

St. SomeTimes

V215  March 2019

Diving in Saudi

The other side
of the Red Sea

The Life and Times of an international educator

Following a short winter break, teachers and students are chomping at the bit for our Spring Break. The end of March cannot arrive soon enough.

Spring Break back in Lugano, Switzerland with my Swiss Family

Dream Master

Not Bad for Close-By

“Last summer, a teacher from our middle school took a group of students diving in the Red Sea on the Dream Master live-a-board vessel. Long story short, his leg was severed when he got caught in the propeller.”

That was the only information I had about this live-a-board. Other than that, I just knew it was close. All I had to do was fly across the Saudi desert to Jeddah. The boat lives in a marina not 20 minutes taxi ride from the airport. Jeddah is a 2 hour flight from Dammam. \$500 for three days, three nights and 10 dives.

We arrived around 11pm after a work week. The time set for departure was midnight so all of the divers (20 total) were out to restaurants. I stowed my only shoes and deposited what little clothing I brought in the cabin. With surprised permission from the boat crew, I headed up to the top deck with a blanket and pillow. The crew was busy loading up fresh groceries and fuel so even with divers on board, we didn't depart until 1am. I stayed awake to watch the captain navigate the canal through the city. Every ten minutes or so, the shipmate would shine a flashlight on the console. The ship's console had no working lights to monitor engine temperature or

other information. “What was I getting into?”

We arrived at the exit of the canal around 2am and pulled up to the dismal building of the coast guard. A herd of cats bolted out of the surrounding shabby buildings thinking we were a fishing vessel. Out hops our Filipino dive master with the paper work. For some reason, the Saudi Dive Master was already snoring away and couldn't be woken.

I watched and waited for the next hour to see what was going to happen. One of the Saudi divers had decided to brave the windy top deck. He briefly woke up and translated what was happening with the Coast Guard: “The officer says we don't have permission.” No less than three different Saudi Coast Guards got involved at different points during the confusion hour. I just watched the cats fight and hit my Buffett playlist on my phone.

The rest of the night was spent driving 40k/hr (21.5 knots) into the winds of the Red Sea, along the coast of Saudi Arabia. The wind was gusting but not cold enough to penetrate my blanket. I gently fell asleep after watching the fading coastline for 20 minutes. This was only a three day weekend. I was going to dive!

The only way to really describe this ship is to compare it to the other live-a-board vessels I have been on. It's small, measuring in at 23m (75ft) on one part of their website and 28.3m (93.4ft) on another part. So it's somewhere between 75 and 95 ft. We crammed 20 guest divers and 3 Dms into the dive area. Yes, we had to dance a lot and wait a lot.

The weirdest factoid about this dive vessel is the air compression. For some reason, the air compressor cannot run at the same time the boat is using the engine to move. Hmm? That means we had extended surface intervals while the air guy refilled our tanks. When he was done filling the tanks, the boat would move to the next site. I still don't understand this. I guess the motor is too small for this 2005 boat?

The main galley area was couches. We ate there, briefed dives there, hung out there, and some even slept there. The galley reminded me of my VZ apartment on weekends when my group of friends would visit from Caracas. Bedding, clothes, and general stuff thrown everywhere.

Don't get me wrong. We were diving. It's a liveboard, just not at the same level of excellence as others I've enjoyed.



The Saudi side of the Red Sea lies pretty much untouched by divers. Imagine, only the divers residing in Saudi can dive here.

2004 was my first experience diving in the Red Sea. I remember seeing golden reef fish, lots of lion fish, and very cold water. What I remember most was the amount of other divers! My memories are filled with visions of Sharm el Sheik boats filled with 40 divers moving in and out of the port every 30 minutes. Divers everywhere. Divers and trash they leave behind.

If you take away the divers, the Red Sea is even more spectacular - and clean. How do you take away all of the divers? Simple. Live in a kingdom with limited access. Dive in an area that is controlled by a royal family.

The fish are as I remember. Like the image above, you can see the plentiful reef fish are golden cousins to the aqua blue ones in Southeast Asia and the blue ones in the Caribbean. Yes, there are a ton of lion fish around. They just float in the corals and feed off their herds



"I'm surprised the lion fish aren't turning an orange color after all the orange reef fish they prey on."

of reef fish. I'm surprised the lion fish aren't turning orange after all of their orange meals.

