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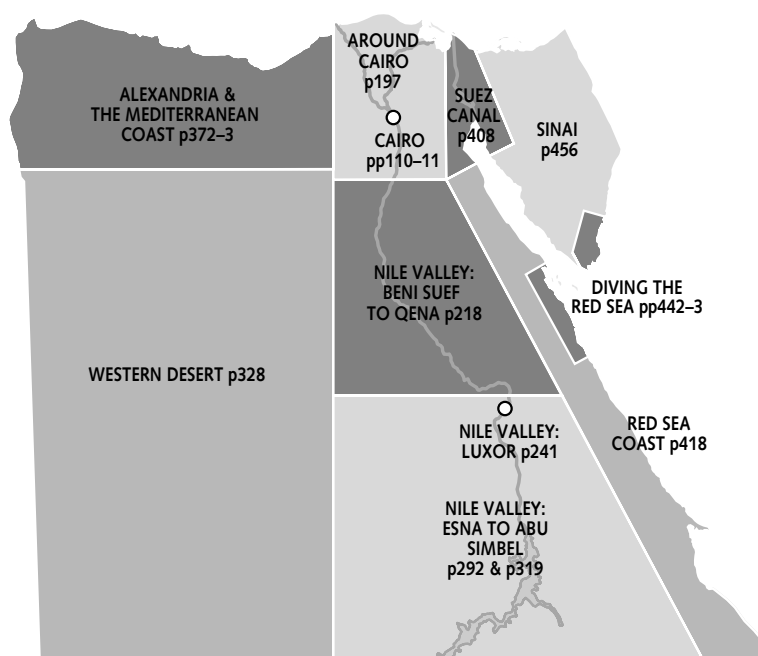
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# Regional Map Contents





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# Destination Egypt

A land of magnificent World Heritage Sites and a thousand tourist clichés, Egypt was enticing visitors millennia before Thomas Cook sailed his steamers up the Nile. It was here that the Holy Family sheltered, Alexander conquered and Mark Antony flirted. Napoleon stopped long enough to pilfer a few obelisks, the Ottomans paused to prop up the great and barbarous pasha Mohammed Ali, and the British stayed around to get the train system running and furnish every spare nook of the British Museum. And all this was long after Menes united the two states of Upper and Lower Egypt, and set the stage for the greatest civilisation the world has ever known.

Lingering over coffee in one of Alexandria's cosmopolitan cafés or sipping a calming glass of *shai* (tea) after a frenzied shopping episode in Cairo's Khan al-Khalili are activities as popular today as they were back when 19th-century tourists started to arrive en masse. Magnificent monuments are everywhere – the pointed perfection of the pyramids, soaring minarets of Cairo's skyline, and majestic tombs and temples of Luxor are just a few of the wonders that generations of visitors have admired during their city sojourns, jaunts up and down the Nile and expeditions through spectacularly stark desert landscapes.

Beyond the graceful symmetry and calculated order of the country's ancient pyramid and temple complexes, Egypt is bursting at the seams. Half a century on from the great Nasser-led revolution, and 25 years since Hosni Mubarak and his wife Suzanne first set up house in the presidential palace, Egypt is in a pretty bad state. Unemployment is rife, the economy is of the basket-case variety and terrorist attacks are starting to occur with worrying regularity. Once home to the all-powerful pharaohs, the country has largely been reduced to being a dependent state of the USA, reliant on more than US\$2 billion a year in military aid and economic assistance.

The list of woes continues. Egyptian police regularly torture and ill-treat prisoners in detention; child labour is common within the lucrative national cotton industry; scores of members of Islamist opposition groups are regularly imprisoned without charge or trial; women face systematic discrimination under personal-status laws; rampant inflation has led to food shortages within the poorest communities; and the environment is under constant threat, with polluted waterways, gross overpopulation, unregulated emissions and soil salinity being of serious concern.

Today, Egypt is weathering a storm of internal strife and struggling to define its identity as a moderate Islamic country. On one hand, Egypt was a member of US President George W Bush's ill-fated 'Coalition of the Willing', and the sultry belly-dancing of underground pop sensation Dina is questioning the nation's traditional views of sexuality. On the other, the vast majority of Egyptians are foaming at the mouth over the USA's dogged support of Israel, and the increasing popularity of televangelist Amr Khaled is credited with convincing young girls to start wearing the headscarf.

Of course, one of the many reasons why Egypt remains such a fascinating tourist destination is that it is very much a country in flux. Egypt may be famous the world over for the Pyramids of Giza and the Valley of the Kings, but these ancient monuments are just part of the equation. From the suffocating density of Cairo's city streets to the harsh elements of the open desert, the Egyptians are an incredibly resilient people who find humour and optimism in the most unlikely of circumstances. Your travels in Egypt won't always be easy-going and hassle-free, but they'll certainly be eye-opening.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 80 million  
Population growth rate: 1.7%  
Inflation: 7.7%  
GDP: US\$334.4 billion  
Main exports: Petroleum, petroleum products, cotton  
Average annual income: US\$4200  
Average male life expectancy: 69 years  
Average female life expectancy: 74 years  
Male literacy rate: 83%  
Female literacy rate: 59%



# Getting Started

Egypt is the most traveller-friendly country in North Africa and the Middle East. Most of the tourist hotspots are well connected by cheap buses, and many are also linked by trains and planes. Accommodation is plentiful, particularly in the budget and top-end categories, and decent eateries are thick on the ground in nearly every corner of the country. Unlike in some other parts of the region, enjoying a beer, meeting the locals and accessing the internet are all things that can be taken for granted. Predeparture planning will usually guarantee your accommodation of choice, but on the whole it's not necessary – unless you're on a tight timetable, it's usually more enjoyable to leave your itinerary in the lap of the gods. After all, there are a lot of them to call on...

See Climate Charts (p504) for more information.

## WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Egypt depends on where you want to go. Generally speaking, winter (December to February) is the tourist high season and summer (June to August) is the low season in all parts of the country except on the coasts, and to a lesser degree in Cairo. Hotel prices reflect this.

Weather-wise, June to August is unbearable almost anywhere south of Cairo, especially around Luxor and Aswan, where daytime temperatures soar up to 40°C. Summer in Cairo is almost as hot, and the combination of heat, dust, pollution, noise and crush makes walking the city streets a real test of endurance. On the other hand, a scorching sun might be exactly what's wanted for a week or two of slow roasting on the beaches of southern Sinai, the Alexandrian coast or the Red Sea – just be prepared to fight for hotel rooms with locals on their summer holidays and Gulf Arabs escaping the even greater heat in their home countries.

When visiting somewhere such as Luxor, winter is easily the most comfortable time. Cairo isn't quite as pleasant, with often overcast skies and chilly evenings, while up on the Mediterranean coast Alexandria is subject to frequent downpours resulting in flooded, muddy streets. Even Sinai's beaches are a little too chilly for sunbathing in January. The happiest compromise for an all-Egypt trip is to visit in spring (March to May) or autumn (September to November).

Most of Egypt's religious and state holidays (for dates see p510) last only one or two days at most and should not seriously disrupt any travel plans. Buses, however, may be fully booked around the two *eids* (Islamic feasts) and on Sham an-Nessim. Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, can be

## DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

There is very little that you might need and won't be able to find in Egypt. That said, you may not have the same degree of choice as at home. So bring sunglasses, a torch (flashlight), sunscreen and a hat. If you're a light sleeper you may also want to bring earplugs – bus rides are rarely quiet, Cairo is a very noisy city and throughout the country dawn is accompanied by the amplified voice of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. If you are visiting during winter, a sweater or light jacket is necessary for evenings, especially in desert areas. Although most toiletries can be found in city pharmacies and supermarkets, certain items can be difficult to get and expensive when you do find them. This is certainly the case with contact-lens solution, roll-on mosquito repellent, tampons and contraceptives (local condoms have a distressingly high failure rate).

Finally, make sure you check travel advisories (see p507) for a current security update.

## TIPS FOR TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Take only photographs, leave only footprints – the following is a list of Lonely Planet author–tested tips for minimizing the impact of your stay and limiting your ecological footprint.

**Learn the language.** Although English is widely spoken as a second language in Egypt, make an effort to learn a bit of Arabic. Knowing the basic greetings will win the respect of locals, and a firm command of the numbers will give you some bargaining power.

**Sail the Nile.** The only choice for Cleopatra is still the best way to go for 21st-century travellers. Until recently feluccas were the only sail-powered option, but there are now a growing number of dahabiyyas, most of them operating between Esna and Aswan.

**Rent a bike.** The opening of the bridge across the Nile in Luxor has seen a huge rise in the number of coaches and taxis on the West Bank, with all the usual issues of pollution. But bikes are easy to rent on both sides of the river and slow travelling gives a different perspective on the country you pass through.

**Don't bribe guards.** Do give them a present if you want – they are paid so little that any amount will be welcome. But don't exploit your economic superiority by bribing them to let you do things you shouldn't do.

**Don't touch the ruins.** The deterioration of temples, pyramids and monuments due to rampant overtourism has reached critical levels. Unless draconian measures are taken, a large percentage of reliefs and paintings may be gone in another generation.

**Dress conservatively.** Rural areas in the deserts are home to very conservative communities that do not see many travellers. Be cautious with revealing dress, showing affection in public and any behaviour that may offend sensibilities.

**Use a pump.** For the vast majority of travellers, drinking bottled water is not so much a necessity as it is a convenience. However, you can go easy on the plastic by bringing your own pump and filtering the tap water.

seriously disruptive to your best-laid travel plans. During daylight hours many cafés and restaurants are closed, while bars cease business completely for the duration. Offices also operate at reduced and very erratic hours.

## COSTS &amp; MONEY

By international standards Egypt is still fairly cheap, though admission fees, guided tours and private transportation can really hike up the price.

If you're a hard-core budget traveller, it's possible to get by on about US\$20 a day or maybe less, though you will have to stick to the cheapest hotels, eat the staple snacks of *fuul* (fava beans) and *ta'amiyya* (felafel), use the cheapest local transport and limit your sightseeing. At the other end of the scale, Egypt has plenty of accommodation charging upwards of US\$200 a night, and some of the better restaurants will set you back US\$20 per person or more.

Taking a middle route, if you stay in a modest hotel with a fan and private bathroom, eat in low-key restaurants frequented by locals (allowing for the occasional splurge), and aim to see a couple of sites each day, you'll be looking at between US\$30 and US\$50 a day.

Getting around the country is cheap: the 10-hour train ride between Cairo and Luxor can cost as little as US\$6 in 2nd class, and even domestic flights on EgyptAir can cost as little as US\$35. However, private taxis in convoys between tourist destinations can get pricey, though these are often the safest and most comfortable way to travel.

The major expense is going to be the entry fees to tourist sites. Foreigners are seen as dollars on legs, so places where they flock tend to be pricey. A complete visit to the Giza Pyramids costs more than US\$50 in admission charges, while seeing the mummies at the Egyptian Museum costs about US\$25. However, if you have a valid International Student Identity Card (ISIC), you can rack up some serious discounts. Of course, no card will make you exempt from the seemingly obligatory demands for baksheesh, which can seriously drain your wallet if you're not careful.

## HOW MUCH?

Meal in a cheap restaurant: EE12 to EE18

Meal in a good restaurant: EE60 to EE120

Glass of tea: EE2

Short taxi hop: EE6

Average museum admission: EE30

See also Lonely Planet Index, inside front cover.

A service charge of between 10% and 15% is applied in most upmarket restaurants and hotels, to which value-added tax (VAT) and municipal taxes are also added. In other words, the price that you are quoted at a hotel or read on a menu could be almost 25% higher when it comes to paying the bill.

## PREDEPARTURE READING

*In an Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh is a wonderfully observant account of the author's lengthy stay in a Delta village. It's entertaining, educational and one of the few travel books that is not patronising towards its subject.

*The Pharaoh's Shadow* by Anthony Sattin is travel lit with a twist. Sattin searches for 'survivals' of Pharaonic traditions and practices in the Egypt of today, encountering along the way magicians, snake catchers, mystics and sceptics. Also by Anthony Sattin, *Florence Nightingale's Letters from Egypt* tell of the five-month trip that the famous 'Lady with the Lamp' took through Egypt in the winter of 1849–50. The book is packed with 19th-century images of Egypt.

*The Blue Nile* and *The White Nile* by Alan Moorhead form a two-volume *tour de force* describing the search for sources of the Nile.

*Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour*, translated and edited by Francis Steegmuller, includes choice excerpts from Flaubert's diary as he made his way up the Nile. Detailed descriptions of Upper Egyptian dancing girls and prostitutes spice up his accounts of ancient sites.

*A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* by Amelia Edwards is a travel classic describing a 19th-century journey from Cairo to Abu Simbel and back on a dahabiyya.

*Letters from Egypt* by Lucie Duff Gordon is the journal of a solo woman traveller who lived in Luxor for seven years from 1862 to 1869.

*Travels With a Tangerine: A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah* by Tim Mackintosh-Smith sees the modern-day author following the route taken by the medieval adventurer; three great chapters are set in Egypt.

*Cairo: The City Victorious* by Max Rodenbeck offers a broad history of Cairo and a commentary on modern social life – it's great for helping foreigners adjust their attitudes to the city.

## PREDEPARTURE FILM VIEWING

In recent years extortionate taxes levied on foreign film companies have kept the cameras away (that's Tunisia standing in for Egypt in *The English Patient* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Arizona in *Stargate*, and computer-generated imagery in the remake of *The Mummy*). But even if they haven't been shot on location, there are plenty of films that evoke the country and its colourful history splendidly. All make great predeparture viewing.

*The Ten Commandments* (1956) with Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner and Anne Baxter is an enduring classic about the Exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt.

## BEST SLEEPS

**Beach camp** Penguin Village, Dahab (p476).

**Boutique hotel** Talisman Hotel, Cairo (p159).

**Budget hotels** Hotel Luna, Cairo (p158) and Happy Land Hotel, Luxor (p277).

**Ecolodges** Basata, Mahash (p488) and Adrére Amellal, Siwa (p363).

**Hotel with a view** Desert Lodge, Dakhla (p343).

**Luxury hotel** Al-Moudira, Luxor (p280).

**'Florence Nightingale's Letters from Egypt tell of the five-month trip that she took through Egypt in the winter of 1849–50'**

# TOP PICKS

Libya

EGYPT

Saudi Arabia

## FILMS SET IN EGYPT

For an on-screen look at the beauty of Egypt, check out any of the following films:

- *The Ten Commandments* (1956)
- *Cleopatra* (1963)
- *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977)
- *Death on the Nile* (1978)
- *Al-Mohager* (The Emigrant; 1994)
- *The English Patient* (1996)
- *The Yacoubian Building* (2006)

## GREAT READS

Whether you're travelling by plane, train or boat, any of the following reads will help pass the time:

- *In an Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh
- *The Pharaoh's Shadow* by Anthony Sattin
- *Florence Nightingale's Letters from Egypt* by Anthony Sattin
- *The Blue Nile and The White Nile* by Alan Moorhead
- *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour* translated and edited by Francis Steegmuller
- *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* by Amelia Edwards
- *Letters from Egypt* by Lucie Duff Gordon
- *Travels With a Tangerine: A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah* by Tim Mackintosh-Smith
- *Cairo: The City Victorious* by Max Rodenbeck

## USEFUL WEBSITES

The following websites are extremely useful in planning your travels in Egypt:

- <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg> (Al-Ahram Weekly)
- [www.descegy.bibalex.org](http://www.descegy.bibalex.org) (Description de l'Egypte)
- [www.touregypt.net](http://www.touregypt.net) (Egypt: The Complete Guide)
- [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com) (Lonely Planet)
- [www.red-sea.com](http://www.red-sea.com) (Red Sea Guide & Search Engine)
- [www.sis.gov.eg](http://www.sis.gov.eg) (State Information Service)
- [www.thebanmappingproject.com](http://www.thebanmappingproject.com) (Theban Mapping Project)
- [www.seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com) (The Man in Seat 61)

*Cleopatra* (1963) starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton al-most bankrupted 20th Century Fox, though the film remains the best onscreen adaptation of the famous love affair between Mark Antony and Cleopatra.

*The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) starring Roger Moore as James Bond follows the exploits of the original international man of mystery as he travels to Egypt and meets the lovely Agent Triple X in front of the Pyramids at Giza.

Based on an Agatha Christie mystery novel, *Death on the Nile* (1978) featuring Peter Ustinov and Jane Birkin follows the murder investigation of Belgian detective Hercule Poirot as he travels along the Nile.

*Al-Mohager* (The Emigrant; 1994) by Egyptian director Youssef Chahine is a beautiful avant-garde Arabic film that relates the journey through life of a man who has been rejected by his family.

Although it's not actually Egypt on screen, *The English Patient* (1996) with Ralph Fiennes and Kristin Scott Thomas depicts a love story set against the North Africa campaign of WWII.

