

On The Edge:

SHAPE Sub Aqua Club (SSAC) Members Dive Into The Red Sea, Hurghada, Egypt

By Colleen Thompson (USA - Civ)

Ho-hum and yawn. Boring. You'd think that after three consecutive years of the same trip, to the same place, to see the same stuff, I'd just not want to go again. You'd think it was enough. You'd think I'd say, quite simply, "No, thank you." You'd think it was a cut-and-dried (idiom meaning a situation which is clear and easy to understand) example of "been there, done that, have the t-shirt to prove it." Again, yawn.

Well, you'd think that, and...you'd be wrong! Way wrong! For the past three years I've traveled to Hurghada, Egypt for a dive trip with other members of the SHAPE Sub Aqua Club (SSAC) and this year, the fourth year in a row, I was first in line to sign up. Am I crazy? Am I going for a world record? Am I a glutton for punishment? Yes, no, and maybe. Let me explain.

Hurghada, Egypt, which has now become a seemingly annual trip for SSAC, takes place in late November/early December. What's not to like about leaving Belgium when it is quickly settling into its winter hibernation of long, dark days and cold, dreary nights?! We're talking 28 degrees vs. 12 degrees! Sun vs. no sun! And, if that was-



△Old dogs learning new tricks.



△Emperor Angelfish.



△The always popular turtle.

n't enough to convince me to take the trip yet again, then scuba diving in the Red Sea's pristine waters vs. Belgium's murky waters certainly would be!

Actually, when I think about it, this is quite possibly my favorite scuba diving trip! In previous SHAPE Community Life articles I've mentioned some of my other scuba diving trips and their highpoints: Thailand aboard a Chinese Junk, Turkey aboard a Gulet, the Maldives with its Hammerhead Sharks and Manta Rays, Mozambique with its Whale Sharks, and Philippines with its Nudibranches and Thresher Sharks. Since I've experienced these unique and often breathtaking aquatic experiences how can ho-hum, boring, same old same old Hurghada, Egypt and the Red Sea be my favorite? Let me explain.

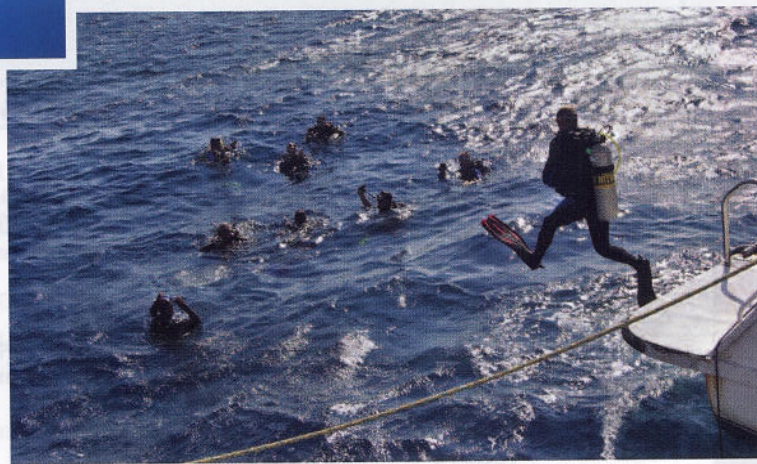
The one unique thing about the SSAC Hurghada trip is newbies. That's right. Look it up. Newbie. Newcomer. Novice. Noob. Whatever you want to refer to them as, they are the wide-eyed fledglings standing on the edge of the boat, quivering with a combination of excitement and fear as they take their first stride-entry of their first open water dive into the deep blue of the Red Sea. Several of them may splash and come up coughing with a bit of salt water burning in their lungs, but the thrill of the soon-to-be discovered unknown is just below their fins, and they press on - downward. It wasn't so long ago that that was me. I vividly remember being a newbie. And that is what keeps me coming back; the experience of being a part of bringing these newbies to the brink of the



△Xavier Michelot and Michael Volpin.



