

## November 2001

### Inside This Issue

The Sofishticated Brothers

The Farnetastic Seals

Stop Press ... Stop Press

### The Sofishticated Brothers



The end of British Summer Time ... what better excuse could there be for a week aboard the luxury liveaboard, MY Rosetta, taking in some of the Red Sea's finest dive sites. The MY Rosetta is an impressive liveaboard, exceptionally well equipped for the task of transporting us to the remote marine parks. All 8 of her twin cabins have their own bathroom, the lounge area is spacious and between dives there is plenty of room for sun-worshippers to sprawl out up-top. As a dive vessel her facilities cannot be faulted, Nitrox is available on board and fills are reasonably priced at \$6 a shot. All of the tanks are filled in-situ so there is never any need to remove your BCD, just undo your first stage and when you return for your next dive, hey presto your tank is fully charged. The dive platform is huge and provides plenty of room for everyone to kit up in comfort.

As is usual with liveaboard trips our first day's diving is based around Hurghada and is relatively tame stuff, giving everyone a chance to find their water wings and their sea legs. A pleasant drift along the southern side of Little Giftun yielded tales of Napoleon wrasse, morays and turtles, but I knew that this was only a hint of what was in store for us. The Brothers beckoned and after a late night dive, with the wind starting to drop, the engines sprang to life and the real adventure begun. The pitch and roll of the boat soon sent me off to sleep and my dreams were almost as vivid as the colours of the fish and corals that lay ahead.

At 3am I was suddenly awoken by micro pandemonium in the cabin and what sounded like gallons of rushing water!! In his infinite wisdom Ray had opened one of the portholes and our en-suite bathroom was now rapidly becoming en-suite aquarium!! We managed to get the porthole closed and returned to bed. I lay awake for a while trying to fathom the logic and rationale behind my husband's actions, it proved to be a great cure for insomnia!!

The next morning we awoke to find ourselves at Little Brother, the smaller of two tiny islands that sit in the middle of the Red Sea and constitute the only preserve breaking the surface for tens of square miles. The exposure of these islands to the currents from the open seas has promoted a proliferation of coral and a great number of pelagic fish regularly converge on the islands in search of food. For the morning dive the zodiac dropped us on the north plateau and from here we would head back towards the boat along the eastern wall. Looking across the blue to the sheer drop below we caught sight of our first shark, a white tip reef shark, slowly circling close to the wall. On the plateau at 40 metres there were a further 15 grey reef sharks enjoying their morning "clean". Then out of the blue came 3 hammerheads ... WOW !! ... what a start to the week and a real treat for our birthday boy, Tracker!! Our second dive on Little Brother took us along the west wall. The vertical wall, dropping into the deep blue abyss, was a stunning carpet of red, orange, purple and yellow corals. Huge sea fans and plumes of black coral gently swayed in the current. The whole wall was literally alive with colour, omnipresent shrouds of jewel fairy basslet teemed over the coral heads, groupers, beautiful emperor anglefish and graceful bannerfish sheltered in overhangs. It was a truly fantastic sight. Our final dive on Little Brother rewarded us with another hammerhead and in the late afternoon light the colour of the corals looked even more spectacular.

The next day we moved across to Big Brother, where the wrecks of the Aida and the Numidia were waiting to be explored. The Aida sits almost vertically on the reef wall and with the top of the wreck at 30 metres there is barely enough no-decompression time to explore fully although we did manage to swim through the bridge where a veil of glassfish protected our exit onto the near vertical decks. Back up on the reef wall it was the usual mass of colour and fish, making our extended safety stop a pleasure. We completed 2 more dives on Big Brother and were hoping to move to Daedalus Reef, however, that night the wind howled and raged around the isolated island making it impossible for us to head South. So we spent a second day on Big Brother, but it proved to be a most rewarding lay over. On the last dive we dropped onto the shallower wreck of the Numidia, with its bow at 13 metres and its prop in 85 metres. The wreck provided some excellent swim-throughs and once again the coral was prolific and the fish abundant. Coming out from the inside of the wreck we suddenly noticed the unmistakable diamond outline of a majestic manta ray in the blue above us. We gazed in wonder as she danced a surreal ballet with Ollie, our French dive guide. We spent an amazing 5 minutes with this elegant giant of the sea, her 3m meter wing span at times blocking out the sun as she passed overhead. Eventually she headed back out into the blue with just her remora fish for company and we were left feeling very privileged to have witnessed such a wonder.

