

# EGYPTIAN SUMMMER

Teens giant-stride into the Red Sea on a once-in-a-lifetime Broadreach adventure.

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PHOTOS BY **CARLOS VILLOCH**



**W**e arrived at midnight in Cairo, where Egyptian women were dressed in black from head to toe. I'm sure we looked pretty weird sporting piercings and dressed in our brightly colored Broadreach shirts. We were about to embark on Broadreach's Sinai Experience in the Red Sea, and I was just hoping everyone would like me. This was quite a culture shock, but that's why I wanted to come here: to experience the extraordinary.

Broadreach is the coolest summer experience for teens. They offer numerous specialties, such as Open Water, Advanced, Rescue, Master, Naturalist, Deep, Night, Drift and Boat Diver, and Project AWARE Fish Identification. But since I was already a Master Diver, I was really along for the experience. This intense diving program includes a weeklong live-aboard adventure, but we also went camel trekking, hiked Mt. Sinai, slept under the stars in the desert and experienced a culture most of us had never encountered.

After a seven-hour bus ride, we finally reached our first destination, Sharm el Sheikh. It wasn't even 8 a.m., and already it was bright and hot. We all grabbed our bags and climbed a long flight of stairs. By the time we reached the top, we were totally out of breath, but we were rewarded with an incredible view. Sharm el Sheikh overlooks an enormous bay lined with shops and restaurants. When we finally turned around to see where we were staying, we saw what looked like an *Indiana Jones* movie set: huts made of straw and string, 10 feet by 10 feet, each containing only two beds and a plug-in fan.

This was going to be an experience.

After a nice nap we met with the gorgeous German blonde bombshell divemaster (as all the guys liked to call her), Bianca, who would be our local dive leader. We boarded Camel Dive's boat, the *Verdi*, and headed to Fiddle Reef, where we did our skills test and got a taste of what was to come in the next few weeks. The Red Sea is one of the richest oceans I have ever seen. Everything — and I

mean everything — is so colorful, almost fruity. It was like diving a rainforest designed by Willy Wonka. It was ridiculous how much bigger and healthier the reef was than others I'd dived. There were loads of orange and purple fairy basslets and anthias, flowing over the reef like colorful snowflakes.

above me at the top of the reef.

That night we headed to a café on the side of a hill that twinkled with little white lights woven through the tree branches. We reclined on luxurious pillows and I felt like I was in one of those movies where belly dancers come out to feed you grapes and fan



**LAND OF TEMPLES** Clockwise from top: **Nato and two other Broadreachers near Sharm el Sheikh. On a camel trek to a Bedouin village. A PADI Rescue Diver lesson at sunset.** Opposite: **Soft corals and anthias at Ras Mohammed.**

That evening we spent some quality time on the hilltop with our new Bedouin friend, Omar, who worked in the village area where we were staying. We all sat in a circle, talking about our lives, bonding over Bedouin tea and admiring the beautiful place we were so lucky to be experiencing.

#### RA IN THE MORNING

We woke up early to the sound of our names being yelled by our Ra. "Ra" — as in the Egyptian sun god — was the name we gave the person who was responsible for waking everyone up.

Our first dive that day was Woodhouse Reef, and I spotted a shark as soon as we started to descend. The reef blossomed with color, and I noticed that all the animals were healthy and large. I even saw a six-foot free-swimming moray eel, which I'd never seen before, and a turtle feasting on sponges

you until you fall asleep. Jake, from Boston, was the main entertainment, telling stories and doing funny imitations, and we all had our own little laughs on the side while taking pictures of each other. At this point, I had no doubt that this group was going to make my trip 10 times better, and I was excited to be experiencing it with every single one of them.

#### JUMP LIKE PENGUINS

"Jump like penguins!" Bianca yelled as we leaped one by one into the sea to dive Yolanda and Shark Reefs, one of the Red Sea's most popular dives. Here, twin peaks of a single



**MUST DO**

**Ride a Camel to Lunch**  
Ride a camel into the desert for lunch with Bedouins under a tent. The "wow" factor of your high, wobbly perspective and the exotic aspect of this form of transportation outweigh any discomfort.

