

# The OCEANSOURCE STORY



Oceansource El Tur is a new windsurfing centre in Egypt partly set up by former BOARDS staff writer, photographer and tea boy **Gregg Dunnett**. So, what's it like taking the plunge and setting up a new windsurfing business – is it really living the dream?

**W**hen I heard that the Egyptian rental centre El Tur Windsurfing was up for sale, my first thought was “*What poor bugger is going to end up with that place?*” This article – along with being a thinly veiled attempt to sell you on the charms of the place – explains how the poor bugger in question ended up being me.

Having been to El Tur several times on BOARDS test trips I knew it very well. I thought it was one of the most alien places I'd ever been; a bustling Egyptian town where tourists

were so rare we attracted a crowd of curious locals that followed us wherever we went. The Moses Bay Hotel where we stayed was pretty ‘quirky’. It didn't seem to know what to make of western tourists, and the reception was staffed 24 hours a day by a man whose sole word of English was “Yiss” – no matter what you asked him. The showers usually didn't work and the pool was filled and emptied several times a week for no apparent reason.

I'd also seen over a few years how the initial enthusiasm of the windsurfing club owner had

waned, and on my last visit I'd noticed the tired old Mistrals and JPs with their patched up noses and the booms held together with electrical tape. The whole place had by then an air of disappointment and neglect, and I wasn't particularly surprised it was for sale. So why the hell did I buy it?

Very good question.

Well, there were also a lot of upsides to the place – after all, why did BOARDS keep going



Habibi – the only wave beach in Egypt



The new Oceansource El Tur windsurfing centre

wind stats are amazing, and on their own a big reason why BOARDS kept (and keeps) turning up. It's windy all year round. Even the worst months offer well over 65% days with planing wind. In summer it's more like 95%.

The centre building is great too. It's a wooden building a bit like a Swiss alpine lodge, well built, spacious and a really nice place to hang out with a view of the action. The beach itself is private, and since you're stuck out at the end of a small peninsular, there's no passing traffic. No tourist touts selling rubbish – just windsurfers and sunbathers. It's no tropical paradise though. It's in a desert and the town has radio aerials, a boatyard and (I hate to admit it) occasionally an oilrig to admire as you sail around.

I also really liked the nearby town (El Tur). Even though it's dirty and has virtually nothing to offer tourists in terms of fancy restaurants or souvenir shops, it has a great busy feel, especially in the evening when the whole population comes out to shop, drink tea and chat. And it's totally authentic; nothing is staged because you're a tourist. It's just real people getting on with their lives, and I found it amazing to walk around just enjoying being somewhere so totally different.

In fact you might conclude there wasn't that much wrong with the whole El Tur Windsurfing set up that a few wellthought out tweaks

but didn't offer much for a good night out after a hard day's windsurfing. And the kit clearly needed investment, and lots of it. But basically you'd be right. So when my business partner Ed showed a keen interest, I agreed to find out more about the sale.

I need to digress for a moment here to explain how on earth a BOARDS magazine tea boy came about having a business partner. Bear with me.

I'm one of those people who has a 'great' idea every few months. I get all excited only to lose interest when the next idea comes along. One such idea resulted in an amateurish looking website to chart each airline's exact policy for flying with windsurfing equipment (following being charged a fortune by an Easyjet). I told everyone I knew about the site and all agreed it was a great idea, at which point I learnt that proper websites are harder than I'd thought and rapidly began to lose interest. However, someone mentioned it to a West Wittering windsurfer named Ed Texier, who happens to own a web design agency. Long story short, Ed and his team quickly built the site [www.oceansource.net/airlines](http://www.oceansource.net/airlines), which is now the best source for information on flying with windsurfing kit. You can leave feedback on airlines whenever you fly so others can learn from your experience, and we all avoid nasty surprises at the check in. (It's been quite successful, so I hope the editor feels generous and leaves in this blatant plug!)

Anyway, Ed's one of these gogetting, allaction types, while I'm more of a haveacupofteaanddecideit'sprobablyabitriscky kind of guy. But we get along well anyway, partly because we share a deep love for the sport of windsurfing.