After our experience with the manta, everything else seemed to pale into insignificance. We moved across to Elphinstone reef but unfortunately the tempestuous weather prevented us from reaching the northern plateau, where the big pelagics hangout. At Fury Shoal the immaculate coral garden provided a home to giant squirrelfish, blue spotted stingrays, grubbing in the sand, bright orange spine surgeonfish, triggerfish, a stunning bighorn nudibranch and of course, everyone's favourite ... the clownfish.

However, the trip did have one final big treat in store for us. On the last day we moored at the sheltered site of Sha'ab Marsa Alam where a pod of 11 spinner dolphins were playing in the

shallow waters. These were exceptionally sociable animals and after only a short while they seemed happy to accept us and even allowed us to touch them. As the morning wore on they became more frisky and began leaping out of the water. It was such a joy to see these lovely creatures in their natural environment and once again we all felt tremendously privileged to have been able to spend time in their world.

All in all it was a great week and the Red Sea had certainly given up some of its most precious treasures, leaving everyone with wonderful memories. The long dark winter nights definitely feel warmer when I think back to the beautiful dolphins. Finally, thanks to everyone who made the trip such fun - Touché the Brave, Son, Tracker, Brother Neil, Nicola, Pete Stanning, Gary Sydenham, Marcus Watling, Steve Groome, Mark Harvey, Sturdy Bird, Gilly Bean, Steve "Courvoisier" Lucas, Paul, Denise and Tom Butler.

Word & Pictures by Lesley Clark

### The Farnetastic Seals



It was through Adventure Divers' cunning advertising that I first considered going to the Farne Islands. Supposedly saving money for University, they knew that I wouldn't be able to resist diving with the seals and so once again my increasingly expensive passion for diving found me writing yet another cheque and booking on to the trip. Hey, but what the hell, this would be the perfect way to bring my diving season to a close. However, driving down twisty country lanes at almost midnight, trying to find "Farnes Diving Services" I did start to question my own sanity. Not only had the temperature dropped by a dramatic 5 degrees since leaving London, but the fact that the Farne Islands were nowhere to be seen on any road atlas was more than a little concerning. Nonetheless, after some 7 hours it was with an intense sense of relief that we eventually found our accommodation.

The weekend kicked off with a hearty breakfast courtesy of our host, Stan Hall. An aging and very salty old sea dog, his accent confirmed the fact that we were well and truly in Geordie Land. I was definitely in need of a translator and Stan may as well have been speaking in Swahili for what little of his dialect I could understand. However, I did manage to catch "eat your food lass otherwise you'll never get down!" ... I can only presume that he was talking about the diving! After breakfast we made our way to the harbour at

Seahouses where our hard boats were waiting for us. Separating ourselves into two groups we loaded equipment and tanks on board and we were soon heading out to sea.

Before long we had reached Longstone Island and I caught my first glimpse of the grey seals that make these island so famous. Watching them bob in and out of the water I began to wonder how these soft, cuddly-looking animals would react to us ... would they be aggressive and territorial or shy and nervous of our presence in the water ... I was soon to find out. My buddy (Brother Neil) and I kitted up and dropped into the water just off of Brownsman Island. Hitting the bottom at 14 metres we discovered the remains of the Snowdonia. The wreck was so broken up that it was difficult to imagine that this was once a sea going vessel. All that remained was a large anchor chain and a few unidentifiable chunks of metal and timber that stood as a telling testament to the cruel sea conditions, which persist in these parts. I later discovered that it is not uncommon to dive here and see no trace of the wreck whatsoever, so all considered I figured that we had done quite well. However, I still hadn't seen any seals!

On the second dive, along the southern edge of Longstone Island, in an area known locally as The Shitons (the skipper later explained that the name was something to do with birds and the call of nature), I was to experience my first encounter with the seals. Descending to a relatively shallow 12 metres my attention was soon captured by a large blob darting towards us ... it was a seal! Through my excitement and on account of the fact that I am a silly cow, I was immediately struck by a fit of the giggles and flooded my mask ... and before any of you ask, no I was not narked (but it has been known - Ed). Regaining my composure I cleared my mask and restored my vision. The seal circled around us and I was shocked by his size, he was almost as big as me, which isn't hard I have to admit. Darting back up to the surface, he returned with one of his mates and they came a little closer. From the look in their eyes I could tell that they weren't in the least bit scared, simply curious. The seals continued to reappear throughout the dive and after 50 minutes we ascended, buzzing with excitement and adrenaline. The fact that I had just swam with seals was definitely one of the highlights of my year, but knowing that there were still two days diving left to do was even better.

