

BLUE WATER ADVENTURES

A Private Charter, A Bespoke Diving Itinerary And A Load Of Shiny New Kit...

Every Wreck-Head's Dream!

By James Neal

It was almost two years in the planning and execution... chartering M.Y. Nimar in itself, for a private trip, is not particularly difficult, negotiating a bespoke itinerary aimed squarely at 'wreck heads' gets a little more complicated but organising 24 divers, from two continents and 4 countries is, quite frankly, like herding cats! But first, let's go back to 2014...

It was September, I had suffered a subarachnoid haemorrhage, a bleed on the brain, the preceding December which had almost claimed my life and it had kept me out of the water for the best part of ten months... this was my first liveaboard post SAH. It was also my first trip outside of the UK and away from the care of my doctors.

I boarded M.Y. Superior in Hurghada and was greeted by Sonia Goggel, the 'Queen of the Red Sea'. Already on board were a group of Australian divers.

We had booked two liveaboards, back-to-back. We were doing the northern 'wrecks and reefs' and the southern 'St Johns' itineraries. Expectations were high.

Events that unfolded during that first week were to create an indelible bond between the two groups of divers that will last a lifetime... the events themselves were tragic, the death of an Egyptian deckhand and diver. Those ninety minutes will be forever etched in our minds. His name was Samir, and we were

returning to the Rosalie Moller to respect his memory five years after his tragic loss.

'Organising 24 divers, from two continents and 4 countries is, quite frankly, like herding cats!'

Negotiating the itinerary was difficult, there were certain wrecks that we wanted to dive. In particular were the M.V. Million Hope, the S.S. Turkia, S.S. Ulysses and the M.V. Loullia. We also wanted to go back and dive some wrecks that we had dived several times before.

The months passed and eventually it was time to think about packing as our departure date was drawing close. Water temperature was reported as being in the mid to high twenties... so it was certainly wetsuit time!

I elected to take a full length suit, knowing that I would be doing three or four dives a day and that I would no doubt have some reasonably lengthy decompression to complete on some of the dives. I packed a 5mm BARE Velocity Ultra wetsuit.



The S.S. Carnatic, M.V. Ghiannis D, M.V. Salem Express, the S.S. Thistlegorm and of course the plan was to show our respect and dive the S.S. Rosalie Moller.

There was a lot of toing and froing but eventually we agreed on a price and had to accept that the M.V. Turkia would have to wait for another trip.

The Velocity benefits from enhanced durability and warmth characteristics so I knew I would be extremely comfortable in the water.

One of the frustrations I have always had with full-length wetsuits is donning & doffing them, especially once they're wet. I usually end up resorting to plastic bags



suit when it's not being worn. A simple, yet effective, addition that helps maintain the suit's longevity.

I also opted to dive sidemount as it allows me to carry a significant amount of gas without having to organise a twin set.

I packed a set of Hollis LX 200 regs which I have done some serious dives with and know I can trust in demanding UK conditions, so diving them in the Red Sea would be a breeze. I also packed my Hollis Katana sidemount wing.

over my feet and hands!

I don't need to do this with the Velocity as it is fitted with substantial zips on the legs and arms that allow you to get in and out of the suit a lot easier. I also find that the cut and shape of the suit is very well suited to my body shape, it's not so tight as to constrict and as soon as I release the zips it's easy to take off and then get back in to, even when it's wet!

The Velocity also benefits from a number of other features that prevent water from flushing through the seams or the neck. The attention to detail on this suit is typical BARE, it's exquisitely detailed and superbly manufactured. I particularly like the 'suit saver'. Which is a simple flap that folds over the velcro tab on the neck seal that prevents it from damaging the

'The attention to detail on this suit is typical BARE, it's exquisitely detailed and superbly manufactured.'

The Katana is an epic bit of kit. I'd pretty much consider it sidemount perfection in its design and execution. It trims beautifully and is very quick to adjust... exactly what you want when you go away and need to switch from drysuit to wetsuit. I also packed a pair of BARE ultrawarmth booties and a set of Atomic Aquatic Blade fins. I really wanted to take my Zeagle Recon fins, but the pair that I have are sized for rock boots and my drysuit, but the Blade fins proved to be a great choice.