**MUST DIVE**

1. Yolanda and Shark Reefs
2. The SS *Thistlegorm*
3. Small Crack
4. Blue Water Hammerhead Encounter
5. Ras Mohammed

## RIGGED AND READY

### aquaSketch

IM your friends underwater-style on this portable device. When you need more space, just turn the knob to advance the scroll. You can even use colored pastels on the vellum paper to create underwater works of art.

[aquasketch.com](http://aquasketch.com)

### Ripcurls

Wraparound frames keep a tight profile and block the sun from practically every angle. You can even bodysurf while wearing these and they won't fall off.

[ripcuri.com](http://ripcuri.com)



### Lomograph

Think Photoshop built into a plastic 35 mm camera where light leaks are part of the plan. Lomography emphasizes the "don't think, just shoot" approach, resulting in artistic pictures with abstract effects.

[lomographics.com](http://lomographics.com)



coral seamount rise up off the Ras Mohammad coast; also found here are the remains of the wrecked freighter *Yolanda*. As soon as I looked out into the blue, I saw a sheer wall made up of millions of schooling fish: Napoleon wrasse, snapper, barracuda, jackfish and surgeonfish. We also got to see a *crazy* eel fight as two jetted through the schooling fish.

Bianca signaled when we were close to the freighter. Suddenly we looked around the corner and saw the remains of the *Yolanda* ... toilets! There were about a hundred, plus a BMW. Go figure! Stranger still were the eels that had made their homes inside the porcelain bowls.

I never wanted to leave, but we had to get back to our huts — we had packing to do for our four-day trip into the desert, and, man, it was going to be hard. My hut looked like a tornado full of clothes hit it.

The next morning we walked (for what seemed like the millionth time) down the eternal staircase to meet our new guides: three Egyptian men dressed in *calasiris*, full tunics made of linen. The leader, Achmeid, showed us our two Jeeps with all sorts of bags and pots strapped on the top. No wonder we were allowed only one small bag each.

## DOWN BY THE SEA

After a couple of hours we arrived at a small Bedouin town right on the sea. It was quite fascinating to compare our cultures and see how happy people here were without everything that some of us feel are necessary. And we were finally going to see the camels I'd been looking forward to this whole trip! They were *soooo* cute sitting there in a huddle with their legs tucked beneath them. We were in store for a two-hour camel ride. Little boys helped each of us on (my camel was a sweetie I named Fifi) and showed us how to sit, cross our legs and hold on to the reins. The ocean sparkled in the sun as we all rode along the beautiful coast. It felt totally surreal as we finally reached the next Bedouin town, where we would have lunch. I said goodbye to Fifi and ducked inside the big tent to relax and devour the delicious stew, pita, salad, potatoes, rice and hummus.

Finally, we loaded back into the Jeeps for a little off-roading in the desert to reach our final destination — the foot of Mt. Sinai, which we'd begin climbing at 2 a.m.

We woke to the moon glowing brightly in the night sky and a flashlight beam shined in our eyes by the graceless Ra! Within 10 minutes we were hiking up the winding path. People come from all over the world

to hike Mt. Sinai for spiritual rediscovery. We ran into people all ages hiking, as we were, to reach the top in time to see the sunrise. We cheered each other on as the sky's colors shifted from browns to reds until we reached the peak. The sun rose as a perfect yellow ball of fire that lit up the canyons for miles. We didn't have long to linger, though; Achmeid kept urging us, "Please hurry, the sun is coming, we must keep moving!"

We also hiked the colored canyons where enormous cliffs engulfed us as we passed along the narrow paths below. I felt like we'd fallen back to the cave-man era. I wondered why they were called the "colored canyons," but before I could ask, Achmeid shook his water bottle over the wall; as the droplets spread out, reds, yellows and oranges slowly appeared. He explained that the coloration was from marine deposits, which I thought rather strange considering that there was no longer any water around.