△Juan Babio and Santiago Avanzini on the wreck of the El Mina.



△Taking the plunge.



△Michael Volpin in a school of Yellow Goatfish.



△Ian Pratschler celebrating his 16th birthday.

amazing world of scuba diving and then, lovingly and tenderly, shoving them off the boat. Let me further explain.

Scuba divers trained through SSAC have been taught in a classroom, at the SHAPE pool, and at a Belgium quarry or lake. During classroom sessions they have learned about the effects of nitrogen on the body and have been shown bright and exciting photos of previous SSAC trips (the proverbial carrot at the end of the stick). In the SHAPE pool they have practiced skills such as tired-diver-pull and sharing air. Then in often brisk and always murky Belgium waters they have completed skills and dives to obtain their NAUI Basic Open Water certification. As an active volunteer with SSAC, I've watched these newly trained divers progress from hesitantly clearing their masks in the pool to successfully completing emergency swimming ascents in full kit in caliginous water. I've witnessed them struggling into 7mm wetsuits, donning 20+ kilos of kit, and bravely submerging themselves into the gray, unknown. These are the determined,



excited, and a bit tentative divers now standing on the boat platform in Hurghada, looking into the abyss of the Red Sea, inflating their BCs, holding their gauges, their finger on their forehead and mask, leg forward, pushing off, and then turning to the boat master to give the "OK" signal. And this is why I return time and time again to Hurghada and the Red Sea.

And there it is. My explanation for why this is quite possibly my favorite scuba diving trip. The biggest thrill of scuba diving is always the camaraderie of the SSAC club, the pure exhilaration of sharing my diving experiences with fun, like-minded divers from all

nationalities, abilities, and age. Aside from my personal satisfaction of seeing so many novices bloom into great divers, this year's trip provided many others with great experiences and memories. Here is a short-list summary:

This year's trip was the biggest yet! The number of attendees has increased with each year, from 15 divers in 2008 to 30 divers in 2011. Of those 30 divers, 12 completed their Advanced certification and 14 completed their Nitrox certification.

This year's trip had the most diverse nationality representation with 13 countries! Are you curious to know the count? BEL-1, BRG-1, CAN-1, CZE-1, DEN-1, DEU-3, ESP-4, FRA-1, GRB-5, IRL-1, ITA-1, NLD-1, POL-1, and USA-8. And that was just divers. There were also 10 family members and friends along for the fun!

This year's trip had the widest age spread yet! Christian Jorgensen and Kitty Plompen, 67 and 68 years young, took their enjoyment of the underwater world from snorkeling to scuba diving by completing their Basic Open Water qualification. In contrast, youngster Ian Pratschler celebrated

his 16th birthday while completing his 57th dive.

This year's trip had milestones! Dita Machovcova celebrated the successful completion of her 100th dive and Paloma Avanzini completed a 1st-try dive.

This year's trip saw the creation of new memories and wondrous sights! Despite numerous trips to the Red Sea, Angelo Leone consistently exudes joy at being there and always has new experiences. This trip, his underwater personal highlights were seeing for only the second time a crazy-looking Filamented Devilfish and also being surrounded by a huge school of hundreds of Barracuda. Leone's non-diving highlights were the evenings spent with friends reliving the dives and sights of the day with a Turkish coffee and a Shisha.

This year's trip provided a nice warm-up! Glynn Wade, Steffen Broecker, Silvia Matern, Peter Matern, Angelo Leone, and I are now prepared for our trip to Phuket, Thailand in January with SSAC for a live-aboard adventure on The Junk! (Sorry, the trip is full!)

Enjoy the pictures! The adage "A picture is worth a thousand words" couldn't be more apropos.

SSAC has more than 60 members and offers scuba courses at reduced cost to the SHAPE community. For more pictures of this and other trips, or for more information, visit www.shapesubaqua.com or send email to shapesubaqua@yahoo.com.



△Peter and Silvia Matern.



△Cheryl and Steven Lewis on the wreck of the El Mina.