

“It took me a few minutes to understand that they really exist”

In the Red Sea, an unsung hero of the deep has become a scuba diver's holy grail. We head to Egypt in search of the dugong

 Words by Ally Wybrew

I'm 16m underwater and feeling out of breath – which isn't ideal. I've been enthusiastically scuba diving to catch a glimpse of the elusive creature that's brought me to Egypt's Red Sea: the dugong.

Of the many things the female form has been compared to over the centuries, a 400kg mass of torpedo-shaped blubber is one of the least flattering. Yet dugongs once fooled sailors into thinking they were beautiful mermaids who lured men to their deaths. It's hard to imagine how these so-called sea cows – who share a 60-million-year-old ancestor with elephants (the males still sport tusks) – could be mistaken for humans. Yet to the land-starved sailor, the dugong's oval-shaped face, sloping shoulders and habit of bobbing on the surface while cradling their young was likely the closest thing to a woman they'd seen in years. Add in a decent amount of dehydration, and the mermaid folklore was born.

Sailors tend to be better hydrated today, but dugongs maintain a certain mythic quality. During my four-day trip to Marsa Alam, it became common to see divers trying to hide their

Here Divers are asked to keep their distance when spotting the dugong

Three Red Sea dive sites not to miss

Known commonly as 'The Brothers', the **El Ikhwa Islands** are one of the Red Sea's go-to spots for shark sightings. Oceanic whitetips, grey reef and even hammerheads are often seen here. [divessi.com](#)

Fly into: Hurghada

Abu Dabbab Bay is flanked by two beautiful reefs frequently covered in turtles – it's not uncommon to see numerous green or Hawksbill turtles on a dive here. Check out the Red Sea Project's conservation programme to help protect them. [redsea-project.com](#)

Fly into: Marsa Alam

Exploring the recesses of the **SS Thistlegorm** is a bucket-list item for almost every diver. This sunken cargo ship is still filled with trucks, rifles and ammunition, as a piece of preserved World War II history. [padi.com](#)

Fly into: Sharm El-Sheikh



disappointment as they returned from the ocean. They'd been spoiled by colourful coral outcrops, gaping moray eels and bizarre-looking tropical fish – but the dugong had evaded them.

According to Ahmed Fouad, PADI Master Instructor and director of the Red Sea Project, it's not surprising. "The last estimated dugong population in the Egyptian Red Sea was between just 30 to 35 individuals," he tells me. "In our personal database we have 22 individuals, but we don't have long-term monitoring programmes."

Ahmed started the Red Sea Project – an NGO based in Marsa Alam – in 2021, with a plan to educate locals and tourists on the region's rich marine fauna and preserve it in the process. He chose the perfect place: this southern stretch of bay-bitten coastline is renowned for its fantastic dive sites and sprawling layout. Accommodation here often sports eco-friendly initiatives (including Red Sea Diving Safari, where I stayed), which,



combined with the underdeveloped feel of the region, attracts marine-curious travellers seeking a more eco-conscious Egyptian experience.

While visitor numbers might be on the rise here, the endangered dugongs are in decline due to boat collisions, commercial fishing net entrapment and shark attacks. Their life cycle is also a hindrance, Ahmed says. "One of the main reasons they're vulnerable is their lifespan. A female will start mating at maturity (16 to 18 years old) and only have one calf at a time, which she'll carry for 18 months. She'll look after it until maturity, meaning that mothers usually only give birth once or twice in their lifetime."

Even in Marsa Alam, a known dugong hangout, chances of seeing one are relatively slim. If you're diving at a known feeding ground, Ahmed puts your chances of a sighting at between 35% and 60%. "It's not impossible to find them," he says, "but you still need a bit of luck."

Which is why I'm now dragging on my regulator to catch my breath. On descent, I'd thrown a frantic 360°, looking for signs of movement, and glimpsed a grey smudge vaporising into the watery distance. I couldn't let it get away.

What I didn't know was that this cousin of the manatee can move at a surprising speed, covering



Clockwise from here

A dugong on the ocean floor; the Red Sea Project team; the Red Sea is a diving haven; a diver explores some coral

vast seagrass feeding grounds at pace. While their favoured dinner spots are a good place to start a search, Ahmed is cautious about advertising them, as overtourism is an issue. When he receives visitors determined to find a dugong, he enforces strict rules to ensure minimum interference with the creatures, such as diving at less popular times and maintaining distance, not feeding or touching the animals, and not making loud sounds.

"Dugongs are a great marketing tool, as long as people learn about them and enter the water knowing what to do and what not to – with an awareness of how easy it is to harm the animal and how valuable they are," he explains. Dugongs play a crucial role in maintaining the growth of the seagrass meadows on which they feed, ensuring the wider health of the region's marine ecosystem.

In the end, I was lucky enough to observe one quietly chomping furrows in the seagrass, then thrusting to the surface for air, dragging leech-like remora fish on its back. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen, exuding serenity despite its bulk. Ahmed's first encounter was similar.

"It took me a few minutes to understand that they really exist," he recalls. Perhaps they are a bit mythical after all. [padi.com](#)

✈ **Wizz Air flies to Marsa Alam**