*The Yacoubian Building* (2006), an onscreen adaptation of the best-selling Egyptian novel by Alaa al-Aswany, is a scathing commentary on the modern decay of Egypt's political system.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Al-Ahram Weekly** (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>) Electronic version of the weekly English-language newspaper. Almost the whole paper is online and the archives are fully searchable and free to access.

**Description de l'Egypte** ([www.descegy.bibalex.org](http://www.descegy.bibalex.org)) An online version of the impressive scholarly collaboration produced by more than 150 academics that accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte on his 1798 expedition.

**Egypt: The Complete Guide** ([www.touregypt.net](http://www.touregypt.net)) The official site of Egypt's Ministry of Tourism is updated reasonably regularly with magazine-type features, news and a huge range of resources and links.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Includes summaries on travelling to Egypt, the Thorn Tree bulletin board, travel news and links to the most useful travel resources on the web.

**Red Sea Guide & Search Engine** ([www.red-sea.com](http://www.red-sea.com)) This site does exactly what the name suggests: provides heaps of travel tips and water-sports information and links.

**State Information Service** ([www.sis.gov.eg](http://www.sis.gov.eg)) A huge amount of information on tourism, geography and culture, plus a great many useful links, all courtesy of the Egyptian State Information Service.

**The Man in Seat 61** ([www.seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com)) The source for all train-related inquiries in Egypt as well as the rest of the world.

**Theban Mapping Project** ([www.thebanmappingproject.com](http://www.thebanmappingproject.com)) Professor Kent Weeks' website dedicated to all things to do with the Valley of the Kings. If only all Egyptology websites were this good.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### WHISTLE-STOP NILE TOUR

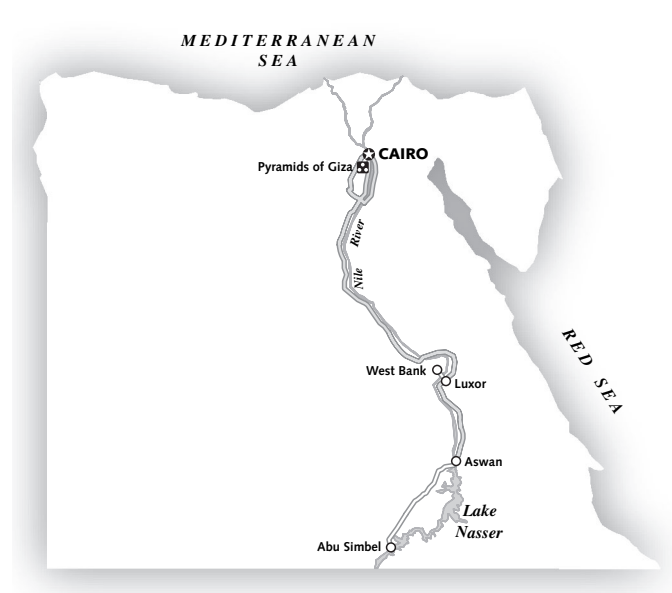
One to Two Weeks/Cairo to Abu Simbel

On a punishing schedule, one to two weeks is just enough time to traverse the length of the Nile Valley and see some of Egypt's most famous sights.

Starting in **Cairo** (p107), two days in the capital will allow you to see the astounding **Pyramids of Giza** (p143), seek out the treasures in the **Egyptian Museum** (p185) and shop till you drop in **Khan al-Khalili** (p128). Catch the overnight train (or a quick flight on EgyptAir) to **Luxor** (p239), arriving early in the morning – the perfect time to head over to the **West Bank** (p254) to see the monuments of the ancient necropolis of Thebes. In two days, you can visit most major sights, including the **Valley of the Kings** (p258), the **Valley of the Queens** (p273) and **Deir al-Bahri** (Temple of Hatshepsut; p267). Spend the afternoons and evenings cooling off on the **East Bank** (p242), but be sure to save time for the spectacular temples of **Karnak** (p243) and **Luxor** (p249).

You can either jump on a morning train to **Aswan** (p299), or spend a few days sailing down the Nile on a budget-friendly **felucca** (p85) or a luxurious five-star **cruiser** (p87). Once in Aswan, you absolutely must visit **Abu Simbel** (p323), the grandest of all Pharaonic monuments, which is perched on the edge of Lake Nasser. With a day or two to spare, you can explore Aswan's other highlights including the **Nubia Museum** (p302) and the **Unfinished Obelisk** (p303) before hightailing it back to Cairo.

The 1000km Whistle-Stop Nile Tour will race you along the lifeline of Egypt – the Nile River – teasing you with a brief taste of what this country can offer.



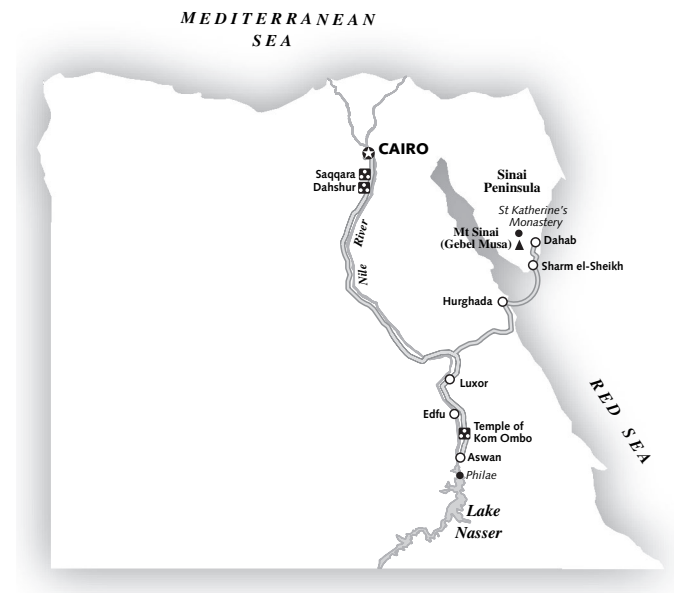
### TRAVELLING AT A STEADY PACE Two Weeks to One Month/Cairo to Sinai

Two weeks to a month is an ideal amount of time to get the most out of the Nile Valley while adding the Sinai Peninsula to your itinerary.

Starting in **Cairo** (p107), be sure to add the **Step Pyramid of Zoser** (p201) at Saqqara and the **Bent** (p206) and **Red Pyramids** (p207) at Dahshur to your itinerary, as well as the twisting alleyways and splendid mosques of the medieval quarters of **Islamic Cairo** (p160). Take your time and spend a moment or two relaxing in one of the area's fabulous *ahwas* (coffeehouses), where you can alternate between sips of strong Turkish-style coffee and puffs of apple-scented *sheesha* (water pipe).

Next, train it (or fly) straight down to **Aswan** (p299), from where you can add to your itinerary trips to the island Temple of Isis at **Philae** (p316) and the **West Bank** (p307), home to ancient monasteries and tombs that cling to the edges of the desert. Then, move into relaxation mode with a slow felucca or cruiser, sailing up to **Kom Ombo** (p297), site of a fine Ptolemaic-era temple dedicated to Sobek, and **Edfu** (p293), site of a fine Ptolemaic-era temple dedicated to Horus.

From here you can move on to **Luxor** (p239) before catching a bus across the Eastern Desert to the resort town of **Hurghada** (p422), where you can catch a ferry to **Sharm el-Sheikh** (p462) and then a bus to the backpacker paradise of **Dahab** (p472). Around here you can delight in the underwater world before visiting the Greek Orthodox **St Katherine's Monastery** (p490) and climbing to the top of **Mt Sinai** (p492), which is revered by Muslims, Christians and Jews alike.



Whether you have two weeks or 40 days and 40 nights, you can experience at a steady pace this 1500km jaunt through the Nile Valley and Sinai.

## EGYPT BENEATH THE SURFACE

More than One Month/  
Cairo to Sinai plus Siwa & Petra

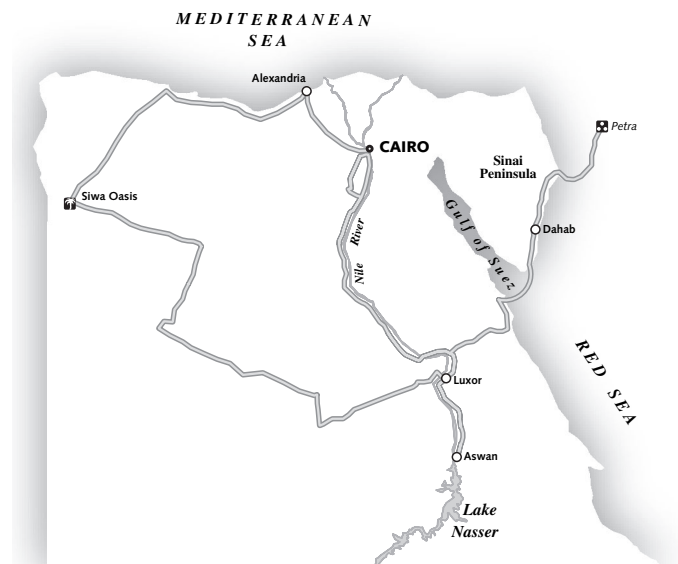
In a month or more you could cover most of Egypt's main sights, and still have time to explore the Western Desert and even southern Jordan.

Starting in **Cairo** (p107), you can add to your itinerary a visit to **Coptic Cairo** (p123), the oldest part of modern-day Cairo and the Christian heartland of the city.

Before heading south to Aswan, take an early train north to Alexandria's Sidi Gaber station and transfer directly to a bus for **Siwa Oasis** (p355), one of Egypt's most idyllic spots. After a couple of days hanging out in this tranquil haven, backtrack along the Mediterranean coast to **Alexandria** (p369) and spend a couple of days in its wonderful cafés and museums.

Take the sleeping train (or plane) to **Aswan** (p299), then back to **Luxor** (p239) and eventually **Dahab** (p472). Here, you should slow down, chill out and enjoy the laid-back Bedouin vibe of Sinai, pausing only to arrange the obligatory **dive trip** (p445) and/or **desert safari** (p475). Finally, say goodbye (temporarily) to Egypt on a brief excursion to Jordan en route to the ancient Nabataean city of **Petra** (p486), one of the 'New Seven Wonders of the World'.

If you have more than a month, you could comfortably cover over 2000km and visit Egypt's far-flung desert oases in addition to Jordan's ancient city of Petra.



## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### EXPLORING THE SINAI PENINSULA Two Weeks/Sharm el-Sheikh to Taba

If you really want to get a taste of all the Sinai has to offer, spend about two weeks exploring its incredible desert landscapes and serene underwater world.

Starting in **Sharm el-Sheikh** (p462), the gateway to Sinai, hop on a bus to **Dahab** (p472), a laid-back town dubbed the 'Koh Samui of the Middle East'. From here, you can easily arrange all of your camel and jeep safaris to such natural wonders as the **Coloured Canyon** (p475) the **Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate** (p479).

If you're looking to get wet, a diving trip to **Ras Mohammed National Park** (p460), home to some of the world's most spectacular reefs, is a must. Serious divers can arrange trips to more remote reefs or to the world-famous **Thistlegorm** (p448), a wrecked British supply ship that was sunk during WWII with a full cargo of military goods.

After waiting 24 hours for your body to release all that nitrogen, lace up your hiking boots and head to the **St Katherine Protectorate** (p490). Head first to **St Katherine's Monastery** (p490), which is a must for the complete biblical experience – it has the burning bush, a famous Byzantine church and a stunning icon collection. Afterwards, arrange a trek through the protectorate with a Bedouin guide, but save some energy for a night-time ascent of **Mt Sinai** (p492) in order to catch the spectacular sunrise.

After your mountain-climbing excursions, choose any of Sinai's far-flung beaches to relax and recover – a good place to start is at any of the camps along the coast from **Nuweiba** to **Taba** (p485).



In about two weeks, you could explore the underwater and desert landscapes of the Sinai Peninsula, the crossroads of Africa.



## EXPLORING THE WESTERN DESERT

Two Weeks/Luxor to Siwa

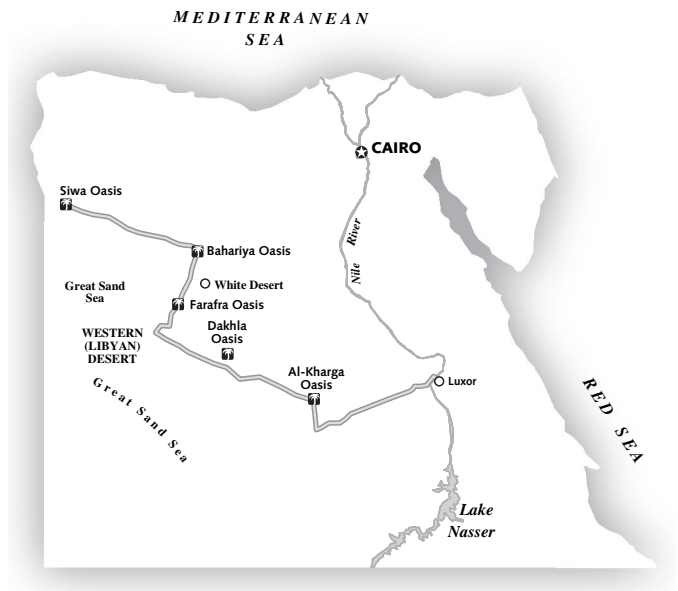
Taking inspiration from films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The English Patient*, would-be desert rovers should opt for two weeks of getting sand-happy in the amazing **Western Desert** (p327).

Begin your journey by taking a bus from **Luxor** (p239) to **Al-Kharga Oasis** (p330), the southernmost oasis in the Western Desert loop. Spend a day here exploring the **Al-Kharga Museum of Antiquities** (p331) as well as the profusion of Graeco-Roman temples, tombs and other interesting ruins scattered around the oasis.

From Al-Kharga, make your way northwest to **Dakhla Oasis** (p336) for the experience of seeing the fascinating hivelike mud-walled settlements of **Balat** (p341) and **Al-Qasr** (p342). Next, head north to either **Farafrā Oasis** (p343) or **Bahariya Oasis** (p348), both of which are great places to organise trips out into the stunning **White Desert** (p347).

Real desert addicts can then strike west across several hundred kilometres of open desert to **Siwa Oasis** (p355), one of the most surreal spots in the entire country. Perched on the edge of the **Great Sand Sea** (p367), Siwa is renowned for its dates and olives, and serves as a convenient base for exploring some of the most stunning yet accessible sandscapes in Egypt.

Shun the cities  
for two weeks  
in favour of get-  
ting swept up in  
deserts, though be  
sure to take time  
to chill out and  
cool down in the  
stunning oases.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### THE ANCIENT EGYPT TRAIL

If you're interested in the Pharaonic era, it greatly adds to the experience to tour Egypt in a chronological fashion.

Start in **Cairo** (p107), making **Saqqara** (p200) the first port of call to view the **Step Pyramid of Zoser** (p201), the prototype of all pyramids to come. Next, travel to **Dahshur** (p206) to view the **Bent Pyramid** (p206) and **Red Pyramid** (p207) before returning to Giza to see the final article in the **Great Pyramid of Khufu** (p147). Visit the **Egyptian Museum** (p185), focusing on the Old Kingdom galleries.

Your next stop should be **Luxor** (p239), moving into the era of the Middle and New Kingdoms. The temple complex of **Karnak** (p243) offers a history lesson set in stone. Cross to the West Bank, and explore the **Valley of the Kings** (p258) and the **Valley of the Queens** (p273), viewing the tombs in chronological order to witness the development of tomb painting. Before leaving the West Bank, visit **Medinat Habu** (p274) for the most complete expression of the Pharaonic golden age.

Tourist police permitting, travel north by taxi or train to Al-Balyana for **Abydos** (p233), the ancient burial ground of Osiris and home to the sublime **Temple of Seti I** (p233). Finally, return to Cairo and revisit the Egyptian Museum, this time to see the Middle and New Kingdom galleries.



### EGYPT FROM BELOW

Egypt isn't just about pyramids and deserts, and it only takes a quick plunge in the Red Sea to find yourself in another world.

If you're a certified diver, set aside as much time as possible to **dive** (p439) Egypt's incredible number and variety of sites. One of the best ways to do this is to explore the Red Sea on a **live-aboard** (p453), which allows you access to some of the country's most far-flung and pristine locales. The challenging dive spots in the **south** (p448) and **far south** (p449) have restricted access and see no more than a smattering of divers each year. Of course, if you don't have your licence, you can always spend a few busy days in **Dahab** (p472), studying up for your PADI Openwater certification. Once you pass your course (don't worry – it's not that hard!), don't leave before diving the infamous **Bells & Blue Hole** (p446), a gaping underwater sink hole that simulates the feeling of skydiving. Also check out the **Canyon** (p445), a long, narrow trench that is filled with corals and schools of exotic fish.

