

**EXCLUSIVE!**  
 NEPCA  
 CAMPS FOR THE RED SEA  
 SAVING WRECKS  
 FIRST DIVE ON THE ALL-NEW THISTLEGORM AFTER CLOSURE CONTROVERSY

# The Thistlegorm new and improved



The Thistlegorm has now reopened to divers after being closed for a month to allow moorings to be installed. Mark Evans got an exclusive look at the new system during the closure.

Photographs by **Mark Evans** Additional photographs courtesy of HEPCA

Hepca want to ensure Red Sea wrecks are preserved



Divers drill holes into the deck

**W**hen the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA) announced it was closing the famed wreck of the SS Thistlegorm for a month from 15 November to 15 December to allow for conservation work to be carried out, there was an uproar from certain quarters of the Egyptian dive industry. While it would have been difficult for anyone to argue that the Thistlegorm didn't need the work doing, all they saw was a top dive site

being taken off their itineraries during the winter season, but Amr Ali, managing director of HEPCA, remained resolute and the closure happened much on schedule.

The closure was the start of the Saving the Red Sea Wrecks campaign, which was launched at the Dive 2007 show in Birmingham with the full support of many influential individuals, dive centres and boat operators, tour operators, the Chamber of Diving and Watersports (Egypt), regional bodies and organisations.

At the time of the launch, Amr said: "This campaign is long overdue. For far too long, divers, diving operators and organisations have sat back and witnessed the long-term effects of an unprecedented level of use on the SS Thistlegorm and other wrecks in the Red Sea. 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."

Then, at the end of November, his resolve was strengthened after an incident on another wreck – the Rosalie Moller. He said: "Many diving operators consider the closure of the Thistlegorm unpractical and have voiced their objections. However, the fact remains that we are losing this wreck and many others. Too many operators do not demonstrate any responsible behaviour of their own accord – and for that reason it is time for such intervention.

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"In recent years the liveboard operators have all opted to make bigger and better boats. With these boats comes a greater negative impact on the reefs and wrecks, simply due to their sheer weight and more aggressive resistance to wind and sea conditions. However, with bigger boats comes the added responsibility to change the systems and procedures that are being used for mooring and diving throughout the Red Sea. The commitment to minimise negative impact on our dive sites and marine life should have increased in direct proportion to the size of these boats. It did not.

"A case in point is the wreck of the Rosalie Moller. Only a few weeks ago the magnificent rear mast was upright and many a diver enjoyed diving around it. Many great photographs were taken of this mast and these images appeared in



One of 36 moorings is secured

## It was strange dropping onto the Thistlegorm and not seeing mooring lines in every direction

magazines around the world, which in turn created a desire for other divers to come and dive here. Over the years, many liveboard operators have opted to tie their boats to the top of the mast. Now, alas, the mast is no longer standing in its majestic form. It has been pulled down by the greed and carelessness of the liveboard operators and their irresponsibility.

“What fell down in November was not just the mast of the Rosalie Moller. What fell down was the remaining respect that these liveboard operators, dive guides and divers held for our Red Sea. What also fell down was any final shared sense of responsibility, team work and credibility. Now we will all be punished by the actions of the irresponsible few – and the Red Sea and its spectacular diving will be all the poorer.

“HEPCA is fed up with the continued resistance for change. We are fed up of being asked to defend and apologise for our actions that are merely the last resort in a battle that has been going on for years to ensure the future sustainability of our Red Sea. It would be wrong for HEPCA and the general diving community to sit back and ignore what is happening. This is the responsibility of every diver, dive guide and diving operator. It is



Dive boats moor to floating ropes secured on the seabed

also the responsibility of each and every guest on a dive boat to question the procedures of the crew and guides as they moor on each wreck and reef.

“It is critical that we all make sure that the tie off points make sense and do not endanger the divers, the wreck or the reef. Just as a diver in the Red Sea should report any activity that adversely affects the marine life, any operator not conserving the wrecks and reefs and demonstrating responsibility should



be reported.”

Strong words indeed, and the whole reason this pioneering campaign seeks to implement mooring systems – and force a change in common vessel operational procedures – to prevent further degradation to the wrecks. Now that the Thistlegorm has been completed – it reopened to divers on 16 December – the Rosalie Moller is next on the schedule.

