later we are at the dive centre. We register, load our kit into crates and board the boat. It is brilliant- there are only 7 of us on this large boat, which means plenty of room for kitting up. This



The View from the apartment

to get into my wetsuit! I wish somebody would invent a spray on one! The ropes are cast off and we are on our way to our first site.

Our dive guide is called Maged- he reminds me of a young Denzel Washington. When we arrive at Abu Ramada, Maged gives us the briefing and tells us that there is a current running. He isn't kidding. We fin into the current for 5 minutes without moving! The return swim is great though, with lots to see including a crocodilefish and some raucously coloured parrotfish. After a delicious lunch on the boat we all have a siesta in the sun. It's a hard life, but someone has to do it! We move on to our second site, Aquarium East. This is a much easier dive and there is more to see, including sweetlips with cleaner wrasse. We are excited to see a giant moray in the reef. The soft corals are stunningly colourful, as are some of the tiny fish bustling around the reef.

Back on the boat, we return to the dive centre. The sun is still beating down on us.



Giftun Island

We have time to chat over a beer before the bus takes us back to the apartment.

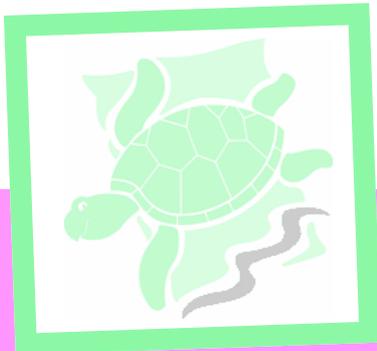
That amazing view inevitably detains us on the balcony, where we relax with a Sakara! On Saturday night the Hard Rock Café does a free barbecue for divers- you only pay for drinks and desert. We make the most of the barbecue and decide to find somewhere a bit more lively that sells alcohol. This is easier said than done- we are in Hurghada, which is still very Egyptian and not as cosmopolitan as Sharm. Spaniel says he wants to go

to a club where he can throw some shapes. I think this means he wants a bit of a boogie. I threw enough shapes earlier, trying to get into my wetsuit! We walk up and down the strip, but there is only one club that serves alcohol- apparently it is the Dutch Bar. By now, only Spaniel and Tony Mac are up for it. The more mature members of our group have retired for a quiet nightcap!

In the morning the bus arrives bright and early- this is too bright and early for the clubbers! Once on the boat, we head out to Sha'ab Iris. This is a beautiful dive around six pinnacles. The towers are made of hard coral, smothered with soft coral and surrounded by glassfish. We see nudibranchs and starfish, before we spot a large turtle. Maged and I fin like crazy to get close enough to take photos of the turtle. This is fine, but on the way back to the boat I run low on air. I ask Maged for his ockey, and he decides to negotiate a fee at 12m. How Egyptian! Once we have concluded our bartering, he gives me his alternate. This becomes a running joke for the rest of the week- if he needs help undoing his suit, we negotiate a fee!

Our dive after lunch is Abu Ramada North. We are required to make a negative entry, and fin down to the plateau, where the current carries us along the wall. At 29m we enter an opening into the reef, and then ascend up a tunnel. We emerge on the top of the reef in a little cave, filled with glassfish. This is a very pretty dive!

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We continue to dive this pattern for the rest of the week. The dives are easy, and are separated by long surface intervals for lunch and siestas in the sun! On one of our dives we see a stonefish devour a parrotfish whole! All that remains of the victim is its tail, poking out of the stonefish's maw! There is an abundance of scorpionfish, parrotfish, wrasse, morays and turtles. A couple of times we even have dolphins swimming with our boat! Tuesday is the only exception to our routine- we complete both of our dives before lunch, so that the skipper can take us to Giftun Island. The boat is run up on to the beach and we climb down on to the golden sand to have a drink and a wander around. This is the original "desert island", but is a pretty part of the marine park nonetheless. All too soon it is our last day of diving. We visit two beautiful sites- Umm Gamar and El Fanadir. For me, the

latter is the better. It is nice and shallow and there is a lot to see including many different kinds of moray. This means I can actually spend time taking photographs. I am down for nearly an hour, clicking away, and just admiring this beautiful underwater world. Maged signals that he will take a shot of Eve and me together, so I hand him my camera. He begins to negotiate a fee.....

I take one last look before heading for the surface to say goodbye for another year.

This is my third trip to Egypt. It has been the best so far, with an easy, relaxed approach to diving and luxurious accommodation. I know why the apartments are called "The Sanctuary"! Thank you to everyone on this trip, for making it so memorable, especially Ray and Sarah who ensure everything is just right in the apartment. I can't wait for the next visit!

Article and pictures by Colin Steele

Society News

It's always good to see the blossom on the trees and the daffodils bobbing their yellow heads on the roadside- it means that the sea is slowly warming up, and soon it will be time to go diving again! If you are not one of the (fool) hardy few who have been in the water all through the winter, now is the time to come down to one of the pools and brush up on those rusty diving skills! Despite our best efforts, the numbers

of members attending last year's Dinner and Dance were once again disappointing. Nevertheless, the crowd who made the effort to turn up were rewarded with an excellent evening- good food, good company, dodgy dancing and, of course, plenty of liquid refreshment! Ray delivered his annual speech, reporting on the ups and downs of the year. Essentially student numbers (and hence shop sales) are down, predominantly due to the fact that nowadays people prefer to train on referral courses, qualifying abroad in warmer climes. With this in mind, Ray is extremely keen to promote courses which can be completed at our own very comfortable apartments in the Red Sea town of Hurgada. As you can see from Colin Steele's article, everything is set up for an outstanding holiday- so what are you waiting for?! Awards were presented on the evening to Jon Critoph (Most Improved Diver), Pete Stanning (Most Travelled Diver), Neil Froggitt (Divemaster of the Year) and Mitch Compton (for Services to Adventure Divers, mostly keeping the rib on the seal). Of course, no Christmas do would be the same without Ray spilling wine somewhere on his person! Last year was no exception, but the help he had turning his shirtfront crimson was not entirely appreciated. Cecilia, you have been warned! Oh, and if I were you, I wouldn't wear anything too posh to an AD bash for a while!

Best fishes for a new year of diving! See ya in the blue! Ant.