Regardless of where you base yourself, organise a trip to **Ras Mohammed National Park** (p447), the crown jewel of Egypt's underwater offerings and one of the top dive destinations in the world. With so many spots, it can be extremely difficult to choose a site, though you can't go wrong with **Shark Observatory** (p447). And don't miss the hulking mass that is the **Thistlegorm** (p448), often regarded as the top wreck dive in the world.



## IMPRINTS OF ANCIENT CULTURE

With a rich and diverse heritage stretching back several millennia, Egypt is a treasure trove of ancient cultural sites that beckon to be explored.

It goes without saying that the **Pyramids of Giza** (p143) and the temples and tombs at **Luxor** (p249) are the best evidence of Pharaonic Egypt. However, don't let these sights overshadow all of the other cultures that have touched Egypt over the millennia.

Although its legendary library is no more, it's worth visiting **Alexandria** (p369), on the Mediterranean, if only to stand on the hallowed grounds of this fabled Graeco-Roman city. The Romans left their mark throughout the country, though perhaps nowhere as striking as in the oases of the **Western Desert** (p327), which prospered in Roman times as part of an expansive caravan network.

It should come as no surprise that various religions have their roots in the deserts of Egypt. The first sight that should immediately come to mind is the legendary **Mt Sinai** (p492), the holy mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments. Egypt also houses the holiest Coptic Christian sights, namely the **Red Sea Monasteries** (p418) of St Anthony and St Paul. These monasteries are the oldest in both Egypt and the entire Christian world, and continue to function today as centres of worship.

Finally, it's worth mentioning the contributions of the Nubians, whose cultural influences are still felt today throughout the country. There is no better place to get a sense of their unique cultural heritage than at the **Nubia Museum** (p302) in Aswan.





# On the Road



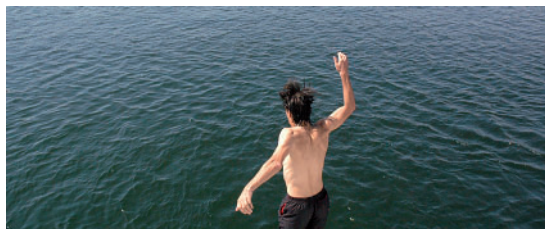
## **MATTHEW D FIRESTONE** *Coordinating Author*

This shot was taken at the summit of Mt Sinai (p492) shortly after sunrise. Although I'm trying my hardest to look awake and alert, I can hardly keep my eyes open. The trek to the top of Sinai was a gruelling overnight trudge, but it was worth every blister, stubbed toe and twisted ankle.



## **ZORA O'NEILL**

The caretaker at the Cairo Agricultural Museum (p142) unlocked the room devoted entirely to food, my personal passion. I felt a little bad about manhandling the exhibits, but he wouldn't rest until I'd fondled every piece of fruit.



## **ANTHONY SATTIN**

Bilharzia (Schistosomiasis) puts most people off swimming in the Nile and it certainly isn't recommended anywhere north of Luxor. But choose your spot carefully, be sure you are in fast-flowing water, and nothing beats ending a hot temple visit by jumping off a boat into the river of history.



## **RAFAEL WLODARSKI**

I'm a total desert rat. I love it. You just can't beat its technicolour sunsets (I don't always make the sunrise), or looking out the window and seeing camels bobbing purposefully by the side of the road. But most of all, I love the long meditative drives through the endless, barren landscape of the Western Desert (p327).

*For full author biographies, see p551.*

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# History

The history of Egypt is as rich as the land, as varied as the landscape, as lively as the character of its people. And it is as long as the Nile, longer than most in the world. While much of Europe was still wrapped in animal skins and wielding clubs, Egyptians enjoyed a sophisticated life, dedicated to maintaining order in the universe and to making the most of their one great commodity, the Nile.

## THE NILE

### The Nation's Gift

The Greek historian Herodotus observed that Egypt was the gift of the Nile and although it might now be a cliché, it also happens to be true. Ancient Egyptians called it simply *iteru*, the river. Without the Nile, Egypt as we know it would not exist.

The exact history is obscure, but many thousands of years ago the climate of North Africa changed dramatically. Patterns of rainfall also changed and Egypt, formerly a rich savannah, became increasingly dry. The social consequences were dramatic. People in this part of Africa lived as nomads, hunting, gathering and moving across the region with the seasons. But when their pastures turned to desert, there was only one place for them to go: the Nile.

Rainfall in east and central Africa ensured that the Nile in Egypt rose each summer; this happened some time towards the end of June in Aswan. The waters would reach their height around the Cairo area in September. In most years, this surge of water flooded the valley and left the countryside hidden. As the rains eased, the river level started to drop and water drained off the land, leaving behind a layer of rich silt washed down from the hills of Africa.

Egyptians learned that if they planted seed on this fertile land, they could grow a good crop. As more people settled along the valley, it became more important to make the best use of the annual floodwater, or there would not be enough food for the following year. A social order evolved to organise the workforce to make the most of this 'gift', an order that had farmers at the bottom, bureaucrats and governors in the middle and, at the top of this pyramid, the pharaoh.

Egyptian legend credited all this social development to the good king Osiris, who, so the story went, taught Egyptians how to farm, how to make best use of the Nile and how to live a good, civil life. The myth harks back to an idealised past, but also ties in with what we know of the emergence of kingship: one of the earliest attributions of kingship, the pre-dynastic Scorpion Macehead, found in Hierakonpolis around 3000 BC, shows an

*The Penguin Guide to Ancient Egypt* by William J Murnane is one of the best overall books on the lifestyle and monuments of the Pharaonic period, with illustrations and descriptions of the major temples and tombs.

Egyptians called the vast areas of barren desert *deshret* (red land) and the narrow banks of the Nile *kemet* (black land).

## TIMELINE

### c 250,000 BC

Earliest human traces in Egypt. The valley is surrounded by savannah that provides ample food for groups of hunter-gatherers until climate change turns lush countryside to desert and forces settlement along the fertile Nile.

### c 3100 BC

Legend credits a pharaoh named Narmer with uniting the people between the Mediterranean and the first Cataract at Aswan. Memphis emerges as the first capital of a united Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt.

### 2650–2323 BC

This period of great pyramid building at Giza and Saqqara suggests that for at least part of each year, presumably when the Nile flooded, a substantial workforce was available for civic projects.

irrigation ritual. Which suggests that even right back in early times, making use of the river's gift was a key part of the role of the leader.

### Source Stories

The rise of the Nile was a matter of continual wonder for ancient Egyptians, as it was right up to the 19th century, when European explorers settled the question of the source. There is no evidence that ancient Egyptians knew where this lifeline came from. In the absence of facts, they made up stories.

One of the least convincing of all Egyptian myths concerning the rise of the Nile places the river's source in Aswan, beneath the First Cataract. From here, the story went, the river flowed north to the Mediterranean and south into Africa.

The river's life-giving force was revered as a god, Hapy. He is an unusual deity in that, contrary to the usual slim outline of most gods, Hapy is usually portrayed as a pot-bellied man with hanging breasts and a headdress of papyrus. Hapy was celebrated at a feast each year when the Nile rose. In later images, he is often shown tying papyrus and lotus plants together, a reminder that the Nile bound people together.

But the most enduring and endearing of all Egyptian myths concerning the river is devoted to the figure of Isis, the mourning wife. Wherever the river originated, the annual rising of the Nile was explained as being tears shed by the mother goddess at the loss of the good king Osiris.

### Matters of Fact

Wherever it came from, the Nile was the beginning and end for most Egyptians. They were born beside it and had their first post-natal bath in its waters. It sustained them throughout their lives, made possible the vegetables in the fields, the chickens, cows, ducks and fish on their plates, and filled their drinking vessels when they were thirsty. When it was very hot or at the end of a day's work, it was the Nile that provided relief, a place to bathe. Later, when they died, if they had the funds, their body would be taken along the river to the cult centre at Abydos. And it was water from the Nile that the embalmers used when they prepared the body for burial. But burial was a moment of total separation from this life-source for, if you were lucky, you were buried away from the damp, where the dry sands and rocks of the desert would preserve your remains throughout eternity.

But not everything about the river was generous for it also brought dangers in many forms: the crocodile, the sudden flood that washed away helpless children and brought the house down on your head, the diseases that thrived in water, and the creatures (among them the mosquito) that carried them. The river also brought the taxman, for it was on the level of flood that the level of tax was set. The formula was simple. Bureaucrats watched the rise of the river on Elephantine Island, where a gauge had been cut along the side

The clothing identified among the treasures of Tutankhamun's tomb ranges from gold-encrusted tunics to neatly folded underwear, several pairs of socks and 47 pairs of flip-flop type sandals.

## 2125–1650 BC

Thebes emerges as capital of Upper Egypt and as the pre-eminent seat of religious power. When the Theban ruler Mentuhotep II defeats his northern rival and establishes the Middle Kingdom, Thebes becomes its capital.

## 1650–1550 BC

The Hyksos – western Asian tribes settled in northern Egypt – establish control over the Egyptian Nile Valley, ushering in the Second Intermediate Period, a time of great technological and social innovation.

## 1550–1186 BC

Ahmose, prince of Thebes, defeats the Hyksos c 1532 BC and begins a period of expansion into Nubia and Palestine. Over the next two centuries, Thutmose III and his New Kingdom successors expand the empire.

of the rock. Each year's flood was recorded at its height. If the water rose to the level of 14 cubits, there would be enough food to go around. If it rose to 16, there would be an abundance – and abundance meant good taxation. And if there were, say, only eight cubits, then it was time to prepare for the worst because famine would come and many would follow Osiris to the land of spirits beyond the valley.

The river also dictated the rhythm of life and everything started with the beginning of the inundation: New Year fell as the water's rose. This was a time of celebration and also, for some, of relaxation for as the land was covered with water and one needed a boat to travel from one village to the next, farmers found time to catch up on long-neglected chores, fixing tools and working on their houses. This was also the period of the *corvée*, the labour system by which it is thought many civic projects were built, among them the pyramids, the canal cut through from the Nile to the Red Sea and, in the 19th century, the Suez Canal.

## Old Habits

Even when the old gods were long dead, and roads and railways ran alongside the river, the Nile exerted its magic and its power. In the 18th and 19th centuries it was the way in which foreigners uncovered the mysteries of the past, sailing upriver when the winds blew from the north, and finding themselves face to face with unimaginable splendour. Even then, Egyptians clung to their habits and their dependence on the river. In the 1830s, the British Orientalist Edward Lane recorded that 17 June was still called the Night of the Drop. 'It is believed,' he wrote, 'that a miraculous drop then falls into the Nile; and causes it to rise.' Lane also recorded the custom of creating a figure of a girl, the 'Bride of the Nile', out of mud, which was then washed away as the river rose, an echo of an ancient ceremony in which effigies – and perhaps also young women – were sacrificed to the rising river.

Exactly 100 years later, in 1934, the Egyptologist Margaret Murray spent a mid-September night in a Coptic village, celebrating the night of the high Nile, giving thanks 'to the Ruler of the river, no longer Osiris, but Christ; and as of old they pray for a blessing upon their children and their homes.'

This kind of spiritual bond with the river was broken when dams and barrages stopped the annual flood. But Egyptians, whether they live along the river or in one of the new satellite cities in the desert, remain as dependent as ever. Now, instead of praying to the 'Ruler of the river', they put their faith in engineers, who, like kings of old, help them make the most of the water, and in politicians who are currently renegotiating water-sharing agreements with Nile-basin neighbours. But wherever they pin their hopes, they know that as ever their happiness, their very existence, depends on water flowing past Aswan on its way to the Mediterranean.

*Ramses: The Son of Light* by Christian Jacq is the first of a five-volume popular hagiography of the famous pharaoh. The prose is simplistic, but Jacq is an Egyptologist so the basics are accurate.

*The Complete Pyramids: Solving the Ancient Mysteries* by Mark Lehner and Richard H Wilkinson is a readable reference to the famous threesome of Giza and the other 70-plus triangular-sided funerary monuments besides.

*Cleopatra* (1963) is the best known of several screen adaptations of the Ptolemaic queen's life, and best remembered for the on-set affair between Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor.

## 1352–1336 BC

Akhenaten establishes a new monotheism and a short-lived capital at Akhetaten. But by the death of his heir, Tutankhamun, in 1327, Thebes is again the capital and power is restored to the priests of Amun.

## 1294–1279 BC

Seti I restores some of the empire and also initiates a period of neo-conservatism: his temple at Abydos copies styles of the Old Kingdom. He then constructs the finest tomb in the Valley of the Kings.

## 1279–1213 BC

Seti's son, Ramses II, constructs more buildings than any other pharaoh. He makes Avaris, the old Hyksos capital and his home town, the centre of Egyptian trade, but adds to the glory of Thebes.

## CHRONOLOGY OF THE PHARAOKS

This is not a complete listing but it does include the most significant rulers mentioned throughout this book. See also p47 for a Pharaonic Who's Who.

### EARLY DYNASTIC PERIOD

#### 1st Dynasty 3100–2890 BC

including:  
Narmer (Menes) c 3100 BC

#### 2nd Dynasty 2890–2686 BC

### OLD KINGDOM

#### 3rd Dynasty 2686–2613 BC

including:  
Zoser 2667–2648 BC  
Sekhemket 2648–2640 BC

#### 4th Dynasty 2613–2494 BC

including:  
Sneferu 2613–2589 BC  
Khufu (Cheops) 2589–2566 BC  
Djedefra 2566–2558 BC  
Khafre (Chephren) 2558–2532 BC  
Menkaure (Mycerinus) 2532–2503 BC  
Shepseskaf 2503–2498 BC

#### 5th Dynasty 2494–2345 BC

including:  
Userkaf 2494–2487 BC  
Sahure 2487–2475 BC  
Neferirkare 2475–2455 BC  
Shepseskare 2455–2448 BC  
Ranefer 2448–2445 BC  
Nyuserra 2445–2421 BC  
Unas 2375–2345 BC

#### 6th Dynasty 2345–2181 BC

including:  
Teti 2345–2323 BC  
Pepi I 2321–2287 BC  
Pepi II 2278–2184 BC

#### 7th–8th Dynasties 2181–2125 BC

### FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD

#### 9th–10th Dynasties 2160–2025 BC

### MIDDLE KINGDOM

#### 11th Dynasty 2055–1985 BC

including:  
Montuhotep II 2055–2004 BC  
Montuhotep III 2004–1992 BC

## 1184–1153 BC

Ramses III provides a stable moment in an unstable century, controlling the Libyans, defeating the 'Sea People', a mix of Mediterranean tribes, and suppressing internal dissent. After his death, power slips from the throne.

## 1070 BC

By the time of his death, Ramses XI has lost control of much of southern Egypt, the palace and many Theban tombs have been robbed, and central authority has disappeared. The New Kingdom grown old.

## 945–715 BC

Libyan settlers become increasingly powerful in the Delta, eventually taking power as the 22nd and 23rd dynasties, but the Egyptian Nile is divided among a series of princes.

**12th Dynasty**

including:

Amenemhat I  
 Sesostris I  
 Amenemhat II  
 Sesostris II  
 Sesostris III  
 Amenemhat III  
 Amenemhat IV

**1985–1795 BC**

1985–1955 BC  
 1965–1920 BC  
 1922–1878 BC  
 1880–1874 BC  
 1874–1855 BC  
 1855–1808 BC  
 1808–1799 BC

**13th–14th Dynasties****1795–1650 BC****SECOND INTERMEDIATE PERIOD****15th–17th Dynasties****1650–1550 BC****NEW KINGDOM****18th Dynasty**

including:

Ahmose  
 Amenhotep I  
 Tuthmosis I  
 Tuthmosis II  
 Tuthmosis III  
 Hatshepsut  
 Amenhotep II  
 Tuthmosis IV  
 Amenhotep III  
 Akhenaten  
 Tutankhamun  
 Horemheb

**1550–1290 BC**

1550–1525 BC  
 1525–1504 BC  
 1504–1492 BC  
 1492–1479 BC  
 1479–1425 BC  
 1473–1458 BC  
 1427–1400 BC  
 1400–1390 BC  
 1390–1352 BC  
 1352–1336 BC  
 1336–1327 BC  
 1323–1295 BC

**19th Dynasty**

including:

Ramses I  
 Seti I  
 Ramses II  
 Seti II

**1295–1186 BC**

1295–1294 BC  
 1294–1279 BC  
 1279–1213 BC  
 1200–1194 BC

**20th Dynasty**

including:

Ramses III

**1186–1069 BC**

1184–1153 BC

**THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD****21st Dynasty**

including:

Psusennes I

**1069–945 BC**

1039–991 BC

**663 BC**

After a series of diplomatic and military confrontations, Ashurbanipal, King of the Assyrians, attacks Egypt, sacks Thebes and loots the Temple of Amun. Devastated Egypt is ruled by Libyan princes from Sais in the Delta.

**610–595 BC**

Late Period Pharaoh Necho encourages foreign trade by strengthening ties (and his navy) in the Mediterranean, cutting a canal to the Red Sea and sending an expedition to sail around Africa.

