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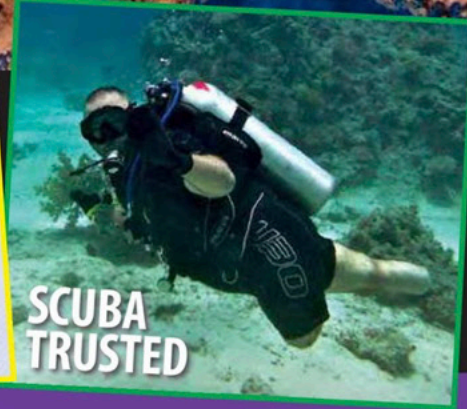
Japanese aircraft of the Solomons



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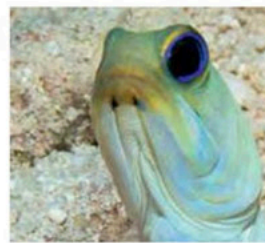
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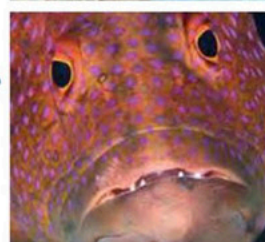
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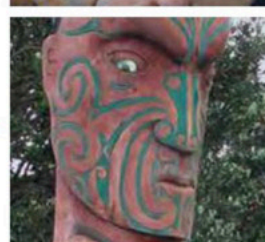
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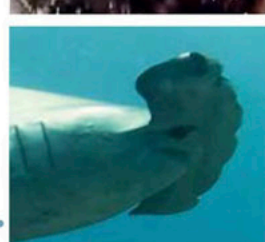
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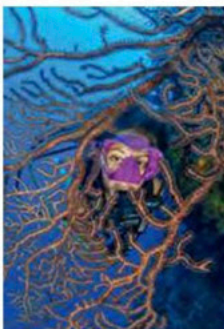
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COVER IMAGE:
Sam Lungari
with a sea fan
in Grand Cayman,
by Alex Mustard
(see *First In*)

DIVERNET

The biggest online
resource for scuba divers
divernet.com

THE DIVE-SITE WAS CALLED “Dangerous”, but we couldn’t have been keener to enter the water and begin exploring.

After a 10-hour flight from New York to Cairo, followed by a one-hour flight to Hurghada and a frantic three-hour drive down the coast to Port Ghalib to board the 36m liveaboard *Heaven Saphir*, we had motored some 14 hours overnight to reach this spot. We were in the St John’s Reef area and it was time to dive.

Our objectives were to explore the reefs in the southern part of the Egyptian Red Sea, photograph some of the dramatic coral and reef formations, and encounter at least one oceanic whitetip shark.

Although these sharks are hardly uncommon in this area, we had never seen one and we, our cameras and our memory-cards were ready!

It was November, and the Egyptian winds were kicking up choppy seas and some rolling swells, but the air was dry and clear with pleasant temperatures.

We bobbed in the boat’s RIB for a few moments and then, on the count of three, all rolled over together, and our Red Sea adventure was underway.

Almost instantly, we were transfixed by an other-worldly vista of craggy coral heads, sheer vertical pinnacles and inviting crevices and cracks in the reef.

Descending to 20m, we found an opening in the side-wall of the coral slope and entered a fairly narrow passageway.

Stopping to create a few images along the way, this was our first taste of the fascinating geological display we would enjoy in these reefs. The crevices provide shelter for soldierfish, cardinalfish and the attractive Vanikoro sweeperfish.

BEFORE LONG A FORK in the road appeared. To our left was an inviting entrance to a cave that we had been warned not to enter by the divemaster.

To our right was a narrower passage that would eventually lead back to open water. We went right, and before long were marvelling at the antics of an anemonefish as it nervously flitted back and forth in the tentacles of its host, right at the exit point of this coral passageway.

The dive continued along the slope of the coral head until we could see a group of massive pinnacles, standing tall and to



HEAVEN HELPS US ALL



Geological splendour and the number of endemic species are what strikes US divers MICHAEL

SALVAREZZA and CHRISTOPHER P WEAVER on their first trip to the Red Sea – but would their prime wish come true?

attention in the distance.

