

# Bagpuss Gets Wrecked

## (SSAC Northern Red Sea Wreck Expedition Feb. 2011)

One day in the late summer of 2010 Bagpuss, a saggy baggy cloth cat who by his own admission was now a bit loose at the seams, was busy reliving his glory days as a TV star over a pint with his best friend and diving partner Dave "DIR" Robins when he realised with a shock that within 12 months he would be 50.

To mark this milestone, what was needed was a special holiday combining a level of luxury appropriate for a cat of his age and standing, with a heady mix of spicy adventure and intriguing mystery.

Time passed and as the beer flowed ideas ranging from the fantastically impractical to the downright suicidal swirled around like eddies in a tidal pool.

In a moment of inspiration only truly appreciated by those who've downed 10 pints followed by a red hot a curry, the solution appeared in a blinding flash – what about a Red Sea wreck diving trip? Not just any old trip though, what was wanted was one which offered the chance to dive several of the rarely visited sites as well as all the classics aboard an all singing, all dancing boat.

Holding firmly onto that thought, and any fixed object they could find on the way home the dynamic duo eventually retired for the night.

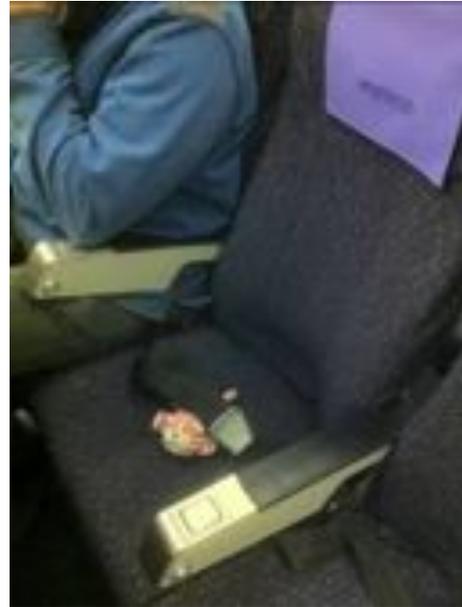
Bagpuss, whose many talents definitely don't include organising things, rapidly passed that particular baton to Martin and Ali who true to form put everything together in their own amazingly professional way.

Not even a revolution in Egypt fazed them, but it did provide an opportunity to update the Trip Manager's check list:

Deposits paid – Yes,  
Flights confirmed – Yes,  
New government installed – Yes  
Tanks off streets & harbour clear – Yes

On 13<sup>th</sup> February 2011 after a five hour flight Bagpuss and his SSAC friends: Dave "DIR" Robins, Richard "Hippo" Hobson, Paul "Bootneck" Beardsall, Brian "Caveman" Ingle, Martin "Brolly" Davies and his model partner

Alison, Dave "No Fear" (or was it No Beer) Purvis, Richard P and Lynn M



Bagpuss – DIR

arrived in a very subdued Sharm- El-Sheikh to join their boat, the Grand Dame of the Tony Backhurst fleet - MY Hurricane.



MY Hurricane in Sharm El Sheikh - DIR

Once onboard we met our chief guide Mike Ward and the other 8 divers who would be sharing Bagpuss' 50<sup>th</sup> birthday adventure with us, and what an adventure it would turn out to be.

In 6 days we would travel over 300 miles, complete 17 dives on 11 great wrecks spanning 150 years of maritime history, and achieve the twin pinnacles of wreck diving in this part of the world by diving both the Rosalie Moller and Thistlegorm in clear visibility with nobody else within 50 miles of us.

After a good night's sleep moored against the harbour wall, dawn saw us slip our lines and head out into the Red Sea to begin the adventure.



**Sunrise at Sharm - DIR**

In the Red Sea a check out dive is mandatory as well as best practice, the objective being to ensure all equipment has survived the airport baggage handling system and give the guides an idea of the diver's in-water ability.

The site chosen for this exercise was the wreck of the livaboard Emperor Fraser which sank after hitting Mahmoudat reef in the Ras Muhammed national maritime park.



**Bow Emperor Fraser**

She now lies in 30 meters adjacent to a surprisingly vibrant reef.



Small and compact with plenty to see and little to harm the visiting diver, the Emperor Fraser is a very good site for an extended check out dive.

The damage to her starboard hull and prop is clearly visible



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Whilst her large partly covered deck area and the clear water provided opportunities to practice wreck penetration techniques in a safe environment.



With all equipment functioning and breakfast over, we sedately motored across the Gubal Strait to Sha'ab Abu Nuhas reef near Gubal Island where we would dive four of the many wrecks which have come to grief there.

The oldest wreck we would dive was the Carnatic sunk in 1869 whilst the youngest would be the Giannis D sunk over 100 years later in 1983.

Our first dive was on the wreck of the **Kimon M**, a refrigerated cargo steamer built in Germany and launched in 1952.

She was 121 meters long, 15.8 meters wide and weighed 3129grt. She had a central bridge and passenger accommodation deck which separated her 2 forward and 2 aft cargo holds whilst below decks she was fitted with an 8 cylinder 2940hp diesel engine which gave her a top speed of 12 knots.

Originally named Brunsbüttel she was re-named three more times before receiving her final name in 1975 when she was bought by the Ianissos Shipping Co. of Panama.

In early December 1978 she loaded 4500 tons of lentils at the Turkish port of Iskenderun and set sail for Bombay.

It appears the captain remained on the bridge almost continuously whilst he negotiated the Suez Canal and the treacherous upper reaches of the Straits of Suez.

On 12<sup>th</sup> December 1978 having safely entered the Straits of Gubal he handed control of his ship to the first mate and retired to his cabin to rest. Shortly afterwards however, the Kimon M with her engines set to full ahead, drove headlong onto the north east corner of Sha'ab Abu Nuhas reef where she sank.

Over the next few days she effectively broke in two, her bows clinging to the reef top whilst the rest of the ship slipped down the reef coming to rest on its starboard side in 30 meters of water.



Bow buried in the reef – DIR

Her large propeller and unusual ribbed rudder have enabled her to be positively identified and now provide excellent photographic opportunities.

