Sharm el Sheikh’s Pioneers: interview with Adel Taher

Once upon a time a disputed desert, a mountain desert of mystic fascination, overlooking one of the most beautiful sea on Earth: the Red Sea. There, in the Sinai peninsula, some divers dreamt about a life paced by the rhythms of the desert and the sea, and then founded one of the most popular diving destination in the world: Sharm el Sheikh. They were DAN members and had very clear ideas about tourism reception and diving safety. They knew that if you want to see your divers coming back again, you have to make sure they exit unharmed from every dive …

Dr. Adel Taher, age 59: Medical Director of the Hyperbaric Medical Center (HMC) in Sharm el Sheikh and Dahab since 1993. Regional Director of DAN-Egypt since 1994, diving instructor since 1982, Dr. Taher is considered one of the top world experts in hyperbaric medicine.

– Sharm el Sheikh. How long ago the first encounter?

Dr. Adel Taher

I arrived to Sharm el-Sheikh in the night of the 24th of April, 1982, after a long and tiresome trip on roads that have not been maintained for years and that we did not know. Together with a friend of mine, Eng. Farid Atteia, we were privileged to be allowed to join the army and the first municipality of civil workers coming to receive the so called “C” section of the Sinai from the Israelis according to the Camp David agreement. This was not usual procedure. The why and how is a long story, but in effect, we were the first Egyptians diving Ras Mohamed after it was returned.

– Was it love at first sight?

Dr. Adel Taher

About an hour after crossing the Suez Canal onto the Sinai, I had a strange gripping feeling in my stomach, that this land is different than anything I had experienced in my life and I knew, even before putting my head under the water, that my life and future schemes and plans will all change… drastically! I always cherished the desert and the sea. Sharm just offered me both in a beautiful blend.

– Sinai desert is a mystic presence. How does it still influences your days, your routine?

Dr. Adel Taher

The desert is purification and regeneration, it is a continuous test to your mental and physical abilities, all mixed with an utmost feeling of elation and hovering above the ground. The desert in Sharm is close to my house and within 15 minutes by car I can be in some magnificent canyons unknown to most and feel that I am on top of the world. No plastic bottles, no food wrappers, not even cigarette butts…creation as it was intended by the creator. I do my best to take my dog and include a part of the desert in my daily routine, either very early in the morning or one hour before sunset.

– How was the Red Sea when it was untouched? What did it change?

Dr. Adel Taher

The first thing that I notice are the sounds. Before, it used to be as Cousteau said, “the silent world”. Well not really silent, you heard the “natural” sounds of the sea: the parrot fish nibbling on the corals, the waves breaking, if you were close to shore or to the surface. If you were very lucky, you heard dolphins. During the first and second Gulf War, we heard also submarine sonar pinging everywhere! Now, you hear mainly boat engines, and shakers of instructors and deckhands banging on the ladders to call the divers up… The marine life changed a lot, too. Before, there were no broken ends of corals and hardly ever did we see fishing lines entangling the strap holders on your fin. There was no plastic cups and bottles, wrapping materials and cans of beer. The sea floor was clean. The so called “touristic development” has an unfortunate high price: we paid it by organizing every odd days clean up dives to remove what others put in.

– Safety has always been a strong shared value in Sharm el Sheikh diving community, coming by a long way…

Dr. Adel Taher

Safety in diving is consciousness. When we started we did not have a chamber, search and rescue and ambulances, nor an intensive care and so we had to stress the issue of safety while teaching. All my students were experts on decompression illness and first aid and how to treat and deal with poisonous fish stings by the time they finished their open water course. Divemasters learned more, they could suture wounds and deliver infusions, if they had to. It was maybe “unorthodox”, but it saved lives. We managed to introduce new regulations, like the necessity to have Oxygen onboard and we are still pushing to have the Oxygen delivery systems unified and effective, like the DAN systems. Spreading awareness is the key. We talk to dive professionals and dive center managers and owners and we also talk to the authorities to help us and enforce safety with regulations. It does not always work, but we continue with our efforts. In1993, I managed to finally get a recompression chamber to Sharm el-Sheikh and it was a dream come true. The Hyperbaric Medical Center and its team saved thousands of life, it worked non-stop answering to all emergencies since March 1993 and never refused a patient.

– And then there was DAN Egypt…

Dr. Adel Taher

DAN-Egypt is an affiliate of DAN-Europe and I talked about it the first time with Professor Alessandro Marroni in 1994, when a mutual friend, Rheinhard Berger (RIP), arranged a meeting and we drove from Germany, after the BOOT show toRoseto. From that day on, Sandro has been a true friend, mentor and a shield protecting us in rough times. He gaveDAN-Egypt his full support, which allowed us to expand and grow and serve all DAN members and non-DAN members in cases of emergency in Egypt and in neighbouring countries. The courses DAN offers to divers changed their concepts towards safety and responsibility and I dare say that DAN members have a higher understanding of safety if compared to average divers. DAN-Egypt also contributed to some research projects with DAN Research and we are always very eager to help advance our understanding of ‘what goes wrong and leads to a diving accident’.

People ask me a lot about diving accidents and I tell them: “diving safety is nothing but common sense, but it seems that common sense is not common any more” DAN makes it common!

– Your favourite dive site?

Dr.Adel Taher

Very hard question to answer! The two wrecks on the Brothers Islands, the Numidia and the Aida. In

addition to the wall of Ras Mohamed and the Northern tip of Jackson reef in the Straits of Tiran.

The best dive site, though, is still to come. I always dream of finding a new place in the Southern Red Sea, in Halaieb and Shalatin. The greatest feeling is that of exploring a new site and being convinced that your eyes are the first human eyes to see it.

– What the ‘expert’ recommend to divers coming to Sharm?

Dr. Adel Taher

Drink, drink and then again, drink some more! The diving will be superb and there will be many factors to cause dehydration: your travel by air, the dry, hot weather, the wet suit you are wearing and waiting for others in the sun to get ready, the longer dive duration, as the water is a comfortable temperature and the visibility is great and you are breathing dry gas from the tank, the alcohol you had the night before and the two coffee mugs you had this morning. Of course we are presuming that you do not have any ‘Traveller’s Diarrhoea’ and did not get sea sick on the way out!

Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS), is a good addition to have and sun block for sensitive skins can save your vacation. We hope to see you soon and you have an open invitation to come and visit the recompression chamber.

Dr. Adel Taher facts and timeline

1982 – Medicine and Surgery MB, BCh, Cairo University

1982 – First arrival and first dive in Sharm el Sheikh

1982 – PADI Open Water Scuba Instructor & MSDT

1993 – Opening the Hyperbaric Medical Center and managing as Medical Director

1994 – DAN Egypt – Medical Director: managing diving accidents, man the hotline 24hours, educate divers on safety in diving and the use of oxygen delivery systems, insure professional and recreational diver’s insurance and spread the safety awareness, advise governmental agencies on diving safety, participate in various diving medical research projects and conferences.

2006 – Opening of the Dahab Hyperbaric Medical Centre and the Sea Rescue facility (HMC)

2008 – CEO, Sharm Medical Group, Sinai Clinic Hospital

2019 – Inducted in the International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame for playing “a vital role in promoting diver safety in the Red Sea region”