

SHAPE Sub Aqua Club - Hurghada, Egypt By Colleen Thompson (USA-Civ)



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△Moray Eel and Cleaner Wrasse

SIX! Six consecutive years in a row! Over the past six years, that's how many times I've been to Hurghada, Egypt with the SHAPE Sub Aqua Club (SSAC). Every November since 2008, I have happily traveled to the warm, pristine waters of the Red Sea on what is now a seemingly annual pilgrimage. Over these past six years I've traveled with as few as 12 divers to as many as 53 people (34 divers and 19 family members). And for the past two years my son, daughter-in-law, and grandson have gone with me making it not only an experience with friends, but also a truly amazing family experience.

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 other SSAC scuba diving trips that I've been on and their highpoints:



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△Toughest Fish on the Reef

Thailand aboard a Chinese Junk, Mozambique with its Whale Sharks, Indonesia with its Mola Mola, Malaysia with its Flamboyant Cuttlefish and Madarinfish, and the Philippines with its Nudibranches and Thresher Sharks. Since I've experienced these unique and often breathtaking aquatic experiences, Hurghada, Egypt might almost seem pale in comparison.

The one unique thing about the SSAC Hurghada trip that sets it apart from all the other SSAC scuba trips is newbies. 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 might promptly come up coughing a bit of salt water, but with the thrill of the soon-to-be discovered unknown just below their fins, they press on – downward. It wasn't so long ago that that was me. I vividly remember being a newbie. The intoxicating thrill of the underwater world is what keeps me coming back; the experience of being a part of bringing these newbies to the brink of the amazing world of scuba diving, lovingly and tenderly shoving them off the boat, to then see their passion for diving

<Relaxing Before Dinner



△Best Dives Buddies



△MV Salem Express Propeller



△New Divers at their Safety Stop



△Egypt 2013

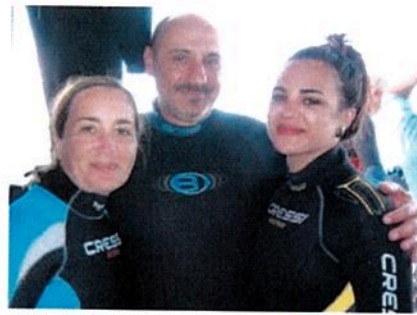
develop much as mine did.

Scuba divers trained through SSAC are taught in a classroom, at the SHAPE pool, and at a Belgium quarry or lake. During classroom sessions they learn about the effects of nitrogen on the body and are shown bright and exciting photos of previous SSAC trips (the proverbial carrot at the end of the stick). In the SHAPE pool they practice skills such as regulator recovery and sharing air. Then in often brisk and always murky Belgium waters they complete skills and dives to obtain their 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, 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. The biggest thrill of scuba diving is always the camaraderie of SSAC club members and the pure exhilaration of sharing my diving experiences with fun, like-minded divers from all nationalities, abilities, and age.

This sixth year of going to Hurghada proved no different. Newcomer Elisabeth Ammerlaan completed her first 10 dives. Novices Christopher and Katie Thompson, Matt and Susannah Lieblong, and Melissa Alemanno all completed their NAUI Advanced Diver and NITROX qualifications. NAUI Advanced divers Kitty Plompen and Christian Jorgensen hit the 150 dive mark after just two years of certification. Xavier Michelot, who is currently working on his NAUI Master Diver certification, fell one dive short of 100 dives and ended the trip with 99 dives,



△Camel in the desert



△Diving is a Family Affair

▷Being visited by friendly Dolphins



△Playing games between dives

while new club member Yasuko Kondo hit 200 and potential dive students Milena Volpin and Canset Alemanno completed a try dive. This year's trip also provided a nice warm-up for 13 club members who are now ready to head off in April, along with 30 other SSAC members, to the open-air huts with no land in sight diving experience of Sipidan-Kapalai, Borneo, Malaysia. (Sorry! The trip is full!)

This year's trip to Hurghada, Egypt offered the added bonus of a special dive away from Hurghada. We took one day and traveled by bus to Safaga to make a sobering dive on the Salem Express. The MV Salem Express was a passenger ferry that sank in December 1991. Due to the deal toll of 470 and the fact that many bodies remain unrecovered, the ship had been closed to divers until recently. We were briefed to treat the wreck with respect and reverence, even more so due to the fact that one of our dive guides had both his brother and uncle perish on the wreck and not found. Personal effects are still strewn about the car deck adding to the feeling of great loss. It is difficult to put the feelings which swept over many of us during the dive. It was a silent, cold and lifeless dive, yet calm and tranquil. It's hard to explain and although I recommend the dive, I also ask to please, please, please respect the many who lost their lives and "take nothing but memories and leave only bubbles."

SSAC has over 70 members and offers scuba courses at reduced cost to the SHAPE community. For more information, visit www.shapesubaqua.com.