## SWEET RELIEF

We returned from the desert to the *Enigma*, a live-aboard where we'd stay until the end of the trip. As soon as we walked into the main cabin, cold air from the air conditioner swooshed over our bodies and we all just fell on the ground in gratitude. Cushions were scattered on the top deck so we could lounge and tan, and there was even a small bar where we could get drinks — sweet relief after the long hikes. Our bedrooms were downstairs, but we all slept on deck and just used the rooms to store our baggage. We didn't waste any time: After meeting the rest of the crew, we headed to dive the famous wreck of the *SS Thistlegorm*.

We finned alongside the wreck, spotting huge machine guns on the stern — we could even see damage from where it was

bombed. We ran into some huge Napoleon wrasses and a couple of eels while circumnavigating the wreck. There was so much to see we needed to dive it twice!

After some breakfast those of us who were trained to explore inside vessels jumped back in. I saw boots floating on the ceiling, a result of air from previous divers becoming trapped inside. There were old-fashioned cars in the holds and a ton of motorcycles standing up, as though just waiting to be driven off. There were even tiny fishing boats covered in all different kinds of coral. Jacques Cousteau is said to have found gold here! Everything was dark and had the most historical vibe, and although I don't like to judge my future dives, I think this will forever be my favorite wreck dive.

The next morning I woke up to the ocean's rocking and a pillow being thrown at my head by Ben. Still in sleep mode, I stumbled down for breakfast, where there was quite an uproar due to the fact that our Nutella was running low.

Our guide, Fanny, led us into the blue in search of hammerheads. Fanny said the chances were slim since he hadn't seen any in quite awhile, but we still had hope. It was our last dive, and we knew that even if we didn't see the sharks we'd already had an incredible experience. Then, suddenly, Nick grabbed my hand and pointed right beneath us: Fading in and out, like shadows, were shiny silver objects. Hammerhead sharks were ascending from right below us — my eyeballs almost popped out of my skull!

Nick and I turned around to give everyone the hammerhead sign, but they were already watching the sharks slowly begin circling, their striking eyes staring right at us. They were so close that I could see my reflec-



**BEYOND THE DUNES** Above: **Butterflyfish and a wildly patterned wrasse at Ras Um Sid off Sharm el Sheikh.** Opposite: **Enjoying some dune time between dives.**

tion, scuba gear and all, in their eyeballs. I grabbed Nick's arm because, I gotta admit, I was a little nervous. I had never seen hammerhead sharks before! *One, two, five, OK — whoa there, buddy — eleven ...* how many could there possibly be? The final count was about 20. Sadly, our air got low and we had to leave these amazing creatures.

You feel a special bond with people on a Broadreach trip, and as soon as we hit the surface we sat down to write cards for each other to read on our separate flights home. Enjoying the Egyptian sunset was the perfect way to say goodbye to the Red Sea — and the perfect way for it to say goodbye to us.

*Special thanks to everyone at Broadreach ([gobroadreach.com](http://gobroadreach.com)).*



## Deco Stops Red Sea

Some of my favorite things during my Sinai Experience: **riding a camel**, shopping and **bargaining** for jewelry with locals, eating pita bread with every meal, playing cards, **open-air sleeping** on the live-aboard's deck, my crucial tan, creating inside jokes with Team America, swimming in the Red Sea, watching **Egyptian sunsets**, seeing the sunrise from the top of **Mt. Sinai**. My not-so-favorite things: flies, getting sunburned, being asked strange questions by the dudes in the market, group consensus about what music to play. Tips for future **Broadreach** attendees: Learn to say "azek," "what's up?" in Arabic. If you're awakened by a singing man, don't panic (like I did) — it's actually the **Islamic call for prayer** that they do five times a day. Bring tons of sunscreen, Pepto-Bismol (hal), bug spray and AA batteries, because the ones you buy there aren't very good. Last but not least, bargain for everything you buy.

### DESTINATION PRIMER

**AVERAGE WATER TEMP:** 72-80°F **WHAT TO WEAR:** 3/2 mm fullsuit or shorty in summer, 5 mm in winter **AVERAGE VIZ:** 100+ feet **WHEN TO GO:** Year-round