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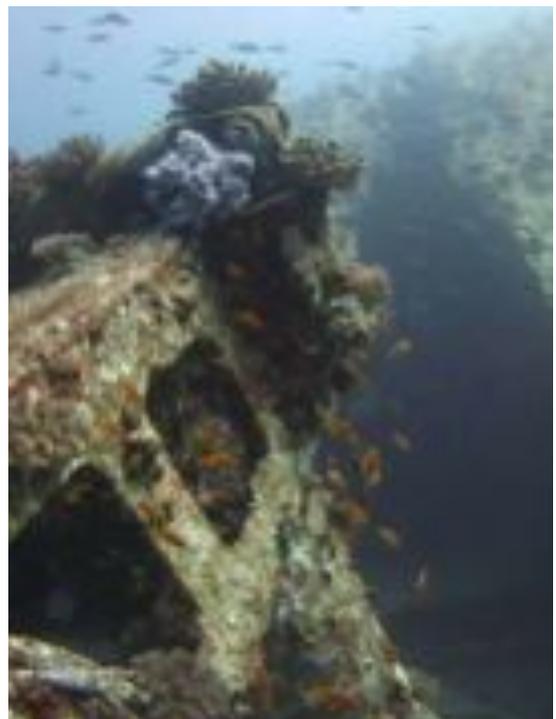
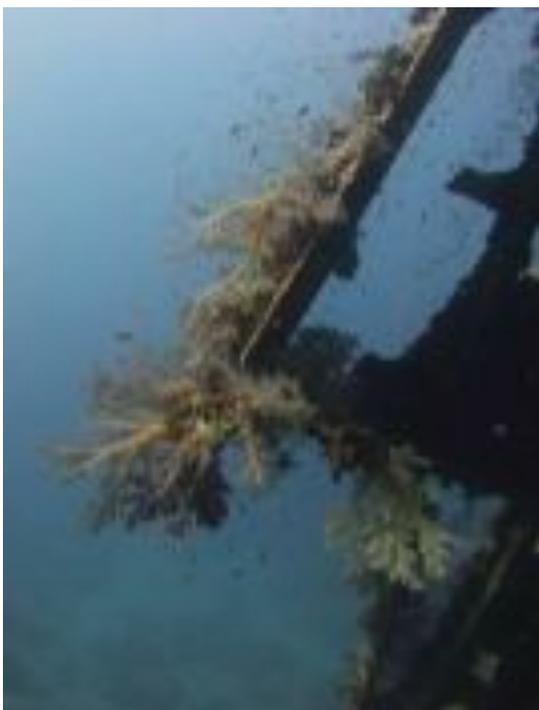
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The whole wreck is covered in life, with shoals of brightly coloured Anthias and damsel fish darting around the corals



Silent witnesses



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Ascending towards the port rail, glass fish cover the open deck creating a swirling cloud which continuously splinters and then re-forms in ever changing patterns.



The broken plates of the port forward hold provide cool shelters for the small orange coloured fish which abound here.



The final dive of the day was on the wreck of the Giannis D, a general cargo ship built in Japan and launched in 1969 as the Shoyo Maru.

She was 99.5 meters long, 16 meters wide and weighed 2932grt. Her bridge and crew accommodation were located aft above her engine room, forward of which were two large holds.

Below decks she was fitted with a 6 cylinder 3000hp diesel engine which gave her a top speed of 12 knots.

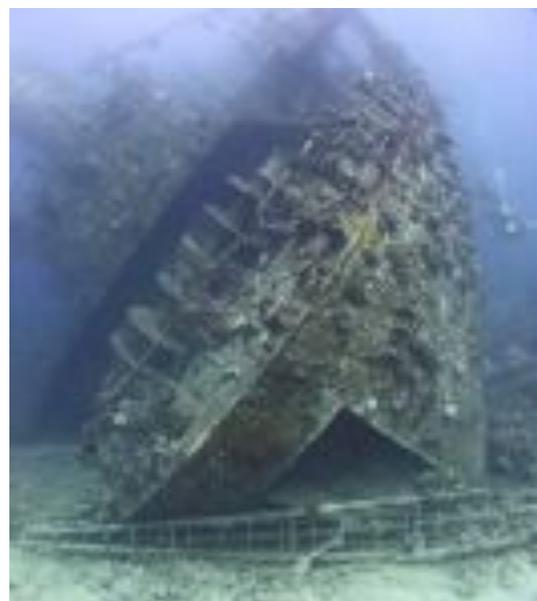
In 1980 she was sold to the Dumarco Shipping and Trading Corporation of Greece and re-named the Giannis D. In mid April 1983 she set sail from the Croatian port of Rijeka loaded with a cargo of sawn softwood bound for Jeddah and later Yemen.

Her captain like many before him personally navigated his ship though the Suez Canal and the small islands of the Gulf of Suez only leaving the bridge when he entered the Straits of Gubal by which time he was completely exhausted.

Shortly afterwards the Giannis D was seen to suddenly veer from her allotted course and drive at full speed into the north west corner of Sha'ab Abu Nuhas reef where she stuck fast.

Abandoned she slowly broke up and slipped down the reef face ending up on her port side at about 45 degrees to the sea bed in 22 – 25 meters of water.

Her stern is intact and arguably the most photogenic area of the wreck



Stern

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and there are a number of large openings which provide easy and safe access to the bridge and crew accommodation areas



Lifeboat davits



Entrance to engine room



The mid-section is badly broken and largely unrecognisable though in some places the remains of her cargo of timber can still be seen.



Funnel marked "D"





Part of cargo of sawn timber



Foremast – looking towards bow



The bow with its intact foremast is also interesting providing opportunities for some very atmospheric pictures for those skilled enough to take them.

After an un-eventful night moored in the lee of Gubal Island we were woken at “stupid O’clock” to dive the third of our four Sha’ab Abu Nuhas wrecks; the general cargo vessel Chrisoula K or the “Tile Wreck” as she was known for years due to the huge quantities of Italian floor tiles which cover the site.

Despite the early start this was to be a perfect day.

The sea was mirror calm and as we motored round to the site in the Zodiacs we were joined by a pod of Dolphins which played around the boats for a good 10 minutes before disappearing with a casual flick of their powerful tails.



Bow



Built in Germany and launched in 1954 the Chrisoula K was 98 meters long, 14.8 meters wide and weighed 3807 grt.

She had five holds, 2 forward and 3 aft and a central bridge/accommodation section. Below decks she was fitted with a 9 cylinder 2700 hp diesel engine which gave her a top speed of 12 knots.

Originally named the Dora Oldendorf she became the Chrisoula K when she was sold to the Clarion Marine Company of Piraeus in 1979.

In August 1981 she was loaded with Italian patio/floor tiles and set sail for Jeddah under the command of Captain Kanellis

Like the Masters of the Kimon M and Giannis D before him, Captain Kanellis insisted on undertaking all navigational and administrative duties required to steer his ship through the Suez Canal and Straits of Suez himself, with the result that like them he was extremely tired when his ship finally entered the Gubal Strait on 31<sup>st</sup> August.

Believing all dangers to be behind him he set a course, ordered full steam ahead and retired to his cabin.

Very shortly afterwards his ship collided at full speed with the North east corner of Sha'ab Abu Nuhas reef where she stuck fast and was later abandoned.

Over time she settled by the stern with her bows embedded in the reef.

Lying in 25 meters of water the ship is more or less upright until aft of the bridge area.

From there aft she has twisted through 90 degrees to starboard so the starboard side rest on the sea bed



Her rudder and large four bladed steel propeller is still in place though her funnel has toppled onto the seabed roughly mid-ships on the starboard side



View stern to bow – starboard side



Funnel

Divers wishing to penetrate this wreck can easily do so via the large tear in the ship's side which leads to No 4 hold.

