

PELAGIC *magic*

After a ten-year hiatus, the Aggressor Fleet is back in the Egyptian Red Sea. Mark Evans joined the vessel for a trip out to the Brothers, Daedalous and Elphinstone - and was not disappointed

Photographs by MARK EVANS





The Red Sea Aggressor is back. The Aggressor Fleet used to run a boat called the Excel as their Aggressor in Egypt, but this ceased operation some ten years ago. Now the worldwide company has returned to the Red Sea, this time utilising the tried-and-tested Suzanna 1 as their liveaboard. The Red Sea Aggressor is a modern, well-appointed boat that was a good-quality liveaboard when she was initially launched in 2004, but now it has been 'Aggressor-ised' it is certainly near the top of the crop in Egyptian waters.

The Aggressor Fleet has a global presence, but a high percentage of its clientele hail from North America, and so it was on the itinerary I joined. Apart from a lone South African and a British couple, all the rest were from the USA or Canada. This is great news for Egypt in the current climate - North Americans know and trust the Aggressor brand, so if this is enough for them to want to make the trek across the Atlantic to the Middle East, then I am all for it. Room-mate and buddy Brad Gehrt had been on several Aggressor/Dancer Fleet vessels, and that helped with his decision to try out the Red Sea Aggressor for a week.

The Red Sea Aggressor runs two itineraries - north to Brothers, Daedalous and Elphinstone (which is known as 'Simply the Best' among Red Sea aficionados), and south to St John's/Fury Shoals - back to back, so several of the guests on board had either been on the boat the week before, or were staying on after our trip. A smart marketing idea which is obviously working - hell, if you've travelled a long way to get here, why not stay for two weeks? They also do occasional ten-day specials which take in the best bits of both normal itineraries.

I was looking forward to our northern itinerary, as the Brothers in particular rank as some of my favourite dives anywhere in the world. First up were a few fringing reef dives to allow everyone to fettle their weighting and get acquainted with the marine life of the Red Sea, then we set off on the long crossing to the Brother Islands.

THE BROTHERS

The Brother Islands - also known as El Akhawein in Arabic - are two pinnacles of rock which protrude out of the Egyptian Red Sea some 60 miles offshore. There is simply nothing else around apart from these two barren outcrops, which lie about a mile apart, hence why they are a magnet to marine life of all shapes and sizes.



First up was Big Brother, which is topped by a British lighthouse built in 1883 that is manned by military personnel who have got a nice sideline in 'I Dived The Brothers' T-shirts! This spit of land is roughly cigar-shaped and is approximately 800 metres long.

On the north point lies the wreck of the Numidia, one of the most-stunning wreck dives in the world. This huge cargo ship ran aground in 1901, and then sank down the reef, becoming impossibly stuck on to the sheer wall. The bow has been smashed by constant wave action, and so the top 10-12m comprises broken wreckage, but beyond that the ship is remarkably intact, all the way down to the props at 86m.

Swept by sometimes extremely strong currents, the Numidia is absolutely smothered in soft coral growth, which drapes over the superstructure, railings and masts. Reef fish swarm over the wreck, and grey reef sharks can be seen circling around it in the blue, as well as the odd barracuda, trevally and

tuna. The sheer size of the wreck, plus its bizarre orientation, make it a dive not to be missed.

Around the west side of Big Brother lies the second wreck, that of the Aida. This Egyptian transport vessel was bringing supplies to the lighthouse in 1957 when it ran aground and promptly broke in half - the bow section was obliterated on the shallow reef, while the stern portion sank into deeper water and lodged vertically between 35-65m. You don't get long on this wreck, but again it is covered with soft corals and makes for a dramatic view disappearing into the deep blue below.

