

In Depth

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Consumer Reviews for Sport Divers

Poseidon's Quest Arabian Nights in the Red Sea

Zabargad, El Akhawein, Sha'ab Abu Nuhas, Ras Mohammed — words that could have come from the ruby-red lips of Scheherazade; instead, names of equally enchanting dive sites. A 12-day August magic-carpet ride on the *Poseidon's Quest*, with its 5-star living and diving, delighted our group with warm waters, incredibly colored soft corals, and swirling kaleidoscopes of rainbow-hued fish. It was like going along on one of Sinbad's mythical voyages.

On the Rug

Poseidon's Quest is arguably the finest dive boat in the Red Sea. Built of oak in Yugoslavia in 1967 as a private yacht by the owner of a large fishing fleet, she was constructed to last. For a yacht accommodating only 10 guests, this is a good-sized boat. Almost 100 feet long, with a 21-foot beam, a 13-foot draft, and two turbocharged Volvo engines, she cruises about 10 knots and carries fuel and food for a range of 3,000 miles.

Upon boarding at the Egyptian Naval Base at Sharm el Sheik, we were given an orientation tour. The well-lit cabins are air conditioned and roomy, with two single beds and an adjoining, equally spacious bathroom. There's plenty of space for a diver's clutter, and the most storage room I've ever seen in a dive boat cabin. The salon is exactly what I'll have in my lottery: large, comfortable sofas and chairs, three large tables for working on cameras, a VCR for viewing the day's video, an extensive library, free bottled water, honor-system soda and beer. The mahogany shines and the burnished brass gleams. The separate dining room between the galley and the salon is cozy and, with two tables, provided enough room for our group of ten. We found it a good room for tea and quiet reading when the salon was busy. Topside is a small covered area with tables and chairs for

relaxation, especially at night. This is a comfortable magic carpet indeed.

The Voyage Begins

After we had settled in and relaxed with a cold one, dive-master Martin showed us the dive facilities. The stern of the main deck is devoted to diving, and although not as spacious as, say, the *Wave Dancer*, does provide adequate room for gearing

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up. Steel tanks (12- and 15-liter, with knitted tank covers!) line both sides of the outside passageway. Each diver picks a built-in bin for gear storage.

Most diving calls for kitting up on the stern, walking amidships to a 3-step ladder, and descending into the RIB (rigid-hull inflatable boat) for a fast trip to the dive site. Roomy enough for six divers with full camera gear, the RIB made two trips to put all divers in the water. (Although *Poseidon's Quest* has two, one was out of commission for our trip. But the 90-horsepower outboard really moves, so wait time between groups was minimal.) Occasionally, at certain moorings, dives can be made from the boat by a giant (and I do mean giant) leap from the side. Exits are by a steep climb up a pole ladder to the main deck. The two freshwater showers at the stern are a nice touch, as are the rinse tanks for cameras and computers.

I was impressed with the diving philosophy expressed by Captain Yan Ellingsen, a Norwegian with many years of experience in the Red Sea. He explained that diving was "unlimited," even though practical considerations like surface intervals, meals, and ship travel usually meant four to five dives a day. Although the distance to a chamber dictated some prudence, there were no arbitrary depth or time limits for daylight dives. (For safety reasons, night divers were asked to surface after an hour.) The major requirement was the use of safety sausages — giant, high-quality orange sausages with the *Poseidon's Quest* logo. With divers diving wherever and whenever they wished, a lookout on the boat acted as a dispatcher, sending the RIB to pick up divers as they surfaced.

A couple of night dives were omitted because of the time required to travel from one area to another. After dinner each evening, the captain would explain the next day's options and their advantages and disadvantages. He would make a recommendation, but the guests got to choose the diving itinerary — a great way to run a

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dive boat. (His recommendations were usually followed.)

Creatures of the Deep

We cruised the Egyptian Red Sea from the tip of the Sinai down to the Sudanese border and back. The diving was as magical as Scheherazade's tales and as full of wonders as any of Sinbad's voyages. The highly touted Red Sea deserves its reputation as one of the top spots in the world for diving. Because of its isolation, hundreds of its fish species are endemic. Corals are abundant, with over 400 species cataloged so far. Incredible soft corals, myriad reef fish, pelagics such as thresher sharks, vertical walls and shallow reefs — it's all here for the looking.

