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Billing

David Attenborough contrasts the Red Sea's colourful characters with the Gulf, a shallow sister sea more famous for wars and oil. Yet the Gulf is home to nesting green turtles and terns, whale sharks and cormorants, and may even help save the flamboyant and better known wildlife of the Red Sea reef.

Synopsis

David Attenborough unveils two stunning underwater realms. The flamboyant wildlife of the Red Sea is a stark contrast to the hot muddy Gulf on the other side of Arabia. The Gulf appears at first the ugly sister of the two seas, more famous for sand, oil and war. Look a little deeper though, and nesting green turtles and dancing terns are revealed, with huge whale sharks and gangly cormorants. Both seas have wonderful characters, but the Gulf has hidden riches, and according to the latest science, may even come to the rescue of the spectacular but fragile Red Sea reef.

TOP FACTS

1. The Red Sea is older, deeper and cleaner than the Gulf. It is over a mile deep in places, with steep cliffs covered in coral and anemones. The Red Sea is low in nutrients because everything falls off the edges of the reef to the depths, 'like crumbs off a tablecloth'.
2. The reef is solar powered. Coral contains algae which uses sunlight to make sugar that feeds the coral.
3. The Red Sea reef is famous for wildlife, particularly for the complex lives of colourful fish. Wrasse groom sweetlips, shrimp clean a moray eel, and a blue spotted ray has a sand perch to look out for it. A coral grouper in the cabin of a spectacular wreck guards glassfish from predators, but eats a few, the price of its protection.

4. The sand in the Red Sea is partly ground up coral that has passed through the gut of parrotfish, including Bumphead parrotfish, the largest in the world.
5. Starfish are able to regenerate from a single arm, and a dismembered limb can crawl away to grow a new body.
6. Lionfish use their waving spines to conceal their fish outline while hunting at night. Parrotfish hide at night in a bubble of mucus.
7. The Red Sea and the Gulf are together known as the hottest open seas in the world. The Gulf gets marginally hotter, occasionally exceeding body temperature in shallow water. It is uncomfortably hot to swim in.
8. Oil is made from marine deposits. Saudi Arabia is thought to have some of the biggest oil fields worldwide. About a third of the world's oil comes from around the Gulf.
9. The Gulf is shallow and sandy with seagrass and rare patches of coral. The seagrass is one of the most productive habitats on earth. Most of the life is microscopic and hidden in the mud.
10. Sea snakes are some of the most venomous creatures in the world, but their mouth is generally too small to bite swimmers.
11. A quarter of a million Socotra Cormorants nest in the Gulf, one of the world's great wildlife events. Life in the colony is brutal, and even cannibalism is common.
12. Sandstorms in the Gulf turns out to be the source of the nutrients that feed the underwater world. The sandstorms are called Shamals.
13. A Gulf goby shares a burrow with a shrimp, who does all the housework for him.
14. Green Turtles feed in the Gulf on seagrass, and nest on sandy beaches. They dig a hole three foot deep and lay about 100 eggs. Very few hatchlings will survive to adulthood.
15. Plankton bloom in the Gulf and feed whale sharks and huge schools of fish. A whale shark is the biggest fish in the world, forty feet long, and as heavy as several elephants.
16. The corals in the Gulf are adapted to higher temperatures, and may help other coral reefs under pressure from climate change survive, including Red Sea reefs.
17. About half of coral reefs worldwide are dying or have died thanks to climate change and marine pollution.
18. On one or two nights only, pololo worms spawn, a spectacular event never filmed before.