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ISSUE 6 JUN - FEB 11 FREE

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Into the blue

Underwater photographer **Tony Baskeyfield** won first prize at the prestigious Antibes underwater image festival this year for his shot of spinner dolphins taken at Wadi Lahami in the deep south of the Egyptian Red Sea. He shares his tale of his amazing dolphin encounter and the other out of the blue experiences on his first shore diving trip to Marsa Alam.

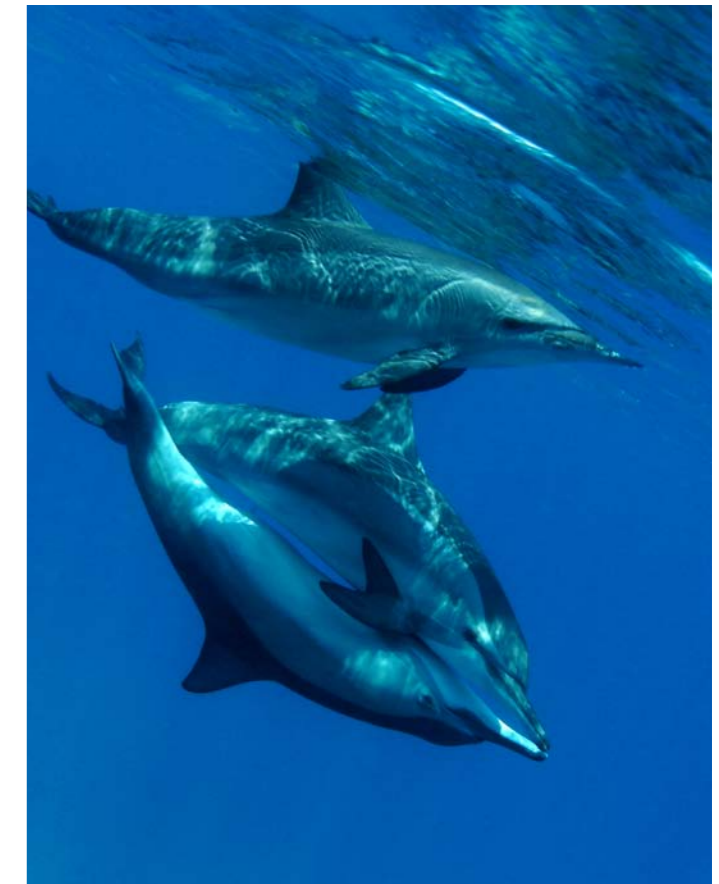


In a spin at Wadi Lahami

Rising with the sun, we departed in our air-conditioned minibus at 6am. Destination: Wadi Lahami. Passing little signs of life, save a few military checkpoints en-route we arrived at a hot and barren landscape in the very southern part of the Egyptian Red Sea. Completely unspoiled, there is not even a tourist shop in sight in Wadi Lahami. Even at 8am, we could all feel the heat of the desert rising and were looking forward to a giant stride to sea.

Wadi Lahami is situated close to the Fury Shoals and there are many world-class sites within this reef system. We chose not to dive on this particular day, choosing instead to concentrate on the spinner dolphin action – armed with just snorkeling equipment and cameras. The RIB boat ride to Sataya Reef took around 30 minutes on the flat calm water. This reef system is surrounded by shallow sand at around 10m to 20m of sand keeping the dolphins close to the surface and making it easy for us to swim with them.

As soon as we got there around 9am, we could see the dolphins with their dorsal fins breaking the surface. We had the whole area to ourselves with no other boats in sight. This meant we could take our time to get in the water ahead of the first pod. It was amazing. We had a full fantastic three hours of snorkeling with them. They swam by us in formation while interacting with each other, squeaking and spinning playfully. There they were swimming, mating and playing. I estimate one pod had over 100 dolphins passing past us in groups of 30 or so. The boatman would drop us off in front of a pod. The dolphins passed us, only stopping for brief periods to look at us. Our three-hour encounter ended with a short encounter with one individual who acknowledged us with a short flick of the tail before heading off with the rest of the pod into the blue. It was the best experience with dolphins I have ever had. Luckily there were only three of us in the boat: myself and my two nephews Simon and John. This made it easy to nip back into the boat and off to the front of the pod for a wonderful series of out of the blue dolphin displays.





The cover shot

A pair of dolphins get together. While mating, a second male attempts to get in on the action and nudge the first male out of the way.



The deep south by shore

Once seen by divers as one of the most difficult corners of Egypt to access, Marsa Alam is today a flight away from many international destinations, including direct from the UK. Not only has the area opened up in terms of access, the growth of facilities onland has also expanded its appeal to divers wishing to enjoy shore-based action. The Deep South used to be the domain of liveaboard divers, but now its incredible sites are easily accessible from the shore and RIBs. The coastline of fringing reefs offers unspoilt diving with a view of timeless Wadis and Bedouin villages. With many new resorts popping up, Marsa Alam even has its own recompression chamber, so its days of being viewed as a remote diving destination have all but vanished.