What happened to all of the angels, squirrels, butterflies, eels, and schools of other reef fishes? I was hoping to see more plentiful schools in such an untouched area. Alas, there must be a lot of uncontrolled fishing going on along the Saudi reefs. It wouldn't surprise me if the Chinese fishing vessels were making deals with Saudi.

Luckily, we saw sharks on about a third of our dives. Well, more like A shark, rather than the plural of the word. I distinctly remember Willy, our dive master, finning as fast as he could to capture a lone shark on his go pro. Just like that, he was gone. Swimming after a fleeting shark like an open water diver who has seen his first shark -

ever. Think about this situation: what would you do if some stranger came into the local park, where you were jogging, and started flailing his arms, pointing at you, chasing after you with a camera extended on a selfi stick? Would you let him catch up with you? Would you stop and hang out with the dude a while so he could take video or photos of you in your jogging outfit? I think not.

I wasn't impressed with the fish situation in the Red Sea. Perhaps I am jaded because I recently spent between and 30-40 dives in the Maldives and Philippines. Oh well. The bottom line is most of the world WON'T be diving in the Saudi Arabian side of the Red Sea. So who cares.



We See Sharks!

The Dreammaster

Looking back on the entire trip leaves me with mixed feelings. I signed up for this trip knowing full well about the history of the Dreammaster.

Last summer, a colleague from our Middle School took a group of students on the Dreammaster for a dive weekend. At one of their dive sites, he jumped in off the dive platform at the same time the captain was repositioning the boat. Total misconception! According to multiple renditions of the story, his body

was sucked into the intake of the reversing propeller. At the last second, he turned his body sideways and it saved his life. The propeller severed one of his legs - later rescued but not able to be reattached. It happened so fast, but according to further sources, he dragged himself, sans leg, back onto the dive platform. The Coast Guard rallied and a helicopter got him to the hospital.

The important piece of this story is the diver takes the ultimate

responsibility. In the end, both he and the captain are to blame, but I probably wouldn't have gone on this ship if the accident had been solely due to the crew.

Our trip had a heightened sense of safety and routines. Divers were not allowed even onto the platform until the captain had shut off engines. It's sad that it took such a catastrophic incident before the ship heightened its safety awareness.

Knowing all of this, I still went.



The crew was a lot of fun and hard working. Someone caught that big fish (left) and the chef prepared it for that night's feast. The zodiac (right) was used for setting anchors off the reefs or transporting divers to farther distance dives.

It is difficult not to compare the ship and the dive experience with my previous trips. The *Dreammaster* is owned by a Saudi Prince. So why is it so shabby looking. It's more of a sloop than a live-a-board. Why isn't it the most beautiful ship in the harbor? It's not well painted. The main galley looked like a frat party. As I said before, the air compressor situation is laughable and time consuming. The rental gear was in worse shape than 90% of dive shops I have seen around the world. Only a few of the electronics on the captain's bridge worked or were lighted. What's with that? This ship could be so much more! Compared to

the limousine, 7star experience on the *Carpe Diem* in the Maldives, this was more of a 10 yr old Ford Taurus rental.

My descriptions may make me sound like a diving curmudgeon, but I have been truly spoiled. This trip was close and cheap compared to the Maldives. Too bad the weather was so cold and windy. The viz was about 20 meters and there wasn't a lot of surge underwater.

The whole experience was rewarding and worth it. My worst fun-dive days are still better than my best days at work.

Will I go on another Dream trip? Probably. Melissa took a big risk

by letting me join her group of divers. You see, we all have our groups outside of school. This group of divers is Melissa's way of getting away. I tried to keep to myself and be purposely "outside" of the group while Melissa basked in her friendships. I mixed a bit to be a "part" of the group but I wasn't my usual social butterfly. Melissa seems content. I know she had a good trip. The cold weather is the only thing she really talks about.

I'll mark it as a success that I didn't ruin her sense of "my dive group of friends". That is important to me.



قالب الياقوت

Gulf Craft

Team Master 2002

Toilet

Safety First

Lifebuoy with Arabic text

Night Dives!

I'm in!

The best part of this entire weekend was, by far and beyond, the chance to night dive again. It is such a hassle to find dive experiences that entertain the idea of night dives. Even the few live aboard experiences I have had end up in an argument to do more night dives. There are so many excuses: not enough divers want to; the ship has to get underway; not enough lights; not a safe dive site for night; currents; the weather is bad; we just don't do night dives. Ugh. I really think it is laziness. Even on my last Maldives aboard the Carpe Diem, we had to plead and beg for an extra night dive. Damn. We were on board for ten nights. We only dove two night dives. What a wasted opportunity. Let me be in charge for one trip. Make the divers happy.