Moving forward past piles of floor tiles many still in blocks of 20 it's then possible to access the ship's workshops where a fascinating

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array of tools including a large turret drill can be seen.



Pallets of Italian floor tiles - DIR

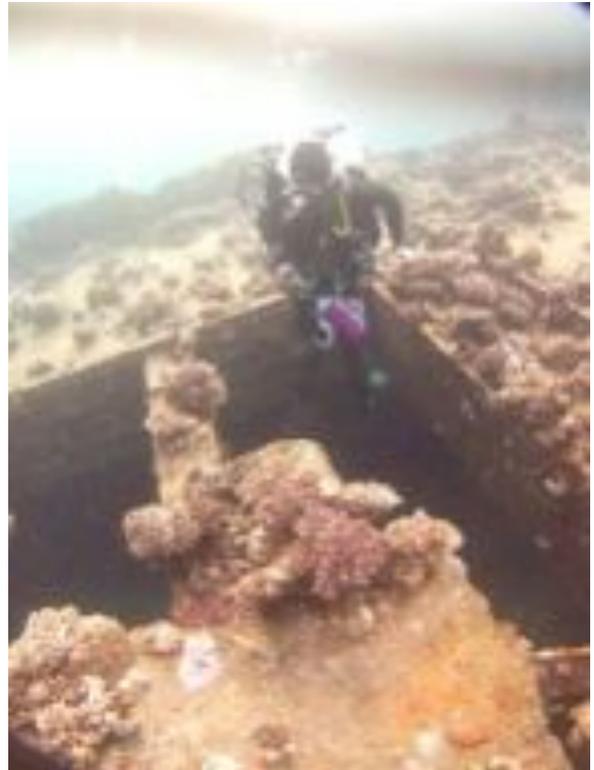


Inside the ships workshop



Lion fish on the prow

Throughout the ship Lion fish abound whilst the whole of the upper decks are covered with hard corals





Top of entrance to engine room

After a well earned breakfast there was plenty of time for everyone including Bagpuss to relax, chill out and enjoy the ambiance of our surroundings.



Bagpuss "chillin out" - DIR



Catchin some rays - DIR

The final Sha'ab Abu Nuhas wreck we would dive was the oldest and arguably the best and most photogenic of the four – the Carnatic.

Built in 1892 for the splendidly named Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (or P & O as we now know them) the Carnatic was registered by them in London in March the following year.

Described as an iron framed planked passenger steamer she was 90 meters long, 11.6 meters wide and weighed 2014 grt. Although officially a hybrid "sail and steam" ship her principle means of propulsion was a 4 cylinder 2442 hp compound steam engine, which pushed her along at a respectable 12 knots via a single three bladed propeller.

Her sailing credentials weren't forgotten though and just in case the new fangled engine failed she also carried a spritsail and two square rigged masts together with a traditional figurehead to keep her safe.

In 1863 traveling to the Egyptian Red Sea and Far East wasn't the simple task it is today and certainly not one for the faint hearted.

The Suez Canal hadn't been completed so all freight and passengers destined for India and the Far East first traveled from Britain to Alexandria, where they were disembarked. They then travelled 200 miles overland to Suez often having to fight off marauding bandits to get through. When they finally arrived at Suez they then boarded another ship to continue their journey.

As one of the most opulent ships in the P & O fleet, the Carnatic's job was to take passengers and freight in style from Suez to Bombay and China.



Carnatic in Calcutta 1863 –note figurehead - NM

On 12<sup>th</sup> September 1869 the Carnatic slipped her mooring lines at Suez and set sail for Bombay (Mumbai) under the command of her highly respected and experienced Captain, Captain Philip Jones.

On board were 210 passengers and crew including 19yr old Ensign Edmund Cuppage of the 38<sup>th</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> Staffordshire) Regt of Foot who was traveling to India to join his unit and valuable cargo including large quantities of copper sheeting and unfinished silver coins destined for the Bombay mint.

Having successfully piloted his ship through the hazardous Gulf of Suez, Captain Jones then personally undertook every aspect of the ship's navigation as it traveled southwards towards the open Red Sea.

Unfortunately it appears he miss-calculated his position at some point and in the early hours of 13<sup>th</sup> September 1869 the Carnatic collided with Sha'ab Abu Nuhas reef where she became

firmly fixed on a coral outcrop which holed her and damaged her keel.

As his ship appeared relatively secure and knowing another P & O ship, the Sumatra would be passing in a few days Captain Jones ordered the passengers and crew to remain on board and await rescue.

For many this was to prove a fatal decision as unknown to Captain Jones the Sumatra was running late and the coral outcrop had seriously weakened his ship's keel.

At 11am on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1869 the Carnatic suddenly split in two. The aft section sank immediately taking 26 crew and 5 passengers (including Ensign Cuppage) with it. The bow section fell over to its port side throwing the remaining survivors into the sea and slipped off the reef.

Eventually at 9pm that day the Sumatra arrived and rescued the remaining 180 survivors. A plaque commemorating the untimely death of Ensign Cuppage was later erected near his home in Dublin by his fellow regimental officers.

The loss of the Carnatic had severe repercussions for all involved.

Captain Jones was found guilty of gross negligence by a Board of Trade enquiry, had his Master's ticket suspended for 9 months and with his reputation in ruins never went to sea again.

P&O very nearly went bankrupt as in those days ships and cargo weren't insured, and any losses had to be covered by the ship's owners alone.

Today the Carnatic lies in 25 meters of water and is a truly spectacular dive.

Covered in life she lies on her port side, and looks more on less ship shape as her bow, stern and damaged mid sections somehow re-aligned after sinking independently of each other.

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Her twin masts stretch out onto the sand at right angles to the ship like giant fingers and debris is all around.



Or simply wonder at the volume of glass fish swirling around inside.

The bow area is very photogenic as the wooden deck planking has rotted away leaving a lattice of iron beams and cross members through which divers can explore 4 deck levels.



Bow – Lynn auditioning for the new figurehead?



Bow between decks – note capstan hub lower left of image

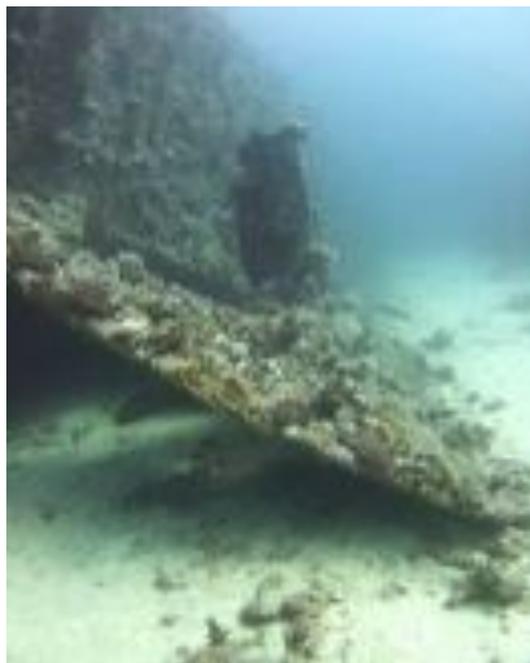
Moving aft across the mid section debris field someone has kindly gathered up a collection of broken wine bottles from her cargo for divers to look at.