**525 BC**

The Persian king Cambyses makes Egypt part of his empire and rules as pharaoh, launching an attack against Nubia and then on Siwa, in which his army disappears into the desert.

## CHRISTIAN EGYPT

Coptic tradition states that Christianity arrived in Egypt in AD 45 in the form of St Mark. The story goes that St Mark, originally from Cyrene in modern-day Libya, was in Alexandria when his sandal broke. He took it to a cobbler, Ananias, who hurt his hand while working on the sandal and shouted 'O One God', at which St Mark recognised his first convert to the new religion. While there is no way to prove the story, there is no denying the basic truth that Christianity arrived early in Egypt, direct from Palestine.

The country had long been open to foreign religious influences and nowhere more so than Alexandria. At the height of their power, ancient Egyptians had exported their religions – Amun of Thebes was known and feared throughout the Mediterranean. And even in times of weakness, the cult of the goddess Isis spread throughout the Roman Empire. But Egyptians were also open to foreign religious ideas. The Persians did little to impose their gods on the country when they sacked Thebes in the 6th century BC and made Egypt part of their empire. Two centuries later, Alexander the Great viewed things differently, at least in the north of the country, for while he built shrines to Amun at Karnak and was happy to be welcomed as pharaoh by the priests at Memphis, he also encouraged Greeks and Jews to bring their gods to his new city. Alexandria under the Macedonian's successors, the Ptolemies, became a centre for multiculturalism, where people of many different beliefs and religions lived and worshipped side by side.

It wasn't always a happy coexistence. The city's history is scarred by fights between devotees of different religions, as St Mark discovered to his cost: he was executed for speaking out against the worship of the city's pagan god Serapis. And at times, decrees came from Rome that litigated against Christians, the worst coming from Emperor Diocletian. The persecution was so extreme and cost so many lives (some Coptic historians have estimated 144,000) that the Coptic Church calendar, the Era of Martyrs, begins with the year of Diocletian's accession, AD 284. But change was not far away.

In AD 293, Diocletian found himself sharing power with Constantine. In 312, just as Constantine went into battle against his opponents, he had a vision of a cross blazing in the sky, on which was written, *In this conquer*. When he emerged victorious, becoming ruler of the empire, Constantine converted to Christianity and, in 324, made Christianity the imperial religion.

By then, Egypt's Christians had absorbed much from both the form and the content of the ancient pagan religion. It is impossible to make direct parallels, but the rise of the cult of Mary appears to have been influenced by the popularity of Isis: both were said to have conceived through divine intervention. According to the late Coptic musicologist Dr Ragheb Moftah, the way in which the Coptic liturgy was performed seems to have evolved from ancient rites and in it, even today, we can hear an echo of ancient Egypt's rituals. Even the physical structure of Coptic churches echoes the layout of

*Coptic Egypt* by Christian Cannuyer tells the story from the earliest preachings by Mark the Evangelist in 1st-century-AD Alexandria to 21st-century Christianity in Egypt.

The past and present are described and ruminated over by the archaeologists leading the ongoing harbour explorations in *Alexandria Rediscovered* by Jean-Yves Empereur.

### 518 BC

Cambyse's successor, Darius I, visits Egypt, completes the canal to the Red Sea and introduces the camel, which transforms the possibilities of desert travel and the experience of modern visitors to Egypt.

### 331 BC

Alexander invades Egypt and visits the capital, Memphis, and the oracle at Siwa. He then lays out a city, Alexandria, that will become the pivot of a new Hellenic culture in the Mediterranean.

### 323 BC

On Alexander's death in Babylon, his general Ptolemy is given control of Egypt. Alexander's body is buried in Alexandria, Ptolemy's new capital. Ptolemy builds the Museion and Library and perhaps also the Pharos.



earlier pagan temples in the use of three different sacred spaces, the innermost one containing the altar reserved for priests. This is hidden from the rest of the congregation by the iconostasis, with its images of saints, just as ancient priests were hidden behind walls decorated with gods and pharaohs.

The early need to hold hidden prayer, the desire to follow Jesus' example of retreat from the world, the increasing difficulty of reconciling spiritual values with the demands and temptations of urban life, and perhaps also the memory of pagan hermits, led some Christians to leave the Nile Valley and to seek a spiritual purity in the desert. The man credited with being the first is St Paul, born in Alexandria in AD 228, who is said to have fled to the Eastern Desert to escape persecution and died there in AD 343. Although there are 5th-century accounts of the man, there is still some controversy as to whether St Paul existed. There is no such problem with the man he is said to have inspired.

St Anthony was the son of wealthy landowners, but found himself orphaned at an early age. As an adult, he sold his inheritance, gave the proceeds to the poor and retreated to the desert near St Paul. Other Christians soon followed, inspired by his example and perhaps also to escape persecution. The hermit moved further up into the hills, hiding alone in a cave, while leaving his followers to a life of collective retreat – a first monastery – in the valley below. Although there may have been earlier religious communities in the desert, especially one in Palestine, Copts credit St Anthony with creating a new way of life that sought salvation through retreat. It was left to St Pachomius, born around AD 285, to order the life of these hermits into what we would now recognise as monasteries, which has proved to be one of the most important movements in Christianity.

Egypt's Christians played a decisive role in the evolution of the young religion. In a series of meetings with Christians from across the empire, Copts argued over the nature of divinity, the duties of a Christian, the correct way to pray and many other aspects of religious life. In one matter in particular, Copts found themselves isolated. Many Christians argued that, as Jesus was born, there must have been a time when he was not divine and part of God. The Coptic clergy, particularly one Athanasius, argued that this idea of a dual nature was a throwback to polytheism. The crunch came in 325 at a council in Nicea, organised by the emperor, at which the Alexandrians triumphed: the Nicene Creed stated unequivocally that Father and Son are one. With this success, Alexandria confirmed its status as the centre of Mediterranean culture.

In 391, Emperor Theodosius issued an edict that banned people from visiting pagan temples, but also even looking at pagan statues. While the edict was ignored in some places, it was taken seriously in Alexandria, where the Temple of Serapis still stood in the city centre. The golden statue of the god remained in his sanctuary, adored by the faithful, until the Christian patriarch

*The British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* by I Shaw and P Nicholson gives an authoritative overview of ancient Egypt.

## c 310–250 BC

Under Ptolemaic patronage and with access to a library of 700,000 written works, scholars in Alexandria calculated the earth's circumference, discovered it circles the sun and wrote the definitive edition of Homer's work.

## 246–221 BC

Ptolemy III Euergetes I begins a building programme that includes the Serapeum in Alexandria and the Temple of Horus at Edfu. His successor continues his work, adding a new tomb to Alexander in Alexandria.

## 145–116 BC

Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II's reign is characterised by violence and brutality, but also by the opening of Edfu Temple and by building at Phiae and Kom Ombo.

**'Under their brilliant leader Amr ibn al-As, the Arabs swept through a badly defended and ill-prepared Egypt'**

of Alexandria stirred a crowd and led them in an attack on the temple: the god was toppled from his plinth – proving false the prophets who foresaw doom should he be damaged – and then dragged through the streets and burned. The crowd also set fire to the temple library, a store of some three or four hundred scrolls, which had been one of the largest collections in the world, since the Alexandrian 'mother library' had been burned during an attack by Julius Caesar. The patriarch then built a church over the ruins.

Constantine had moved his capital to the city of Byzantium, renamed Constantinople (now Istanbul), in 330 and from that moment power seeped from Alexandria. More than a century later, in 451, the Egyptians were officially sidelined at the Council of Chalcedon. Refusing to accept that Jesus had one person but two natures, which again seemed a revival of polytheism, the Egyptians split with the rest of Christianity, their patriarch was excommunicated and soon after Alexandria was sacked.

Yet in spite of the religious split, Egypt was still part of the Byzantine Empire, ruled by a foreign governor and its fortunes were tied to the empire. This caused ever-greater tension, which peaked in the reign of Emperor Justinian (528–565). Alexandrians stoned the emperor's governor, who retaliated by sending his army to punish the people. In 629, a messenger travelled to the emperor in Byzantium from Arabia. He had been sent by a man named Mohamed, to reveal a new religion, Islam. The messenger was murdered on the way. Ten years later, Arab armies invaded Egypt.

Under their brilliant leader Amr ibn al-As, the Arabs swept through a badly defended and ill-prepared Egypt, defeated the Byzantine army near Babylon (see p123) and found the gates of Alexandria opened to them without a fight.

Amr didn't force Egyptians to convert to the new religion, but did levy a tax on unbelievers and showed preference to those who did convert. Slowly, inevitably, the population turned, although how fast is open to dispute. Eventually, however, some monasteries emptied and Coptic writing and language, the last version of the language of the pharaohs, stopped being spoken in public. Christian communities remained strongest in the new capital, Cairo, and in the valley south as far as the ancient capital, Thebes (Luxor). Increasingly Christians also fell back on the monasteries. In places such as Wadi Natrun and studded along the Nile Valley, monastic communities hid behind their high walls, preserving the old language, the old traditions and, in their libraries, some of the old wisdom.

By the middle of the 19th century, even the monasteries were under threat and European travellers sailing up the Nile were shocked to discover monks swimming naked up to their boats to beg for food and money. The decline continued until the 20th century. By then, only around 10% of Egyptians were Christians and the great monasteries were at their lowest ebb. Ironically it has responded to threats by enjoying something of a revival. Modernising

## 30 BC

After Anthony and Cleopatra are defeated at Actium, the queen commits suicide, bringing an end to the Ptolemies and the start of Roman rule, with Egypt initially the personal property of the Octavian (the future Emperor Augustus Caesar).

## AD 45

According to Coptic tradition, St Mark arrived in Alexandria this year and converted the first Egyptian, an Alexandria cobbler, to Christianity. The new religion was certainly established in Egypt by the end of the century.

## c 271

St Anthony begins his retreat from the world, leaving home near Beni Suef and living in a cave in the Eastern Desert. He soon attracts others, whom he organises into a loose community and Christianity's first monks.

influences in the early 20th century sparked a cultural renewal that breathed new life into, among other things, the long-defunct tradition of icon painting. Islamist violence aimed at Copts in the 1980s and 1990s had the effect of significantly increasing the number of monks. At St Anthony's Monastery it rose from 24 in 1960 to 69 in 1986, in St Bishoi from 12 to 115. But the majority of Christians in Egypt still live in towns and cities along the Nile, still coping with continual threat from Muslim extremists, still cut off from the rest of the world's Christians and still, as ever, proud of their claim to be the true heirs of ancient Egypt.

## THE MAMLUKS

Every Egyptian army had its contingent of foreign soldiers, sometimes mercenaries, often slaves. When Psammetichus II sent an expedition into Nubia in 593 BC, a large contingent of Greek mercenaries went with them and left graffiti on the walls of Abu Simbel to tell us about it. In fact, no ruler of Egypt seems ever to have embarked on a large-scale campaign without foreign fighters. And often even the rulers were foreign – Macedonians like Ptolemy I (323–283 BC), Romans like Octavian (30 BC–AD 14) and even Kurds such as Salah ad-Din (1171–93), the Saladin of Crusader fame.

Saladin had created a dynasty, the Ayyubids, and reinstated Sunni Islam after the Shia rule of the Fatamids (969–1171). One of the last rulers of his dynasty, a man named Sultan As-Salih, brought the innovation of a permanent Turkic slave-soldier class. Most sultans relied on friends and relatives to provide a measure of security. As-Salih was so despised by all that he thought it wise to provide his own protection and did so by purchasing a large number of slaves from the land between the Urals and the Caspian. These men were freed on arrival in Egypt – their name, Mamluks, means 'owned' or 'slave' – and formed into a warrior class, which came to rule Egypt.

Mamluks owed their allegiance not to a blood line but to their original owner, the emir. New purchases maintained the groups. There was no system of hereditary lineage; instead it was rule by the strongest. Rare was the sultan who died of old age. Natural born soldiers, Mamluks fought a series of successful campaigns that gave Egypt control of all of Palestine and Syria, the Hejaz and much of north Africa, the largest Islamic empire of the late Middle Ages. Because they were forbidden to bequeath their wealth, Mamluks built on a grand scale, endowing Cairo with the most exquisite mosques, schools and tombs. During their 267-year reign (1250–1517), the city was the intellectual and cultural centre of the Islamic world.

The contradictions in the Mamluk constitution are typified in the figure of Sultan Qaitbey, who was bought as a slave-boy by one sultan and witnessed the brief reigns of nine more before clawing his way to power. As sultan he rapaciously taxed all his subjects and dealt out vicious punishments with his own hands, once tearing out the eyes and tongue of a court chemist who had

*Zayni Barakat by Gamal al-Ghitani is full of intrigue, back-stabbing and general Machiavellian goings-on in the twilight of Mamluk-era Cairo.*

Many of the tales recounted each night by Sherezade in *The Thousand and One Nights* (Anonymous) are set in Mamluk-era Egypt, particularly in Cairo, referred to as 'mother of the world'.

Favoured punishments employed by the Mamluks included *al-tawsit*, in which the victim was cut in half at the belly, and *al-khazuq* (impaling).

391

Fifty years after the Byzantine Emperor Constantine spoke against the religion of the pharaohs, his successor Theodosius makes paganism a treasonable offence and Alexandria's Temple of Serapis burns, along with its library of 40,000 books.

451

At the Council of Chalcedon, Egyptian Christians refuse to accept the Imperial view that Jesus Christ had two natures, human and divine. The Coptic Church has been separated from the rest of Christianity ever since.

640

An Arab army under Amr ibn al-As sweeps through Egypt and establishes a base at Babylon (now part of Cairo). The following year, Amr captures the Byzantine capital, Alexandria.

failed to transform lead into gold. Yet Qaitbey marked his ruthless sultanishp with some of Cairo's most beautiful monuments, notably his mosque, which stands in the Northern Cemetery (p139).

The funding for the Mamluks' great buildings came from trade. A canal existed that connected the Red Sea with the Nile at Cairo, and thus the Mediterranean, forming a vital link in the busy commercial route between Europe and India and the Orient. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Mamluks worked with the Venetians to control east-west trade and both grew fabulously rich from it.

The end of these fabled days came about for two reasons at the beginning of the 16th century: Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope freed European merchants from the heavy taxes charged by Cairo; and the Ottoman Turks emerged as a mighty new force, looking to unify the Muslim world. In 1516 the Mamluks, under the command of their penultimate sultan Al-Ghuri, were obliged to meet the Turkish threat. The battle, which took place at Aleppo in Syria, resulted in complete defeat for the Mamluks. In January of the following year the Turkish sultan Selim I entered Cairo and although the Mamluks remained in power in Egypt, they never again enjoyed their former prominence or autonomy.

## FOREIGN INVADERS

The story of ancient Egypt is the story of Egypt's relationships with its neighbours, for its wealth attracted some and its strategic location on the Mediterranean and Red Seas, and on the trade routes between Africa and Asia, attracted others. When it was strong, it controlled the gold of Nubia and the trade route across the Levant – not for nothing was the image of Ramses II crushing the Hittites at Kadesh splashed across so many temple walls. When it was weak, it caught the attention of the power of the moment. In 663, the Assyrian leader Ashurbanipal sacked Thebes. A century later the Persians were in control of the Nile. In 331 BC, Alexander the Great moved against the Egyptians and incorporated them into his Hellenic empire. In 30 BC, Octavian, the future Emperor Augustus Caesar, annexed the country as his own property. Arab armies stormed through in the 7th century AD just as Ottoman ones did in the 16th century. But by the end of the 18th century, the arrival of Europeans heralded the start of a very different age.

### Napoleon & Description de l'Égypte

When Napoleon and his musket-armed forces blew apart the scimitar-wielding Mamluk cavalry at the Battle of the Pyramids in 1798, which he claimed he was doing with the approval of the Ottoman sultan, he dragged Egypt into the age of geopolitics. For all his professions about wanting to revive Egypt's glory, free it from the yoke of tyranny and educate its masses, what he really cared about was striking a blow at Britain. Unable to invade Britain,

The sixth Fatimid caliph, El Hakim, was notorious for his unusual behaviour: convinced that a woman's place was in the home, he banned the manufacture of women's shoes.

832

The Caliph al-Mamun, son of Haroun ar-Rashid, arrives to suppress a Coptic uprising, but also forces a way into the Pyramid of Cheops in the hope of finding treasure. None is recorded as being found.

868

A Turkish general Ahmed ibn Tulun arrives as a governor for the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, but ends up establishing his own Tulunid dynasty.

969

The Shiite general Jawhar lays the foundations for a new palace-city, Al-Qahira (Cairo), where a new university-mosque, al-Azhar, is founded in 971. Two years later the Fatimid caliph, al-Muizz, settles here from Tunis.

Napoleon found a way to strike at British interests by capturing Egypt and in the process taking control of the quickest route between Europe and Britain's fast-growing empire in the East.