Our first night dive was really relaxed. The only grumpy person was a German diver that wanted dinner served before the night dive. He was hungry. I told the dive master to give him a few bread rolls to shut him up. Whatever. I went down with four Saudis that had packed flood lights. All five of us were pho-

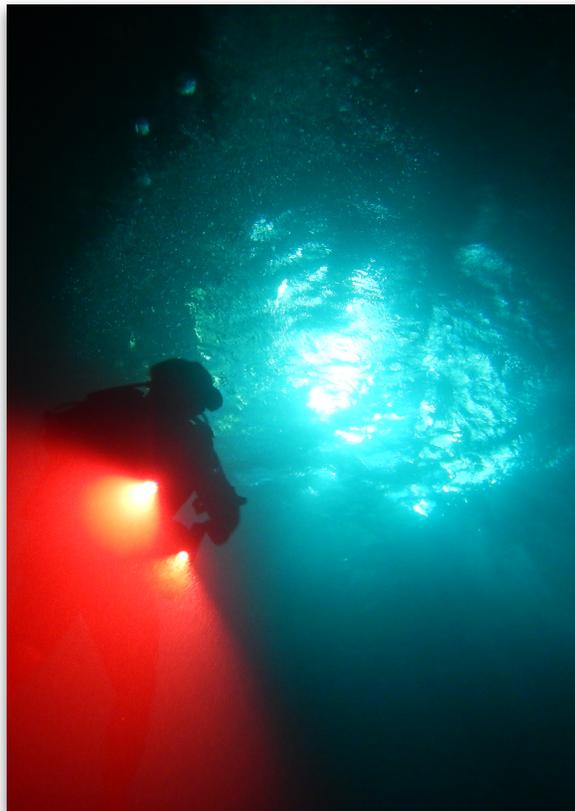
tographers so it was relaxing. We agreed to wander around in the same area for the duration and keep an eye on each other. It was a shallow, sandy bottom dive. I had two torches (flashlights) with me. Both of them are brand new with fresh batteries so I was stoked! However, in comparison with

the Saudis, I didn't have shit. As I sat in a sand patch with my lights off, I watched in awe as the other four divers moved around the ocean floor. Each one looked like an alien spaceship with flooding white lights looking for life to send back to the mother ship. The experience reminded me of a James Cameron underwater special on the Discovery Channel. Needless to say, none of them really noticed my lights off, nor cared. I spent more than half of this dive enjoying the dark environment.

One thing I noticed on both night dives was a lack of eels or hunting animals. There were also a lot of fish out late. Most dives I have done at night involve more of the invertebrates and almost no fish action. Most

are usually sleeping and hiding from octopus or hunting eels. I saw none of that on these dives.

The safest night dives are at dive sites that you precede with a day dive. Our second dive was just





*Pellentesque
risus ante, vi-
tae aliquam
ipsum. Pellen-
tesque con-
sectetur, tellus
sit amet lac-
ulis vestibul-
um, mauris
sem hendrerit*

that - a second dive on the same dive site. The day dive was spectacular. I couldn't wait to see it at night. Oh was I wrong. Yes, the first diver in spotted a shark, but instead of staying in the shallow tops of the pinnacles (where all the life is), my group decided to dive along a wall. A group wandering around a wider area allows each diver to experience more "unscared" nightlife. If you go along a wall with five divers, even if you spread out vertically, most of the nightlife is seen and spooked by the diver that wanders ahead of the

vertical group. Oh well. I spent most of my dive trying to capture vids and pics of the miniature invertebrates in the water that surrounded us. No one else cared. It's too bad I wasn't up front with the Saudi divers in my night group. I should have told them not to bother me if they found sea cucumbers exciting. They meant well, but I was focused on other things much smaller and more interesting to me. The photo above was truly lucky. It is sooooo difficult to get a close-up night shot of a translucent invertebrate with a point and shoot.





*The barren, little Saudi islands
are great to anchor off of, but they
aren't the same quality as those
of the Maldives. This is, after all,
surrounded by desert.*



Minimalist Diving

I still haven't bought my own gear. Even though I am earning more now than I have in my lifetime, my dive "kit" contains Thai fishing pants, a mask, two dive lights, a camera, and my newest dive computer. Compared to most divers that have one or two suitcases of dive gear (Jeff probably has enough to fill his three stall garage), I don't have enough dive gear to fill a carry-on.