Starting at around 20m they rose to various shallow depths, some almost reaching the surface. It was like an underwater Stonehenge, and we swam towards them for closer examination.

Along the sides of these pinnacles, swarms of red and yellow anthias hovered chaotically, with the fish rushing for cover if we made any sudden movements or if we fired our strobes.

They were nice, but we kept an eye out for that oceanic whitetip. However, none was to be seen at Dangerous Reef.

It was good to have become familiar

with the site, because our next dive would be on the same reef at night. Our quarry was the flamboyant Spanish dancer, the brilliantly coloured red nudibranch that can measure up to a foot in length.

About halfway into the dive, with dive-lights flashing in the darkness through the coral gardens, we suddenly came across the distinctive ribbon-like egg case of this creature, and reckoned that there must be one nearby.

A few moments later, there it was – a majestic Spanish dancer was creeping



Below, from left: Picassofish; blue-lipped rusty parrotfish; exploring a vertical wall; Spanish dancer at night; basketstar.

Above: The *Heaven Saphir*.

along a coral outcropping. Later, we would find three more.

Afterwards, back on the liveaboard, one of the other divers approached us and told us about a friend with cancer who had always dreamt of seeing a Spanish

dancer but sadly never had.

Could we give her one of our images? We were happy to oblige.

Heaven Saphir is one of several dive-boats operating in this area, and a few nights earlier, as we had strolled along the docks in Port Ghalib before boarding, we couldn’t help but notice that many of them appeared worn and tired.

Not so with *Heaven Saphir*, a fresh-looking and handsome vessel that accommodates a maximum of 19 guests in comfortable cabins, each with a fridge, shower and individually controlled air conditioning.

With plentiful, delicious food, a friendly and attentive crew and a pair of experienced dive-guides on board, our dive trip to this part of the Red Sea was proving safe and enjoyable.

THE NEXT TWO DAYS brought us to four more dive-sites: Big and Little Gota, Paradise Reef and the Playground. Each one was visually exquisite. Some had sheer walls and drop-offs, while others boasted labyrinthine cracks and tunnels in the coral heads, and eye-catching rock structures and coral pinnacles.

We were particularly excited by the briefing for Little Gota, a nearly circular coral outcrop with vertical walls that brought the hope of seeing passing pelagic fish. Could this be where we would find our oceanic whitetip?

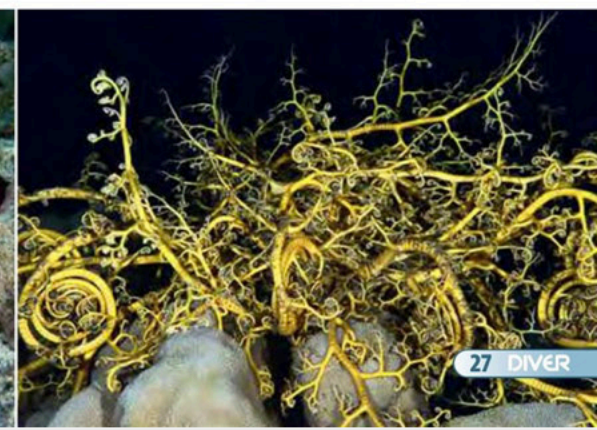
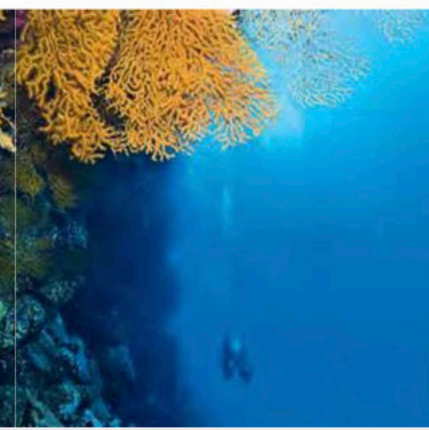
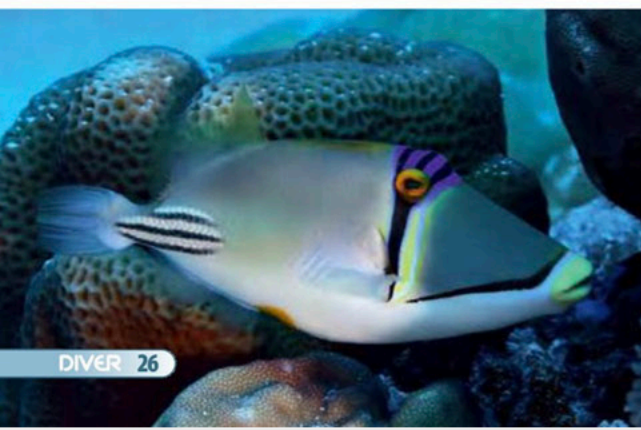
We swam down to 30m and began a drift along the flanks of the coral head, coming across crown, Arabian and the aptly named exquisite butterflyfish at various points in the dive. Sadly, no shark.

