



Divers' delight

The waters of the Red Sea are blue, though they might appear red due to reflections of the surrounding reddish landscape or reddish coral on its seabed, as well as the blooming of plankton.

Saudi nationals and tourists from around the world have acknowledged the Red Sea as one of the world's premier viewing and recreational diving destinations, much of it made popular by Jacques Cousteau. With its incomparable beauty, unique marine life and exquisite coral reefs, the Red Sea unites an unsurpassed ecosystem.

Divers can explore among the many disintegrating shipwrecks and endless underwater rock formations, giving those who venture into these ethereal waters countless hours of up-close viewing – 1,100 species of fish, 44 species of shark, and 1,240 miles and 200 species of spectacular coral reef, some more than 7,000 years old, many still untouched.

In addition to recreational offerings, the Red Sea also gifts nearby oil refineries and cement factories with the use of its water for cooling purposes.

Thirty million years ago, the Arabian Peninsula tore away from Africa in a violent

tectonic jolt that slashed a 1,000-mile gash from Ethiopia to Jordan. This savage tear in the earth's crust permitted the waters of the Indian Ocean to pour into the crevasse, carrying a multitude of marine life with it and heralding the formation of the Red Sea.

Secluded in a long finger of salt water, the Red Sea created life forms found no place else on earth. Home to abundant plankton, boat fish, triggerfish, and varieties of prawns and gobies, the salt-water inlet also hosts shoals of barracuda and groups of giant manta ray in its nutrient-rich waters.

Long dormant volcanic islands rise from the center of the Sea, deceptively tucked away in their silent slumber. In 2007, however, Jbal Al-Tair Island violently erupted, reminding nearby inhabitants that occasionally sleeping giants do wake.

While the Red Sea has an average depth of 1,600 feet, about 40 percent is quite shallow at just 330 feet. The Red Sea's depth and

efficient water circulation are attributed to the development and growth of its reef system. The Red Sea exchanges its water with the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, by way of the Gulf of Aden, thereby reducing the effect of high salinity. Still, the Red Sea remains one of the most saline rich waters in the world.

This unique and awe-inspiring body of water may derive its name from any number of theories, including seasonal blooming of the red-colored cyanobacteria *Trichodesmium erythraeum* algae that thrives near the water's surface, to the mineral-rich red mountains keeping watch nearby.

Still relatively remote and unspoiled, officials in the Red Sea countries worry about the impact of commercialism and tourism upon the waters. Thus, they have taken steps over the past few years to protect and preserve what so many bear witness to every year: that out of such unforeseen violence came such transcendent beauty.