

THE WIND WAS BLOWING at gale force 6 as we ploughed ahead directly into it. Although we had been hugging the coast, our boat was still taking a mauling, riding up the never-ending 12-footers and crashing back down again with tedious repetition.

Everyone had hunkered down in their cabins as we endured this onslaught from a furious sea along our 100-mile, 16-hour journey.

At midnight in our triple cabin the porthole gave up its fight against the pressure of the waves and burst open with a thunderous boom.

A huge inrush of water followed as the sea entered and dumped what seemed like a bathful onto the sleeping Andy Alfred in his bulkhead bunk.

Screams of surprise and shock, along with many expletives, were followed by hushed sniggers from the unaffected as Andy leapt around the cabin soaked from head to foot, dancing without dignity in nothing more than sopping wet boxers.

His mattress had been rendered unusable so, still dripping sea water, he made his way to the next cabin, in the knowledge that there was a spare there.

His frantic knocks were answered by the occupant, who, on being confronted by this drenched, underwear-clad apparition, turned, grabbed a life-vest and headed at speed for the deck, his face a mask of fear – surely the boat had to be sinking?

At the same time a fellow-passenger awoke to find a trevally floundering on the pillow of her spare bunk. It had entered through an open porthole on the main deck. We were left in no doubt that this was an adventure, not a cruise.

Pictured: The hull of the *Scalaria* from the viewpoint of resident anemonefish.

THE LUST FOR RUST



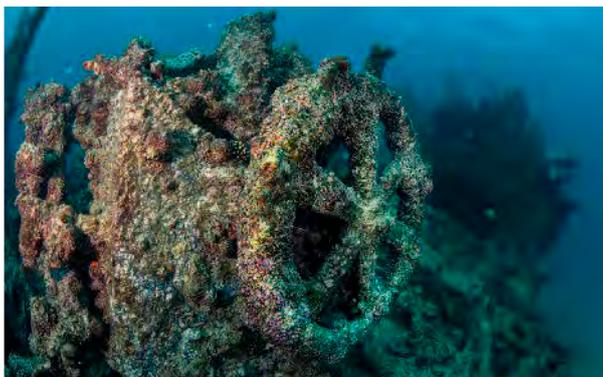
The risk of rough passages and flapping fish on your pillow is surely not too high a price to pay to dive 15 choice northern Red Sea and Gulf of Suez wrecks in a week, is it? **NIGEL WADE** gives the itinerary a blast



Right: The huge reverse-direction hand-wheel on the *Scalaria*.

Far right: Spanners rusting in their rack in the *Scalaria* tool-room.

Clockwise from below: The bow of the *Turkia* rising from the seabed; snagged nets, soft corals and chromis on the wreck; tyres stacked on deck provide a limited foothold for molluscs; the engine-room and boilers.



I had joined a group of wreck enthusiasts on the Red Sea liveaboard *King Marcos II* to undertake an itinerary that would take us from the port of Hurghada 150 miles north along the Gulf of Suez and back.

We would visit only sites that might sate our lust for rust. On route we would have plenty of time to research and debate the history, tragedy, negligence and often violence underlying the hundreds of thousands of tons of shipping that lie broken and decaying at the bottom of the ocean.

Early the following morning we woke, relieved, to a silent calm. We had reached our first destination in the Egyptian Red Sea's northern Gulf of Suez. The strong winds had abated, and in their place a gentle breeze rippled the water surface, below which lay the wreckage of the *Scalaria*.

This 125m, 5683-ton tanker was built in 1922 at the Swan Hunter shipyard in Newcastle, fitted with triple-expansion steam engines capable of propelling her at a top speed of 11 knots. As with all "Shell Tankers" she was named after a mollusc,

in this case a twisting bivalve.

Her demise came on 19 October, 1942. Moored at Ras Gharib after taking on 7000 tons of crude oil, she was discovered and attacked by a German bomber, a Heinkel HE111.

The plane dropped a torpedo that struck the ship on her starboard side, aft of the bridge in number 3 tank.

This was later followed by a bomb that struck the foredeck, setting the whole ship ablaze. The fatally crippled *Scalaria* slipped beneath the waves shortly afterwards.



Right: Technicolour corals adorn the deck-ribs on the elegant *Carnatic*.

Below: The Tile Wreck – is it the *Marcus*, or the *Chrisoula K*?

The remains of the tanker lie scattered over a wide area on a sandy seabed with a maximum depth of 23m. The bow and stern are still upright a few metres below the surface. They are separated from the midships section, a mass of twisted pipework, ladders and hull-plating.

The three boilers and triple-expansion engine were clearly visible aft, as was the huge main engine reverse-direction hand-wheel. With the help of tour guide Steve Rattle we found the tool-room, where massive spanners, now rusted and decaying, sat on their rack in size order.

A large shoal of trevally hunted as one for their breakfast on the wreckage, briefly joining the divers in the vain hope that we would scare some of the resident species into breaking cover.

At the end of the dive I found a pair of Red Sea anemonefish – the view from their home was of the rising bow defiantly upright, as if in protest at the ship's violent demise.