Back on topic. Ed and I contacted Rick Galvin, the owner of El Tur Windsurfing, and he sent us full details on the business and how it had

## “ IN A MOMENT OF MIDLIFE CRISIS I AGREED TO PUT IN AN OFFER... ”

back there? The windsurfing in El Tur is very good by just about anyone's standards. It sits on a protected bay where the water varies from pretty flat to really flat, and just downwind there's a point break that kicks up a great stunt ramp as the protected harbour meets the open sea. Out the back are rolling swells that get pretty big on windy days. And then there's the wave beach (now renamed Habibi Beach), which is still hugely underrated, offering good, reliable south coastlike conditions on most windy days. And that's most days. In fact the

couldn't put right. The problem was they were rather fundamental – the quirky hotel had a long way to go before you'd pay good money to stay there, the town was interesting from an offthebeatentrack travel experience viewpoint,

### OCEANSOURCE

Oceansource El Tur is now open, offering top class kit (RRD / Ezzy / Tushingham) and proper 'doorstep' windsurfing in an amazing location. If I've only half sold it to you check [www.oceansource.net](http://www.oceansource.net) for lots more info as well as loads of pix and clips of the spots.



Freeriding Oceansource style

performed in the four years he'd run it. At this stage I didn't think for a second I'd end up buying it; I was just enjoying playing at being into business and examining the books. I started talking to friends about it, then to friends who were business advisors, and finally business advisors who weren't friends. I started researching other overseas centres and asked for a bit of help on the ever handy BOARDS forums,

As my spreadsheet grew in complexity and the time we invested in the project multiplied, it became less and less a whim and more a serious proposition, and at this point Ed quite sensibly decided he should actually visit the place before committing any more time or money.

I took my girlfriend out to dinner to break it to her that I might now be seriously thinking of remortgaging our house to invest in an Egyptian

Club Mistral manager for information on client numbers, prices, wind stats and most popular sizes of boards, while I secretly filmed the centre with a camcorder stuffed under my T-shirt. OK, I'm fooling noone. I secretly filmed the halfnaked Russian girls with a camcorder stuffed under my T-shirt. I'm not sure if the Club Mistral staff thought we were industry spies or just rather elaborate perverts. We were more subtle at

## “ I'M ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO HAS A 'GREAT' IDEA EVERY FEW MONTHS... ”

getting previous clients to tell us what they thought on a questionnaire (thanks to all those who responded). Eventually I built a complicated spreadsheet to forecast the numbers of clients we could hope to attract. And while it was clear it wasn't going to make anyone's fortune, if you believed in the location it looked like El Tur could sustain a pretty viable business.

windsurfing centre. She knew something was up as I never take her to dinner, but was fairly supportive, telling me to get a real job or she'd leave me. I think she was joking. A few days later Ed and I flew out to Egypt.

There were no last minute flights to Sharm El Sheikh, so we flew to Cairo, a seven-hour road trip from El Tur. We called in at the various other windsurfing centres on the way to get a feel for how they were doing. The whole region is a scrubby sandy desert with almost nothing there, except a rather high density of windsurfing centres. Club Mistral in Ras Sudr was really busy, notably with 30 Russian female kitesurfers who hadn't read the guidebook about covering their modesty. Ed tried to subtly interrogate the

Moon Beach and pretended to be American tourists, wandering around with a camcorder in one hand and a huge ice cream in the other. Back in the car we kept driving south and finally, there it was, El Tur Windsurfing – that mixture of chilled out, kind of exclusive feeling windsurfing centre, but tired and tatty looking. Just as I'd remembered it.

I really had no idea what Ed would think of it. I half hoped he'd hate it, but it was windy and he was able to test drive the flat-water freeride / freestyle bay, get some jumping action in at the point and also spend a few hours wavesailing at Habibi beach. We then made a startling discovery (for me). We went into town and had a fantastic meal in a local restaurant in town with fresh grilled

### THANKS TO...

Massive thanks to all who've helped set up the centre, including (but not exclusively) Jono Dunnett, Oliver Austin, Jem Hall, Wouter Ardern, Clyde Waite, Helen Trehane, Ian Leonard, Maria Lopez, and Sayeed for finally fixing the washing machine.

fish and the nicest calamari I've ever eaten (not to mention the cheapest). In all my trips before we'd never eaten in town, but there were a couple of nice restaurants there, aimed at the richer locals, that we'd never spotted before. The combination pretty much sold it to Ed right there. It was meeting the hotel owner that sold the idea to me though.