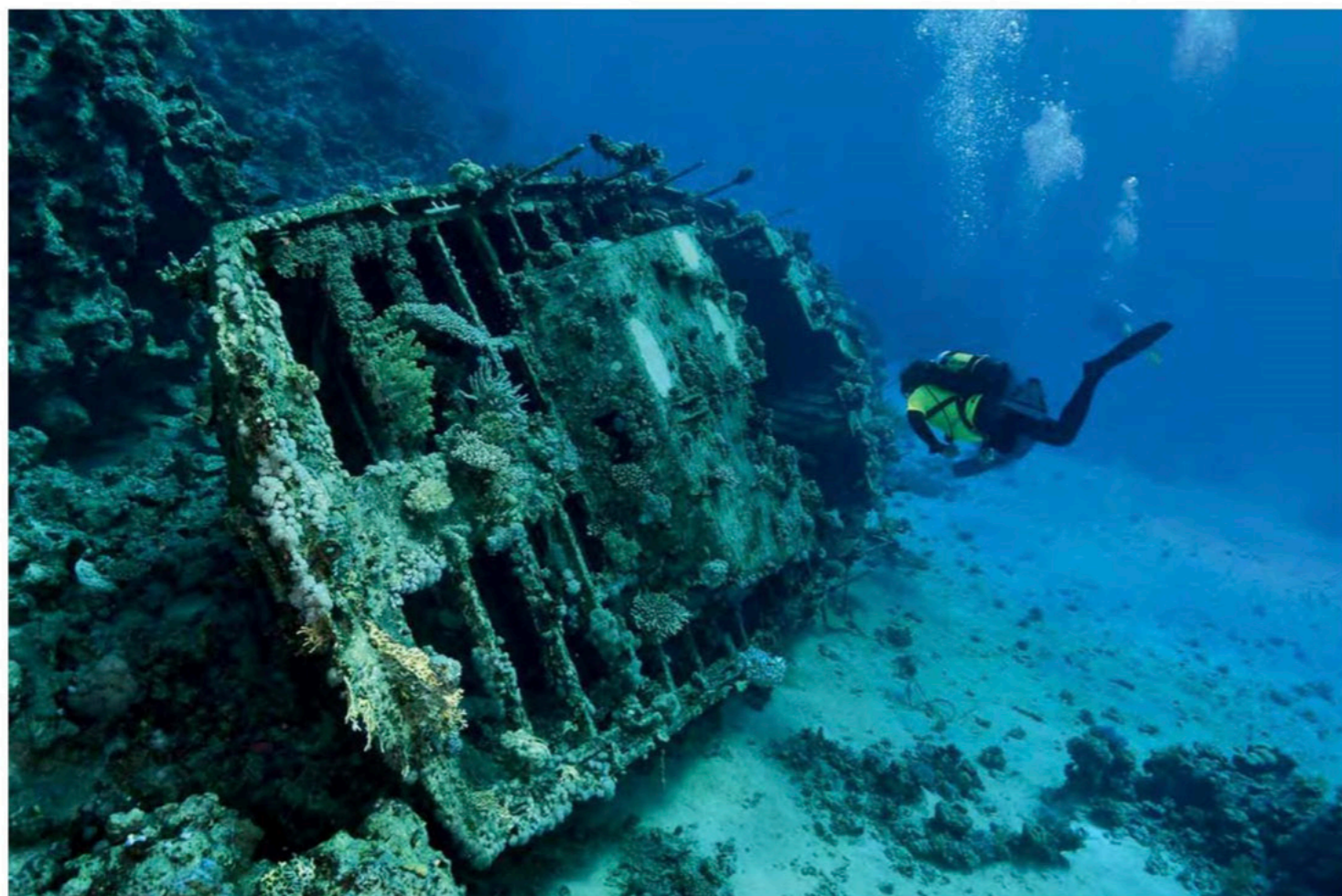
What we did discover in this area was that, while we weren’t encountering big schools of pelagic fish, the real secret to its beauty was that most of the species we were seeing were endemic.

