

Dive Aqaba's Laila Manna Receives Award for Microfinance Excellence



Her Majesty Queen Rania, of Jordan, (left, facing) discusses the future of dive tourism in Aqaba, as well as reef conservation actions for sustainable development and congratulates the Dive Aqaba team for its efforts on environmental and accessibility issues.

Dive Aqaba is a family-owned dive center in Aqaba, Jordan, run by Laila Manna, along with husband Rod Abbotson and son Ashraf Sulaibi. In October 2002, Manna and Abbotson began raising funds to start a dive center to fill in what they saw as gaps in Jordan's dive market, specifically a lack of access to boat diving, limited enriched air availability, no technical diving (a growing niche market in the Red Sea), limited instructor level training and, generally, no European staff, a problem Dive Aqaba solved by implementing an inventive internship program that offers free education and diving in return for help at the center. By April 2003, Dive Aqaba was a PADI Dive Center and by November 2004, it had achieved PADI 5 Star status,

Manna and Abbotson initially financed Dive Aqaba by selling their respective properties in Jordan and the UK. Since then, Manna has kept the project financed through a series of personal and business microfinance loans. It was while attending seminars by an organization called Empretec that Manna met fellow Jordanian business owners who had received grants and microfinance loans for various projects. Empretec (an acronym formed by the Spanish words for entrepreneur [emprededore], and technology [tecnología]) promotes the creation of sustainable small and medium enterprises (SMEs) by helping promising entrepreneurs, including women, build innovative and internationally competitive SMEs. Worldwide, SMEs are a major source of economic growth and their effect on job creation is significant. According to empretecjordan.org, up to 98 percent of Jordan's private sector is employed by SMEs.

This makes Manna's success extremely important to the Kingdom of Jordan. So much so Her Majesty Queen Rania, who is deeply committed to projects helping certain segments of Jordan's population become skilled contributors to the country's economy, stopped by Dive Aqaba's dive boat – Laila One – to congratulate Manna in person on receiving the 2007 Aqaba Development Corporation Award for Excellence in Microfinance Projects. While there, the Queen took time to discuss the future of dive tourism in Aqaba, as well as reef conservation actions for sustainable development, congratulating the Dive Aqaba team for its efforts on environmental and accessibility issues.

In just five short years, Dive Aqaba has graduated from the world of microfinance and established itself as a viable, growing business concern. And, Manna and her family hope to add to its growth soon by obtaining financing for another dive boat, an air/gas blending station and more rental gear. Though microloans made it possible for Dive Aqaba to open its doors, Manna, Abbotson, Sulaibi and staff have kept them open and made this PADI 5 Star Instructor Development Center the successful enterprise it is today.

For more information on Dive Aqaba, go to www.diveaqaba.com. To learn more about Empretec and its work in Jordan and elsewhere, go to empretecjordan.org.

class. It is very poignant to note that financial support from Project AWARE helped fund the program.

"Project AWARE has twice granted ETC funds to support our marine conservation efforts, specifically," said Ridgeway. "PADI also supported the program. It was not monetary, but in the form of educational materials and guaranteed certification processing up to the divemaster level for all my students."

Micro Development

In Mexico, a small group of Mayan women in the Yucatan Peninsula developed a local freshwater cavern into an economically viable ecotourism attraction that brings prosperity to their village.

While not directly benefited by micro lending, the site's development is similar in that it was:

- A grass roots development program;
- Organized on a community level;
- Helped pull its participants out of the poverty cycle; and,
- Benefited the entire community and not just the individuals involved.

The site, called the Yokdzonot Eco-Tourist Cenote, is 18 kilometres/11 miles west of Chichen Itza. Two years ago, the women of Yokdzonot took the initiative to develop the cenote – at the time used as a dump – into a sustainable economic resource. The women laid stone footpaths, cut and assembled railings and docks, and developed an attraction that appeals to tourists and locals alike. The cenote opened to the public in January 2007 and offers visitors to the area can rent snorkel gear, mountain bikes and life jackets.

Microcredit lenders and micro developers are having positive effects on some of the places that divers visit. The next time you're on a dive trip, or any

trip, take a look around. You might witness an economic revolution taking place right before your eyes, and even better, you might be able to take part in it. ♦