But Napoleon had plans for the newly conquered country. He established a French-style government, revamped the tax system, brought in Africa's first printing press, implemented public works projects and introduced new crops and a new system of weights and measures. He also brought 167 scholars and artists, whom he commissioned to make a complete study of Egypt's monuments, crafts, arts, flora and fauna, and of its society and people. The resulting work was published as the 24-volume *Description de l'Égypte*, which did much to stimulate the study of Egyptian antiquities.

Napoleon's army was less successful than his scholars. A British fleet under Admiral Nelson had been criss crossing the Mediterranean trying to find the French force and on 1 August, just a week after Napoleon had ridden into Cairo, they found them at anchor in Aboukir Bay, off the coast of Alexandria. Only three French warships survived the ensuing Battle of the Nile. Encouraged by the British, the Ottoman sultan then sent an army that was trounced by the French, which put paid to any pretence that the French were in Egypt with the complicity of Constantinople. Relations between the occupied and occupier deteriorated rapidly and uprisings in the capital could only be quashed by shelling that left 3000 Egyptians dead.

When the British landed an army, also at Aboukir, in 1801, the French agreed to an armistice and departed the way they had come.

## The Albanian Mercenary

The French and then British departure left Egypt politically unstable, a situation that was soon exploited by a lieutenant in an Albanian contingent of the Ottoman army, named Mohammed Ali. Within five years of the French evacuation, he had fought and conspired his way to become pasha (governor) of Egypt. Although he was nominally the vassal of Constantinople, like so many governors before him, he soon realised that the country could be his own.

The sultan in Constantinople was too weak to resist this challenge to his power. And once he had defeated a British force of 5000 men, the only threat to Mohammed Ali could come from the Mamluk beys (leaders). Any danger here was swiftly and viciously dealt with. On 1 March 1811, Mohammed Ali invited some 470 Mamluk beys to the Citadel to feast his son's imminent departure for Mecca. When the feasting was over the Mamluks mounted their lavishly decorated horses and were led in procession down the narrow, high-sided defile below what is now the Police Museum. But as they approached the Bab al-Azab, the great gates were swung closed and gunfire rained down from above. After the fusillades, Mohammed Ali's soldiers waded in with swords and axes to finish the

The Great Pyramid of Khufu (built in 2570 BC) remained the tallest artificial structure in the world until the building of the Eiffel Tower in 1889.

*Ancient Egypt: the Great Discoveries* by Nicholas Reeves is a chronology of 200 years of marvellous finds, from the Rosetta Stone (1799) to the Valley of the Golden Mummies (1999).

At the Battle of the Pyramids, Napoleon's forces took just 45 minutes to rout the Mamluk army, killing 1000 for the loss of just 29 of their own men.

## 1171

Saladin, the caliph's Kurdish vizier, seizes power, restores Sunni rule and establishes the Ayyubid dynasty. In 1176 he begins work on a citadel in Cairo, home to the city's rulers for the next seven centuries.

## 1250

Mamluk slave warriors, most of Turkish or Kurdish origin, seize control of Egypt. Although their rule was often harsh and anarchic, they graced the capital with some of its most impressive and beautiful monuments.

## 1468

The Mamluk Sultan Qayt Bey begins a 27-year reign which brings stability and wealth to the country. Qayt Bey is a prodigious builder, constructing a notable tomb complex in Cairo and a fort on the site of the Pharos in Alexandria.

*City of the Horizon, City of Dreams, City of the Dead* by Anton Gill is a highly readable mystery trilogy set in the turmoil of post-Akhenaten Egypt.

Famed as an American icon, the monument now known as the Statue of Liberty was originally intended to stand at the mouth of the Suez Canal.

The opera *Aida* was originally commissioned for the opening ceremony of the Suez Canal, but Verdi was late delivering and it was first performed on Christmas Eve, 1871, two years after the opening.

job. Legend relates that only one Mamluk escaped alive, leaping over the wall on his horse.

Mohammed Ali's reign is pivotal in the history of Egypt. Having watched the old Mamluk army flounder against modern European weapons and tactics, he recognised the need to modernise his new army, as well as his new country. Under his uncompromising rule, Egypt abandoned its medieval-style feudalism and looked to Europe for innovation. In his long reign (he died in 1848), Mohammed Ali modernised the army, built a navy, built roads, cut a new canal linking Alexandria with the Nile, introduced public education, improved irrigation, built a barrage across the Nile and began planting Egypt's fields with the valuable cash crop, cotton. His heirs continued the work, implementing reforms and social projects, foremost of which were the building of Africa's first railway, opening factories and starting a telegraph and postal system. Egypt's fledgling cotton industry boomed as production in the USA was disrupted by civil war, and revenues were directed into ever-grander schemes. Grandest of all was the Suez Canal, which opened in 1869 to great fanfare and an audience that included European royalty, foremost being the Empress Eugenie of France. In the same year that the Khedive (Viceroy) Ismail announced that Egypt was now part of Europe, not Africa, Thomas Cook led the first organised package tour to see the wonders of ancient Egypt. It was the start of an industry that was to become one of Egypt's core businesses, mass tourism.

Khedive Ismail had taken on more debt than even Egypt's booming economy could handle and European politicians and banks were quick to exploit his growing weakness. Six years after opening the canal, Ismail was forced to sell his controlling share to the British government and soon after that, bankruptcy and British pressure forced him to abdicate. This sort of foreign meddling in Egyptian affairs created great resentment, especially among a group of officers in the Egyptian army, who moved against the new khedive. In 1882, under the pretext of restoring order, the British fleet bombarded Alexandria, and British soldiers defeated a nationalist Egyptian army.

## The Veiled Protectorate

The British had no desire to make Egypt a colony: their main reason for involvement was to ensure the safety of the Suez Canal. So they allowed the heirs of Mohammed Ali to remain on the throne, while real power was concentrated in the hands of the British Agent, Sir Evelyn Baring. By appointing British 'advisors' to Egyptian ministries and himself advising the khedive, Baring operated what became known as the veiled protectorate, colonisation by another name.

British desire to ensure the safety of their passage to India coloured Egyptian policy for the next few decades. For instance, it became increasingly obvious that controlling Egypt meant controlling the Nile and therefore an

## 1517

Turkish sultan Selim I takes Cairo, executes the last Mamluk sultan and makes Egypt a Turkish province. For almost 300 years, it will be ruled, however weakly, from Istanbul.

## 1798

Napoleon invades, bringing a group of scholars, who produce the first full description of Egypt's antiquities. The British force the French to leave, but their legacy, a fascination with ancient Egypt, lives on.

## 1805

An Albanian mercenary, Mohammed Ali, exploits the power vacuum left by the French to seize power and establish a new 'Egyptian' dynasty; he begins a modernisation programme that transforms the country.

Egyptian force was sent to protect that interest in Sudan. When they came up against the Islamist uprising of the Mahdi, and following the death of General Charles Gordon in Khartoum in 1885, British troops became involved on the middle Nile.

The protectorate did much to achieve its ends. The canal was secure, Egypt's finances were bolstered, the bureaucracy and infrastructure improved, and there were some social advances, but the fact remained that Egypt and its resources were being used to further British foreign policy. This situation became even more frustrating for Egyptians with the outbreak of WWI. When Turkey, still officially sovereign of Egypt, sided with Germany and against Britain, the British felt the need to make Egypt an official protectorate.

The desire for self-determination was strengthened by the Allies' use of the country as a barracks during a war that most Egyptians regarded as having nothing to do with them. Popular national sentiments were articulated by riots in 1919 and, more eloquently, by the likes of Saad Zaghloul, the most brilliant of an emerging breed of young Egyptian politicians, who said of the British, 'I have no quarrel with them personally but I want to see an independent Egypt'. The British allowed the formation of a nationalist political party, called the Wafd (Delegation), and granted Egypt its sovereignty, but this was seen as an empty gesture. King Fuad enjoyed little popularity among his people and the British still kept a tight rein on the administration.

The British and their Allies came to Egypt in ever-greater numbers following the outbreak of WWII. The war wasn't all bad news for the Egyptians, certainly not for shopkeepers and businessmen who saw thousands of Allied soldiers pouring into the towns and cities with money to burn on 48-hour leave from the desert. But there was a vocal element who saw the Germans as potential liberators. Students held rallies in support of Rommel, and a small cabal of Egyptian officers, including future presidents Nasser and Sadat, plotted to aid the German general's advance on their city.

Rommel pushed the Allied forces back almost to Alexandria, which had the British hurriedly burning documents in such quantity that the skies over Cairo turned dark with the ash, but the Germans did not break through. Instead, British maintained a military and political presence in Egypt until a day of flames almost seven years after the war.

## INDEPENDENT EGYPT

### A Riot of a Time

On 26 January 1952, 'Black Saturday', Cairo was set on fire. After years of demonstrations, strikes and riots against foreign rule, an Anglo-Egyptian showdown over a police station in the Suez Canal zone provided the spark that ignited the capital. Shops and businesses owned or frequented by foreigners were torched by mobs and many landmarks of 70 years of British rule were reduced to charred ruins within a day.

The best source for accurate plans of the Theban tombs can be found in Reeves and Wilkinson's 1996 book *The Complete Valley of the Kings*, supplemented by Siliotti's *Guide to the Valley of the Kings*.

J Baines and J Malek's *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, B Manley's *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt* and BJ Kemp's *Anatomy of a Civilisation* are all great Egypt resources.

1856

Africa's first railway, between Tanta and Cairo, is built by British engineer Robert Stephenson. The line extended to Suez in 1858 and was popular with Europeans heading to India and the Far East until the opening of the Suez Canal.

1869

Khedive Ismail, Mohammed Ali's grandson, opens the Suez Canal. The British, who had preferred a railway, soon take control of the waterway as the quickest route to their empire in the East.

1882

British troops invade to suppress nationalist elements in the army. Although they officially restore power to the khedive, Britain effectively rules Egypt in what becomes the 'veiled protectorate'.



One of the most notable casualties of Black Saturday was Shepherd's, the city's most famous hotel, and host to European royalty and Hollywood stars. A new Shepherd's was built beside the Nile in 1957.

*Cairo: The City Victorious* by Max Rodenbeck is the most authoritative and entertaining read on the convoluted and picturesque 1000-year history of the Egyptian capital.

The trilogy of *The Mummy* (1999), *The Mummy Returns* (2001) and *The Scorpion King* (2002) was written by Stephen Sommers. The films feature fabulous art direction and far-fetched plots set in ancient and early-20th-century Egypt.

But while the smoke cleared, the sense of agitation remained, not just against the British but also against the monarchy that most Egyptians regarded as too easily influenced by the British. King Farouk assumed the monarchy would survive the turmoil because it could count on the support of the Egyptian Army. But a faction within the officer corps, known as the Free Officers, had long been planning a coup. On 20 July 1952, the leader of the Free Officers, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, heard that a new minister of war knew of the group and had planned their arrest. Two nights later, army units loyal to the Free Officers moved on key posts in the capital and by the following morning the monarchy had fallen. King Farouk, descendant of the Albanian Mohammed Ali, departed from Alexandria harbour on the royal yacht on 26 July 1952, leaving Egypt to be ruled by Egyptians for the first time since the pharaohs.

Colonel Nasser became president in elections held in 1956. With the aim of returning some of Egypt's wealth to its much-exploited peasantry, but also in an echo of the events of Russia in 1917, the country's landowners were dispossessed and many of their assets nationalised. Nasser also moved against the country's huge foreign community and although he did not force them to emigrate, his new measures persuaded many to sell up and ship out.

In the year of his inauguration, Nasser successfully faced down Britain and France in a confrontation over the Suez Canal, which was mostly owned by British and French investors. On 26 July, the fourth anniversary of King Farouk's departure, Nasser announced that he had nationalised the Suez Canal to finance the building of a great dam that would control the flooding of the Nile and boost Egyptian agriculture. A combined British, French and Israeli invasion force, intended to take possession of the canal, resulted in diplomatic embarrassment and undignified retreat after the UN and US applied pressure. Nasser emerged from the conflict a hero of the developing world, a sort of Robin Hood and Ramses rolled into one, and the man who had finally and publicly shaken off the colonial yoke.

## Neighbours and Friends

Nasser's show of strength in 1956 led to many years of drum-beating and antagonism between Egypt and its Arab friends, and their unwelcome neighbour Israel. On June 1967 Israel launched a surprise attack and destroyed Egypt's air force before it even got into the air. With it went the confidence and credibility of Nasser and his nation.

Relations with Israel had been hostile ever since its founding in 1948. Egypt had sent soldiers to fight alongside Palestinians against the newly proclaimed Jewish state and ended up on the losing side. Since that time, the Arabs had kept up a barrage of anti-Zionist rhetoric. Although privately Nasser acknowledged that the Arabs would probably lose another war against Israel, for public consumption he gave rabble-rousing speeches about liberating Palestine. But he was a skilled orator and by early 1967 the mood

## 1902

Inauguration of the Aswan Dam, the world's largest at that time, and the Asyut Barrage, which help control the Nile flood. The Egyptian Museum is also opened on what is now Cairo's Midan Tahrir.

## 1914

When Turkey sides with Germany in the war, Britain moves to make Egypt an official British Protectorate. A new ruler, Hussein Kamel, takes the title of Sultan of Egypt.

## 1922

Britain ends the protectorate and grants Egypt independence, but reserves the right to defend Egypt, its interests in Sudan and, most importantly, the Suez Canal, where Britain continues to maintain a large military presence.

engendered throughout the Arab world by these speeches was beginning to catch up with him. Soon other Arab leaders started to accuse him of cowardice and of hiding behind the UN troops stationed in Sinai since the Suez Crisis. Nasser responded by ordering the peacekeepers out and blockading the Strait of Tiran, effectively closing the southern Israeli port of Eilat. He gave Israel reassurances that he wasn't going to attack but meanwhile massed his forces east of Suez. Israel struck first.

When the shooting stopped six days later, Israel controlled all of the Sinai Peninsula and had closed the Suez Canal (which didn't reopen for another eight years). A humiliated Nasser offered to resign, but in a spontaneous outpouring of support, the Egyptian people wouldn't accept this move and he remained in office. However, it was to be for only another three years; abruptly in November 1970, the president died of a heart attack.

Anwar Sadat, another of the Free Officers and Egypt's next president, instigated a reversal of foreign policy. Nasser had looked to the Soviet Union for inspiration, but Sadat looked to the US, swapping socialist principles for capitalist opportunism. Having kept a low profile for a decade and a half, the wealthy resurfaced and were joined by a large, new, moneyed middle class who grew rich on the back of Sadat's much-touted *al-infitah* (open door policy). Sadat also believed that to revitalise Egypt's economy he would have to deal with Israel. But first he needed bargaining power, a basis for negotiations.

On 6 October 1973, the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, Egypt launched a surprise attack across the Suez Canal. Its army beat back Israel's superior forces and crossed their supposedly impregnable line of fortifications. Although these initial gains were later reversed, Egypt's national pride was restored and Sadat's negotiating strategy had succeeded.

In November 1977, a time when Arab leaders still refused to talk publicly to Israel, Sadat travelled to Jerusalem to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel. The following year, he and the Israeli premier signed the Camp David Agreement in which Israel agreed to withdraw from Sinai in return for Egyptian recognition of Israel's right to exist. There was shock in the Arab world, where Sadat's rejection of Nasser's pan-Arabist principles was seen as a betrayal. As a result, Egypt lost much prestige among the Arabs, who moved the HQ of the Arab League out of Cairo, and Sadat lost his life. On 6 October 1981, at a parade commemorating the 1973 War, one of his soldiers, a member of an Islamist group, broke from the marching ranks and sprayed the presidential stand with gunfire. Sadat was killed instantly.

## Mubarak & the Rise of the Islamist Movement

Sadat was succeeded by another of the Free Officers, Hosni Mubarak, a former airforce general and vice president. Less flamboyant than Sadat and less charismatic than Nasser, Mubarak has been called unimaginative and indecisive, but has managed to carry out a balancing act on several

Both Egypt and Israel were able to claim victory in the October 1973 war. The Egyptians boast of having broken the Israeli hold on Sinai while the Israelis were fighting their way towards Cairo when the UN imposed a ceasefire. This sense of victory made the Camp David peace talks possible.

As a young Egyptian officer during WWII, Anwar Sadat was imprisoned by the British for conspiring with German spies.

### 1922

Howard Carter discovers the tomb of Tutankhamun. The first great Egyptological discovery in the age of mass media, the tomb contains more than 3000 objects, which take 10 years to record and remove.

### 1952

Anti-British sentiment leads to many foreign buildings in Cairo being burned. By the summer, Nasser and his fellow Free Officers have overthrown King Farouk and established the Republic of Egypt.

### 1967

Egypt, Syria and Jordan are defeated by Israel in what becomes known as the Six Day War. Egypt loses control of the Sinai Peninsula and Nasser resigns, only to be returned to power by popular demand.