They looked similar to familiar species but were subtly different.

After each dive, the fish geeks would pore over the boat’s coral-reef guide books, compare notes and excitedly exclaim after identifying something they hadn’t seen before. We were among those geeks!

At Paradise Reef, an undulating wall of coral and rocks marked the southern

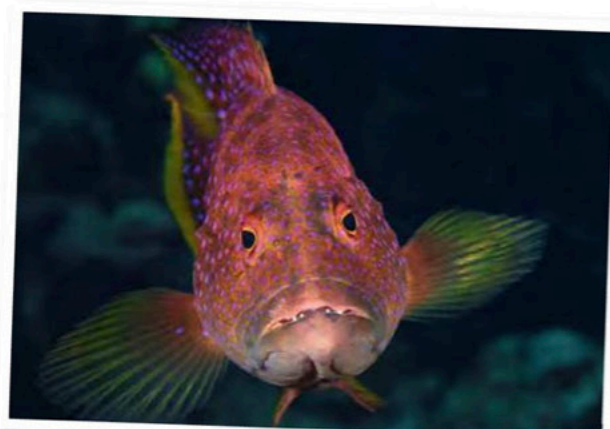




end of the reef system and this is where we tied to the mooring lines and began our dives. At 15m we enjoyed the antics of the aptly named picasso triggerfish, found only in the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf, before moving to deeper water and the valley of underwater pinnacles standing like monuments in a museum.

Above: Divers examine a small shipwreck.

Below from top: Lyretail grouper showing its teeth; oceanic whitetip shark.



Suddenly, an excited dive-guide nearby shook his noisemaker and made the universal signal for a shark. With furious kicks, we abandoned the anemonefish we were photographing and raced towards the scene.

As we rounded a coral rock we spotted the object of the excitement – a rather small whitetip reef shark. Is it possible to hear someone sigh under water?

OUR DIVE ROUTINE on the liveaboard started with a wake-up knock on our cabin door at 6am. A 6.30 briefing was followed by a dive before breakfast. After a surface interval, we would enjoy a late-morning dive, followed by lunch and an afternoon dive preceding a night-dive. By then, a hearty dinner was in order and was enjoyed by all.

Green turtles, blue-spotted sting rays and free-swimming giant moray eels

were among the larger creatures we came across, but the southern waters are well-suited for macro photography, with numerous opportunities to capture images of reef fish, invertebrates, nudibranchs and hard and soft corals.

Because the Red Sea lies directly on a tectonic rift zone, the geology is more dramatic than in some other dive destinations. Without the presence of large schools of fish, we focused on the smaller critters and the unique nature of what we were seeing.

Of all the dives in this area, perhaps the Playground was the most fun. Similar to the site at Paradise Reef, it consists of a massive coral head fractured with rifts and cracks, but we swam directly through these visually arresting vistas before emerging into an amphitheatre.

This large bowl was surrounded by walls festooned with hard and soft corals, large sponges and whip corals.

Along the sandy bottom were piles of rocky rubble, each home to tiny marine lifeforms. This area gave way to a passage to the other side of the coral head, and we then swam around the outside of the reef in search of our elusive shark before arriving back at the boat.

