

diving into the deep

A team of expert divers are raising the Red Sea resort of Aqaba's profile as a diving hot spot – offering underwater adventure, marine conservation and plenty of on-land attractions, too

Words » Farah Shanti



Brilliantly coloured coral reefs cut through the crystal clear waters, offering both expert and novice divers an unspoiled world of aquatic wonders. Jordan's resort and port town of Aqaba, off the Red Sea, has long been famous for its scuba diving opportunities in sparkling blue seas teeming with marine life. But a group of highly skilled, expat divers are now raising Aqaba's profile even further.

They have come up with a project called 166point6, so called because, in July, they made a record-breaking dive of 166.6 metres – 20 metres deeper than any previous dives in the area. The intrepid group included Rod Abbotson, co-owner of Dive Aqaba; Mark Ellyatt, who held the world record for the deepest technical dive at 313m, and Dunc Baillie, a British diving safety expert who has settled in Jordan. A major aim of the project is to boost awareness of Aqaba's coastline and marine life. 'More people should know about Aqaba and the rest of Jordan,' says Baillie. 'It's a true gem.'

Many Jordanian people supported the technical dive project, too. It took time to raise sponsorship money but it came in the end, with locals appreciating the vision of the project. 'We were delighted with the response of all those who saw the potential of making the dive happen, and putting Aqaba on the technical diving

Above left: One of the beautiful underwater scenes that greet divers in Aqaba. Above right: The target diver's depth gauge reads 167m, a record-breaking depth for diving in the area

map,' says Sam Mort, the event organiser. 'The Kempinski Aqaba was our base for the weekend; Sea Star Aqaba and Dive Aqaba partnered to showcase the best of Aqaba's dive schools and ensure the dive went without a hitch; Aramex delivered all our equipment; and Play FM broadcast their first radio show from a boat, which was a lot of fun.'

Mort also expresses gratitude to Aqaba Special Economic Zone and Aqaba Development Corporation for their financial support. 'Their help allowed us to get the word out about what a sensational place Aqaba is in its own right, and as a gateway to some of Jordan's treasures, like Petra and Wadi Rum,' he says.



ADVENTURE AND ECOLOGY Aqaba's waters are home to many beautiful underwater adventures. Activities range from an hour's snorkelling to a week-long Padi dive course. But it is technical diving that the 166point6 team want to see take off in Aqaba. They believe the port's distinctive character can attract more fans. 'The underwater topography – with canyons, walls and drop-offs spread out – is magnificent, and lends itself wonderfully to this type of diving,' says Baillie. 'From the coastline, the terrain drops away dramatically, which means no lengthy swims to reach deep water. The water is warm all year round, the current is minimal and the fringing reefs are teeming with marine life. Only a few weeks ago we saw 7.5-metre whale shark.'

Stingrays, manta rays, lionfish, turtles, eels, sea cows, and dolphins also call the Red Sea their home. While the diving project puts importance on the expansion of tourism in Aqaba, it also aims to encourage the protection of Aqaba's coastline, coral reef environment, and marine life. 'Aqaba should continue to help its visitors and locals become more aware of the dangers to its ecosystem, such as from littering or over-fishing,' says Baillie. 'Aqaba is famous for its reef, so to hurt this delicate and complex world would hurt the port as a whole.' »



With special cleaning missions starting, the project is set to have an impact, with momentum slowly picking up. Jake Link, another of the project's safety divers, says: 'With the media coverage the event received, we hope we'll be seeing greater awareness. This will be the case if the Jordan government and Jordanian enthusiasts as a whole take up the mantle to help spread the word.'

Finally, special annual technical dive events are now being planned. 'Breaking the record was great,' says Link, 'but next year we really want to go to the bottom of the Gulf of Aqaba, find things that have yet to be explored. With the rich history of the area and its key role in trade back in Roman times, it's going to be spectacular to explore




Above: Diving in Aqaba provides some unusual sights.
Below: Dunc Baille from the 166point6 project believes Aqaba is a 'gem'

some of the untouched ancient wrecks that are awaiting our discovery.'

And it doesn't just stop in Aqaba. The team is also proposing to showcase Wadi Rum and nearby ancient ruins as an outdoor sporting enthusiasts destination. 'Since we've succeeded in doing the 166.6-metre dive, our next attempt will hopefully be to do the highest skydive from a balloon in Jordan,' Link says of the future venture.

The skydive is still in the early days of planning, and may see the participation of the Royal Aerosports Club. The team is still sticking to the number theme, though, with metres converted to feet for a jump of 16,666 feet.

With the weather cooling off after the summer and more diving centres opening up, this is the perfect time to experience one of the most beautiful watersports spots in the world. And is Aqaba ready for the influx of tourists? 'Without question,' Baillie says. 'This is the best time for Aqaba to capitalise on its beauty and resources and shine as a regional diving jewel.' 

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Hot spot »

For experienced divers, the Rainbow Reef is a deep gully that runs down the north side of the reef, forming an awe-inspiring wall of feather stars.

At night »

The Cedar Pride wreck is a spectacular night-time visit. It's at the deep end of the reef and accessed from the shore, where there is a special kitting-up area for divers.

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