*No God but God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* by Genevieve Abdo is one of the best books on the Egyptian Islamist movement. It examines the movement as a response to a general increase in Muslim piety and the ineptitude of governance in the post-Nasser era.

*A History of Egypt* by PJ Vatiokis is the best one-volume history available, although it's a decidedly modern history with a focus on the 19th and 20th centuries.

The site of Luxor Temple has been a place of worship for the last 3500 years and remains one today: the Mosque of Abu al-Haggag is situated high above the great court.

fronts, abroad and at home. To the irritation of more hard-line states such as Syria and Libya, Mubarak rehabilitated Egypt in the eyes of the Arab world without abandoning the treaty with Israel. At the same time, he managed to keep the lid on the Islamist extremists at home. In the early 1990s the lid blew off.

Despite their use of religion, Egypt's Islamist groups are part of a political response to harsh socio-economic conditions. More than 30 years after the revolution, government promises had failed to keep up with the population explosion and a generation of youths was living in squalid, overcrowded housing, without jobs and with little or no hope for the future. With a repressive political system that allowed little chance to voice legitimate opposition, the only hope lay with Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood and their calls for change. Denied recognition by the state as a legal political entity, in the 1980s and 1990s the Islamists turned to force. There were frequent attempts on the life of the president and his ministers, and clashes with the security forces. The matter escalated from a domestic issue to a matter of international concern when Islamists began to target one of the state's most vulnerable and valuable sources of income: tourists.

Several groups of foreign tourists were shot at, bombed or otherwise assaulted throughout the 1990s, most horrifically in 1997 with the sickening one-two of the fire-bomb attack on a tour bus outside the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, followed a few weeks later by the massacre of holidaymakers at the Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor by members of the Gama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group), a Muslim Brotherhood splinter group.

The brutality of the massacre and its success at deterring international visitors destroyed grass-roots support for militants and the Muslim Brotherhood declared a ceasefire the following year. Things were relatively quiet until October 2004, when bombs at Taba, on the border with Israel, and the nearby Ras Shayan camp, killed 34 and signalled the start of an unsettled 12 months.

In 2005 President Mubarak bowed to growing international pressure to bring the country's political system in line with Western-style democracy, and proposed a constitutional amendment (subsequently approved by parliament and ratified at a national referendum) that aimed to introduce direct and competitive presidential elections. While some pundits saw this as a step in the right direction, others suspected it was a sham, particularly as popular opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood were still banned and other independent candidates were required to have the backing of at least 65 members of the lower house of parliament. As the lower house was dominated by the National Democratic Party (NDP), the possibility of real change was slight. When the Kifaya! (Enough!) coalition of opposition groups protested at these restrictions, security forces cracked down. Ayman Nour, the leader of the popular Ghad (Tomorrow) party, was jailed on what many claimed were trumped-up charges and opposition rallies around the country were violently dispersed.

## 1970

Fifty-two-year-old Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian president since 1956, dies of a heart attack and is replaced by his fellow revolutionary, Anwar Sadat.

## 1971

The Aswan High Dam is completed. Eleven years in the making, it extends Lake Nasser to some 510km, forces the relocation of 50,000 Nubians and many monuments, and extends Egypt's farmland by 30%.

## 1973

In October, Egyptian forces attack and cross the supposedly impregnable Israeli defences along the Suez Canal. Although the Egyptians are repulsed and Israel threatens Cairo, the war is seen as an Egyptian success.

At this stage the banned Muslim Brotherhood began holding its own rallies and there were two isolated terrorist incidents in Cairo aimed at foreign tourists, both carried out by members of the same pro-Islamist family. Soon afterwards, three bombs at the popular beach resort of Sharm el-Sheikh claimed the lives of 88 people, most of them Egyptian. Various groups claimed responsibility, tourism took an immediate hit and Egyptians braced themselves for the possibility of further terrorist incursions and domestic unrest.

President Mubarak won the 2005 election with 89% of the vote, though with a turnout of just 23% of the 32 million registered voters, he could hardly claim to have a popular mandate. Even then, opposition parties and candidates (including Ayman Nour) alleged that the vote had been rigged and that the result was invalid.

They were even more concerned when subsequent parliamentary elections in November 2005 were marred by widespread allegations that pro-government supporters had physically prevented some voters from entering polling booths and voting for Brotherhood-aligned independent candidates. Even after these intimidation tactics, the Muslim Brotherhood independents managed to win an extraordinary 88 seats in the 444-seat national parliament (six times the number that they had previously held), making the Brotherhood a major player on the national political scene despite its officially illegal status.

## Egypt Today

Despite the ever-present – though slim – threat of an Islamist uprising, the two biggest challenges facing President Mubarak's government as this book goes to print are not associated with an election backlash, religious extremism or global terrorism. Nor are they related to the constant international and opposition denunciations of press censorship and other infringements on human rights in Egypt.

The single biggest threat to the NDP's hold on power is the irrefutable fact that Egypt is in serious economic crisis, and has been for many years. The national economy, often described as a basket case, has to cope with a massive growth in population, rise in unemployment, and decline in the value of the Egyptian currency. Perhaps of greater concern is uncertainty over the health of President Mubarak. When the national paper *Al-Dastur* ran rumours of the president's ill health in September 2007, the editor was arrested for damaging the public interest and some US\$350 million was withdrawn from the Egyptian stock market by nervous foreign investors. The president's demise is an inevitability – he was one of the Free Officers who overthrew the monarchy in 1952 – but the succession is far from clear. The constitution states that power passes to the vice president, but Mubarak has always refused to appoint one. Many rumours surround the president's son, Gamal Mubarak. But whoever does succeed the current president will only do so with the blessing of the armed forces.

Many commentators recognised that Gamal Mubarak's 2007 wedding in Sharm el-Sheikh removed one of the last obstacles to him becoming the next president. While most Egyptians marry young, Mubarak was still unmarried in his early 40s.

## 1981

President Sadat is assassinated by Islamist army officers, an event precipitated by his having signed the Camp David peace accord with Israel in 1978. He is replaced by Vice President Hosni Mubarak.

## 1988

Naguib Mafouz wins the Nobel Prize for Literature. Although many Egyptians feel he is not the best of their writers, his nomination, the first for an Arab writer, is the cause of great nationalist pride.

## 2005

After a highly controversial presidential election, in which American pressure forces the acceptance of other candidates, President Mubarak wins a fifth term (25th year) in office.

# Pharaonic Egypt Dr Joann Fletcher

Dr Joann Fletcher is an Egyptologist, a writer, and a consultant to museums and the media. For more biographical information, see p552.

Despite its rather clichéd image, there is so much more to ancient Egypt than temples, tombs and Tutankhamun. As the world's first nation-state, predating the civilisations of Greece and Rome by several millennia, Egypt was responsible for some of the most important achievements in human history – it was where writing was invented, the first stone monuments erected and an entire culture set in place, which remained largely unchanged for thousands of years.

All this was made possible by the Nile River, which brought life to this virtually rainless land. In contrast to the vast barren 'red land' of desert that the Egyptians called *deshret*, the narrow river banks were known as *kemet* (black land), named after the rich silt deposited by the river's annual floods. The abundant harvests grown in this rich earth were then gathered as taxes by a highly organised bureaucracy working on behalf of the king (pharaoh). They redirected this wealth to run the administration and to fund ambitious building projects designed to enhance royal status. Although such structures have come to symbolise ancient Egypt, the survival of so many pyramids, temples and tombs have created a misleading impression of the Egyptians as a morbid bunch obsessed with religion and death, when they simply loved life so much that they went to enormous lengths to ensure it continued for eternity.

The depth of this conviction suffused every aspect of the ancient Egyptians' lives, and gave their culture its incredible coherence and conservatism. They believed they had their gods to take care of them, and each pharaoh was regarded as the gods' representative on earth, ruling by divine approval. Absolute monarchy was integral to Egyptian culture, and the country's history was shaped around the lengths of each pharaoh's reign. Thirty royal dynasties ruled over a 3000-year period, now divided into the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms separated by intermittent periods of unrest (Intermediate periods) when the country split into north (Lower Egypt) and south (Upper Egypt).

When this split finally became permanent at the end of the New Kingdom (around 1069 BC), foreign powers were gradually able to take control of the government. Yet even then, Egyptian culture was so deeply rooted that the successive invaders could not escape its influence, and Libyans, Nubians and Persians all came to adopt traditional Egyptian ways. The Greeks were so impressed with the ancient culture that they regarded Egypt as the 'cradle of civilisation', and even the occupying Romans adopted the country's ancient gods and traditions. It was only at the end of the 4th century AD, when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity, that ancient Egypt finally died; their gods were taken from them, their temples were closed down, and all knowledge of the 'pagan' hieroglyphs that transmitted their culture was lost for some 1400 years.

## PHARAONIC WHO'S WHO

Egypt's Pharaonic history is based on the regnal years of each king, or pharaoh, a word derived from *per-aa* (great house), meaning palace. Among the many hundreds of pharaohs who ruled Egypt over a 3000-year period,

The Tomb of Nefertari one of five wives of Ramses II and perhaps his favourite, in Luxor.

PHOTO BY LEANNE LOGAN

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the following are some of the names found most frequently around the ancient sites.

**Narmer c 3100 BC** First king of a united Egypt after he conquered the north (Lower) Egypt, Narmer from south (Upper) Egypt is portrayed as victorious on the famous Narmer Palette in the Egyptian Museum. He is perhaps to be identified with the semimythical King Menes, founder of Egypt's ancient capital city Memphis. See also p29, p32, p186 and p196.

**Zoser (Djoser) c 2667–2648 BC** As second king of the 3rd dynasty, Zoser was buried in Egypt's first pyramid, the world's oldest monumental stone building, designed by the architect Imhotep. Zoser's statue in the foyer of the Egyptian Museum shows a long-haired king with a slight mustache, dressed in a tight-fitting robe and striped *nemes* (headcloth). See also p187 and p201.

**Sneferu c 2613–2589 BC** The first king of the 4th dynasty, and held in the highest esteem by later generations, Sneferu was Egypt's greatest pyramid builder. He was responsible for four such structures, and his final resting place, the Red (Northern) Pyramid at Dahshur, was Egypt's first true pyramid and a model for the more famous pyramids at Giza. See also p210.

**Khufu (Cheops) c 2589–2566 BC** As Sneferu's son and successor, Khufu was second king of the 4th dynasty. Best known for Egypt's largest pyramid, the Great Pyramid at Giza, his only surviving likeness is Egypt's smallest royal sculpture, a 7.5cm-high figurine in the Egyptian Museum. The gold furniture of his mother Hetepheres is also in the museum. See also p147 and p187.

**Khafre (Khephren, Chephren) c 2558–2532 BC** Khafre was a younger son of Khufu who succeeded his half-brother to become fourth king of the 4th dynasty. He built the second of Giza's famous pyramids and although he is best known as the model for the face of the Great Sphinx, his diorite statue in the Egyptian Museum is equally stunning. See also p149 and p187.

**Menkaure (Mycerinus) c 2532–2503 BC** As the son of Khafre and fifth king of the 4th dynasty, Menkaure built the smallest of Giza's three huge pyramids. He is also well represented by a series of superb sculptures in the Egyptian Museum, which show him with the goddess Hathor and deities representing various regions (nemes) of Egypt. See also p150 and p187.

**Pepi II c 2278–2184 BC** As fifth king of the 6th dynasty, Pepi II was a child at his accession; his delight with a dancing pygmy was recorded in the Aswan tomb of his official Harkhuf. As one of the world's longest-reigning monarchs (96 years), Pepi contributed to the decline of the Pyramid Age. See also p205 and p308.

**Montuhotep II c 2055–2004 BC** As overlord of Thebes, Montuhotep II reunited Egypt and his reign began the Middle Kingdom. He was the first king to build a funerary temple at Deir al-Bahri, in which he was buried with five of his wives and a daughter, with further wives and courtiers buried in the surrounding area. See also p188 and p267.

**Sesostris III (Senwosret, Senusret) c 1874–1855 BC** The fifth king of the 12th dynasty, Sesostris III reorganised the administration by taking power from the provincial governors (nomarchs). He strengthened Egypt's frontiers and occupied Nubia with a chain of fortresses, and is recognisable by the stern, 'careworn' faces of his statues. His female relatives were buried with spectacular jewellery. See also p206.

**Amenhotep I c 1525–1504 BC** As second king of the 18th dynasty, Amenhotep I ruled for a time with his mother Ahmose-Nofretari. They founded the village of Deir el-Medina for the workers who built the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, and Amenhotep I may have been the first king to be buried there. See also p190 and p249.

**Hatshepsut c 1473–1458 BC** As the most famous of Egypt's female pharaohs, Hatshepsut took power at the death of her brother-husband Tuthmosis II and initially ruled jointly with her nephew-stepson Tuthmosis III. After taking complete control, she undertook ambitious building schemes, including obelisks at Karnak Temple and her own spectacular funerary temple at Deir al-Bahri. See also p189, p248 and p267.

**Tuthmosis III c 1479–1425 BC** As sixth king of the 18th dynasty, Tuthmosis III (the Napoleon of ancient Egypt) expanded Egypt's empire with a series of foreign campaigns into Syria. He built extensively at Karnak, added a chapel at Deir al-Bahri and his tomb was the first in the Valley of the Kings to be decorated. See also p189, p247 and p264.

**Amenhotep III c 1390–1352 BC** As ninth king of the 18th dynasty, Amenhotep III's reign marks the zenith of Egypt's culture and power. Creator of Luxor Temple and the largest ever funerary temple

Although the Narmer Palette is in many ways Egypt's earliest historical document, it is also a giant piece of cosmetic equipment, designed as a surface on which to prepare eye make-up.

Sneferu was a great inspiration to later pharaohs. Excavations at Dahshur have revealed that incense was still being offered to Sneferu's memory 2000 years after his death.

Regarded as the most magnificent of the pharaohs, Amenhotep III seems to have appreciated literature, judging by the discovery of small glazed bookplates bearing his name.

Nefertiti had a taste for beer. She is shown drinking in several tomb scenes at Amarna, and even had her own brewery at the site, which produced a quick-fermenting brew.

Many of the treasures found in the tomb of Tutankhamun bear the names of his predecessors Akhenaten and the mysterious 'Smenkhkare', and were apparently buried with Tutankhamun simply to get rid of all trace of this unpopular family.

Although synonymous with ancient Egypt, Cleopatra VII was actually Greek by descent, one of the Ptolemaic dynasty of pharaohs who originated from Macedonia where Cleopatra was a popular royal name.

marked by the Colossi of Memnon, his many innovations, including Aten worship, are usually credited to his son and successor Amenhotep IV (later 'Akhenaten'). See also p186, p252 and p257.

**Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV) c 1352–1336 BC** Changing his name from Amenhotep to distance himself from the state god Amun, Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti relocated the royal capital to Amarna. While many still regard him as a monotheist and benign revolutionary, the evidence suggests he was a dictator whose reforms were political rather than religious. See also p189, p225 and p252.

**Nefertiti c 1338–1336 BC (?)** Famous for her painted bust in Berlin, Nefertiti ruled with her husband Akhenaten, and while the identity of his successor remains controversial, this may have been Nefertiti herself, using the throne name 'Smenkhkare'. Equally controversial is the suggested identification of her mummy in tomb KV 35 in the Valley of the Kings. See also p189, p225 and p252.

**Tutankhamun c 1336–1327 BC** As the 11th king of the 18th dynasty, Tutankhamun's fame is based on the great quantities of treasure discovered in his tomb in 1922. Most likely the son of Akhenaten by minor wife Kiya, Tutankhamun reopened the traditional temples and restored Egypt's fortunes after the disastrous reign of his father. See also p252 and p261.

**Horemheb c 1323–1295 BC** As a military general, Horemheb restored Egypt's empire under Tutankhamun and after the brief reign of Ay eventually became king himself. Married to Nefertiti's sister Mutnodjmet, his tomb at Saqqara was abandoned in favour of a royal burial in a superbly decorated tomb in the Valley of the Kings. See also p263.

**Seti I c 1294–1279 BC** The second king of the 19th dynasty, Seti I continued to consolidate Egypt's empire with foreign campaigns. Best known for building Karnak's Hypostyle Hall, a superb temple at Abydos and a huge tomb in the Valley of the Kings, his mummy in the Egyptian Museum is one of the best preserved examples. See also p190, p233, p247 and p265.

**Ramses II c 1279–1213 BC** As son and successor of Seti I, Ramses II fought the Hittites at the Battle of Kadesh and built temples including Abu Simbel and the Ramesseum, once adorned with the statue that inspired poet PB Shelley's 'Ozymandias'. The vast tomb of his children was rediscovered in the Valley of the Kings in 1995. See also p189, p190, p196, p234, p261, p263, p322 and p323.