I've had such good luck renting. Many times, dive clubs throw in the rental fee because I spend so much diving with them or they are simply entertained with my choice of just Thai pants. Anyway. The question is: should I bother buying my own kit? Jeff has my only other piece: a scubapro regulator. I don't really miss it. I can dive with almost anything.

This trip was sheer luck. The organizer of the local Saudi dive group is named Maan. (Yes, the jokes are endless. "Maan overboard" when he goes in for a dive.) Anywho, Maan called me up a few weeks before the trip to follow up on how I was getting my gear to the airport. When I explained about my carryon, he offered fins, booties and his extra BCD. Sure. Save me some cash. The XL BCD was way too big. The fins were "cold water" fins with straps and booties - definitely not my favorites - but it all worked. I've experienced a lot worse. Who cares. Get me down. Once I'm underwater, it's all good. My crappola gear list is short: squeaky regs, fins that fall off, flooding masks, or leaking octopus. I'm still riding the fence. Why carry everything with me, travel

with all the gear, if I can enjoy diving with basic rental gear? If a piece of rental gear hits my crapola list, I just change it out for the next dive. Works like a charm. And yet...

The most important piece of gear now is my mask. Of all the things to not fit. I've tried everything to make due with this mask. I still wind up clearing my mask every 3 minutes. It's getting in the way of my photography. Clearing my mask is second nature, but this is tiresome.

Speaking of a possible new dive kit, one of the divers on the Dream was a local instructor. He actually dives with a full face mask. This is a first for me. He doesn't use it for communication. He just loves the fit and ability to breath through his nose. He can always add the communication kit to it, but that is super expensive and you need someone else on the other end of the communication. We talked about this a few times

and agreed the communication kit would be intrusive. We both love just submerging and hearing nothing but our own breathing. Talking underwater would intrude on the environment.

Back to my basic current kit. I still have a set of Thai fishing pants from way back in the past. They have a rip in the crotch so I handed them off to an Indian seamster in the city. He simply copied the design and sewed me two new versions of the pants - one in black and one in blue. I might go a bit more wild and have him make some out of random patterns of fabric. That should be fun!

So, armed with a simple camera, a pair of Thai Fishing Pants, a mask, and my dive watch, I am good to go down underwater. Bring it on. Let the live a boards LIVE!! Australia here I come - in December 2019.



Nikon AW130 - \$350 no case needed. Goes down to 30m. Rechargeable battery.



Oceanic Geo 2.0 - \$250-\$350 - My fourth dive watch. Has all the basics, including multiple gas selection, extendable safety stop times, and easy nitrox editing.

Thai Fishing Pants - \$20 - fast drying and good for well below 30m.





Ye Old Goats!

Visiting Sarah and Todd

Once again, it was time to visit Switzerland. Todd and Sarah (above) have grown a lot older since I saw them a year ago. Todd celebrated his 39th and the goat looks better than he does.

Joking aside, I spent my entire spring break with Todd and Sarah in Switzerland. It was truly the best way to relax and get away from dreary Saudi life for a while, see the friends I left behind in Lugano, and have some fun.

Not only do Sarah and Todd put up with me on their couch, they arrange for all of the weekend and evening get-togethers. Each evening was something different. Pam and Andra came over the first night to Casa del Bearden for a pulled pork extravaganza. Friday night was a “pencils down” social at Casa Flemming, where I

ran into a lot of old faces. Tom Lil, KC, Brendan & Cory (with their new baby), MJ, and a slew of other staff were on hand to share stories of days new and days past. Other nights were dinner at [Giardino](#) with the Volpi clan; dinner at [Grotto Ticinese](#) with Sarah S., Sky, Pam, Beardens, and a special pop-in by Sandra (my severely religious Prague travel companion); pizza with Todd; and an entire afternoon with evening dinner at Casa Carsana (see next story).

All of the planning was done by either Todd or Sarah or both. They would work during the days and play by night. Their Spring Break isn't until later in April.

[TASIS](#) has a lot more security now. The gates are all locked (supposedly) and they actual-



This is a current picture of Todd. I couldn't decide whether to gift him a prayer rug or the first season of Duck Dynasty for his birthday.



I have a guard at the main gate during daylight hours. Needless to say, I stayed off campus for most of my trip. Instead, I spent my time drinking beer in the central plaza at my favorite restaurant, [Tango](#) while I updated my book or read books on my iPad. Heaven. So many beautiful women walking by.

