



Thistlegorm

The story of the "Thistlegorm" starts, in 1940, at the yards of J.L. Tompson and Sons in Sunderland. She was 415 feet long, a beam of 58 feet, and a net tonnage of 7898 tons. She was powered by triple expansion steam engines that could generate 365 nominal horsepower. The British Government had helped fund the construction of the Thistlegorm. Therefore, upon her completion, the government requisitioned her for the war effort. Her final journey started in Glasgow, bound for Egypt, in September 1941.

She was delivering desperately needed war supplies for the British 8th Army in North Africa. She was laden with all kinds of military equipment including Bedford gun carriers, vehicle spares, aircraft and aircraft parts, motorbikes, gun carriers, radios, guns, railway stock, rubber boots, and an abundance of ammunition. At this crucial time of the war.

Germans and Italians virtually controlled the seas and skies of the Mediterranean. Consequently, it was too dangerous for Allied merchant ships to take the shortest, fastest route to Egypt. So the Thistlegorm had to make a 12,000 mile diversion around South Africa to Suez, from where she would go up the Suez Canal to reach Alexandria. The voyage, to what would become her final resting place, was a long one. However, the ship made excellent time and stopped off at Capetown in South Africa where she picked up her escort, the cruiser H.M.S. Carlisle, for the remainder of the voyage. By the 4th of October, they were in the Red Sea on the way out from Suez, and on the 5th, they entered the calm zone alongside Sha'ab Ali to wait for orders to move up the canal. In the early morning hours of October 6, the Thistlegorm was discovered by a long-range German bomber based in Crete.

A pair of German Heinkel bombers were deployed from Crete and headed south-east towards Egypt. As the bombers approached the Sha'ab Ali area, they saw that there were several ships in the anchorage and so they quickly armed their bombs. Because they were low on fuel, they had to choose the first target they came across. Unfortunately, that target was the Thistlegorm. Two of the four bombs released landed close together and penetrated the aft of the ship, one directly on the cover of the ship's fourth hold which was where the ammunition had been stowed. The resultant explosion ripped away the stern section, and set the ship ablaze.

The fire reached the lower holds and the ammunition stored there exploded. The subsequent explosion blew the entire stern midsection of the ship apart and her bow and stern pointed skyward before she sank to her underwater grave. Nine of the crew members met their fates as well that early October morning.

The surviving crew members were picked up and transported to Port Tewfik, just outside the Suez Canal. For many years after the sinking of the Thistlegorm, British navy vessels passing that spot would lower their flags in respect to those who had lost their lives.

The Thistlegorm laid undisturbed until the early fifties when a young explorer named Jacques Cousteau found her. He raised several items from the wreck including a motorbike, the Captain's safe and the ship's bell. He published a book, and in doing so, published the wrong coordinates for her position. Again time passed the wreck by until the early 1990's, when a group of divers found themselves on the bridge of the Thistlegorm. Once word got around as to the magnificence of this dive site, it seemed as though the whole world was flocking to the "World War II museum". This wreck dive has almost legendary status among Red Sea divers. While the site is suitable for all but the most inexperienced divers in calm conditions, the level of expertise required definitely increased as

conditions deteriorate, and they do so regularly. Check for current, when and wave actions, and decide whether the conditions match your skill level.

The Thistlegorm lies at 30m, her largely intact forward section sitting almost upright on the sandy bottom. The midsection where the epicenter of the blast that sunk the Thistlegorm is badly damaged. The stern section, its huge propeller clearly visible, boasts crew quarters, the main anti-aircraft gun and a 42.5 inch gun on deck. Off the port side of the ship, a railway locomotive lies at 33m, thrown from its place on deck as the ship sank. The wreck of the Thistlegorm is like a gigantic, submerged army surplus store. But there are strict penalties for wreck-stripping, so do not help yourself to souvenirs. Among other attractions, you can visit the captains' bathroom where tubeworms grow from the silt-filled bathtub like flowers in a window box.

The site is fairly well colonized by fish and corals, including lots of big jacks, bog schools of snapper, banner fish and huge grouper. There is quite a bit of soft coral growth throughout. Dives generally begin at the bow deck, where down-lines will be secured. Descent and ascents should always be made along the line to avoid being swept of by frequently tricky currents. Diver overload along with looting and vandalism have taken their toll on the Thistlegorm, and in all likelihood, the Egyptian authorities may soon ban diving on her altogether in order to protect the well-being of this "World War II capsule" Yet, it is still considered a vital tub of wreck-diving in the Red Sea, and to the diver is conceived as one of the most sought after wreck-dives in the world. Truly, the Thistlegorm must be one of the best dive sites ever known.

Thistlegorm Timeline

1939	Construction started in Sunderland
April 1940	Launched, carried cargoes from USA, South America and West Indies
May 1941	Carried military supplies for 8th Army in Alexandria, via Cape Town and Suez
September 1941	Convoy anchored off Shadwan Island, waiting for Suez Canal to be cleared
5 October 1941	Four Heinkel 111 bombers depart from Crete
1952 - 1953	Cousteau expedition discovers wreck and recovers bell and captain's safe
1956	National Geographic features expedition
1956 - 1992	Site forgotten by all but local fishermen
1992	Wreck rediscovered by sport divers
May 1993	John Bantin writes about Thistlegorm for Diver
1994	Caroline Hawkins' Last Voyage of the Thistlegorm shown on BBC
6 October 2001	60th anniversary of sinking

