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# THE QUIET SIDE

Judging by the number of windsurfers and different languages you hear on the beach and water, Dahab is the undisputed prime destination for European sailors. Dahab reliably delivers wind and there is an excellent night life in next door Maspata, where you can just about buy anything you need. What's more all this comes in at a price that is highly attractive compared to anywhere else.

## PIONEERING SPIRIT

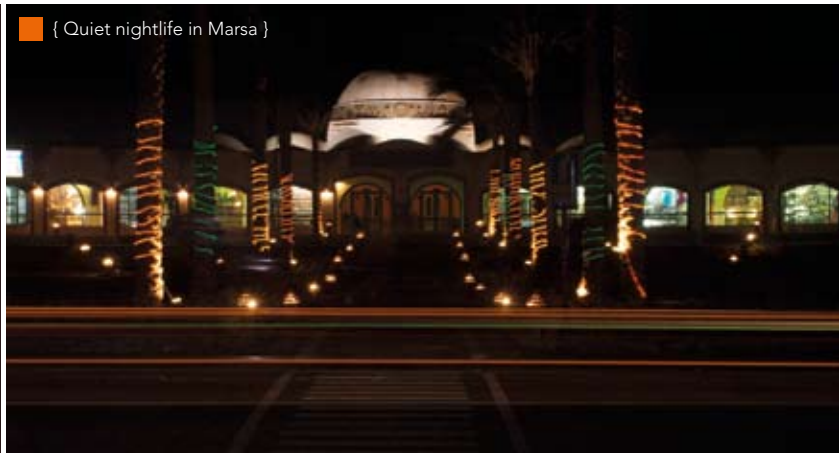
A year or so ago I was reminiscing with Rob Horne, the Harry Nass instructor, about the good old days of Dahab. The days when there were just a couple of hotels in the bay and a handful of boards on the water. We both agreed that it would be great to turn the clock back to those days and relive that pioneering spirit we had when we first happened on Golden Bay. The journey from Sharm was by 4x4 because of drifting sands, mobile phones were confiscated at the airport as a threat to security and the beer was revolting. But the wind in the bay was perfect and there were just a few boards on the water at any one time.

Turning the clock back is impossible, as we all know, but then I started to hear about a place that was as remote and quiet as Dahab in the 90s. It's called Marsa Alam and it lies on the mainland Egyptian coast about two hundred miles north of the Sudanese border. Marsa Alam the town gives its name to a large area, part of which is designated as National Parkland and off limits to tourists in a few places, notably in areas where mangrove growth is well established. The area is very sparsely populated, the nearest hotel to us was a couple of kilometres away and apart from the staff living quarters and a handful of souvenir shops, that's as close as civilisation has been allowed to encroach upon the wall surrounding the Shams Alam Hotel, which is where we stayed. But here's an appetizer as well as a warning – if your idea of a perfect windsurfing holiday is a day on the water and the night in a club or bar whooping it up until the early hours, this place probably isn't for you.

However if you're interested in windsurfing in twos and threes, as well as enjoying the natural environment, plus a few peaceful beers at the end of the day, then read on.

## NOT THE NEW DAHAB

First let's get one thing clear. Marsa Alam is not the new Dahab. Quite apart from anything else, all the main hotel complexes will be built close to the town itself. The main and in fact only windsurfing area is within national parkland and has been designated a 'no-build zone' so, unless there's a major change in policy, what is there now is all there will ever be.



{ Quiet nightlife in Marsa }

GETTING THERE

Although called Marsa Alam Airport, it's actually closer to the neighbouring town of El Quesir. It's a much smaller and quieter terminus than Sharm el Shiekh and you don't have to climb over large Russian women to get to your luggage, nor will 13 year old freelance porters outside the arrival hall doors attempt to lay a finger on your roll along luggage. Indeed, it's likely that yours will be the only flight in at that time. Journey time to the hotel is just under two hours and the only major centre of population is Marsa Alam itself, a rapidly growing town on the coast, although as we passed it in the dark I have very few impressions of it except for a lack of street lights! The hotel is another 50 minutes further south, which is worth remembering because if you run short of anything that is the journey you have to make to get it. The meagre shops opposite the hotel are expensive compared to the rest of Egypt.

Arrival at the hotel is the usual check in and fruit cordial affair, except that reception insists upon holding onto your passport. While you're waiting, look up at the ceiling of this building - a very high dome built entirely of bare brick, an ancient theme you'll see elsewhere in the hotel, which is built in an Islamic style. Most Club Mistral guests are housed in the 2000 block, which is on the beach facing the centre. If you like the odd G&T watching sunset from your veranda, ask for another room because 2000 block verandas face east: great for sun rises, lousy for sunsets. Come the morning, it's time to meet the Club Mistral crew: Tiago and Anna. Anna is

German and Tiago, despite his Brazilian name, is a Brit who was previously at Club Mistral Safaga. Mahmood is the local Bedouin who will help you with your gear and also drives the rescue boat. The range of boards and rigs is there, but in fewer numbers than at busier locations, though when you consider that there aren't likely to be more than a dozen people in total, there's plenty for everyone. Last year with the uncertainty of the future of Mistral, Club Mistral told its guests not to expect the M brand to be at their centres in 2009/10. Well, that has all changed and now we hear that Mistral will indeed be produced with Anders Bringdal at the helm and these boards will be available. Alongside there will also be a range of Fanatic boards, though when this will apply to Marsa Alam I cannot tell, as it is one of their smaller centres. North rigs will be standard as before. The centre operates beginner as well as intermediate tuition and a full range of boards, rigs and wetsuits across all levels is available.