**Ramses III c 1184–1153 BC** As second king of the 20th dynasty, Ramses III was the last of the warrior kings, repelling several attempted invasions portrayed in scenes at his funerary temple Medinet Habu. Buried in a finely decorated tomb in the Valley of the Kings, his mummy was the inspiration for Boris Karloff's *The Mummy*. See also p274.

**Taharka 690–664 BC** As fourth king of the 25th dynasty, Taharka was one of Egypt's Nubian pharaohs and his daughter Amenirdis II high priestess at Karnak where Taharka undertook building work. A fine sculpted head of the king is in Aswan's Nubian Museum, and he was buried in a pyramid at Nuri in southern Nubia. See also p243.

**Alexander the Great 332–323 BC** During his conquest of the Persian Empire, the Macedonian king Alexander invaded Egypt in 332 BC. Crowned pharaoh at Memphis, he founded Alexandria, visited Amun's temple at Siwa Oasis to confirm his divinity and after his untimely death in Babylon in 323 BC his mummy was eventually buried in Alexandria. See also p190, p250, p356 and p369.

**Ptolemy I 323–283 BC** As Alexander's general and rumoured half-brother, Ptolemy seized Egypt at Alexander's death and established the Ptolemaic line of pharaohs. Ruling in traditional style for 300 years, they made Alexandria the greatest capital of the ancient world and built many of the temples standing today, including Edfu, Philae and Dendera. See also p369.

**Cleopatra VII 51–30 BC** As the 19th ruler of the Ptolemaic dynasty, Cleopatra VII ruled with her brothers Ptolemy XIII then Ptolemy XIV before taking power herself. A brilliant politician who restored Egypt's former glories, she married Julius Caesar then Mark Antony, whose defeat at Actium in 31 BC led to the couple's suicide. See also p236, p369 and p375.

## EVERYDAY LIFE

With ancient Egypt's history focused on its royals, the part played by the rest of the ancient population is frequently ignored. The great emphasis on written history also excludes the 99% of the ancient population who were unable to write, and it can often seem as if the only people who lived in ancient Egypt were pharaohs, priests and scribes.



The silent majority are often dismissed as little more than illiterate peasants, although these were the very people who built the monuments and produced the wealth on which the culture was based.

Fortunately Egypt's climate, at least, is democratic, and has preserved the remains of people throughout society, from the mummies of the wealthy in their grand tombs to the remains of the poorest individuals buried in hollows in the sand. The worldly goods buried with them for use in the afterlife can give valuable details about everyday life and how it was lived, be it in the bustling, cosmopolitan capital Memphis or in the small rural settlements scattered along the banks of the Nile.

## Domestic Life

In Egypt's dry climate, houses were traditionally built of mud brick, whether they were the back-to-back homes of workers or the sprawling palaces of the royals. The main differences were the number of rooms and the quality of fixtures and fittings. The villas of the wealthy often incorporated walled gardens with stone drainage systems for small pools, and some even had en-suite bathroom facilities – look out for the limestone toilet seat found at Amarna and now hanging in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Just like the mud-brick houses in rural Egypt today, ancient homes were warm in winter and cool in summer. Small, high-set windows reduced the sun's heat but allowed breezes to blow through, and stairs gave access to the flat roof where the family could relax or sleep.

Often whitewashed on the outside to deflect the heat, interiors were usually painted in bright colours, the walls and floors of wealthier homes further enhanced with gilding and inlaid tiles. Although the furniture of most homes would have been quite sparse – little more than a mud-brick bench, a couple of stools and a few sleeping mats – the wealthy could afford beautiful furniture, including inlaid chairs and footstools, storage chests, beds with linen sheets and feather-stuffed cushions. Most homes also had small shrines for household deities and busts of family ancestors, and a small raised area seems to have been reserved for women in childbirth.

The home was very much a female domain. The most common title for women of all social classes was *nebet per* (lady of the house), emphasising their control over most aspects of domestic life. Although there is little evidence of marriage ceremonies, monogamy was standard practice for the majority, with divorce and remarriage relatively common and initiated by either sex. With the same legal rights as men, women were responsible for running the home, and although there were male launderers, cleaners and cooks, it was mainly women who cared for the children, cleaned the house, made clothing and prepared food in small open-air kitchens adjoining the home.

The staple food was bread, produced in many varieties, including the dense calorie-laden loaves mass-produced for those working on government building schemes. Onions, leeks, garlic and pulses were eaten in great quantities along with dates, figs, pomegranates and grapes. Grapes were also used, along with honey, as sweeteners. Spices, herbs, nuts and seeds were also added to food, along with oil extracted from native plants and imported almonds and olives. Although cows provided milk for drinking and making butter and cheese, meat was only eaten regularly by the wealthy and by priests allowed to eat temple offerings once the gods had been satisfied. This was mostly beef, although sheep, goats and pigs were also eaten, as were game and wild fowl. Fish was generally dried and salted, and because of its importance in workers' diets, a fish-processing plant existed at the pyramid builders' settlement at Giza.

Eugen Strouhal's *Life in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge University Press, 1992) is one of the most informative and best illustrated books dealing with domestic life. Drawing on the author's medical expertise, the chapter on health and medicine is particularly good.

Chickens, described as miraculous birds that 'give birth every day', were first imported from Syria around 1450 BC.

Wine jars were sometimes inscribed with the intended purpose of their contents, from 'offering wine' or 'wine for taxes' to 'wine for merry-making'.

The BBC History Online article 'From Warrior Women to Female Pharaohs: Careers for Women in Ancient Egypt' looks at what was available for women outside the home. Go to [www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/women\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/women_01.shtml)

A contract from AD 206 states that Isadora the castanet dancer and two other women hired to perform at a six-day festival received 36 drachmae a day, well above the average wage.

The first recorded workers' strike in history occurred in 1152 BC when royal tomb builders refused to go back to work because their supplies of moisturising oil had not been delivered.

Although the wealthy enjoyed wine (with the best produced in the vineyards of the Delta and western oases, or imported from Syria), the standard beverage was rather soupy barley beer, which was drunk throughout society by everyone, including children. The ancient Egyptians' secret to a contented life is summed up by the words of one of their poems: 'it is good to drink beer with happy hearts, when one is clothed in clean robes'.

## Public Life/At Work

The majority of ancient Egyptians were farmers, whose lives were based around the annual cycle of the Nile. This formed the basis of their calendar with its three seasons – *akhet* (inundation), *peret* (spring planting) and *shemu* (summer harvest). As the flood waters covering the valley floor receded by October, farmers planted their crops in the silt left behind, using irrigation canals to distribute the flood waters where needed and to water their crops until harvest time in April.

Agriculture was so fundamental to life in both this world and the next that it was one of the main themes in tomb scenes. The standard repertoire of ploughing, sowing and reaping is often interspersed with officials checking field boundaries or calculating the grain to be paid as tax in this pre-coinage economy. The officials are often accompanied by scribes busily recording all transactions, with hieroglyphs first developed c 3250 BC as a means of recording produce.

A huge civil service of scribes worked on the pharaoh's behalf to record taxes and organise workers, and in a society where less than 1% were literate, scribes were regarded as wise and were much admired. Taught to read and write in the schools attached to temples where written texts were stored and studied, the great majority of scribes were male. However, some women are also shown with documents, and literacy would have been necessary to undertake roles they are known to have held, including overseer, steward, teacher, doctor, high priestess, vizier and even pharaoh on at least six occasions.

Closely related to the scribe's profession were the artists and sculptors who produced the stunning artefacts synonymous with ancient Egypt. From colossal statues to delicate jewellery, all were fashioned using simple tools and natural materials.

Building stone was hewn by teams of labourers supplemented by prisoners, with granite obtained from Aswan, sandstone from Gebel Silsila, alabaster from Hatnub near Amarna and limestone from Tura near modern Cairo. Gold came from mines in the Eastern Desert and Nubia, and both copper and turquoise were mined in the Sinai. With such precious commodities being transported large distances, trade routes and border areas were patrolled by guards, police (known as *medjay*) and the army, when not out on campaign.

Men also plied their trade as potters, carpenters, builders, metalworkers, jewellers, weavers, fishermen and butchers, with many of these professions handed down from father to son. (This is especially well portrayed in the tomb scenes of Rekhmire (see Tombs of Sennofer & Rekhmire, p270). There were also itinerant workers such as barbers, dancers and midwives, and those employed for their skills as magicians. Men worked alongside women as servants in wealthy homes, performing standard household duties, and thousands of people were employed in the temples, which formed the heart of every settlement as a combination of town hall, college, library and medical centre. As well as a hierarchy of priests and priestesses, temples employed their own scribes, butchers, gardeners, florists, perfume makers, musicians and dancers, many of whom worked on a part-time basis.

## OILS, PERFUMES & COSMETICS

Most Egyptians seem to have bathed regularly and used moisturising oils to protect their skin from the drying effects of the sun. These oils were sometimes perfumed with flowers, herbs and spices, and Egyptian perfumes were famous throughout the ancient world for their strength and quality. Perfume ingredients are listed in ancient texts, along with recipes for face creams and beauty preparations, and cosmetics were also used to enhance the appearance. Responsible for the familiar elongated eye shape, eye-paint also had a practical use, acting like sunglasses by reducing the glare of bright sunlight and explaining why builders are shown having their eyes made up during work. Both green malachite and black galena (kohl) were used in crushed form, mixed with water or oil and stored ready for use in small pots. Red ochre prepared in a similar fashion was used by women to shade their lips and cheeks. Some Egyptians were also trained to apply cosmetics and perform manicures and pedicures.

Although most people kept their cosmetic equipment in small baskets or boxes, the wealthy had beautifully decorated chests with multiple compartments, pull-out drawers and polished metal mirrors with which they could inspect their carefully designed appearance.

## Clothing, Hairstyles & Jewellery

Personal appearance was clearly important to the Egyptians, with wigs, jewellery, cosmetics and perfumes worn by men and women alike. Garments were generally linen, made from the flax plant before the introduction of cotton in Ptolemaic times. Status was reflected in the fineness and quantity of the linen, but as it was expensive, surviving clothes show frequent patching and darning. Laundry marks are also found; male launderers were employed by the wealthy, and even a few ancient laundry lists have survived, listing the types of garments they had to wash in the course of their work.

The most common garment was the loincloth, worn like underpants beneath other clothes. Men also wore a linen kilt, sometimes pleated, and both men and women wore the bag-tunic made from a rectangle of linen folded in half and sewn up each side. The most common female garments were dresses, most wrapped sari-like around the body, although there were also V-neck designs cut to shape, and detachable sleeves for easy cleaning.

Linen leggings have also been found, as well as socks with a gap between the toes for wearing with sandals made of vegetable fibre or leather. Royal footwear also featured gold sequins, embroidery and beading, with enemies painted on the soles to be crushed underfoot.

Plain headscarves were worn to protect the head from the sun or during messy work; the striped headcloth (*nemes*) was only worn by the pharaoh, who also had numerous crowns and diadems for ceremonial occasions.

Jewellery was worn by men and women throughout society for both aesthetic and magical purposes. It was made of various materials, from gold to glazed pottery, and included collars, necklaces, hair ornaments, bracelets, anklets, belts, earrings and finger rings.

Wigs and hair extensions were also popular and date back to c 3400 BC, as does the hair dye henna (*Lawsonia inermis*). Many people shaved or cropped their hair for cleanliness and to prevent head lice (which have even been found in the hair of pharaohs). The clergy had to shave their heads for ritual purity, and children's heads were partially shaved to leave only a side lock of hair as a symbol of their youth.

## GODS & GODDESSES

Initially representing aspects of the natural world, Egypt's gods and goddesses grew more complex through time. As they began to blend together and adopt each other's characteristics, they started to become difficult to

By Roman times Isis had become the most important of all Egypt's gods and by the 1st century AD her worship had even spread as far as London.

Hair colour had great significance for the Egyptians and, in a largely dark-haired population, redheads were regarded as dangerous and described as 'followers of Seth', the god of chaos.

The ancient Egyptians were very good at faking certain materials, with wooden pots painted to resemble costly stone and painted linen used for priestly vestments instead of real panther skin.



Amun



Anubis



Aten



Bes



Hapy



Hathor

identify, although their distinctive headgear and clothing can provide clues as to who they are. The following brief descriptions should help travellers spot at least a few of the many hundreds who appear on monuments and in museums.

**Amun** The local god of Thebes (Luxor) who absorbed the war god Montu and fertility god Min and combined with the sun god to create Amun-Ra, King of the Gods. He is generally portrayed as a man with a double-plumed crown and sometimes the horns of his sacred ram.

**Anubis** God of mummification, patron of embalmers and guardian of cemeteries, Anubis is generally depicted as a black jackal or a jackal-headed man.

**Apophis** The huge snake embodying darkness and chaos was the enemy of the sun god Ra and tried to destroy him every night and prevent him reaching the dawn.

**Aten** The solar disc whose rays end in outstretched hands, first appearing c 1900 BC and becoming chief deity during the Amarna Period c 1360–1335 BC.

**Atum** Creator god of Heliopolis who rose from the primeval waters and ejaculated (or sneezed depending on the myth) to create gods and humans. Generally depicted as a man wearing the double crown, Atum represented the setting sun.

**Bastet** Cat goddess whose cult centre was Bubastis; ferocious when defending her father Ra the sun god, she was often shown as a friendly deity, personified by the domestic cat.

**Bes** Grotesque yet benign dwarf god fond of music and dancing; he kept evil from the home and protected women in childbirth by waving his knife and sticking out his tongue.

**Geb** God of the earth generally depicted as a green man lying beneath his sister-wife Nut the sky goddess, supported by their father Shu, god of air.

**Hapy** God of the Nile flood and the plump embodiment of fertility shown as an androgynous figure with a headdress of aquatic plants.

**Hathor** Goddess of love and pleasure represented as a cow or a woman with a crown of horns and sun's disc in her guise as the sun god's daughter. Patron of music and dancing whose cult centre was Dendara, she was known as 'she of the beautiful hair' and 'lady of drunkenness'.

**Horus** Falcon god of the sky and son of Isis and Osiris, he avenged his father to rule on earth and was personified by the ruling king. He can appear as a falcon or a man with a falcon's head, and his eye (*wedjat*) was a powerful amulet.

**Isis** Goddess of magic and protector of her brother-husband Osiris and their son Horus, she and her sister Nephthys also protected the dead. As symbolic mother of the king she appears as a woman with a throne-shaped crown, or sometimes has Hathor's cow horns.

**Khepri** God of the rising sun represented by the scarab beetle, whose habit of rolling balls of dirt was likened to the sun's journey across the sky.

**Khnum** Ram-headed god who created life on a potter's wheel; he also controlled the waters of the Nile flood from his cave at Elephantine and his cult centre was Esna.

**Khons** Young god of the moon and son of Amun and Mut. He is generally depicted in human form wearing a crescent moon crown and the 'sidelock of youth' hairstyle.

**Maat** Goddess of cosmic order, truth and justice, depicted as a woman wearing an ostrich feather on her head, or sometimes by the feather alone.

**Mut** Amun's consort and one of the symbolic mothers of the king; her name means both 'mother' and 'vulture' and she is generally shown as woman with a vulture headdress.

**Nekhbet** Vulture goddess of Upper Egypt worshipped at el-Kab; she often appears with her sister-goddess Wadjet the cobra, protecting the pharaoh.

**Nut** Sky goddess usually portrayed as a woman whose star-spangled body arches across tomb and temple ceilings. She swallows the sun each evening to give birth to it each morning.

**Osiris** God of regeneration portrayed in human form and worshipped mainly at Abydos. As the first mummy created, he was magically revived by Isis to produce their son Horus, who took over the earthly kingship while Osiris became ruler of the underworld and symbol of eternal life.

**Ptah** Creator god of Memphis who thought the world into being. He is patron of craftsmen, wears a skullcap and usually clutches a tall sceptre (resembling a 1950s microphone).

**Ra** Supreme sun god generally shown as a man with a falcon's head topped by a sun disc, although he can take many forms (eg Aten, Khepri) and other gods merge with him to enhance

their powers (eg Amun-Ra, Ra-Atum). Ra travelled through the skies in a boat, sinking down into the underworld each night before re-emerging at dawn to bring light.

**Sekhmet** Lioness goddess of Memphis whose name means 'the powerful one'. As a daughter of sun god Ra she was capable of great destruction and was the bringer of pestilence; her priests functioned as doctors.

**Seth** God of chaos personified by a mythological, composite animal. After murdering his brother Osiris he was defeated by Horus, and his great physical strength was harnessed to defend Ra in the underworld.

**Sobek** Crocodile god representing Pharaonic might, he was worshipped at Kom Ombo and the Fayyum.

**Taweret** Hippopotamus goddess who often appears upright to scare evil from the home and protect women in childbirth.

**Thoth** God of wisdom and writing, and patron of scribes. He is portrayed as an ibis or baboon and his cult centre was Hermopolis.