After our first days diving, nothing was more welcome than a pint of beer and a fantastic meal in the local pub. The landlord was most hospitable and gave us a warm welcome, showing great interest in our days diving. However, he looked at me somewhat quizzically. Confused by the fact that I am the size of a Munchkin and trying to work out if it could be possible for me to carry a tank all on my own, the landlord questioned ... "does she go down as well?" Having grown somewhat accustomed to being the butt of everyone's jokes, I retorted with some of my finest Noorf London invective ... "normally I make the sandwiches and the tea, but I am allowed to go down on special occasions". The landlord's expression didn't change!

On the second day I buddied with Lesley and Gillian. Lesley had told us about a gully that she had found that had been swamped with seals from every angle. Gillian and I had therefore decided that Lesley was probably a good choice to buddy up with. On the first dive at Knivestone we dropped down into 6 metres and then over a ledge into a beautiful valley of white, orange and yellow anemones ... it looked like a magical carpet. Drifting down into the gully we came across the wreckage of the *Abysiminal*, a German destroyer from the 1st World War. Her boilers were clearly visible and the wreckage provided a home for some lovely ballan wrasse. The seabed was alive with tiny shrimps, baby starfish and hermit crabs. I had never seen anything like it and we had to be careful with our fin action in order not to disturb them. For the second dive we returned to the seal gully, which Lesley had described. Starting at a depth of 19 metres, a crack in the rock, some 5 metres across, gradually narrowed as we moved shallower until there was just enough room for one person. At the end of the gully it opened up into a shallow pool where the seals were busy playing in the kelp and darting in and out of the water. The longer we spent with the seals the more curious they became and soon Gillian found that one of them had taken a liking to her fins. With the sun filtering through the water it made for a beautiful sight and we spent most of the dive just watching them play.

Throughout the weekend we had been extremely lucky with the weather but on the last day our luck finally ran out. The wind had swung round to the North and we awoke to a grey and overcast day. Needless to say it was a bit lumpy on the way out to our final dive site, the *Somali*, and so kitting up was a challenge. Once in the water there was no time for messing around and so it was straight to the buoy and down. The *Somali* was heading for Hong Kong when she fell victim to a squadron of Heinkel 111 bombers in March, 1941. At the time she was carrying tons of general cargo, including shoes, batteries, medical supplies, bicycles, heavy lorry tyres, several 4x4s, coins for Hong Kong banks, tons of toy lead soldiers and, it is rumoured, GOLD! Following unsuccessful attempts to control the fire in her holds, an explosion finally broke the ship in two and she sank a few miles off of Beadnell. Today she sits in 30 metres of water and seems to have suffered little from the winter storms and although the wreck has been extensively salvaged it still looks like a ship. Its "much-rummaged" holds still turns up plenty of interesting items but as usual I found nothing apart from the remains of an old tyre. However, I did see the boilers and engine room, which were amazingly still intact.

This was a great way to end a great weekend. The diving had been fantastic and it was nice to finish my season on a high note. Finally, a big thank you to everyone who made the weekend so much fun - Touché the Brave, Mum, Steve, Gilly Bean, Brother Neil, Piglet, Louise, Paul, Mitch, Beaver, Mr Hyde, Pill Freak, Cathy and Neil.

Words By AWT (aka Katie Ball)

## **Stop Press ... Stop Press**

Potential Divemaster LUKE was left "reeling" during a recent weekend at Weymouth when he spectacularly launched himself from the boat into the water to patiently await the company of his novice divers. They believed that the tirade of abuse which followed was as a result of their failure to follow swiftly, but their presence (or lack of it) was not the problem. Their supercharged buddy had failed to secure his SMB and had felt his reel and buoy make the steady descent without him !! Under normal circumstances a quick search and recovery may have been sufficient however in visibility of less than 12 inches this would have required a team of 44 buddies and several days. Their devastated companion was left cursing his luck whilst his sympathetic boat buddies, Jim and Rob, rocked gently to and fro on board !! A valuable lesson learnt - I f you f\*~k up big time, keep it to yourself.

**Many thanks to YoYo Walsh for spilling the beans.**