Cult Dive: Shark & Yolanda Reef

Location: Red Sea, Egypt.

GPS: 27° 43’ 51.03” N 34° 15’ 37.99” E

Type of dive: deep, drift.

Marine life: the entire food chain, vibrant corals, underwater landscape that will make your head spin.

Level: advanced, expert divers.

Landscape

There’s no need to get in the water to understand why Shark & Yolanda Reef is among the ten most beautiful dive sites in the world, it’s enough to look at a map. The ochre rocks of the desert there plunge down towards the Great Rift Valley that separates the African Plate from the Arabian Plate, thus creating the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. And exactly there, on the Southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, two matching reefs emerge from the abyss, in the point where two gulfs meet: Suez, and Aqaba; each one with its currents, and its endemic species.



What to see and when

Shark Reef will never disappoint you. In the winter months, you're sure to find record visibility (50 m. +) and juvenile fish in all their glory, but between the end of June and the beginning of September clouds of jackfish, snappers, barracudas, batfish, and unicorns gather here. In the summer months, make sure you pick a dive guide who knows how to avoid crowds, and you'll be able to spot blacktip sharks inside the schools.



Encounters with tunas, groupers, moray eels, jackfish, turtles, napoleon fish, and eagle rays are frequent year-round. At times, dolphins inside swarms of fusilier fish. The seductive soul of Shark Reef is in its light and in the extremely vivid colors. Soft corals, sea anemones, and parazoanthus cover every square centimeter of the wall. Gorgonian fans guard many crevices and overhangs, but thrive especially on the outside of Yolanda Reef. The wreck of the Yolanda, from which the reef takes its name, has sunk to over -150 meters. Extremely unappealing, all that's left to see is part of its cargo: bathroom fixtures, and plumbing products. When you reach the cargo, in standard current conditions you're not able to go on. This is where you'll wish for a creative dive guide.





The best time to dive here is when the current is strong, preferably when it moves from Shark to Yolanda. This is when the soft corals open up, the fish gather where the current splits or where there's a lull in the current, and the reef becomes an explosion of life and color.

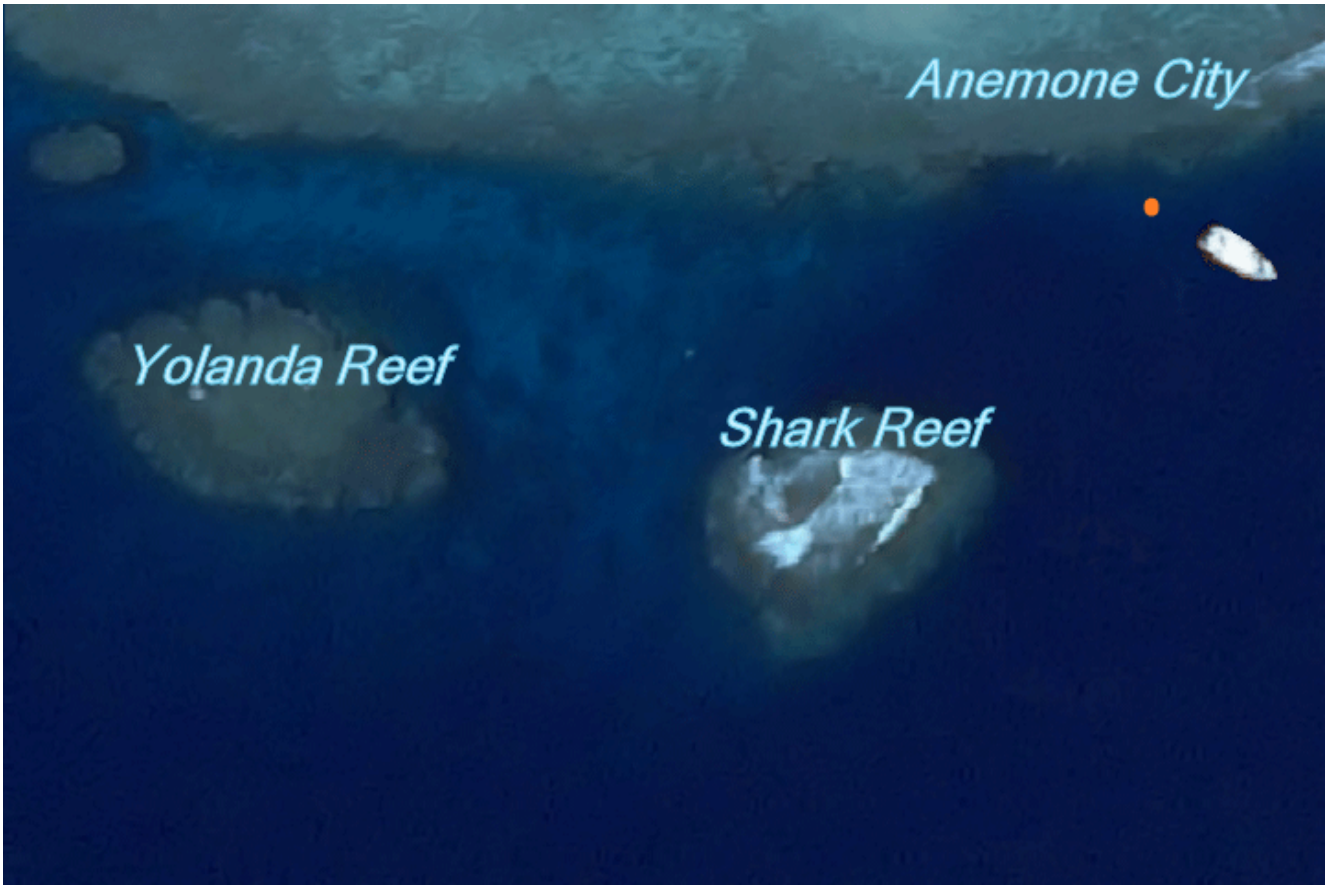
THE BRIEFING

There's no time to lose. When you jump on Shark Reef, everyone needs to be ready and forget any hesitation. This is not the place to check your weights. The boat gets close to the reef, then moves away with the propellers at minimum speed. Deciding the exact point of entry is up to the guide, but being ready is the responsibility of divers. You go down where there's virtually no current, but a meter's difference is enough to shoot you off to the right or left.

Classic Route



Alternative Route



On the corner, the wall is completely covered in soft corals. This is where I head in the blue, at a depth of around 10-15 meters, to look for schools of fish or pelagic fish passing by. If there's action, it's worth spending a lot of time here. I keep going with the reef to my right towards the saddle, where I assess the whimsical nature of currents, and consider my options: heading straight to the plateau outside Yolanda, rich in gorgonian fans and pinnacles between 13 and 30 meters; going around Shark Reef; or taking the 'back' of Yolanda, and flying with the current on the shallow inner plateau, to reach the cargo. The traditional dive ends there, on the cargo of the Yolanda. The other option, which I prefer, is to jump on Anemone City and cross in the limitless blue towards Shark Reef. This guarantees a privileged overview on the whereabouts of fish and on currents. Most importantly, you'll avoid seeing divers being thrown every which way like confetti as soon as their fins touch the water. Suitable for divers with good air consumption.

WARNING!
Currents can be extremely strong and can vary without warning.
In summer, **strong down currents** can happen on the saddle and the wall of Shark Reef, that drops down to -800 meters!
Also beware of **boats**, the area is very busy.

LOGISTICS AND CONNECTIONS

Access: boat.

Dive Guide: compulsory. There are dozens of dive centers with good facilities in the area of Sharm el Sheikh, South Sinai, Egypt.

Airport: Sharm el Sheikh – SSH

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