One of the first goals I had was to load up on my Borotalco deodorant stock. Manor had a mother load. I bought them out. \$200 worth should be enough to last me for the next year. I've been able to stretch my current stash from last year with success. Hopefully, I can re-enter Saudi with 30 bottles of spray deodorant past the customs no problem. Fingers crossed. My second goal was the present for Katrina and Scott's wedding. Shhhh. That was a bust for a while.



It was just great to spend time with Todd and Sarah for a few days. Todd's new beard opened up a whole new avenue to give him shit. It is rare to have something to continually grind on him for. Here I am trying to get away from the Muslim world for a bit of time and Todd picks me up from the train station looking like the local Imam.

Thank you Todd and Sarah!

Borotalco is an amazing deodorant I have only found in Switzerland. The brand has micro elements of baby powder in the spray. Try it (but not mine)



Wedding Bells!

(left to Right) Me, Laurent, Sarah, Tina, Todd. Laurent and Tina are to be wedded in July of 2019.

A few years back, when I first moved to and taught in Lugano, the resident Italian party animal was our elementary science specialist Laurent, Carsana. Over the next few years, Sarah and I would invite him to teach special labs in our classrooms. Soon, he reorganized the entire science curriculum and centralized all of the elementary science materials.

It worked really well. All of the materials that were gathering dust in classrooms ended up in his small building down the hill. That building became the famous *Laboratorio di Laurent* and the Italian





“Cosa?” It’s a lot of fun to sit around with friends like Laurent and Todd, listening to Todd beef up his street slang Italian Phrase collection.

Both Tina and Laurent speak several languages and Todd is a sponge for dirty slang.

party animal morphed into a lame “I have a girlfriend so I can’t party anymore”.

It was the end of my second year at TASIS and I was ready to party again. (The first year and a half was settling in and calming down from the VZ partier Greg)

This was unfortunate timing for me. I was finally ready to party with this Italian animal, but Tina had tamed him. We had fun teaching and engaging in deep conversations about educational philosophies.

Tina is perfect for Laurent. They are the kind of couple that use the “we” in every sentence and play off each other in conversations. Romantic.

Todd, Sarah, and I spent the entire Sunday at Laurent’s house on the mountain. Laurent grilled a tasty lunch that we ate on his patio. The weather was perfect. 🍷

I don’t know where the day went. The five of us sat there for hours in the sun and shade talking about everything. I learned that Tina actually

spent a lot of time in Africa. Her mother grew up in Kenya and her dad was an Italian tour company man. We shared Safari stories and she wowed me with her pictures.

I plan on tracking this new couple over the years. Tina mentioned she loves to play matchmaker so I made her promise to find me a beautiful Italian woman!

Congratulations in advance to Laurent and Tina!





Franziskaner
Weissbier



Lugano

It's the Little Things

I took the public bus 436 down to the city on weekdays while Todd and Sarah worked at school. I know the bus route like the back of my hand because I used to do the same routine when I lived here. My routine takes me to the central plaza for an expensive pizza diavola (pepperoni pizza) and several liters of Franziskaner Weißbier. I sit for hours and type on the computer or read a book.

Every once in a while I sit back and simply watch life go by: beautiful model-esque women dressed in Italian haute fashion, German tour groups, locals with their dogs on leashes and plastic poop bags, Swiss punks, career waiters that speak four or five languages interchangeably, Russian oligarch wives meeting at cafes for espresso, elderly German couples discussing whether or not Tango accepts Euros, non-working mommies bringing their infants to meet their mommy group for lunch in the plaza, and businessmen in seersucker Italian

suits making deals over salads and Pellogrino bottles.

I could take a few years off to write a book while I sit at a restaurant. Too bad I can't afford it for more than a few days.

Menus at most restaurants are in Italian, English, sometimes German. Store clerks and waitstaff greet you in Italian and switch to whichever language you greet them back in.

Everything, everywhere, is clean. Most bathrooms have floors you could eat off. The weather is moderate bordering on perfect. Smokers sometimes offer to move away to smoke if you are eating. Few people are crabby. Smiles are ubiquitous, except for the tall models. They tend to stare off at a higher altitude of attitude.

I spent an hour watching a laundry truck driver move the modular laundry baskets onto the elevator rear door of his truck, drop of new deliveries, and reorganize the modules of dirties.

The local buses have hydraulics that lower the right half of the bus for entry and exit of passengers. Life is all about the details here.



*Thank you, Laurent and Tina!
Keep in touch!*