AFTER BREAKFAST we made our way further north to the wreck of the steamship *Turkia*, which sits upright on a sandy seabed in 30m with its bow facing west towards the shore at Zaafarana.

Built in Hull by Earles Shipbuilding & Engineering Co in 1909 the vessel was originally *Livorna*, but was renamed in 1934 following a change of ownership.

The *Turkia* is 100m long with a 14.5m beam and had a reciprocating triple-expansion engine. Her final voyage began in New York in early May 1941, loaded with wartime cargo including tyres, wire

coils, ingots, vehicles and firearms. She also carried a large consignment of explosives.

Reports suggest that she was abandoned on 17 May following a serious and developing fire in her number 3 hold. The explosion that rocked her just 10 minutes later proved fatal, and she slipped beneath the waves. Because of the nature of her sinking *Turkia* doesn't appear on Lloyds War Losses records as a casualty, but is listed simply as a wartime loss.

We entered the water under the mid-day sun. The entire wreck was visible below, lying upright on its keel with ripples of light dancing across the deck.

Snagged fishing-nets festooned the aft port railings, draped motionless in slack water and covered in dirty marine growth. The ironwork beneath these had been left broken and twisted as fishermen had tried in vain to retrieve their lost property.

Soft corals had long ago made the wreck their home, reaching towards the surface and providing a haven for scores of yellow-tailed chromis.

Anemones grew on the decking among the remains of mortar shells still tightly crammed together, their wooden boxes long ago replaced with coral concretion to make the explosives seem part of a growing reef structure. Resident clownfish flitted around this highly explosive payload.

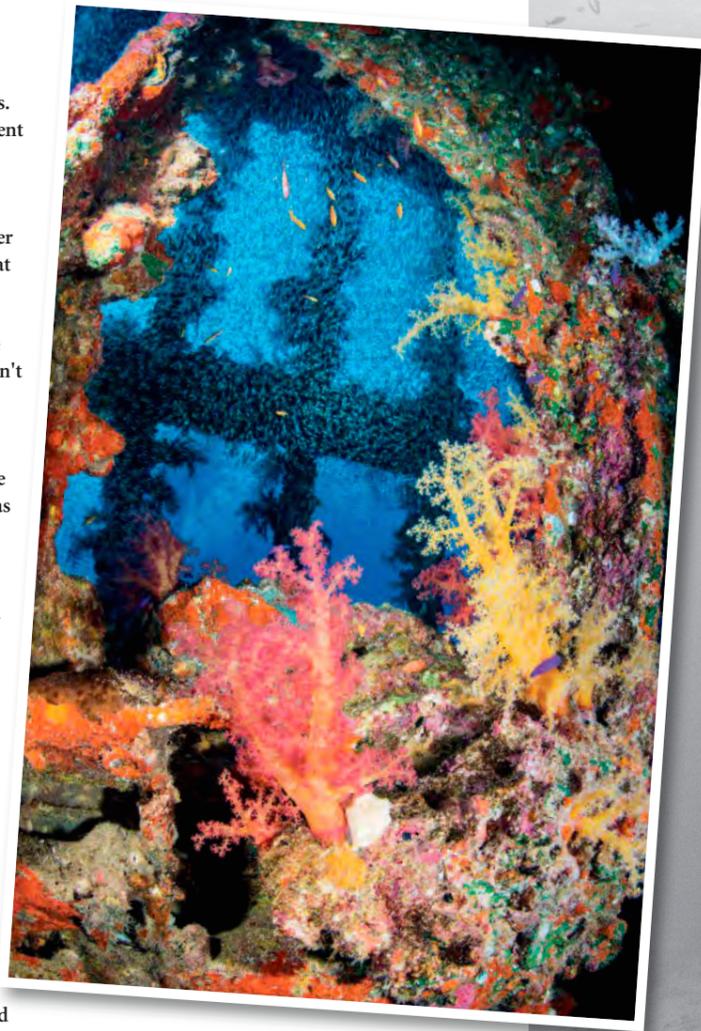
Tyres were scattered throughout the holds as well as on deck. Communities of hard-shelled molluscs had found few footholds on the smooth black rubber, and instead resided in small clumps around the tread areas.

The *Turkia* has been hailed by some as the "new *Thistlegorm*". I'm not convinced; the much-dived and much-loved wreck 70-odd miles south is just too good a site to relinquish its crown just yet. However, the consensus was that our *Turkia* dives were worth every minute of the long and uncomfortable journey.

OUR WRECK TOUR had started with a shallow check-out dive on the remains of the *El Mina* (Harbour Wreck) just out of the port at Hurgada. This Soviet-built Type 43 minesweeper lies at a maximum depth of 30m and was sent to her watery grave by Israeli fighter planes in 1969.

The stern is twisted to port, the decking facing the seabed. The mine-sweeping sonar gear and winches are still in place, as is the anchor-chain that snakes across the seabed.

But our next stop was at Abu Nuhas to



dive what I consider the most graceful of wrecks in Egyptian waters, the passenger ship *ss Carnatic*. Built in the UK's Isle of Dogs by the Samuda Brothers in 1862, she was fitted with primitive inverted tandem compound engines, although her 12-knot maximum speed was generated in the main by her sails.