Zabargad Island, close to the border with Sudan, gave me my strongest *Arabian Nights* flashback. To enter a coral grotto, I had but to wave my hand to

part the huge curtain of glassy sweepers at the cave entrance — like Ali Baba shouting, "Open sesame!" Inside the reef wall, the cave revealed hard and soft corals gleaming like jewels from an ancient land. On a sand shelf lay a crocodile fish and his neighbor, a scorpion fish, like ugly genies guarding the treasure. On some rubble nearby were several pipefish, one a male with a swollen pouch, obviously carrying his wife's children. Off the wall, an endless school of striated fusiliers streamed by. Further down the reef cruised equally large schools of snappers. Always nearby was a giant Napoleon wrasse, swiveling his near eye at me like a green Cyclops. Near an old abandoned dock was a juvenile axilspot hogfish with orange tail and beak and black and white body dots. Late afternoon sunlight angled through holes in the reef wall; caught in these magic rays were the ubiquitous golden anthias and brilliant purple Solomon's dottybacks, lighting the reef like moving jewels from a Caliph's treasure trove.

Equally reminiscent of the *Arabian Nights* were the dives at a small island south of Zabargad called Rocky Island, where the crew feeds sharks. Here we spent three mornings watching sharks, up close and hungry. Watching seven voracious blacktips tear into fish attached to a heavy chain (and hearing the crunch of teeth on that chain) brought visions of the monsters Sinbad saw on his voyages. Rocky Island produced more shark sightings than other dive sites, probably because of the feeding. Several of us saw hammerheads off in the blue.

Another legendary dive site, the Brothers Islands (El Akhawein), are hard to reach

but a must for Red Sea enthusiasts. Because of heavy wave action, we were able to dive only at Little Brother, but this site deserves its reputation. Here the great barracuda cruises off the reef wall, accelerating now and then like a rocket to snatch a meal. Mean-looking tuna and jacks prowl for a free lunch. Schools of unicorn fish and surgeonfish provide splashes of color against the brilliant blues. Longnose and pygmy hawkfish are here in abundance, as are blennies and the ever-present anthias at the reef top. Although one can see butterflyfish on any dive in the Red Sea, here I was particularly struck by the beauty of the masked butterfly fish, unique to these waters and looking like floating golden coins. Another fish we saw everywhere was the Arabian angelfish (mapfish), with its blue body and yellow side marking said to resemble the map of Africa. It took little imagination to see Sinbad using this beautiful fish to chart his voyages around the Horn of Africa and off to his legendary islands.

Our magic carpet took us to two islands, not mentioned in the diving guidebooks and not usually dived, that have it all: Daedulus and Elphinstone. At 110 feet off Elphinstone, at a site we named "Lost Camera Wall," I spotted my first thresher shark, swimming lazily off in the blue. Here also the schooling cornet fish were another page from the Arabian Nights. In the hundreds they moved up and down the reef wall like arrows launched from the bows of an army of dervishes. The moray eels had heads the size of bowling balls and bodies to match. At Daedulus, on a wall covered in white soft coral, I found more nudibranchs than I had seen in the entire trip.

We finished our diving on two wrecks at Sha'ab Abu Nuhas at the mouth of the treacherous Straits of Gobal. Here are many wrecks, ancient and modern; we dove on the *Carnatic* and the *Ghiannis D.* The *Carnatic*, at 90 feet, is a great open wreck filled with fish, including lionfish that will pose in groups for photographers. Most of the passageways and compartments of the *Ghiannis D.*, a more modern freighter, can be explored with ambient light; the engine room is a thrill, as is the bridge.

Food on the Carpet

Lots of diving made for big appetites. Meals were provided by Chef John, an Englishman trained in Her Majesty's Army to feed the chaps at Sandhurst, the British equivalent of our West Point. Breakfasts featured poached, scrambled, or fried eggs. Cold cereal, oranges, and melons were available every day, as was a very nice cold platter of blue cheese and meats with

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garnish. Midmorning and afternoon snacks were available in the salon, as was an always-full bowl of fresh fruit. Lunch, like breakfast, was served buffet style and seemed to be aimed more at the British taste than American. Lasagna, quiche, chicken a la king, thick-crust pizza, crepes with chicken filling, and noodles with

chicken were well received, but two meals of ground beef in pea sauce on toast are not going to win any McDonald's franchises.

Dinners were 3-course meals that began with appetizers like coddled eggs in custard, oxtail soup, and sardines on toast, and ended with desserts such as ice cream with fruit, peaches with cream, custard, and chocolate cake. Among the main courses were chicken with mustard sauce, beef stew with rice and peas, spaghetti bolognese, beef burgundy, chicken in cream, and meat loaf. Everyone applauded the last evening meal, a mixed charcoal grill of various meats.