I also packed my favourite mask, the Oceanic Shadow. And my Atomic cap!

'The Katana is an epic bit of kit. I'd pretty much consider it sidemount perfection in its design and execution.'

The journey to Egypt was fun and I was soon on board M.Y. Nimar and reunited with old friends from 'down under'. Hugs were exchanged, gossip was caught up on and then it was down to the serious business of diving... after we first got our kit assembled and then had a good night's sleep!

We had arrived late in the evening and were pretty tired, exhausted in fact. But it made a lot of sense to get all of the kit set-up that night.

and DSMB were in my kit box. Wetsuit hung up and I had the cylinders rigged for sidemount and the Hollis LX200s were ready for action!

I'm inclined to consider a check-dive to be an essential and mandatory part of any diving trip abroad. You simply don't know what will need to be adjusted until you get in and dive... So you can imagine my delight when I discovered that everything was absolutely spot-on!

'I took my first giant stride off the back of the swim deck and into the sublime water's of Egypt's Red Sea. Taking a moment to saver my delight before I slipped beneath the surface...'



The wreck of the M.V. Loullia. Gordon Reef, Straits of Tiran, Red Sea, Egypt.

I have become accustomed to how easy it is to adjust the Hollis Katanna sidemount wing. I had it suitably sized for my wetsuit in under 5 minutes. Fins, mask, spool

I took my first giant stride off the back of the swim deck and into the sublime water's of Egypt's Red Sea. Taking a moment to saver my delight before I slipped beneath



The wreck of the M.V. Ghiannis D (Shoyo Maru).
Ras Abu Nuhas, Red Sea, Egypt.

the surface into the gloriously warm blue waters that would become my home for the next 6 days.

As I departed the surface I automatically slipped into a horizontal trim. I stopped at 6 metres and did a second bubble-check and started to run through how the kit felt. I noted that the wing was snug and didn't need any further adjustment and the cylinders were perfectly horizontal along my torso. I had attached a couple of weights to the tails of each cylinder to counteract any buoyancy issues as the gas depleted. My weighting appeared to be correct and everything felt comfortable, especially the wetsuit.

The BARE Velocity wetsuit is, in fact, extremely comfortable. It also benefits from enhanced durability and warmth characteristics while not compromising on fit and performance. As a consequence it works beautifully with the rest of my equipment and it doesn't cause any irritation behind the backs of the knees, under the arms or at the ankles, wrists or around the neck.

I glanced at my computers and double-checked my SPGs. All good to go! I reached across to my left shoulder and grabbed the large toggle and gave it a short tug to release just enough gas to allow me to drop slowly down towards the seabed.



The grin broadened across my face with every metre that I descended. Everything felt great!

The check-dive duly completed it was time to motor to Ras Abu Nuhas and dive the Ghiannis D. I didn't need to adjust or change anything. The kit had all been set up in under twenty minutes the night before and it was perfect, even once the cylinders were down to 50 bar, they still sat nicely.

The Ghiannis D (Shoyo Maru) is a favourite wreck of mine, she's sat on the seabed at about 45 degrees and this makes her particularly good to dive as the crazy angles can play games with your head. She's also a photographer's dream with her mighty derricks rising up off the seabed!

We took the Zodiacs across to the wreck and, due to the current running across her, performed a negative entry. You have to have a great deal of faith in your kit to be comfortable doing this... and it's a rush!

As I rolled backwards off the side of the Zodiac the water engulfed me and I immediately dropped down to 6 metres. I orientated towards the wreck and got myself neutrally buoyant with a quick blast of air into the wing, I held position just long enough to bubble-check and ensure everything was as it should be and then I dumped some gas and finned for the wreck.