She was lost after striking the reef at Sha'ab Abu Nuhas, breaking her back and sliding under water on the morning of 14 September, 1869.

We found the wreck lying in two parts on its port side under the weight of more than 145 years of lush coral growth.

The hardwood planks are long gone, making it possible to dive between the steel- and iron-clad decking beams that now resemble a giant ribcage covered in a profusion of technicolour soft corals.

The inside of the stern was stuffed with dense shoals of glassfish and sweepers, making it difficult to navigate as they initially blocked the view, and parting like silver curtains as we approached to let us see through the deck levels out into open blue water.

The bow section was littered with the broken bottles from the cargo that has earned *Carnatic* the nickname the Wine Wreck. Everything about this sailing ship seems to exude elegance – *Carnatic's* final resting place, deck facing the open sea



Pictured: *Ghiannis D's* profile is probably the most photographed in the Red Sea.



Right, from left: The lathe in the tool-room of the Tile Wreck; pillar drill in the same room; the propeller.

Below: A diver checks out the *Rosalie Moller's* crow's nest.



and keel in the shadow of the reef, allows the wreck to be bathed in varying light.

I have dived here in the past, and it's noticeable that the wreck's appearance seems to change with the time of day and position of the sun. For a self-confessed reef-nut like me this dive-site provides the best of both worlds, with the magnificent coral growth and marine life adorning the remains of a ship of the highest calibre.

The shallow reef at Sha'ab Abu Nuhas sits close to busy shipping lanes and has been the downfall of a number of other vessels over the years.

One such was the *Ghiannis D*. Carrying lumber bound for Saudi Arabia, she had sailed through the Gulf of Suez heading for the Straits of Gubal before striking the reef on 19 April, 1983 and sinking.

The wreck lies at an angle on the seabed, and its profile is possibly the most photographed in the Red Sea. The rusting hull is covered in marine and coral growth, providing a texture that seems to soften its appearance.

The large funnel still bears the letter D, so there could be no misunderstanding as to the name of the wreck we were visiting.

THE SAME CANNOT be said of the next wreck on our itinerary, widely known as the Tile Wreck and still giving rise to disagreement. Modern-day historians and wreck-researchers believe the wreck to be that of the *Marcus*, built as the *Atlas Bremen* in 1959, but for years the Tile Wreck was thought to be the *Chrisoula K*.

Chrisoula K, by coincidence, struck the same reef three years after the *Marcus* – a similar ship with a similar cargo on a similar journey. The broken-off bow of the *Chrisoula K* sitting on top of the reef next to the Tile Wreck simply adds to the uncertainty.

The argument over this wreck's identity will no doubt rage on, but it adds interest to the post-dive debate. Whatever the name it offers a fantastic dive.

Light passes through the perforated hull-plates, creating a series of beams that illuminate the stacks of good-quality granite tiles that are piled high but have shifted, allowing room to swim through.

The ship's workshop still has its lathe and drill press, abandoned and rusting but clearly identifiable, sitting exactly as they were when the ship was wrecked.

On our way south from the *Turkia* we stopped off at the site of the *Rosalie Moller*. Another WW2 casualty, bombed at anchor like the *Thistlegorm*, it's likely that she was spotted after being lit up by the fire that followed the *Thistlegorm* attack. The Heinkels returned two days later to bomb her.

Built in Glasgow by Barclay Curle & Co, *Rosalie Moller* was launched as the *Francis* in January 1910 and went into service with the Booth Shipping Line.

She was renamed after her sale in 1931

to the Lancashire-based Moller line. When she was sunk in the early hours of 8 October, 1941, she was carrying a cargo of Welsh coal.

The remains lie upright on a sandy seabed at a maximum 53m with the deck at around 30m, the two masts still intact and rising to within 17m of the surface.

The base of the forward mast was under siege from a dense shoal of glassfish and sweepers, shimmering in the midday sun and reducing our view of the rusting metal structure. Beautiful purple, pink, red and white soft corals grew along the length of the mast, culminating in a small garden of corals at the crow's nest.

More glassfish hugged the contours, ready to dart for cover in unison as ever-present predators came hunting.

THE ROSALIE MOLLER proved to be another wreck offering this reef-nut a welcome respite from searching rusty nooks and crannies while trying to make sense of the jumbled, twisted and decaying remains of once-proud and sophisticated sea-going vessels.

The Red Sea has a wealth of wrecks for all to enjoy, from shallow remains to the deep and dark skeletons that only those with technical skills and equipment should visit.

We had travelled to the far north of the Gulf of Suez and back again, endured rough seas and explored a total of 15 wrecks in just a week of intense diving. We were exhausted, but our lust for rust had been well and truly satisfied.

*** The Scuba Place offers the seven-day Totally Wrecked itinerary, visiting 15 wrecks – others dived include the *Al Bahr*, *Ulysses*, *Aboudy*, *Birchwood*, *Laura Security* and *Thistlegorm*. The package includes flights, transfers, up to four dives per day and free nitrox for qualified divers on *King Marcos II*, and prices start from £1099. Group discounts are available, www.thescubaplace.co.uk**