Having been to El Tur and other centres in Egypt many times, and now having researched the business thoroughly, I believed I'd identified the two main problems to solve if El Tur was going to be a success. The first we could solve ourselves (we just had to convince a bank manager of the wisdom of investing heavily in windsurfing equipment). The second, that the hotel was being run into the ground, we couldn't. But there was reason to believe that the timing of buying the centre was extremely fortuitous. The owner of the hotel, a charmingly mad elderly Egyptian gentleman had recently passed away, leaving his son to take over. The old owner had been quite content to allow the hotel to gently decay as he did, much to the frustration of Rick. But the son was equally frustrated with the state of things and had come in committed to shake things up. He'd spent

But there was one more thing...

Habibi Beach (aka the wave beach) is just a five-minute drive up the coast from the Moses Bay Hotel and the windsurfing centre, so you need to get a pickup truck to take you and your kit there. There are no facilities, just a sandy beach, some dunes and a jumping playground of waist high waves and 4.7m weather. It's very beautiful, but there's no shelter from the sun or the wind, so after a few hours you feel a bit sandblasted and roasted, and need a break. On test trips we'd often talked about how good it would be if there was a simple shelter built there, and Rick had mentioned this to the hotel owner many times. Consequently he'd devised a plan, but for something much more grand than a simple shelter. The new hotel owner was building a whole new hotel actually on Habibi beach. There would be 40 rooms, a restaurant, a pool, landscaped gardens and a brand new windsurfing centre, and this was all part of the deal when buying El Tur Windsurfing. You'd be able to have a great wavesail and then just relax right there. Get out of the wind and into the shade. Rinse off in the fresh water pool, stroll around the gardens. Have a coffee or a beer. No more faffing around with pickup trucks and

midlife crisis (because this isn't the sort of thing I do, really) I agreed to put in an offer. To my shock, Rick accepted it. We were committed.

Since we had no staff, no new boards, no clients and only the vaguest of plans about how to run our new windsurfing centre we did the only thing we could think of. On the day we legally took over, we flew out to Egypt and closed it down for eight weeks to give us time to work out what to do next.

With the decision made I felt I could suddenly pour all the energy I had been putting into whether or not to buy the centre into how to run it. And this was fantastic fun. Like a pair of kids in a sweet shop we quickly made lists of all the 'essentials' a top class windsurfing centre had to have. Awesome kit of course. The best ➔

## TOP WORK!

I've given the impression that Rick and Jeanette left the centre run down and tired, which isn't fair as it's not the whole story. They'd actually done an amazing job in bringing it as far as they did – little things like teaching the hotel staff to speak English, and putting the place on the international map. It's understandable that they ran out of energy, but we're very fortunate that all we need to do is keep building on the solid foundations they put down.

# “ WE DRAGGED BAG AFTER BAG OF ILLICIT IMPORTS PAST THE CUSTOMS INSPECTOR AS HE DRANK TEA... ”

nearly 10 years working for a top hotel in Cairo, and had also lived in Europe for over a year, so he knew something about the quality westerners demanded. When he explained his programme for improving the hotel – new water pump, shower units, proper wireless internet, new beach bar, better food, better service, repainting, staff that spoke English, making over the rooms and bathrooms – it was pretty much word for word the list we'd drawn up ourselves.

rigging/derigging. It wasn't just a pipedream either – the hotel was already half built.

Ed and I came home and we didn't speak to each other for a week. I don't know about him but I thought about nothing else the whole time. Some days I'd wake up determined to buy it, other days the whole idea scared the life out of me. But the momentum was with us and it would have been harder to say no at that stage, so in a moment of



The ultimate windsurfing playground!



El Tur and the mountains at sunset



Habibi – the only wave beach in Egypt

“THE WHOLE PLACE HAD AN AIR OF NEGLECT, AND I WASN'T SURPRISED IT WAS FOR SALE. SO WHY THE HELL DID I BUY IT?”



