

# The Hyperbaric Centres of the DAN Europe Network: Sharm el Sheik

Director of the Hyperbaric Medical Center (HMC) of Sharm el Sheikh and Dahab, Egypt, and Scuba diving instructor since the eighties, Dr. Taher is considered one of the top world experts in hyperbaric medicine.

**Q:** Can you summarise shortly the history of Dan Europe in Egypt?

**A:** This is a very difficult question, and the reason it is a very difficult question is because that DAN Europe was already in Egypt even before DAN Egypt was in Egypt. Since the start of DAN Europe's existence, we saw divers here who were DAN Europe insured. Before we opened our own chamber, and along with it, DAN Egypt, foreigners had been diving in Sinai since 1982, and in the late 80s we began to witness accidents; only there were no chambers. The MFO, the Multi-National Force Observers, used to come when we summoned them, and we'd help them with the examinations and determine if it were a critical diving accident, in which case, the patient would be sent by helicopter to Eliat in Israel for treatment. The only problem was that when the Egyptians had diving accidents, we could not fly them to Israel due to the Camp David agreement, and that is when it became very compelling to have a chamber here. So, we managed to get the hyperbaric medical center started on the 10th of March, 1993, and a few months later we founded DAN Egypt. Of course, it was only natural that DAN Egypt would be affiliated with DAN Europe. DAN Europe was like our big brother, giving us all the support and training we needed, and we were always very grateful to them for taking us under their wing. One day we hope to have enough DAN offices in the Middle East, so we can start a DAN Middle East and take others under our wing. We will always be extremely appreciative of the assistance, understanding and help we receive.

**Q:** Dr. Adel, having looked at some of our statistics, I've noticed after the last 5 years most of the accidents in the Northern African area, or even in the Middle East, are in Egypt. How long after you started running your chamber did the increase in tourism occur? And what is the situation today?

**A:** Let's start from the very beginning. When we started getting tourists from Israel in 1982, the diving tourism in this area was still very limited, and it increased in very small increments until the chamber arrived in 1993. And as much as I love Sharm, I have to admit that the hyperbaric chamber is what greatly contributed to its popularity as a spot for dive tourism. As soon as the chamber was up and running, there were two incidents that set the stage for what was to follow... the first was that the initial cases we treated had a very good resonance abroad, especially in Europe. Our activities were aired on television, making it known that there was a new chamber operating in Sharm el Sheik, and that they seemed to be doing a pretty good job. The second factor was that due to the war in former Yugoslavia, many Europeans (especially Italians that previously went to the Adriatic sea) were looking for a nearby destination offering sun, sea, and a low cost of living. So they "discovered" Sharm el Sheik. From that day onward, we watched investors come and take pictures of the chamber, go and get a piece of land from the government, take a few more pictures of the land, go to some of the major Italian tour operators, getting them to sign a 5... 6... 7 year contract, then get a bank loan, and start up their resorts.

I'm positive that no other city in the world has witnessed development as fast as Sharm el Sheik between the years 1994 to 1999 (after that period it started to slow down a little bit). So with this "magical" influx, hotels started popping up like mushrooms. The city started dealing with divers in huge volumes, and likewise we began to witness a major increase in the number of accidents. Keep in mind that diving spots in Egypt are not not only in South Sinai; there is also Hurgada, and the whole coast down to Sudan. Just

Sharm (or South Sinai) alone receives between 700,000 to 800,000 divers each year, and if you calculate that most of them stay about a week and go diving an average of 2-3 times a day, you can understand why Egypt is at the top of the dive-accident list.

What is also really important here, not only to us, but to the insurance companies that we deal with, is that in Sinai we have maintained our reputation for never "over-treating" patients or giving treatment where treatment was not needed. This has given us a lot of credibility, especially in our relationship with insurance companies.

**Q:** What was the name of your first chamber?

**A:** Adel's baby 'baric.

**Q:** After several years operating without failure, I have seen that your baby has received a very nice big sister.

**A:** So... putting things into the right perspective. Yes, my little baby 'baric has a big beautiful sister, and this sister is a Haux-Starmed 2000/200, capable of handling up to 12 patients, with a very well-equipped, ante-chamber (outer lock), and all built to specially-customised specifications. It is one of the few chambers in the Middle East treating sport divers that has a Siaretron 1000 lper ventilator, a special model, together with a highly advanced and versatile vital signs monitor. The chamber is also equipped with the best hyperbaric fire-fighting system in the world, and not only that, it has also got a gas-mix capability that is rarely found in other chambers - we mix our own Nitrox 40/60, Nitrox 50/50 and Heliox 50/50, giving us a wide spectrum when choosing treatment tables... ample bank for air, two wonderful high pressure compressors... it's altogether a piece of art; it's a magnificent thing. And we've used it five times so far, so we are very happy with it. Though, as I said in the beginning about putting things into perspective, baby 'baric is still working and performing very nicely, and to me baby 'baric is an old, nostalgic love story, and I'll never forget the ones I've loved. So I'm very happy to announce that both chambers are in operation, and we expect both of them to continue in operation for another 10 to 15 years before we begin to think of any alternatives.

The new Haux chamber was fully installed in Sharm by the end of March, 2011. We were delayed a bit because of the "glorious revolution" that took place on the 25th of January that year, and after which, we've been suffering because the number of tourists has dropped remarkably, and we've lost a huge number of visitors. This year it is estimated that we have lost about to 80 to 85% of tourism, which is greatly affecting us. We hope this will get better soon as stability sets in, as we are not run by a regime that is unwelcoming toward tourism, and we hope that tourism will remain one of the main sources of national income for this country. It would be a pity to lose all that.