Bagpuss seemed taken by these and I suspect would have stayed longer had they been intact.



Bagpuss sampling the cargo - DIR

Continuing aft, the curve of her graceful stern is pierced by a row of ornately carved square windows almost identical to those seen on HMS Victory built nearly a century earlier. These features clearly show how her builders adapted traditional “wooden ship” designs into their “modern” ironclads.



Stern windows

Leading from the stern is her impressive rudder which in turn gives way to an iron three bladed propeller. Not until you get up really close to the propeller do you realise just how big it actually is. Each blade is about 5ft long from the hub



Retuning forward to the broken mid- section opportunities abound to penetrate deep into the remains of the engine room and find her 4 cylinder engine and boilers.

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All Bagpuss could find though was the engine's flywheel.



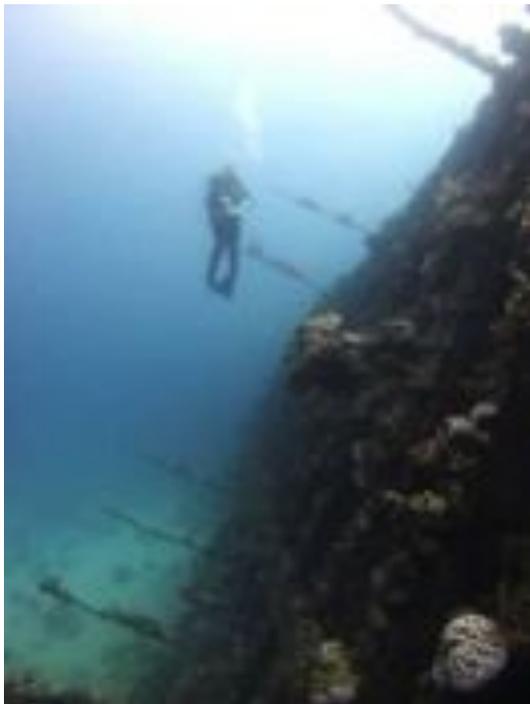
Bagpuss on Carnatic's flywheel - DIR

The Barge site is exactly what you'd expect – a heavily broken double ended work barge of some sort lying in 15 meters of water directly under the boat.

Why it's here it is a mystery. Perhaps it had something to do with salvage operations on one of the many ships wrecked nearby – who knows and frankly who cares because the reason for diving it is not the actual structure but the creatures which have made it their home.

This is a fish and coral diver's paradise with all manner of interesting and sometimes unusual things to see and photograph – though Bagpuss thought someone should tell Martin fish don't mind being wet so there was no need to bring down his umbrellas

Then it was time to go with just one last look at this tragic yet beautiful place.



"Brolly" Davies in action - DIR

and as a cat he thought it was a bit much to expect him to embrace the "fish are friends not food" concept.

With the four Sha'ab Abu Nuhas wreck dives completed, attention now turned away from historic tin and towards fish and other squidgy stuff.

After a short sail to Gubal Island our third dive of the day was on a site called The Barge.



Bagpuss – say after me - fish are friends - DIR



And again - DIR



And again - DIR



Fish of every shape and size hung in the mild current



Whilst lion fish were out on the prowl even during the day

The final dive of the day was a night dive back on The Barge. This was a real adventure for Bagpuss who'd never done one before and knew little of what to expect.

Kitting up he felt an exciting mixture of apprehension and anticipation especially as he was trying out a new twin set specially put together for him by Dave and Paul.



Bagpuss' new twin set - DIR

Once in the water everything however, was fine and there was plenty of time to see the “night hunters” at work including the biggest conger most had seen for a long while.



Conger anyone? – DIR

Whilst the dive a great success, those remaining aboard were treated to a spectacular moonrise



and the rare sight of a Dolphin feeding on fish attracted by the dive lights at the back of the boat.



Day three of Bagpuss' birthday bash began in fine style with a late (relatively speaking) briefing as today we would be undertaking two dives on the iconic Red Sea wreck - the Rosalie Moller.

Built in Glasgow as a general cargo ship for the Booth shipping line she was launched in 1910 as the Francis.

At 108 meters long and 15 meters wide she displaced 3960 grt and her 3 cylinder 4100hp steam engine provided her with a top speed of 10 knots.

For the next 21 years she quietly plied British and European coastal waters delivering goods for her owners. In 1931 however, she was sold to the Lancashire based Moller line and re- named the Rosalie Moller

The Moller brothers sent her to the Far East where she operated along the east coast of China between Shanghai and Tsingtao for the next 7 years.

By 1938 however, war in Europe appeared inevitable so despite being nearly 30yrs old and only able to raise 7 knots from her aging engines the Admiralty requisitioned her for collier duties

In that role she slowly traveled the world transporting 4500 tons of “Best Welsh” coal at a time to wherever the Navy required it sent to feed the hungry boilers of their warships.

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In July 1941 she loaded 4680 tons of “Best Welsh” coal at Cardiff docks, slipped her moorings and under the command of her Master, the splendidly eccentric but highly respected Australian, Captain James Byrne. She sailed independently to Alexandria via Cape Town where her cargo would help re-fuel the Force K ships commanded by Captain Agnew RN, who were heavily engaged in the defence of Malta.

In October 1941 she arrived in the Red Sea and was ordered to anchor at “Safe Anchorage H” near Gubal Island to await instructions as her planned passage through the Gulf of Suez had been put on hold because a collision between ships further up the Gulf had blocked the entrance to the whole seaway creating a massive logjam of ships and escorts.

On 8<sup>th</sup> October 1941 she was bombed by German aircraft based in Crete and sank with the loss of two crew.



She now lies bolt upright in 42-45 meters of water and whilst there is some minor evidence of “wrecking” – her funnel has been pulled over and a large winch has been lifted but dropped across No2 hold –



she is pretty much exactly as she was on the day she sank. Her starboard anchor is deployed and her port anchor remains tight to the ship's side.



Bow section – where did Baguss get to? - DIR



Port anchor – DIR

There are several ways to explore this wreck and with plenty of time available it was decided to explore the bow to mid-ships deck areas and her forward holds, today leaving the stern and aft holds for the next day.

At the extreme bow her jack staff is stowed and in place seemingly ready to proudly unfurl her Union Jack at any moment



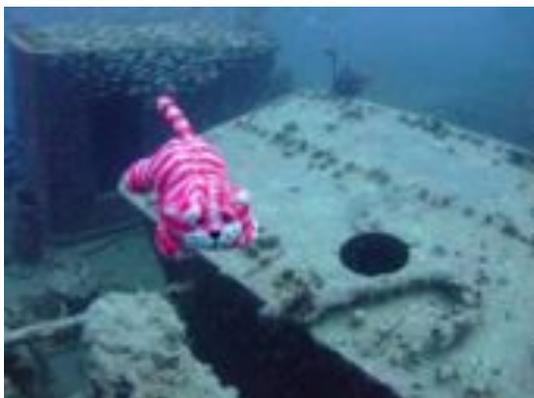
whilst nearby, her large anchor winches and forward deck houses provide a home for many small fish as well as an impressive display of heavy engineering.