The wind is cross off and the water state beyond the reef, which is just a few hundred metres from the sandy shore, is like Safaga or beyond 'Speedy' in Dahab, in fact not unlike the south coast on a good day. The inner sailing area is bounded to the east by a reef and another bunch of reefs and pier to the west. Buoys mark the no-go zones where you might come a cropper by sailing too close to a coral head. Once you're on the outside you're in the clear. You can sail upwind to the next bay, a beautiful white sandy area surrounded by a coral reef so you have to pick your way in and out.

To the west of the hotel beach, the coral heads are plentiful and the basic advice is not to try to sail in this area or land unless it's an emergency. This beach is also used by the Park Rangers who have their local base here. This is the middle of the Wadi Gemal National Park and the rangers' approach to conservation, both on land and in the water, is careful and thoughtful. The seabed around here is covered in marine grass, making it a natural home for the dugong, a large marine, herbivore. Usually they spend their time at the bottom munching on the grass, but they have to come up for air and that's probably the most dangerous time for both dugong and windsurfer. They're more closely related to the elephant than something like a seal and they're big, around six feet is the norm. So if you see a dark shape under you, especially when sailing in or out of the Shams beach, slow down, these are beautiful and peaceful creatures and you certainly don't want one to come to harm.

IS IT WINDY?

I spoke to the Harry Nass centre in Dahab on a couple of occasions during my stay there and I would say that there was maybe half a meter rig difference between the two on those two occasions, Dahab being windier. We had three no wind or south days during our two weeks there last November, which again compares very closely with Safaga and Dahab. The sailing area is not as protected as Dahab, especially the lagoon - more on the scale of Safaga, but because the clientele numbers are small the rescue service is attentive and fast acting should you get into difficulties.





## THE HOTEL

The Shams Alam is located in the middle of the Wadi Gemal National Park, so you're able to enjoy the beauty of the desert. The hotel beach is about a kilometre long and it's naturally sandy, though there are outcrops of coral here and there. There's a swimming pool, fitness and scuba diving centres and a clinic on site with a doctor available 24/7. The rooms are comfortable though not over luxurious, but they're kept meticulously clean by the staff. The upper rooms have brick vaulted ceilings as well as the expected en suite bathroom (with a bath!) ample cupboards, fridge (unstocked) and Sat TV. Your mobile will work here but there is no broadband at the hotel. Mobile phone calls are incredibly expensive in Egypt and likely to stay that way. If you're a frequent visitor you might contemplate having your old phone 'de-networked' and either using it with a cheap SIM card provider or better still a local Egyptian card where the prices are rock bottom – no incoming charges for a start and low world tariffs as well. If you need to stay in touch via your laptop, buy a Vodafone 3G dongle in Egypt and use one of their phone cards which will give you a reasonable service, though not over fast. The hotel only has two phone lines and with 160 rooms, getting through on the phone in either direction is difficult.

## FOOD

Eating was very good at the Shams Alam. Egyptians are past masters at baking and the selection of local breads available for breakfast was excellent. There is one concoction that I like for

breakfast and that's traditional Egyptian 'foul'. Nothing to do with chickens, but a bean dish that is vegetarian that you make yourself by adding any of the following; fresh tomatoes, onions, peppers and spices like chilli, cumin, black and white peppers, salt, plus olive oil and fresh lemon. Generally the food was excellent, the menu throughout the two weeks plentiful, well cooked and presented. I would recommend that you go for full board because the only reason for providing your own lunches is for the sake of variety. But with the nearest alternative restaurant 50km away the chances of using that on a daily basis is slim. On top of that the Shams full board scheme includes alcohol and the local Stella brew is pretty good. Although the rooms are close to the road, the infrequent traffic is restricted to daytime with the vast majority of it lorries loaded with food bound for the Sudan. At night it's very quiet.

## THINGS TO DO

(Apart from windsurfing and the usual camel and horse riding on the beach!) There are a number of jeep safaris into the desert available along with a trip to the camel market in Shalaten, a town towards the south and a shopping trip to El Quesir in the north. The dive centre is open everyday and if you haven't taken any snorkelling gear, which you should, you can hire some from them. In spring and autumn the area is renowned among 'twitchers' for migrating birds. One thing you absolutely, definitely **MUST** do is to visit the five local shops at night. There's nothing worth having in them, but they're on the other side of the

Sudan road that passes the hotel. Conveniently someone has provided a zebra crossing there. It's just a real photo opportunity on a windless day and if the '100 top places' ever includes Egypt, I'm going to nominate this as a prime contender for the title.

## FINALLY...

I thoroughly enjoyed my stay there. The staff were welcoming, the evenings were taken up by sitting by the pool with a beer, reading or just catching up on some old films on DVD (take your own!). Club Mistral runs a welcome 'Sundowner' party on Tuesdays with loads of Cuba Libre (the local rum is OK, well certainly after the third or fourth) and you might see camels silhouetted against the sunset as they cross the hilly sand dunes to the west. It was quiet, well it was quiet for most of the time, but this is a resort that's well known among Italians who turned out to be just fine. Even the couple who had the two hour 'domestic' in front of the whole hotel gave good entertainment value. This place is quiet with an uncrowded beach and water scene, good winds and well run centre with alternatives such as SUPs (yes, the reef actually breaks at certain times).

A couple of words of warning. The hotel accepts Mastercard and Visa in settlement of their bills, but there is no cash dispenser for 50km and that one is on wheels. If you can't find that it's a trip to the airport two hours away! So take cash – it can be changed either at reception or the Marsa Alam airport. *For booking information, please see [www.sportif.travel](http://www.sportif.travel) and [www.planetwindsurf.com](http://www.planetwindsurf.com)*

“IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN WINDSURFING IN TWOS & THREES, AS WELL AS ENJOYING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, THEN READ ON”



{ Dan and Nik from the test team with only the camels for company! }