Small Brother lies around a mile away from Big Brother and is a small, circular island surrounded by sheer walls and deep plateaus. Currents sweep on to the north point, bringing with them nutrient-rich waters, which means the soft coral growth is phenomenal. And you get sharks. Grey reefs are the most-regular visitors, but hammerheads and threshers do put in the odd appearance - we saw a couple of hammers this time around, and the other RIB saw a thresher and a manta ray. The sheer weight of life on Small Brother makes it a smorgasbord of rich, vibrant colours, as all the reef fish flutter in and out of the coral and sponge growth.

DAEDALOUS

Well, what can I say. After my last three trips to Daedalous - Abu Kizan in Arabic - were a damp squib, delivering nothing more exciting than the odd barracuda or trevally, this time around it totally overshadowed its Big and Small Brother.

After hearing reports of multiple hammerhead sightings over the previous few weeks, I have to admit I was quietly harbouring great hopes for this large, circular reef,

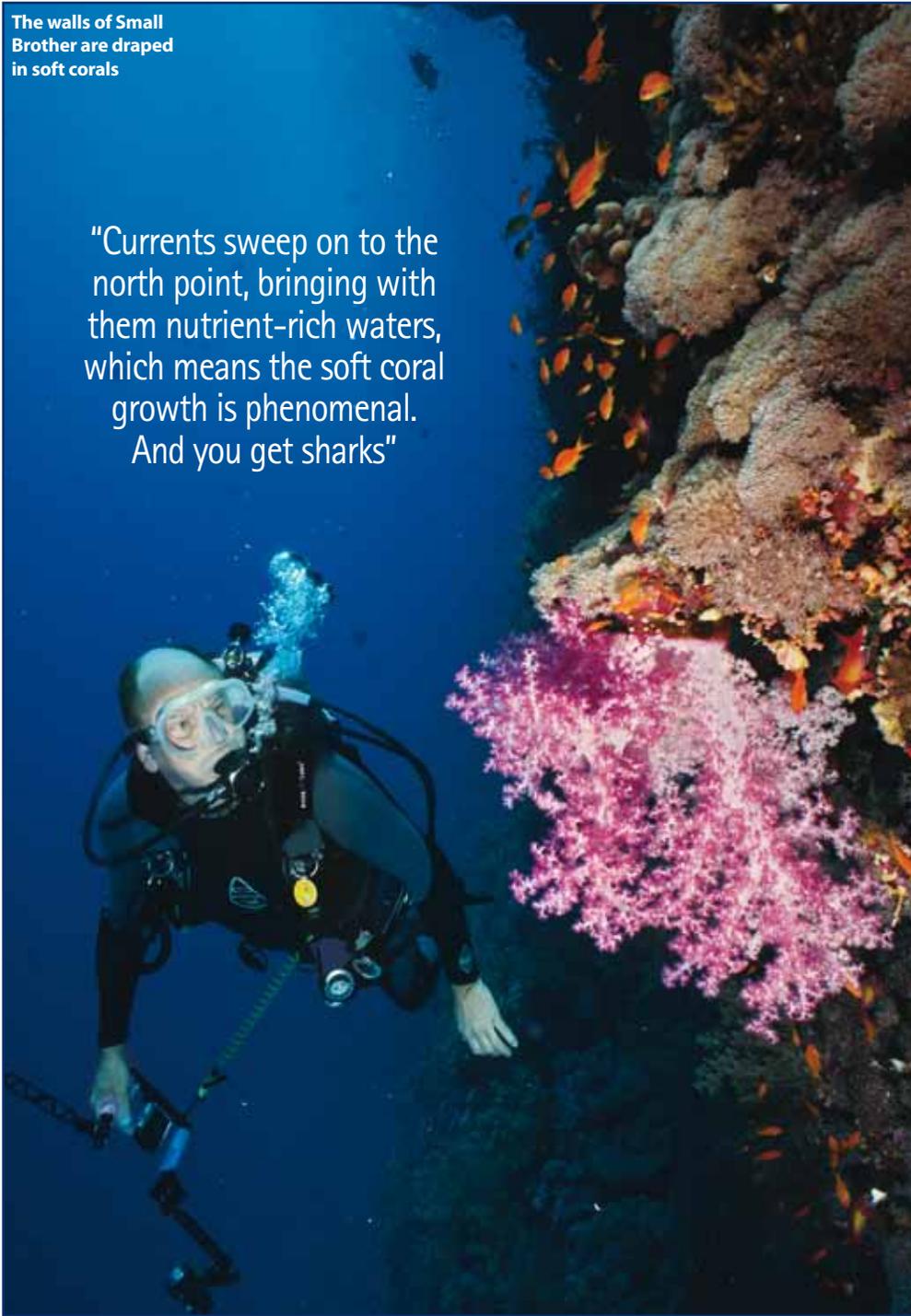


"Sadly they were too far away for any photographs with my 16mm pancake lens, so I contented myself with a bit of video, while at the same time hammering away on my tank with my knife to alert the rest of the group"



The walls of Small Brother are draped in soft corals

"Currents sweep on to the north point, bringing with them nutrient-rich waters, which means the soft coral growth is phenomenal. And you get sharks"



but equally I remembered my recent visits, which involved long periods in the blue for no reward.

I needn't have worried. On the first dive, a hammerhead put in a welcome appearance literally seconds after we dropped in, cruising into sight at around 10-12m from along the wall. Unfortunately, it swiftly made an exit, but heh, it was a good sign. Alas, nothing else appeared, so we slowly made our way along the east wall, keeping an eye open for any pelagic action. The prolific hard and soft coral growth on the wall kept everybody occupied and entertained, but when two hammerheads came mooching along at 25m, everyone took notice.

No one argued when the dive guides suggested doing the exact same dive, and this time three hammerheads came in to check us out after a short hang in the blue, and we were treated to a further close encounter when a lone hammerhead approached the group on the wall in less than 12m.