After several wonderful days and nights in the St John's and Fury Shoals regions, it was time to head back north towards Port Ghalib. We stopped on the way at additional dive-sites such as Abu Galawa



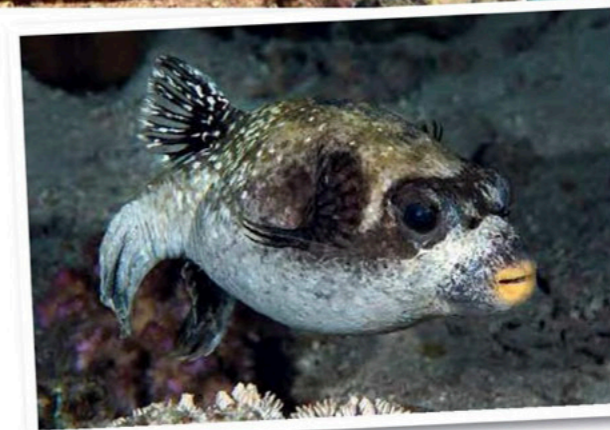
Soraya and Shiriniat to see more coral outcrops and more endemic species.

Exploring closer to Port Ghalib, we encountered more dive-boats and crowded conditions on the reefs.

We had heard about the boat traffic at some Red Sea sites but were still surprised by the number of boats simultaneously mooring there. With RIBs buzzing back and forth and so many moorings, an SMB was an essential tool for diver safety.

The *Heaven Saphir* divemasters were no strangers to these situations and made sure to minimise the effects by careful timing of our dives, and ensuring that we surfaced right by the boat.

On the final day of our safari we arrived at Elphinstone near Marsa Alam, known for its sharks and, with strong currents, usually reserved for more advanced divers. With an eye



Above, clockwise from top left: Blue-spotted sting ray; dramatic pinnacles; masked pufferfish, found only in the Red Sea.

towards the open water we drifted along dramatic coral formations, photographing the marine life but ever hopeful of you-know-what.

In the event, we became obsessed with capturing a good image of the Red Sea orchid dottyback, a 1in purplish-blue fish that seems to know precisely when a shutter is about to be released and darts

away at that precise moment. Capturing a good image was difficult, and we're not sure we ever really got one.

With a change in current direction, we dived to explore a different side of the Elphinstone reef and found dazzling soft corals blooming in the current among healthy hard corals.

A titan triggerfish swam out from behind a ledge to give us a look, while a lyre-tail grouper stared us down as we tried to swim through its territory.

Groups of sergeant-majors excitedly protected their egg masses from predators and from the passing divers. The reef seemed alive with buzzing activity on this late Red Sea morning.

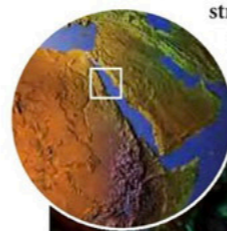
It was all quite enjoyable, but it was only at the very end of the dive, as we waited out our three-minute safety stop, that we finally glimpsed our prize.

AFTER A WEEK of searching on some 20 dives, there, hazy at first but more distinct as she closed, was a 2m oceanic whitetip shark. She took an inquisitive glance at the gaggle of divers hovering at 5m before swimming off into the blue.

Perhaps she had satisfied her curiosity. Perhaps she had issued a statement of superiority to the ungainly divers in the water. Perhaps she had simply seen this all before and was not interested. We will never know, but we felt blessed.

Less than a minute passed from the time we spotted her until she was gone.

Hearts racing, fists pumping in the water, we watched her distinctive pectoral fins and powerful tail fade into the distance as she beckoned us to follow and explore more of the Red Sea.



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Fly from the UK to Hurghada or Marsa Alam, which is closer to Port Ghalib, though flight schedules might prove less convenient.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ *Heaven Saphir* liveaboard, divesaphir.com

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round, but expect windier conditions and cooler temperatures between November and April. In summer temperatures can be uncomfortably warm but the diving conditions are excellent.

MONEY ▶ Egyptian pound

PRICES ▶ Return flights from £300. The eight-day southern itinerary costs from US \$1300pp including transfers, nitrox extra.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ egypt.travel