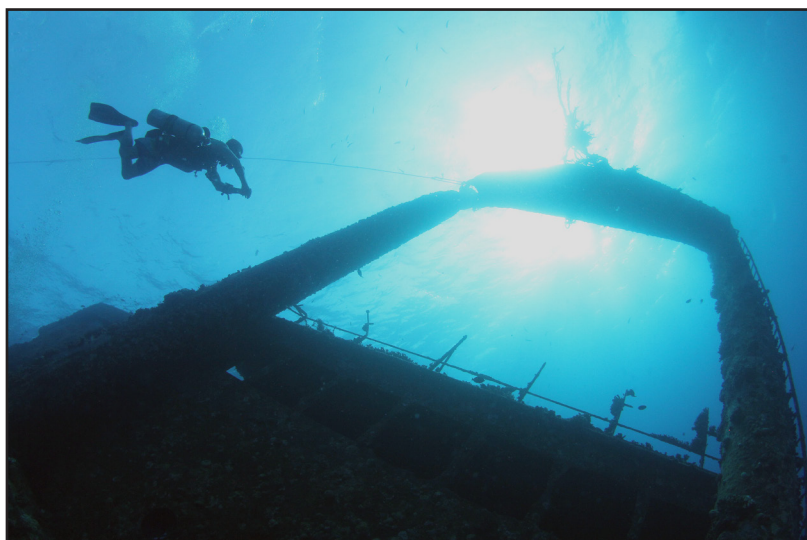
The Atomic Aquatic Blade fins surprised me with just how much 'oomph' they have. They are designed to 'capture' the water and 'contain' the flow without spilling it over the edges while 'channelling' the flow of water down the blade and off the vertical stabilizer edge tips. In other words they've got some get up and go!

I was at the port side of the wreck in no time and had my camera switched on and set-up! I shoot with a Canon EOS 60D, set on fully manual, in a Nauticam housing with twin YS-D2 strobes.

The huge derrick posts tower over the bridge and make for an iconic shot! I get

myself into position and start taking a few pictures, adjusting angle and aperture as necessary.

The Katanna wing holds me in perfect trim, allowing me to position myself in the water column and remain 'planted'



without so much as a twitch of a fin. I'm loving this, I look cool and I know it. I feel like a Jedi, all my childhood dreams have just been wrapped up into one glorious moment... now it's time to go and find the engine room, I feel like I'm flying through the death star and I'm twelve all over again... my grin just got even bigger!

Penetrating the bowels of this wreck is relatively simple, the engine room can be accessed from several points but it's those crazy angles that make it so much fun. The corridors are all at 45 degrees to my horizontal and then I start to swim down, adding a third angle for the brain to process, this can really start to mess with your head, it's so cool... I reach the engine room and the beam from my Hollis canister torch cuts through the

darkness... now I'm wielding a lightsabre!

The light penetrates to the farthest corners of the engine room with ease and I orientate myself towards the ceiling, that's actually a wall, and I head for a hatch that takes me through into another corridor and forward to an adjoining corridor running perpendicular to the seabed. I then turn left and head down, adding a fourth crazy angle that conspires to confuse, until I pop out at the bottom and outside the wreck.

I then head forward across the debris field that is the remains of the mighty cargo ship's holds. I reach the crumpled bow and explore the damage inflicted upon her from the impact with the reef. It's sobering..

I head back towards the stern and take in the awe-inspiring sight of that lies before me. What an incredible wreck she is, what a privilege it is to dive her.

Back on board Nimar I process my photos, write up my log book and then settle down for a spot of lunch. The crew refill all of our cylinders and the guides discuss what's next...

The S.S. Dunraven was actually the next dive, but I'm not going to write about her as part of this article, preferring to save that for a later date, likewise the M.V. Million Hope as these were a couple of very special dives that truly warrant their own editorial.

The wreck of the S.S. Kingston made for a great dive... I entered the water from the swim deck of the liveboard and the current was running like a steam train! Pulling myself hand over hand along the trail line to the main shot was hard work, I was puffing well by the time I had fought my way across the 100 yards or so against the torrent, then I had to drag myself down the shot to the wreck, clinging on with all my might, eventually taking refuge in