Prior to the work being carried out, a group of leading professors from the Suez Canal University, alongside representatives from HEPCA and the National Parks of Egypt, assessed the state of the wreck and decided the best course of action.

The Thistlegorm operation aimed to combat the two main actions that act as a catalyst to natural erosion. Firstly – and perhaps most destructively – vessels using the wreck would routinely tie on to the main superstructure and, as they were subject to high winds and strong under-currents, immense stress was placed on the line and the wreck itself. Secondly, trapped air bubbles left by the thousands

Drill holes are well hidden





Holes enable exhaled air pockets to escape

of divers penetrating the wreck on an annual basis caused air pockets that lead to considerable damage.

On 2 December, a team of divers descended to the wreck and began an intense two-phase operation which lasted 15 days. A total of 36 heavy chains have been securely fastened into the seabed five or six metres away from the Thistlegorm around the entire dive site. Attached to these chains are thick floating ropes which rise to within 15-20m of the surface and have a large loop at the top. It is a simple matter for a dive guide to jump into the water, swim down to one of the mooring lines and attach a rope.

HEPCA was still in the process of writing up a full user-guide for the new system as we went to print, but it was

envisaged that liveboards would use one of the new lines and then use their zodiacs to put out an anchor away from the wreck, while dayboats would use two of the new moorings bow and stern. Divers on either a dayboat or a liveboard would then be able to follow the mooring line down and 'hop over' on to the wreck.

The HEPCA team also drilled a quantity of holes into the wreck as air-escape outlets to prevent build-up from the exhalations of divers exploring the holds of the Thistlegorm. Further holes will be drilled at a later date, but will not require further closure of the site.

The new mooring system appears very straightforward, though trying to explain how it operated to an Egyptian crew who have tied on to the wreck for decades was a challenge, but this shouldn't be an issue once HEPCA has carried out training sessions for dive operators and their boat crews. The bonus is, once they have got the hang of the new moorings, that experience will stand them in good stead for the Rosalie Moller and whatever other wrecks

also get the Protect the Red Sea Wrecks treatment.

I happened to be out on a northern safari on board the Tornado Marine Fleet vessel Whirlwind from 8-15 December and obtained permission to pay an early morning visit during a break in the work to see firsthand what had been done.

It was strange dropping down on to the Thistlegorm and not seeing myriad mooring lines heading up towards the surface in every conceivable direction. The bright-yellow ropes on the new mooring system are easily visible all around the wreck, but the holes drilled by the team are more difficult to find. I know they are there – and I've seen the footage of the drilling on YouTube – but the team have made a great job of ensuring they don't stand out. Well done, guys!

With only the single dive possible, I quickly checked out a couple of the moorings and then headed into the holds out of the relatively strong current which was running over the wreck from stern to bow. Inside hold number one, large pockets of exhaled air could still be seen, and these will be among the areas targeted by future drilling expeditions.

Returning to the Whirlwind after the dive, it was interesting to overhear the comments made by the other divers on the boat. Several of them had never dived the wreck before, and they were suitably blown away. Many veteran divers moan about the current state of the wreck and that it is a shadow of its former self, but for these Thistlegorm virgins, the veritable underwater museum which still exists was more than enough to keep them enthralled. Now, thanks to the efforts of HEPCA and their Protect the Red Sea Wrecks campaign, the Thistlegorm – and the other popular wrecks – stand a much better chance of surviving for future generations of divers to enjoy. All that remains to be done now is further educate the idiot divers who still feel the need to pick up or move items in the holds, but that is beyond the remit of HEPCA – it is up to the dive guides and fellow visiting divers to 'name-and-shame' the mindless few.

As the Thistlegorm reopened, Amr said: "HEPCA would like to thank all those individuals and organisations who gave their valuable co-operation and support and were instrumental in making this pivotal event happen, and to the diving operators and guests for their understanding in being unable to dive the SS Thistlegorm during the period of this urgent conservation work."

*NB: Special thanks to Amr Ali and his team from HEPCA for allowing permission for us to dive on the Thistlegorm during the work.* ■



Work should prevent further damage