**Anchor winches**



Descending into No 1 hold (nearest the bow) her cargo of coal is still visible.



**Bagpuss checking out the Deck houses - DIR**

Moving aft, two cargo winches surround the upright foremast, the lattice of steel supporting its base providing a haven for small fish and a lair for prowling lion fish.



From there you can head aft through the bulkhead door into No2 hold keeping a watchful eye on the winch precariously balanced on the beams above you and exit the hold just forward of the bridge.



The woodwork which once provided top cover for the bridge area rooms and companionways has long since rotted away leaving open and light spaces perfect for exploration.



filling the rooms with shimmering light. Returning towards the bow via the port companionway you can see the swung out lifeboat davits



Huge shoals of small bait fish – similar to sardines but not – swirl around the decks in ever changing patterns like rivers of fish



Life boat davits

before exploring the store rooms and galley area which lead off it



**Aga cooker in galley area**



**Engineer's bench and vice**



**Galley ventilator covered in fish**



**Store rooms**

Day four saw us back on the Rosalie Moller diving the stern areas as planned.

As any sailor will tell you, the sight of a well rounded stern is a wonder to behold and the Rosalie Moller didn't disappoint, her graceful curves rising from the seabed like a figure from a Gauguin painting.

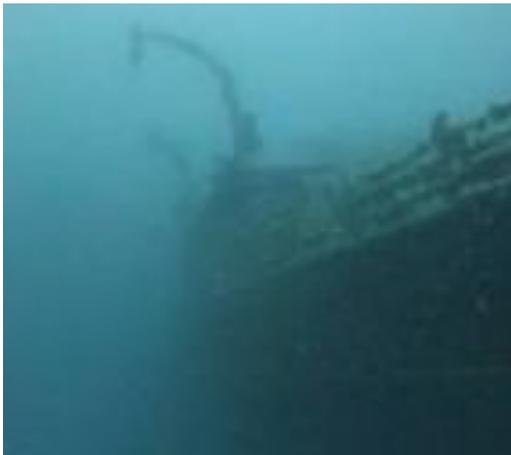


**Rosalie Moller's stern and Lynn (in the foreground)**

Descending to 42 meters her impressive prop and rudder came into view



Returning to deck level there is a haunting view of her port side disappearing into the gloom, life boat davits deployed – exactly how she must have looked in those final moments before sinking 70 years earlier.



Arriving at the aft deck the ship's hydraulic steering gear is in plain view complete with soft coral covering and a shimmering resident shoal of bait fish



Moving forward the next port of call was upper level of the engine room. It's important to stay at this level as the lower levels silts up very easily and several divers have become lost down there and died.

There are two principle routes leading to the upper engine room.

1. Continue at deck level across 4 and 3 holds and drop down through the open engine room hatches aft of the bridge  
Or
2. Enter No 3 hold via the extensive bomb damage to the starboard hull, turn right and swim forward entering the upper engine room space via No 3 hold's port bulkhead door.

Bagpuss chose route 1



Deck level engine room hatches – DIR



Upper engine room level looking aft – DIR

The upper engine room is vast cathedral like structure with the three huge cylinder heads of her steam engine clearly visible.



Upper engine room level looking forward

Having explored engine tops divers can return to deck level by either:

1. Utilising one of the principle entrance routes previously described
- Or
2. Progressing forward close to the port side wall, to the bulkhead door leading to the base of the funnel and then exiting via a relatively narrow break onto the starboard deck behind the bridge.



Bagpuss decided to make a circuit of it and head aft exiting via No3 hold and

arriving at deck level just forward of the aft mast and the engineering accommodation block.



Engineering accommodation block

This structure and its surrounding companionways is a fascinating place for those interested in the day to day working areas of the ship especially as so many original artefacts are still in place



Starboard companionway



Engineering Store room

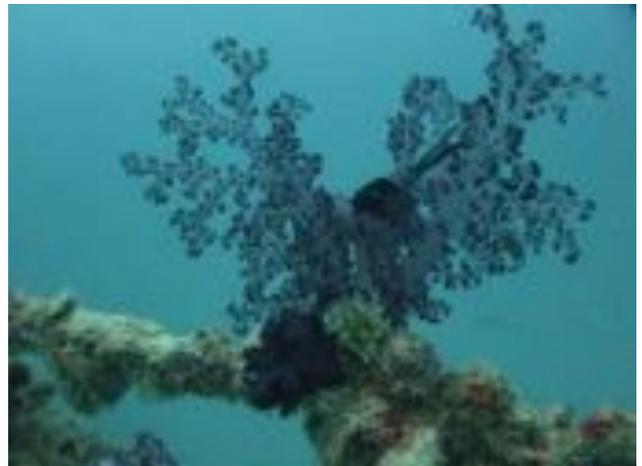
Moving forwards towards the top of the engine room and rear of the bridge



the ship's funnel with its distinctive "M" came into view. Bagpuss clearly had no problems finding it



Bagpuss posing on the Funnel - DIR



Lynn and the funnel that wasn't there

though Lynn reckoned she never saw it at all – a classic demonstration of how narcosis can effect a diver.

The whole of the bridge area is covered in life with everything from Anemones and clown fish to beautiful soft corals to look at.



Electric ray

Day five saw us preparing for our last dive at Gubal Island, our target this morning being the wreck of the Ulysses, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century vessel similar in many respects to the Carnatic we had dived on day 2.

Launched in 1871 the Ulysses was an early sail and steam hybrid – essentially a sailing ship with a back up engine, as opposed to the

later hybrids like the Carnatic which were steamships with back up sails.

Officially though she was described as an “iron screw cargo steamer – planked” and at 95 meters long, 10 meters broad and weighing in at 1992 grt she was quite a large ship for her day.

Her main propulsion system was her two “topsail schooner rigged” masts but to help her in calm weather she’d been fitted with a 2 cylinder 225hp coal fired steam engine which gave her a top speed of 8 knots under steam power.

In early August 1887 the Ulysses, under the command of Captain Arthur Bremner slipped her moorings in London and set sail for Penang with a mixed cargo (including a quantity of Mercury) valued at £60,000 – a fortune in those days.

Captain Bremner though tough and brave (he had been awarded a Lloyds medal for saving

life at sea in 1884), was inexperienced in Red Sea sailing, unapproachable and most importantly not the most able Captain in the fleet.

By the evening of 15<sup>th</sup> August Captain Bremner had safely navigated his ship through most of the Gulf of Suez and was approaching the wider and therefore safer Red Sea proper.

Despite being very tired from his long hours on the bridge he personally plotted the ship’s forward course and issued precise instructions to his officers regarding their duties before retiring to his cabin.