If you can't learn to gybe here there's no hope for you!

## HABIBI WAVE BEACH HOTEL

Completion date for the new hotel at Habibi wave beach (properly known as Berrylands Hotel) was late 2008, but partly because the owners have been focusing on building a new beach bar and refurbishing work at the main hotel (Moses Bay), and partly because Egyptians work to a more relaxed beat than us stressed out Europeans, it might not be completely finished until early 2009. However, the new Oceansource Habibi centre will be finished before the hotel, so we should have some kit rigged and ready on the beach very soon. In the meantime we make the five-minute drive there most windy days, so you can already sample some Habibi wave action on an Oceansource holiday.

boards and sails. Decent carbon masts, skinny booms, proper length harness lines. These were the bare essentials, and an area in which I had some expertise with seven years of BOARDS testing under my belt. But we also wanted a big hot tub, a well stocked bar, a super comfy chill out area, a weather station, underwater sea scooters (you know, the things the baddies in Bond films use underwater when they're moving stolen nuclear missiles around), SUPs, a fleet of mountain bikes, a 4x4 to do missions up and down the coast looking for other good sailing spots... Perhaps a yacht or two... The possibilities seemed endless.

Reality kicked in after a while (before we bought the yachts), but we both had an amazing month or two just buying toys. We pretty quickly blew the money the banks had lent us on the sort of gear you always dream about but never actually buy. It was a bit like winning the Lottery, only we had to be slightly more sensible as we do still have to pay it all back.

That was fun but – probably because I'm now old and boring, or maybe because my favourite TV programmes are *Dragon's Den* and the *Apprentice* – it was even more fun to deal with the more practical matters. The new business needed a new name, a new image, new staff, a

new website, a marketing strategy, prices, agreements with tour operators, banks, systems for taking money, paying bills – everything a functioning windsurfing business needs. We inherited lots from Rick but also took the best ideas we'd seen in other centres around the world. In business every decision you make has consequences for everything else so needs careful thought (something anyone who has their own business will confirm, but it was all news to me). It meant long hours thinking about almost nothing else other than the new Oceansource El Tur business, and I'm sure I bored my family and friends to tears. Probably still do!

Over the next weeks though we muddled our way through our 'to do' lists until only one thing remained: "Go out to Egypt and open the ultimate windsurfing centre".

We packed up 40 boards in double boardbags (which we'd assured the airline was only 20) along with 40 sails and tons of booms and masts on a sunny afternoon in January. The next morning we drove to the airport feeling very nervous until the very nice lady at check in accepted them with barely a second glance (even the long board). It was just as easy the other end. We dragged bag after bag of illicit imports past the customs inspector as he drank tea. Ninety minutes later we crunched to a halt outside the new Oceansource El Tur windsurfing centre, gleaming in the Egyptian sun. There, the adventure really began...

I'm not going to bore you even more with a blow-by-blow account of setting the place up – although I could probably fill several books with what's happened so far. If you want to know all about the place why not come and visit? Let's just say the hotel has done a great job on the improvements and has reached the dizzy heights of being quite a nice place to stay, without totally losing that quirkiness. However, their efforts have been eclipsed by the efforts of our centre manager, Helen, who has transformed the actual centre from a fairly rundown place that just happened to stand beside the ultimate windsurfing playground into a top class setup all round.

## Epilogue

Oceansource El Tur opened its board racks for business on 1 February 2008. It was something of an anticlimax as we didn't have any guests for another two weeks, but it gave us a chance to finish off all the odds and ends. By mid February we had 15 real clients and the BOARDS test team in residence. In April we had our first technique guru visit (Jem Hall), June saw a mass visit by a group from the BOARDS forum, and we're planning the first Oceansource Challenge, a competition that aims to make the most of the three sailing areas with slalom, speed, freestyle and wave competition aimed at normal sailors. It's probably too early to say whether the centre will be a long-term success, but having invested so much time and effort we're delighted to say people seem to be coming home pretty happy so far. And as long as we keep having fun with it I guess it will stay a fun place to visit. If you fancy dedicating a week of your life to some serious windsurfing why not come and check us out? 