

Passengers Die in a Red Sea Liveaboard Disaster

An Undercurrent Report

In the early hours of Monday, November 25, the crew of the Egyptian liveaboard *MY Sea Story* issued a brief distress call before the signal was lost. The vessel capsized and sank in heavy seas in the Red Sea, near Sha'ab Sataya. Built in 2022, the 144-foot-long vessel with 18 twin cabins carried 31 passengers and 14 crew when it left the Port Ghalib marina near Marsa Alam the day before. It was due to disembark passengers in Hurghada nearly a week later.

The Egyptian navy, together with another passing dive boat, recovered 27 people from the water in the Wadi el-Gemal area, and another was found later on the Egyptian shore. They were returned to a resort on land and given necessary medical care. The divers on board included American, British, Spanish, German,



MY Sea Story

Slovakian, Swiss, Belgian, Polish, Norwegian, Irish, Finnish, and Chinese nationals.

The Egyptian navy warship *El Fateh* continued searching for survivors and was aided by military aircraft.

Egyptian-based Dive Pro operated the *Sea Story*. It also operates *Tillis* and *Coral Dream*, and it operated *Sea Legend*, which sank after a fire in February with one life lost, and *Scuba Scene*, which sank on April 22 after a fire.

Survivors of *Sea Story* said the vessel capsized and sank in a few minutes. Five additional survivors, including a crew member, an Egyptian diving instructor who had gone below to help others, were miraculously rescued by divers who found them breathing from an eight-inch air pocket in a cabin inside the sunken hull, 40 feet

deep, 30 hours later. Four other bodies have been recovered. Eight other people are missing, presumed drowned.

It is not believed the vessel hit a reef.

Unusually Bad Weather?

The Red Sea, positioned between two deserts, is infamous among mariners for its low swell but violently rough waves. It is a major route between the Indian Ocean and Suez and has one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Though we rarely hear of commercial shipping going down in rough weather, climate change is causing storms to be stronger than ever.

But Egyptian liveaboards are another story and have been beset with disasters recently. Fires, capsizes, and reef collisions have led to the recent demise of several different liveaboards.

So, what happened to *Sea Story*? For now, we can only offer conjecture and supposition. Most Egyptian-built Red Sea liveaboards have wooden hulls, which draw less water than similar steel-hulled vessels, making them less stable in a rough sea. The *Sea Story* was a relatively new vessel with four layers of superstructure, making it tend to roll a lot.

To provide context for the prevailing weather, the previous Friday, the Iraqi-owned freighter *VSG Glory* ran aground in bad weather near the Movenpick Resort at El Queseir, 100 miles north of Marsa Alam. Its AIS transmitter revealed it had been traveling north for a month after leaving Houthi-controlled Hodeida in Yemen, rarely able to make more than three knots [because the weather was so bad].

Two days later, on Sunday, Hurghada port authorities shut down operations due to worsening weather, predicting 16-foot waves. Yet, the *Sea Story* set sail from the Port Ghalib marina. The 100-foot liveaboard *MY Seduction* set sail in similar conditions and came to grief and sank on October 24. In that case, there were no fatalities. (*Undercurrent* November)

Survivors from *Sea Story* reported she was hit by a large wave. Perhaps the captain had decided to turn back, and while turning, the vessel became broadside on (beam on) to the waves.

Many passengers were in their cabins; those who suffer mal-de-mer often go to their below-deck cabins, where they experience less motion. Others were probably hanging on tightly in the salon. They were the lucky ones.

What the Experts Say

Experts from *The Yacht Report* (a YouTube channel that reports on yacht incidents worldwide, formerly *Superyacht News*) point out that although *Sea Story* was recently built, it had an insufficient number of life rafts, inadequate navigation equipment, and no AIS, which vessels use to avoid collisions at sea and enables tracking by third parties. (It is mandatory for IMO-registered passenger vessels of this size.) But it wasn't registered with the (IMO) International Maritime Organization as are most commercial vessels.

Working from photographs of *Sea Story* supplied by a previous passenger, *The Yacht Report* suggested no inert gas fire-fighting equipment was in the engine room, which demonstrates a lack of safety concern.

The Yacht Report also noted the low cost of about \$1500 for a 6-night trip, speculating that it might suggest quality control issues and that the vessel, though recently built, had no modern technology onboard. www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkhArE7knnw

Tony Backhurst, a retired and well-regarded tour operator who ran Red Sea charters, was scathing in his criticism: "It's simply people not knowing their job. Why would anyone schedule a trip that needs to punch north (to Hurghada) with regularly heavy seas? Trips don't get canceled due to bad weather because passengers need to get flights. I never ran one-way charters for that reason. They also had too many passengers packed in a poorly designed boat."

An experienced liveaboard designer and captain, Frank Van Der Linde, told *Undercurrent*, "I can't imagine a [wooden] vessel going down so quickly. I was reading about 16-foot waves. Why would a captain go out with a vessel [with weather] like that?"

Freddy Storheil, a Norwegian Red Sea veteran operator for 18 years who sailed his steel-hulled ketch *Colona II* around the world twice, offered, "A boat like *Sea Story* should not just fall over. Not enough ballast [for stability], I think."

David Wright, another Red Sea liveaboard operator from the '80s and '90s, observed, "These [Egyptian] boats look great but are made of pine wood, lack correct calculated ballast, lack watertight bulkhead doors, and buoyancy calculations, [and have] stored oxygen onboard – so there are serious risks."

And before anyone suggests that 19th-century navies sailed the world with wooden boats, I'll point out they were constructed with heavy prehistoric oak from forests that no longer exist!

We may never get all the facts. *Sea Story's* operator, Dive Pro, in Hurghada, refused to answer inquiries from an Associated Press reporter and no longer responds to inquiries.

It's All About Money

In the mid-90s, the Egyptians entered the diving liveaboard market with a Pax-rate (what passengers are charged) half that was formerly demanded by incumbent foreign operators. Few, if any, of these liveaboards are SOLAS-compliant or built to any international standards. (SOLAS sets international safety standards for safety of life at sea.) They may meet local Egyptian regulations, but those are for vessels that operate close to shore. After a succession of disasters, this tragedy with many lost lives might finally propel the Egyptian government toward meaningful regulation and regular inspection of these liveaboards.

Sadly, the low costs are driven by divers looking for bargains. Some operators elsewhere in the world have often told *Undercurrent* that safety issues never seem to matter to most travel agents and divers booking low-cost dive trips. Low revenues in Egypt mean that back-to-back operations are essential to profitability; these vessels cannot afford cancellations and passenger refunds due to weather.

Costs are uppermost in minds. Even in the U.S., DEMA is actively campaigning against an act of Congress after the *Conception* disaster, which had the unintended consequence of increasing vessel insurance premiums. In a press release, DEMA says members have reported insurance price increases 2 to 5 times higher than last year due to the increased liability for dive boats, which will inevitably increase consumer costs. Meanwhile, safety isn't sexy. Bargain liveaboard trips are.

– John Bantin

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