In the early hours of 16<sup>th</sup> August Ulysses struck Gobar Seghir reef and stuck fast.

At daybreak the lights of the British registered Kerbela were sighted and she quickly responded to a distress signal fired by the Ulysses.

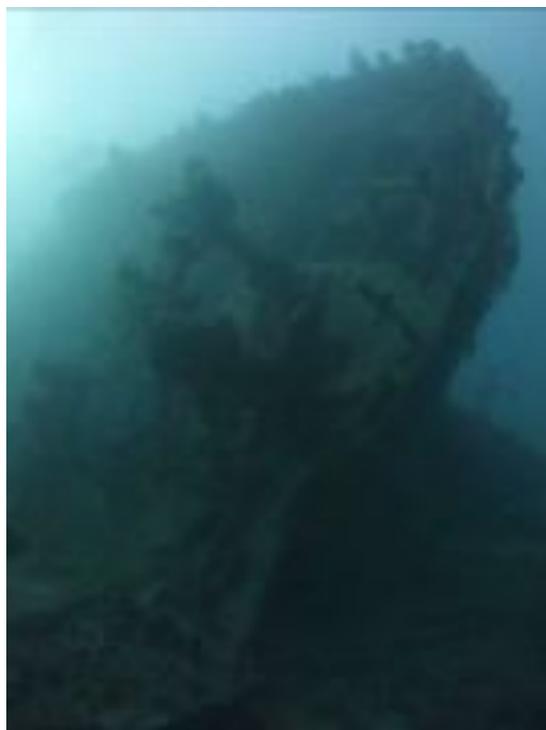
Unable to assist herself, the Kerbela made best speed to Suez to obtain help.

On 19<sup>th</sup> August HMS Falcon and two lighters arrived on site and salvaged most of Ulysses’ cargo. On 6<sup>th</sup> September with the Ulysses heavily down by the stern and still firmly on the reef she was abandoned to her fate and all parties returned to Suez.

At the subsequent board of enquiry the loss of the Ulysses was put down to “navigational error” though why and by whom was never established.

Originally lying upright and pointing up the reef tide and time have taken their toll and whilst she still lies at right angles to the reef, today she’s rolled over onto her port side with her stern in 28 meters of water and the remains of her bow scattered over the reef top in less than 6 meters.

She is a very atmospheric and photogenic dive particularly around her gracefully curving stern.



Stern and remains of tiller



Three bladed propeller

Moving forwards from the stern, part of her propeller shaft can be seen as her once fine wooden decks have rotted away



leaving an intricate lattice of iron beams though which the careful diver can

penetrate two decks before travelling to her bow entirely within the ship.



Outside, her rear mast lies on the sand at right-angles to the open hull with its top close to the remains of the funnel.



Rear mast

At the top of the reef her broken bow plates provide homes for myriads of small and not so small fish



and anchor points for many species of coral.





Crocodile fish

Which Bagpuss seemed to enjoy.



After breakfast we gently motored back across the Gubal Strait to Sha'ab Ali reef for more wreck diving adventures.

Our first dive at Sha'ab Ali reef was on the wreck of another 19<sup>th</sup> Century ship -the Kingston.

Built in Sunderland, the Kingston was launched on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1871 (the same year as the Ulysses) and at the time of her

loss was in service with the Commercial Shipping Company carrying cargoes of coal to ports around the world so visiting commercial and Royal Navy ships could be re-fueled.

Another early hybrid "sail and steam" ship she was 78 meters long, 10 meters broad and weighed 1449 grt.

Like the Ulysses she was a sailing ship fitted with a back up engine. With a top speed of 11 knots, her main means of propulsion were her two schooner rigged masts but she also had a 2 cylinder 130hp compound steam engine for use in light winds or when becalmed.

On 28<sup>th</sup> January 1881 she slipped her moorings at Cardiff docks and set sail for Aden under the command of Captain Thomas Cousins of Portsmouth.

Captain Cousins was a hard, imposing man who few would argue with and had considerable experience of the sea. At 18 he had rounded Cape Horn in a Force 12 gale, and on many occasions gone aloft to furl sails when his hands were literally frozen. At the age of 40 he finally gained his masters certificate.

Despite all this experience he was unfortunately prone to making occasional mistakes and had been involved in a number of collisions and groundings before gaining command of the Kingston.

On 20<sup>th</sup> February Captain Cousins began the task of piloting the Kingston through the narrow upper reaches of the Gulf of Suez.

A now familiar story then unfolded. Unwilling to trust or even consult with his fellow officers, Captain Cousins undertook all the ship's navigational duties himself staying near the helm for hours on end and refusing to allow anyone to check his calculations or bearings.

Inevitably fatigue overcame him causing him to make a mistake when calculating his position relative to two lighthouses. That mistake proved fatal for his ship as it allowed it to travel much further east than he intended and into the path of Sha'ab Ali reef.

In the early hours of 22<sup>nd</sup> February almost exactly 10 years after she had been launched the Kingston ran aground on Sha'ab Ali reef

At first the damage seemed slight and at daybreak Captain Cousins made contact with a passing ship which promised to get help from Suez. But By 23<sup>rd</sup> February it was clear the Kingston was down by the stern and soon all power and light was lost.

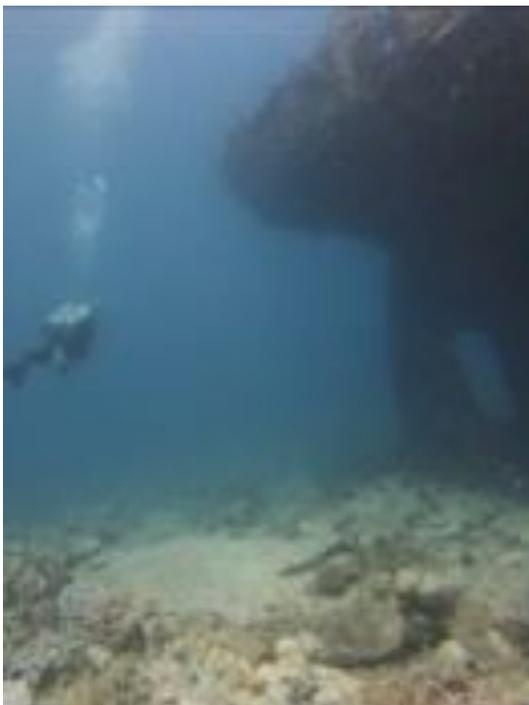
Captain Cousins ordered all crew into the lifeboats and then watched as his ship slowly slid down the reef until only the tops of her masts were above water.

Two hours later an Egyptian salvage tug arrived and took Captain Cousins and the crew to safety in Suez.

On 28<sup>th</sup> February 1881 the Kingston was officially declared a constructive total loss and abandoned to her fate.

Today she lies upright at right angles to the reef that claimed her, her bow is smashed across the reef top whilst her propeller lies in 17 meters of water.

This was a fantastic wreck and reef dive.