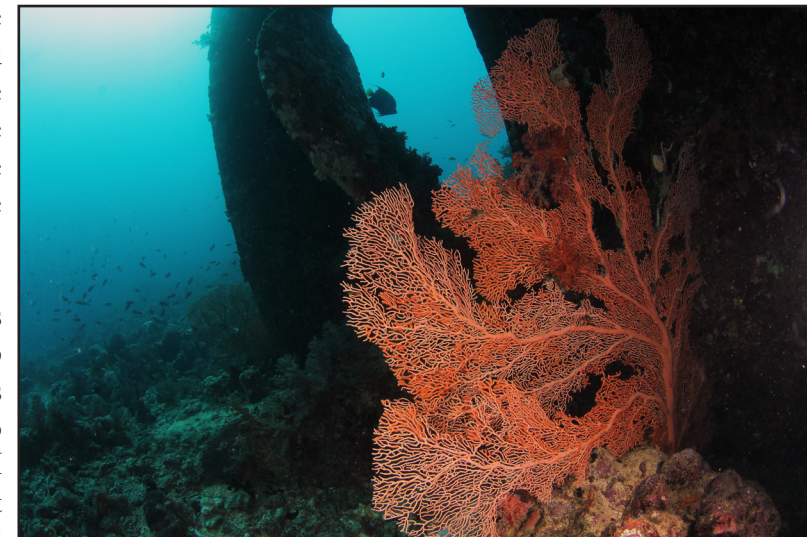


The wreck of the S.S. Kingston.
Strait of Gubal, Red Sea, Egypt.

the leeward side of the wreck. I then worked my way around to the stern and was able to shelter from the current within the wreck itself.

The Hollis LX200s do a remarkable job of delivering gas as demanded, at no point did I feel that I was struggling to get enough air as I worked against the heavy current. They delivered every breath with ease.

I gave myself a moment to recover and just hovered for a couple of minutes taking in the sight that is the myriad of coral that has been growing for tens, if not a hundred years or more, as she sank in 1881. The S.S. Kingston was, and still is, often misidentified as the Sarah H. That name actually belonged to a divemaster that worked in the area many years ago.



I worked my way forward, picking my way through the wreck, it becomes difficult to distinguish wreck from reef as you reach the remnants of the bow. By the time I had reached the coral garden the current had subsided and I was able to explore freely for a good hour.

No trip to Egypt would be complete without at least a couple of dives on the mighty S.S. Thistlegorm. She needs no introduction and I make no excuse for wanting to ferret around this Aladdin's cave of a wreck.



The Hollis canister torch again comes into its own as it lights my way as I penetrate the wreck from the impact site at the stern and squeeze through a narrow gap in the deck plates and into one of the holds on the other side. Away from other

divers I make my way into an isolated section of the wreck and weave my way through this time capsule, forever trapped in 1941, deck by deck. Eventually I emerge from the forward hold, next to one of the large bowsers that hangs precariously over the edge, suspended by some invisible force.



For me, the best part of this dive is the exterior of the ship. She holds me in awe as I work my way around her.

Heading forward, over the hawse gear, I reach the bow and swim onwards, out into open ocean, away from the wreck... only to turn around to take in the sheer magnificence of her. Her bows tower over me, I hang in the water column, motionless, the hiss of the LX200s my only reminder that I'm in an alien world, mesmerised.

I kick back towards the bow and reach the enormous anchor that hangs from her port side, working my way along the outside of the superstructure I come to the bridge and make my way inside.



Continuing aft, I swim across her broken back, a scene of utter carnage, reaching the stern, I visit the mighty propeller and then swim round to her deck guns, poised, silent and motionless.

I glance at my computer, it's time for me to make my ascent, I'm in for a long hang at six metres, but that's fine. I return to our shot line and make

my ascent. Stopping briefly at 12 metres. And now for a 40 minute decompression stop at six metres, I'm extremely grateful for the warmth that the BARE Velocity provides, the minutes tick by...

The wrecks of the Red Sea are where it's at for me. I have a lust for rust. These relics of warfare and misadventure also provide a sanctuary for our ocean's wonderful marine life and I discovered the joy to be had from the challenge of trying to

capture just some of the moments I shared with a few of them.

Next month I'll tell you all about my dives on the Million Hope and the Salem

Express. Two sensational wrecks!



Anemone Fish.
Yolanda Reef, Red Sea, Egypt.