

St. Somewhere Times

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It Doesn't Seem Like CHRISTMAS This Year

Living in a Muslim country is a new thing for me. This is the first Christmas that does not feel like the holiday spirit. Cairo consists mainly of Muslims so the city gets all hyped up during the month of Ramadan. Oh sure, there are a few token Christmas trees, but that is a far cry from the bells and holly of the USA.

I had a chance to go to a few concerts. Our school put on a Christmas concert but some of my parents scheduled a parent conference at the same time so I missed the concert. A few of the teachers from our school sing in a larger community choir that put on a Vivaldi concert at the Cairo American University. That was fun.

The most holiday feeling I had was the faculty Christmas party. (middle school secretary) and her husband Michelle (French version name) had everyone over to their house for our Christmas party. usloads of teachers showed up in caroling cheer with drinks and its in hand. The party included everything from a tree, to caroling, a secret Santa gift exchange! Their house was decorated to the hilt. He even put a Santa Clause climbing onto the front roof and falling : back!

However, no matter how much I observed of this pseudo-christmas, it just wasn't the same. Mooney and I decided to check out the Christmas spirit in Dahab and do a little diving. After checking flights and bus tickets we ended up hiring a taxi to take us the seven hour one-way trip to Dahab. We paid about \$200 but it was better than \$250/each for the short flight with Egypt air. The taxi also made it in 6 1/2 hours instead of the 10 hours by charter bus.

A Red Sea Christmas



This was the normal site on this dive trip. Dahab sits right on the Gulf of Aqaba along the Red Sea. You get to a lot of the outlying dive sites by way of taxi.

The water is so blue in contrast to the red mountains and sandy shores. When I say sandy, I don't mean Floridian white beaches, more like trashy, rocky, desert shores.

The water was about 23 degrees Celsius. That is enough to warrant a full suit (7mm thick) as opposed to the Caribbean, where I usually dove without a wetsuit.

Weight and current were two problems I had to deal with. I rarely got cold but the added buoyancy of the suit was a real pain. (Make sure to allow water into the suit at the beginning of the dive or you will be like most people and overweight yourself to compensate-hard lesson learned.)

You can see the woven mat. It is set down on the sand as a prep area. The taxi driver waits during the dive to watch over anything you leave on shore. Doing a shore dive is a newer experience for me. The reef is about 50 yards off the shore. Navigating over sharp rocks with worn out booties hurts the feet, so make sure you bring some good foot protection.



My Top Ten Red Sea (Dahab) Diving Observations

10. Many of the fish are the same as in the Caribbean, they are just bigger and different colors.
9. Currents can wash you way off course if you are not wary.
8. Camels are often seen running through the dive preparation area!
7. I don't like the amount of wet suit coverage needed. The dive shops start their dives late at around 9:30 am.
6. That means only two dives a day instead of the four or five I am used to.
5. Dives are expensive. One tank costs anywhere from 20-30 Euros. Add another 5 Euros for gear. (currently a Euro equals 1.5 US dollars)
4. There are plenty of dive shops to try out and a lot of wreck dives.
3. Dahab is cheaper and more laid back than the touristy money driven Sharm El Sheik.

2. The reefs are still in great condition, even though there are fins everywhere.

One word: LIONFISH. I am a big fan. Most divers here
1. are so accustomed to seeing them that they just don't care.

This was my Christmas Eve present from an anemone. It swelled up and delivered a dull pain all the way to my upper thigh. There were little spikes sticking out of my ankle with a barb on each one. Eeeek!



It took about a week to heal, even though all the divers claimed it would heal in a day. Watch out for anemone.



Here is a look at Saudi Arabia across from the town of Dahab. Sometimes it is truly hard to believe where I am.

Overall, the diving was great. The best dive included a sight of 20, yes 20, large lionfish feeding just off of a coral pinnacle. There were thousands of smaller reef fish around for them to feed on. What a sight. They just sit still, look menacing, and strike with lightning speed when they get the urge to feed.

The weather was jacket worthy, but nothing like the ice and snow of the Midwest winters.

Merry Christmas readers!