Chef John was fighting a bad cold for most of the trip and had problems getting supplies from an Egyptian agent, but his heart was in the right place (his chocolate cake attempt was with bread flour and cocoa). After our charter, the boat made a supply run to Israel, so I have reason to believe that the charter after ours had somewhat better meals.

Was this boat truly a magic carpet with no problems? Of course not. No dive boat operating in the third world, far from supplies and reliable boatyard workers, can be. Despite a great crew and a commitment from the owner, including air-freighting of spare parts, there were problems. For most of the trip, there was a strong diesel odor in the cabins. The air conditioning was engineered for the Mediterranean, and the 88° Red Sea water taxed it to the limit. Usually the dining room was the warmest place; we opened the doors and windows and prayed for the all-too-infrequent breeze. For the last 2 days of the trip, we had no daytime air conditioning, but clever improvising by the

engineer, Tony, gave us cooler cabins at night. Although promised by the agent at See & Sea, there was no ladder on the RIB, so one woman had some difficulty climbing aboard. With her good nature and the strong backs of RIB operators Tony and Darren, she made it through the trip, albeit with some distinguishing black and blue marks. The See & Sea agent had also promised that underwater scooters would be available; one of our group left his at home, only to discover that the batteries on the *Quest's* scooters had long since perished. These were minor problems for our experienced group, easily dismissed with the ubiquitous Egyptian phrase "Inshallah" ("As God wills"). The divers in our group, most of whom had dived the Red Sea before, were unanimous in their praise for the Norwegian Captain and the all-English crew. All agreed that *Poseidon's Quest* was a 5-star boat with a 5-star crew providing 5-star diving.

Details

Poseidon's Quest is operated by Luxury Dive Charters, Whitefield Road, Bredbury, Stockport, Cheshire SK6, England, phone 061-430-6818, fax 061-430-7928. I booked through See & Sea Travel, San Francisco (800-348-9778 or 415-434-3400). The price for 12 days (11 nights, 11 diving days) was \$2,970. Round-trip airfare from the East Coast to Sharm el Sheik via Cairo was \$1,492. Airline scheduling necessitated two nights (one each way) in a Cairo hotel for another \$160 (plus meals).

For reasons of price and service, I booked the air and land legs with another travel agency. Wise readers will double-check recommendations for airline routing and ticket price as well as land accommodations. Cheaper and more

convenient air travel may be available. Depending on your budget and the security situation, you may wish to fit in a land trip to see the antiquities of Egypt. Consult an agency specializing in Egyptian travel and check out some guidebooks.

The Cairo airport is a madhouse. Ask your travel agent to ensure that you get escort service to expedite customs and immigration (and transfers, if you overnight in Cairo). The escort may be able to help with overweight baggage for the flight to Sharm el Sheik, but if you pack heavy, be prepared to fork over a few dollars.

Late summer is considered the best (although hottest) time to dive the Egyptian Red Sea. But it can be rough, and you'll need a wetsuit in the winter months. The boat has emergency spares, but no rental gear, so bring your own (plus repair kits and spares). You'll need an Egyptian visa from a consulate; allow time for it.

Cabin 5 is smaller, has a double bed, and would work for a couple. Cabins 3 and 4, off the salon, are the best. Cabins 1 and 2 are forward, have a steep stairway, and tend to be a bit warmer.



Kona Blend

Follow Me

My idea of Hawaii? If you're there, do it. Up until now, my itinerary would not have included more than 3 days of diving in Hawaii. I may have to reconsider after reading this report.

I just got back from Kona, and wow, what a trip. Lisa Choquette and Tom Shockley of Dive Makai still run the best dive charter operation this side of Io. But even they can't guarantee sharks, mantas, and dolphins all on a single trip. There's something to be said for being in the right place at the right time.

A big, beautiful whitetip reef shark circled us at Kiawi Point on our first dive. The shark surprised us by coming out of the surf and making a big swing

for Critters

around us before heading back out over the reef. It was the first shark sighting for many in the group, and you could hear the oohs and aahs through regs. Note: If you don't get up into the surf in that area, you're missing out on the fun. One time, I got to see a couple of dozen reef fish literally poured over the lip of the reef by a particularly strong backrush.

We did the manta night dive. I wouldn't do this dive again. There were at least 40-50 divers in the water, watching two (okay, they were exquisite) mantas frolicking in the plankton buffet created by the *Kona Surf's* lights. Too many divers were petting the mantas as they went by, videographers blocking off the mantas' paths and so on. It