However, the third dive proved to be 'the one'. Dropping in at the northern end of the west wall negatively, I dropped rapidly to 20m, and came within a few metres of a chunky grey reef shark. Heading out into the blue with buddy Brad, we were hopeful of more shark action, but after 10-15 minutes, I signalled that we should start swimming south in the blue, give it another five minutes, and then head back in to the reef. No more than 30 seconds later, Brad - who was positioned between the reef and I - pointed past me into the blue. I turned to be greeted by the glorious sight of some 19-20 scalloped hammerheads cruising in formation towards us. Sadly they were too far away for any photographs with my 16mm pancake lens, so I contented myself with a bit of video, while at the same time hammering away on my tank with my knife to alert the rest of the group, who were all swimming along close to the reef.

As I swam along soaking up the magnificent view of shoaling hammers, I was aware of a tank banger going off near the reef. Turning to my right, I was astounded to see a four-metre wingspan manta ray gliding towards me. I quickly snapped off a series of photographs as it cruised past me and turned, heading back out into the deep directly over my head. *This* is what everyone on board had come for, *this* is what Daedalous is all about, and it certainly made up for my last few visits.

Inevitably, the second day at Daedalous couldn't hold a candle to this manic first experience. We again had the odd hammer, and another manta ray came along for a brief encounter on a safety stop, but otherwise everyone was happy to enjoy the bizarrely tranquil conditions and just absorb the views along the dramatic sheer walls.

ELPHINSTONE

Once a hotspot for hammerheads, silvertips and grey reef sharks, my last few trips had



THE RED SEA AGGRESSOR

This 36.5-metre vessel has been outfitted to the highest standards and offers a comfortable base from which to explore the Red Sea. It can take 20 passengers and boasts 12 crew, and the large salon has plenty of space to spread out and relax. The same applies to both sundecks, which have more than enough room for every guest.

All rooms have ensuite, air-con and, rather niftily, a flat-screen TV equipped with a USB stick. You can simply plug in the USB to the onboard Mac, select a movie from the huge collection, drag and drop on the stick and then watch it in the comfort of your own room.

The RIBs are equipped with boarding ladders to make getting back in easier, and are larger than the average liveaboard zodiac, so even with ten divers in it is not too bad a squeeze.