Whilst the sea bed at her stern and her propeller are "must see" areas, for many divers the real beauty of this wreck is

discovered when you get into the ship amongst her collapsed decking.



All the upper areas of the ship are covered in life. Fish and corals abounding wherever you look.



Whilst the decks have partly collapsed there are still many interesting swim-throughs with nooks and crannies to explore.



And sights to see including the spare propeller lying on the upper deck beams.



Her main mast lies on the sand off her starboard side with the crow's nest still attached and visible.



Main mast



Nearby the shattered remains of her starboard hull beams stand on the reef top like the façade of an ancient Greek temple



Crows nest

Exiting the main part of the ship's stern area onto the top of the reef her twin boilers stand proud of the surrounding coral garden



Twin boilers and condensers



In this area the whole of the ship is being changed by the coral reef into a new entity, neither metal nor animal but something in between



After Lunch there was time to relax before being again summoned to the saloon for a briefing on our next series of dives.

The plan was to spend two days diving the Red Sea's most famous wreck – the SS Thistlegorm.

Built by Joseph Thompson and Sons of Sunderland as a general cargo ship for the Albyn Line and launched in 1940 she was 126.5 meters long, 17.75 meters wide and weighed 4989 grt.

Powered by a 3 cylinder 365hp steam engine which gave her a top speed of 11 knots, she had five holds, two forward and two aft of the central superstructure and one (No3 hold) directly under it

This design was so successful that it was later adopted as the template from which all U.S. Liberty Ships would be built.

Always destined for war duties, a raised gun platform was built over her stern and she was fitted out with an old WW1 4.7" gun behind which they mounted a smaller caliber anti-aircraft gun. Thus she entered war service as a DEMS (Defensively Armed Merchant ship)

In May 1941 the Thistlegorm was in Glasgow being loaded with supplies intended for use by the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the relief of Tobruk.

All manner of war materials went aboard, everything from Bren gun carriers to aircraft and airfield spares via shells and Wellington boots.

In addition two Stanier 8F 2-8-0 locomotives fitted with "cowcatchers" at the front together with their tenders and water bowlers were welded to her decks as deck cargo.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> June she slipped her moorings and set sail for Alexandria via Cape Town under the command of Captain William Ellis.

In addition to her usual Merchant Navy complement she also had nine Royal Navy gunners to service her two stern mounted guns.

In late September she arrived in convoy at safe anchorage H at the entrance to the Gulf



of Suez where she anchored to await further instructions.

At this point the Gods conspired to seal her fate through a series of seemingly unconnected incidents.

The first involved two ships colliding close to the entrance to the Suez Canal effectively blocking it and causing a huge backlog of transports waiting to pass through to Alexandria. As a result the Thistlegorm was forced to remain at anchor a full two weeks longer than originally planned.

The second arose as a result of German intelligence receiving reports that a large troopship was due to pass through the Suez Canal with 1200 British troops aboard. As a result on the night of 5<sup>th</sup> October two Heinkel bombers from a squadron recently arrived in Crete were dispatched to look for and if possible destroy it.

Then the third and final incident took place just as the bombers were about to abort the mission due to lack of fuel when one of the pilots spotted a ship at anchor and attacked. The pilot thought he'd found the troopship but in fact it he'd found the Thistlegorm

Two bombs were dropped and both penetrated No5 hold (aft of the bridge) where they exploded detonating a significant amount of the large caliber ammunition stored there.

The enormous blast destroyed 4 & 5 holds, blew both locomotives off the deck into the sea and killed 4 crew and 5 Royal Navy gunners.

She immediately began to sink and the survivors quickly abandoned ship and were rescued by the light cruiser HMS Carlisle.

One of the crewmen – Angus McLeay was awarded the George Medal for rescuing a badly injured shipmate trapped on her burning deck, whilst Captain Ellis was awarded and OBE for “Services to the War effort” for his part in evacuating his ship and causing so many lives to be saved.

Today most of the Thistlegorm sits bolt upright on the sea bed in 32 meters of water. The extreme stern however, is almost severed

from the rest of the ship and is twisted through 45 degrees so the port rail rests on the sea bed.

As we had two days to explore the site it would be possible to dive the bridge to bow area (including the forward holds and starboard locomotive) one day and the bridge to stern area (including both guns and the port locomotive) the next, the order of dives being determined by the direction and strength of the current each day.

This afternoon the current was running from bow to stern, so the bridge to bow dive plan was adopted.

Guided by the admirable Reda the tour began by descending to the lower level of No2 hold just forward of the bridge and exploring the war materials stored there.



Descending into the holds

Despite the many thousands of divers who've visited the site the vast majority of the artifacts appear to be intact creating a fantastic “time capsule” for us to look at.



BSA motorcycles – DIR



Bagpuss inspecting boxes of rifles – DIR



Divers exploring RAF “Pundit” beacon units



Matador gun tractor with aircraft cowling in foreground

Ascending to the hold’s upper level we moved forward into No 1 hold where we were able to see more vehicles and the mundane paraphernalia of war.



Bedford truck



One of the famous Wellington boots

One of the more unusual items seen was a “PUNDIT” mobile beacon unit. Consisting of a generator and a tower carrying a powerful light, each unit transmitted a unique Morse-Code signal enabling pilots to know where they were – a manual version of today’s GPS



Vehicles lined up ready to be driven off



BSA motorcycles are everywhere

Having had a good look around we then returned to No2 hold and ascended to deck level for a quick tour of the bridge.



The rear of the bridge has been effectively destroyed leaving only a tangle of metal.



Inside the cool bridge rooms there is still quite a bit to see though the atmosphere is cool and a bit spooky



Inside the bridge rooms



Exiting onto the forward deck the plan was to head forward to see the deck mounted rolling stock and eventually the bow.

An unexpected pleasure was the discovery of couple of two brightly coloured nudibranchs on the decking.



Its incredible to think that the blast from the bomb hits picked up an engine this massive and dumped it over the side and onto the sea bed like a child's toy. Returning to deck level, next up were the two water bowsers located either side of No1 hold.

First to be encountered were the two locomotive coal tenders welded to the deck on either side of No2 hold.

Bagpuss was well taken with these – not surprising really as most 50 yrs old men are really boys, and all boys want to be engine drivers don't they?



