

THISTLEGORM FACELIFT

By Charlotte Boan

RED SEA

ONE OF the world's most popular wreck sites will be closed to divers for one month while work is done to preserve the structure. The wreck of the Thistlegorm, which lies in the northern Egyptian Red Sea, will be inaccessible to divers from 15 November to 15 December 2007.

Over four weeks, a new buoy mooring system will be put in place, with eight isolated mooring points capable of securing three liveboard vessels each. The new system will require tenders to place and pick up divers at points directly above the wreck.

There will be separate descent and ascent lines secured on the wreck to ease the pressure caused by vessels mooring on the wreck in high winds and strong currents. Holes will also be drilled into the main structure of the wreck to allow divers' trapped air bubbles to escape in order to prevent corrosion.

The project is part of the Saving the Red Sea Wrecks campaign launched and organised by the Hurghada

BREAK TIME: using a shot-line while diving the Thistlegorm



JANE MORGAN

Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA). HEPCA said it has the support of dive centres, operators, tour operators and organisations such as the Chamber of Diving and Water Sports in Egypt.

Amr Ali, managing director of HEPCA, said: 'For too long, divers, operators and organisations have sat back and witnessed the effects of an unprecedented level of use on the SS Thistlegorm. Now is the time to take action before it's too late. Without the intervention of proper preservation

management, we will lose these valuable wrecks forever.'

HEPCA hopes to follow the Thistlegorm project with similar measures on wrecks visited by thousands of divers each year, such as the Rosalie Moller.

Jason Strickland of Red Sea liveboard operator blue o two, said: 'Concern for sustainable tourism and protection of unique areas is high on the agenda for all visiting nationalities to the Red Sea. For the buoy mooring system to be a success operators must work together and adopt these new ethical operations.'



SURFACE INTERVIEW

Amr Ali, managing director of HEPCA has worked in the diving industry since 1989. He has been a HEPCA board member for six years and has been managing director since 2005

What is HEPCA and why was it set up?

HEPCA is a self-regulatory organisation and the leading non-governmental organisation operating in Egypt in the field of marine and land conservation. Founded in 1992 by members representing the Red Sea diving community. We started out with a mooring project, which is now the largest in the world at more than 1,000 moorings.

What are the main projects HEPCA is currently working on?

In addition to the Saving the Red Sea Wrecks campaign, we are also leading the Abu Dabab Conservation Initiative, protecting vulnerable species and promoting positive education in the area surrounding Marsa Abu Dabab. HEPCA is also active in lobbying for legislative change. Our shark project led to a decree, banning shark fishing in the Egyptian Red Sea and the serving of shark meat in restaurants. We are also heavily involved in campaigning for improved fishing law

regulations. More and more we are also concerned with 'people projects' that have important benefits for the local community.

Any plans to close other dive sites for similar projects as the Thistlegorm?

We will be looking to undertake urgent conservation measure on the Rosalie Moller in the near future. It's important to remember that we are not 'closing' the wrecks indefinitely; we are merely stopping traffic and divers for safety reasons while the conservation work is done.

How do you get the funding for such projects?

We are membership-based organisation and the large majority of our funding comes from members, mostly diving operators, individuals and those involved in the tourism business. We also receive funding from the corporate social responsibility committees of major tour operators and travel agents, and some private sector funding from outside the industry.

Future projects?

We are currently cooperating with a team from Stuttgart University to produce an 'aquaculture station'. By reproducing certain species in a controlled environment, we could bring back the balance and replace the species that have been overfished here. By mid-2008, findings and recommendations from a study that HEPCA has been involved in should see major steps being taken to regulate the flow of traffic, in terms of both boats and people, to many of these highly environmentally sensitive areas.

How can divers do their bit?

By being as environmentally conscious as possible on a personal level but also by supporting environmentally conscious operators. The only award that people can give those businesses that do actively care about the environment is their custom. Thankfully, the British market is one that understands that it is up to each and every one of us to make a difference.