Cruise Director David Patterson, and dive instructors Erin Spencer and Mahmoud Abdela, have a great crew onboard with them, and the tasty food is served up in American-size portions, so you will certainly not go hungry!

www.aggessor.com



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...



EGYPT

HOW TO GET THERE

There are numerous charter flights into Hurghada, or you can get on a scheduled flight into this airport or Marsa Alam International Airport, which is a stone's throw from Port Ghalib.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

You can pretty much dive at the Brothers and Daedalous all year round, but the better conditions tend to be in the summer months.

"Turning to my right, I was astounded to see a four-metre wingspan manta ray gliding towards me"

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

You just need a valid passport with six months left to expiry, and can then buy a visa on arrival at the airport - it costs US\$25.

CURRENCY

Egyptian pound (£1 = EGP11).

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

The Red Sea Aggressor serves up tasty meals in the main salon, and there can be few places as appealing to sit back with a beer or cup of coffee than the main sundeck.

"The mammals put on a bit of a show, effortlessly darting here and there on the current-ripped plateau"

VERDICT

The Brothers and Daedalous remain some of the best dive sites in Egypt, and the Red Sea Aggressor is a supremely comfortable liveboard kitted out to the highest specification.



Manta ray cruising overhead at Daedalous



Coral growth on the Numidia

been shark-less, but the reef is still teeming with marine life and colourful coral growth, so it makes for a superb location for the last two dives of an itinerary such as this. The weather conditions were not ideal - we attempted to moor on the northern plateau, but the wave action soon snapped a line, and our captain wisely motored to the south plateau to join the other liveboards already in-situ. Large waves made getting into the zodiac 'fun', but once we were in the water, conditions improved.

A strong current was running over the northern plateau from west to east, and a few of us punched through it and hung at 30m scanning the blue for any sharks, but just as we were about to give up, I turned and caught sight of two large dolphins above and behind my companions. I'd heard them when we entered the water, and now they'd come in for a closer look at us bubble-blowers. I shouted and pointed them out, and as I did so, another four or five swept overhead and around us. The mammals put on a bit of a show, effortlessly darting here and there on the current-ripped plateau before heading off into the blue.

We drifted with the current down the east wall, admiring the fine coral on display while keeping one eye on the blue for any pelagic fish that might show up. Alas, it was not to be, and conditions on the surface had deteriorated to such an extent that Dave decidedly to call it quits and we left Elphin-stone, finishing out the week on a local reef.

CONCLUSION

The Red Sea Aggressor is certainly a nice vessel. It is right up there with the best in the Blue O Two,

Tornado Marine and Emperor fleets. The rooms are fairly spacious, the ensuite bathrooms have a decent-sized shower, the salon is sumptuously furnished, and the sun decks have plenty of room for everyone even on a full charter.

Because it is catering for a mainly North American clientele, it offers four dives a day out at the offshore marine parks instead of the usual three run by its rivals, and I am certain that this number will soon be adopted by other boats. Heh, if you are going all the way out to the Brothers and Daedalous, who wouldn't want to get an extra four dives in over a normal week-long itinerary? We were often the only divers in the water on our second afternoon dive.

One thing they might have to be flexible with if they want to attract more UK and European divers is their maximum depth rule. The boat offers 32 percent nitrox, and so imposed a guideline limit of 33m, but many Brit divers run their dive computers on 1.6 PPO2, which gives an MoD of 38-40m depending on the brand. Also, with the Egyptian depth limit being 40m - and this generally being where the sharks hang out - most seasoned UK liveboarders are going to want to be near this depth on at least the morning dives.

All-in-all, it is great to see a Red Sea Aggressor back in Egyptian waters, and judging by the robust advance bookings, a rosy future is guaranteed for this high-end liveboard. Dave, Erin and Mahmoud have a good crew on the vessel with them, and I look forward to joining them another time to trial their southern itinerary, which takes in the delights of the Fury Shoals and St John's. ■