Starboard bowser top crushed by water pressure

The starboard one is hanging partly over the starboard rail, whilst the port one is balanced precariously on the edge of No 1 hold

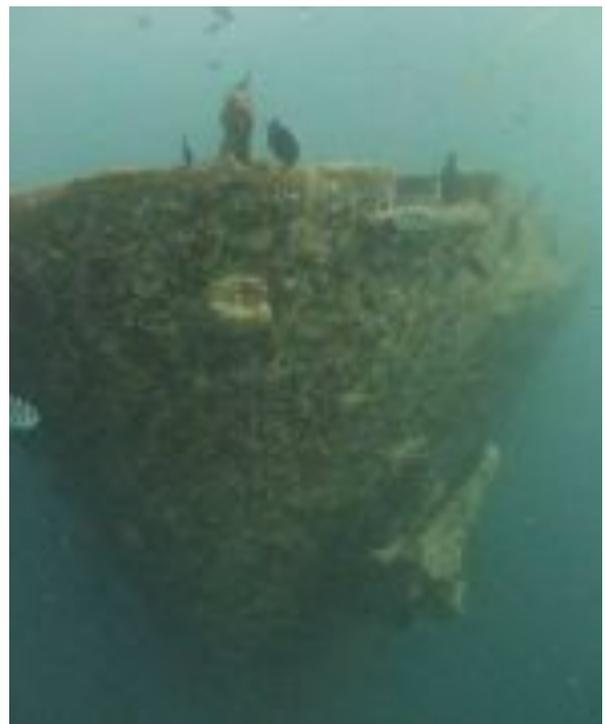


Bagpuss on the Port locomotive tender – DIR

Continuing forward the Thistlegorm's great bow gradually comes into view.

Only by continuing forward into the blue and then looking back does its true magnificence become apparent. .

Dropping over the starboard rail here takes you almost directly onto the remains of the starboard locomotive.



Thistlegorm's bow



Starboard locomotive – DIR



Mike Ward emerging from the chain locker

The following day we awoke bright and early for our final dive on the Thistlegorm and the start of our last day's diving.

The Gods of current were with us as the current had swung through 180 degrees during the night to be now running from stern to bow, perfect for exploring the bridge to stern areas as planned.

This dive would be guided by our resident wreck expert Mike Ward and also take in the port locomotive.

The tour began by descending to the rear of the bridge area and the debris fields that once were Nos. 4 and 5 holds.

Nothing really prepares you for the utter devastation present here. The ships hull is peeled back like a banana skin and the stern section has been twisted and dumped on its port rail

War materials are everywhere, particularly large calibre munitions.



Shells in debris field - DIR



Shells in debris field - DIR



Debris field - DIR



Shell "dollies" in debris field

Arriving at the sea bed on the port side, a short fin at 90 degrees to the ship brought us to the remains of the port locomotive. This locomotive appears to many to be more intact and therefore interesting than its starboard cousin



Port side locomotive



Port side locomotive



Port side locomotive

Returning to the ship we headed aft to see the propeller and rudder



Propeller and rudder

Looking up at her stern one can only admire her graceful lines despite her wartime "add ons"

I think its also the perfect place for a quiet moments reflection, remembering the nine sailors lost in the attack and wishing them God speed and calm seas wherever they now are.



**Thistlegorm stern**

Our respects duly paid, we next headed forward through the stern deck's port companionway and onto the gun deck.



**4.7" gun – DIR**



**Bagpuss playing hide and seek – DIR**



The whole of this area is very photogenic providing lots of opportunities to capture that classic Thistlegorm gun shot



**Secondary armament**

After the excitement and emotion of created by diving the Thistlegorm our final dive of the adventure would be a chance to chill out and just enjoy the view.

The site chosen was Yolanda and Shark reefs. Forming part of the Ras Muhammed national marine park, these reefs are excellent places for fish watching. Yolanda reef gets its name from the freighter Jolanda (pronounced Yolanda) which ran aground and sank there on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1980.

Its deck cargo of containerised bathroom fittings (baths, toilets etc) spilled onto the reef whilst the ship was left balancing on the edge of a very deep drop off.

In 1986 there was a violent storm which caused the Jolanda to slip over the edge of the drop off and be lost apparently forever. Recently however, explorers using ROVs have re-discovered her lying at the base of the drop off in 205 meters of water.



Rotting container sides in full coral plumage



Racks of baths



Dropping in on Yolanda reef the current quickly took us to the Jolanda's debris field.



Bidets and toilets



Coral gardens

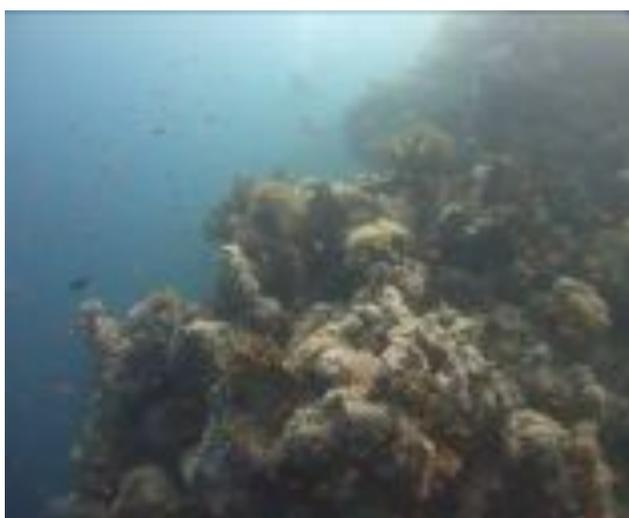


Coral gardens



A high energy site the whole area is covered with corals and life

Soon though, the current's nagging insistence pushed us first to and then over the reef wall. The wall is more or less a sheer drop into the abyss, a place where confidence and excellent buoyancy control is required to avoid joining the Jolanda at 200 meters.





Baguss packing up



Looking out to sea for one last time - DIR



The final night of the adventure was spent moored in Sharm harbour and after breakfast there was time to visit the tourist traps for those last minute "take home" gifts before heading to the airport.



Baguss making new friends

All too soon it was time to go as the adventure had finally come to an end.

Tired but very happy, Bagpuss and his friends bid their farewells to Hurricane and her crew and made their way to Sharm airport to board their flight to Gatwick.

Bagpuss took the chance to catch up on some sleep, and as we all know - when Bagpuss goes to sleep all his friends go to sleep.



Hope you enjoyed the adventure – Goodbye!

### Acknowledgements:

Successful events like this trip was don't just happen, a huge amount of very hard work goes on behind the scenes hopefully completely unnoticed by everyone else until the final product is delivered – so here's a big thank you to:

1. Martin and Alison at SSAC and Lee and Caroline at Scuba Travel for organising it all and holding their nerve when so many didn't
2. Mike Ward our on board Red Sea wreck expert for bringing the wrecks we visited to life with his excellent briefings and tours.
3. All Hurricane's crew for looking after us so well, producing first class meals out of nowhere and generally being great guys
4. Dave Robins for allowing us to share his excellent Bagpuss pictures
5. Last but by no means least - Bagpuss and all his friends for making this trip so very special.

**Please note** all pictures appearing in this document are the property of those who took them.

Those marked DIR belong to Dave Robins, those marked NM belong to Ned Middleton and the rest belong to Dave Purvis – please ask before using them, permission will rarely be refused.

### Further reading:

If you'd like to know more about the many wrecks of the Red Sea may I recommend two excellent books:

1. Death of Ships by Mike Ward obtainable via his web site [www.divewithmike.co.uk](http://www.divewithmike.co.uk)
2. Shipwrecks from the Egyptian Red Sea by Ned Middleton published by Ashgrove Publishing and available from Amazon ISBN 978-185398153-1