Horus



Isis



Khepri

## TEMPLES

Although many gods had their own cult centres, they were also worshipped at temples throughout Egypt. Built on sites considered sacred, existing temples were added to by successive pharaohs to demonstrate their piety. This is best seen at the enormous complex of Karnak (p243), the culmination of 2000 years of reconstruction.

Surrounded by huge enclosure walls of mud brick, the stone temples within were regarded as houses of the gods where daily rituals were performed on behalf of the pharaoh. As the intermediary between gods and humans, the pharaoh was high priest of every temple, although in practice these powers were delegated to each temple's high priest.

As well as the temples housing the gods (cult temples), there were also funerary (mortuary) temples where each pharaoh was worshipped after death. Eventually sited away from their tombs for security reasons, the best examples are on Luxor's West Bank, where pharaohs buried in the Valley of the Kings had huge funerary temples built closer to the river. These include Ramses III's temple at Medinat Habu, Amenhotep III's once-vast temple marked by the Colossi of Memnon and the best known example built by Hatshepsut into the cliffs of Deir al-Bahri.

## TOMBS & MUMMIFICATION

### Tombs

Initially, tombs were created to differentiate the burials of the elite from the majority, whose bodies continued to be placed directly into the desert sand. By around 3100 BC the mound of sand heaped over a grave was replaced by a more permanent structure of mud brick, whose characteristic bench-shape is known as a mastaba after the Arabic word for bench.

As stone replaced mud brick, the addition of further levels to increase height created the pyramid, the first built at Saqqara for King Zoser (see Zoser's Funerary Complex, p201). Its stepped sides soon evolved into the familiar smooth-sided structure, with the Pyramids of Giza (p143) the most famous examples.

Pyramids are generally surrounded by the mastaba tombs of officials wanting burial close to their pharaoh in order to share in an afterlife which was still the prerogative of royalty; see Cemeteries (p151), Tomb of Akhetotep & Ptahhotep (p203), Mastaba of Ti (p204) and Tombs of Mereruka & Ankhmahor (p205). It was only when the power of the monarchy broke down at the end of the Old Kingdom that the afterlife became increasingly accessible to those outside the royal family, and as officials became increasingly independent they began to opt for burial in their home towns. With



Nut



Osiris



Ra



Sekhmet



Sobek



Taweret



Thoth

little room for grand superstructures along many of the narrow stretches beside the Nile, an alternative type of tomb developed, cut tunnel-fashion into the cliffs that border the river. Most were built on the west bank, the traditional place of burial where the sun was seen to sink down into the underworld each evening.

These simple rock-cut tombs consisting of a single chamber gradually developed into more elaborate structures complete with an open courtyard, offering a chapel and entrance façade carved out of the rock, with a shaft leading down into a burial chamber; see Tomb of Kheti (p223), Tomb of Baqet (p223), Tomb of Khnumhotep (p224) and Tombs of the Nobles (p307).

The most impressive rock-cut tombs were those built for the kings of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC), who relocated the royal burial ground south to the religious capital Thebes (modern Luxor) to a remote desert valley on the west bank, now known as the Valley of the Kings (see p258). With new evidence suggesting the first tomb (KV 39) here may have been built by Amenhotep I, the tomb of his successor Tutmosis I was built by royal architect Ineni, whose biographical inscription states that he supervised its construction alone, ‘with no-one seeing, no-one hearing’. In a radical departure from tradition, the offering chapels that were once part of the tomb’s layout were now replaced by funerary (mortuary) temples built some distance away to preserve the tomb’s secret location.

The tombs themselves were designed with a long corridor descending to a network of chambers decorated with scenes to help the deceased reach the next world. Many of these were extracts from the Book of the Dead, the modern term for works including The Book of Amduat (literally, ‘that which is in the underworld’), The Book of Gates and The Litany of Ra. These describe the sun god’s nightly journey through the darkness of the underworld, the realm of Osiris, with each hour of the night regarded as a separate region guarded by demigods. In order for Ra and the dead souls who accompanied him to pass through on their way to rebirth at dawn, it was essential that they knew the demigods’ names in order to get past them. Since knowledge was power in the Egyptian afterlife, the funerary texts give ‘Knowledge of the power of those in the underworld, knowledge of the hidden forces, knowing each hour and each god, knowing the gates where the great god must pass and knowing how the powerful can be destroyed’.

## Mummification

Although mummification was used by many ancient cultures across the world, the Egyptians were the ultimate practitioners of this highly complex procedure, which they refined over 4000 years.

Their preservation of the dead can be traced back to the very earliest times, when bodies were simply buried in the desert away from the limited areas of cultivation. In direct contact with the sand, the hot, dry conditions allowed body fluids to drain away while preserving the skin, hair and nails intact. Accidentally uncovering such bodies must have had a profound effect upon those able to recognise people who had died years before.

As society developed, those who would once have been buried in a hole in the ground demanded tombs befitting their status. But as the bodies were no longer in direct contact with the sand, they rapidly decomposed. An alternative means of preservation was therefore required. After a long process of experimentation, and a good deal of trial and error, the Egyptians seem to have finally cracked it around 2600 BC when they started to remove the internal organs, where putrefaction begins.

As the process became increasingly elaborate, all the organs were removed except the kidneys, which were hard to reach, and the heart, considered to

## HEALTH

With average life expectancy around 35 years, the ancient Egyptians took health care seriously, and used a blend of medicine and magic to treat problems caused mainly by the environment. Wind-blown sand damaged eyes, teeth and lungs; snakes and scorpions were a common danger; parasitic worms lurked in infected water; and flies spread diseases. Medicines prescribed for such problems were largely plant- or mineral-based, and included honey (now known to be an effective antibacterial) and 'bread in mouldy condition' – as described in the ancient medical texts – which provided a source of penicillin.

By 2650 BC there were dentists and doctors, with specialists in surgery, gynaecology, osteopathy and even veterinary practice trained in the temple medical schools. The pyramid builders' town at Giza had medical facilities capable of treating fractures and performing successful surgical amputations.

Magic was also used to combat illness or injury, and spells were recited and amulets worn to promote recovery. Most popular was the *wedjat*-eye of Horus, representing health and completeness, while amulets of the household deities Bes and Taweret were worn during the difficult time of childbirth. Mixtures of honey, sour milk and crocodile dung were recommended as contraceptives, and pregnancy tests involving barley were used to foretell the sex of the unborn child. Magic was also used extensively during childhood, with the great mother goddess Isis and her son Horus often referred to in spells to cure a variety of childhood ailments.

be the source of intelligence. The brain was removed by inserting a metal probe up the nose and whisking until it had liquefied sufficiently to be drained down the nose. All the rest – lungs, liver, stomach and intestines – were removed through an opening cut in the left flank. Then the body and its separate organs were covered with natron salt (a combination of sodium carbonate and sodium bicarbonate) and left to dry out for 40 days, after which they were washed, purified and anointed with a range of oils, spices and resins. All were then wrapped in layers of linen, with the appropriate amulets set in place over the various parts of the body as priests recited the necessary incantations.

With each of the internal organs placed inside its own burial container (one of four Canopic jars), the wrapped body with its funerary mask was placed inside its coffin. It was then ready for the funeral procession to the tomb, where the vital Opening of the Mouth ceremony reanimated the soul and restored its senses. Offerings could then be given and the deceased wished 'a thousand of every good and pure thing for your soul and all kinds of offerings'.

The Egyptians also used their mummification skills to preserve animals, both much-loved pets and creatures presented in huge numbers as votive offerings to the gods with which they were associated. Everything from huge bulls to tiny shrews were mummified, with cats, hawks and ibis preserved in their millions by Graeco-Roman times.

## ART IN LIFE & DEATH

Ancient Egyptian art is instantly recognisable, and its distinctive style remained largely unchanged for more than three millennia. With its basic characteristics already in place at the beginning of the Pharaonic period c 3100 BC, the motif of the king smiting his enemies on the Narmer Palette (see Room 43 – Atrium, p186) was still used in Roman times.

Despite being described in modern terms as 'works of art', the reasons for the production of art in ancient Egypt are still very much misunderstood. Whereas most cultures create art for purely decorative purposes, Egyptian art was primarily functional. This idea is best conveyed when gazing at the most famous and perhaps most beautiful of all Egyptian images, Tutankhamun's

Temple rituals included the burning or smashing of wax or clay figurines of anyone who threatened divine order, from enemies of the state to enemies of the sun god.

The eyes of cats in tomb scenes were occasionally painted with gold leaf, giving them a realistic reflective quality in the darkness of the tomb and linking them to the sun god's protective powers.

One of the most common souvenirs of a trip to Egypt in the 19th century was a mummy, either whole or in bits – heads and hands were particularly popular as they fitted easily into luggage.



death mask (see Room 3, p192), which was quite literally made to be buried in a hole in the ground.

The majority of artefacts were produced for religious and funerary purposes, and despite their breathtaking beauty would have been hidden away from public gaze, either within a temple's dark interior or, like Tut's mask, buried in a tomb with the dead. This only makes the objects – and those who made them – even more remarkable. Artists regarded the things they made as pieces of equipment to do a job rather than works of art to be displayed and admired, and only once or twice in 3000 years did an artist actually sign their work.

This concept also explains the appearance of carved and painted wall scenes, whose deceptively simple appearance and lack of perspective reinforces their functional purpose. The Egyptians believed it was essential that the things they portrayed had every relevant feature shown as clearly as possible. Then when they were magically reanimated through the correct rituals they would be able to function as effectively as possible, protecting and sustaining the unseen spirits of both the gods and the dead.

Figures needed a clear outline, with a profile of nose and mouth to let them breathe, and the eye shown whole as if seen from the front, to allow the figure to see. This explains why eyes were often painted on the sides of coffins to allow the dead to see out, and why hieroglyphs such as snakes or enemy figures were sometimes shown in two halves to prevent them causing damage when re-activated.

The vast quantities of food and drink offered in temples and tombs were duplicated on surrounding walls to ensure a constant supply for eternity. The offerings are shown piled up in layers, sometimes appearing to float in that air if the artist took this practice too far. In the same way, objects otherwise hidden from view if portrayed realistically, appear to balance on top of the boxes that actually contained them.

While working within such restrictive conventions, the ancient artists still managed to capture a feeling of vitality. Inspired by the natural world around them, they selected images to reflect the concept of life and re-birth, as embodied by the scarab beetles and tilapia fish thought capable of self-generation. Since images were also believed to be able to transmit the life-force they contained, fluttering birds, gambolling cattle and the speeding quarry of huntsmen were all favourite motifs. The life-giving properties of plants are also much in evidence, with wheat, grapes, onions and figs stacked side by side with the flowers the Egyptians loved so much. Particularly common are the lotus (water lily) and papyrus, the heraldic symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt often shown entwined to symbolise a kingdom united.

Colour was also used as a means of reinforcing an object's function, with bright primary shades achieved with natural pigments selected for their specific qualities. Egypt was represented politically by the White Crown of Upper Egypt and the Red Crown of Lower Egypt, fitted together in the dual crown to represent the two lands brought together. The country could also be represented in environmental terms by the colours red and black, the red desert wastes of *deshret* contrasting with the fertile black land of *kemet*. For the Egyptians, black was the colour of life, which also explains the choice of black in representations of Osiris, god of fertility and resurrection in contrast to the redness associated with his brother Seth, god of chaos. Colour does not indicate ethnic origins, however, since Osiris is also shown with green skin, the colour of vegetation and new life. Some of his fellow gods are blue to echo the ethereal blue of the sky, and the golden-yellow of the sun is regularly employed for its protective qualities.

Among the very few named artists known from ancient Egypt, Men worked as a sculptor for Amenhotep III while his son Bek worked for Amenhotep's son and successor Akhenaten, claiming he was 'the apprentice whom his majesty himself taught'.

The textiles used to wrap mummies are often described as 'bandages', although all kinds of recycled linen was used for the purpose, from old shirts to boat sails.

Since it was thought that images of living things could reanimate in the afterlife, the nose and mouth of unpopular figures were often defaced to prevent them inhaling the breath of life needed to live again in the next world.

Even human figures were initially represented with different coloured skin tones, the red-brown of men contrasting with the paler, yellowed tones of women, and although this has been interpreted as indicating that men spent most of the time working outdoors whereas women led a more sheltered existence, changes in artistic convention meant everyone was eventually shown with the same red-brown skin tone.

The choice of material was also an important way of enhancing an object's purpose. Sculptors worked in a variety of different mediums, with stone often chosen for its colour – white limestone and alabaster (calcite), golden sandstone, green schist (slate), brown quartzite and both black and red granite. Smaller items could be made of red or yellow jasper, orange carnelian or blue lapis-lazuli, metals such as copper, gold or silver, or less costly materials such as wood or highly glazed blue faïence pottery.

All these materials were used to produce a wide range of statuary for temples and tombs, from 20m-high stone colossi to gold figurines a few centimetres tall. Regardless of their dimensions, each figure was thought capable of containing the spirit of the individual they represented – useful insurance should anything happen to the mummy. Amulets and jewellery were another means of ensuring the security of the dead, and while their beauty would enhance the appearance of the living, each piece was also carefully designed as a protective talisman or a means of communicating status. Even when creating such small-scale masterpieces, the same principles employed in larger-scale works of art applied, and little of the work that the ancient craftsmen produced was either accidental or frivolous.

There was also a standard repertoire of funerary scenes, from the colourful images that adorn the walls of tombs to the highly detailed vignettes illuminating funerary texts. Every single image, whether carved on stone or painted on papyrus, was designed to serve and protect the deceased on their journey into the afterlife.

Initially the afterlife was restricted to royalty, and the texts meant to guide the pharaohs towards eternity were inscribed on the walls of their burial chambers. Since the rulers of the Old Kingdom were buried in pyramids, the accompanying funerary writings are known as the Pyramid Texts – see Pyramid & Causeway of Unas (p202), Pyramid of Teti (p204) and South Saqqara (p205).

In the hope of sharing in the royal afterlife, Old Kingdom officials built their tombs close to the pyramids until the pharaohs lost power at the end of the Old Kingdom. No longer reliant on the pharaoh's favour, the officials began to use the royal funerary texts for themselves. Inscribed on their coffins, they are known as Coffin Texts – a Middle Kingdom version of the earlier Pyramid Texts, adapted for nonroyal use.

This 'democratisation' of the afterlife evolved even further when the Coffin Texts were literally brought out in paperback, inscribed on papyrus and made available to the masses during the New Kingdom. Referred to by the modern term *The Book of the Dead*, the Egyptians knew this as *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*, with sections entitled 'Spell for not dying a second time', 'Spell not to rot and not to do work in the land of the dead' and 'Spell for not having your magic taken away'. The texts also give various visions of paradise, from joining the sun god Ra in his journey across the sky, joining Osiris in the underworld or rising up to become one of the Imperishable Stars, the variety of final destinations reflecting the ancient Egyptians' multifaceted belief system. These spells and instructions acted as a kind of guidebook to the afterlife, with some of the texts accompanied by maps, and images of some of the gods and demons that would be encountered en route together with the correct way to address them.

Current research is starting to reveal that the Egyptians were experimenting with mummification as early as 4300 BC, almost 1000 years earlier than previously believed.

Although cats were considered sacred, X-ray examinations have revealed that some at least were killed to order by strangulation prior to their mummification for use as votive offerings.

Among the wives of Tuthmosis III were three Syrians, whose joint tomb at Thebes, found in 1916, was filled with gold necklaces, crowns and bracelets, drinking vessels, mirrors and even pots of face cream.

The same scenes were also portrayed on tomb walls; the New Kingdom royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings (p258) are decorated with highly formal scenes showing the pharaoh in the company of the gods and all the forces of darkness defeated. Since the pharaoh was always pharaoh, even in death, there was no room for the informality and scenes of daily life that can be found in the tombs of lesser mortals (see Tombs of the Nobles, p269).

This explains the big difference between the formal scenes in royal tombs and the much more relaxed, almost eclectic nature of nonroyal tomb scenes, which feature everything from eating and drinking to dancing and hairdressing. Yet even here these apparently random scenes of daily life carry the same message found throughout Egyptian art – the eternal continuity of life and the triumph of order over chaos. As the pharaoh is shown smiting the enemy and restoring peace to the land, his subjects contribute to this continual battle of opposites in which order must always triumph for life to continue.

In one of the most common nonroyal tomb scenes, the tomb owner hunts on the river (see Tombs of Menna & Nakht, p269). Although generally interpreted on a simplistic level as the deceased enjoying a day out boating with his family, the scene is far more complex than it first appears. The tomb owner, shown in a central position in the prime of life, strikes a formal pose as he restores order amid the chaos of nature all around him. In his task he is supported by the female members of his family, from his small daughter to the wife standing serenely beside him. Dressed far too impractically for a hunting trip on the river, his wife wears an outfit more in keeping with a priestess of Hathor, goddess of love and sensual pleasure. Yet Hathor is also the protector of the dead, and capable of great violence as defender of her father, the sun god Ra, in his eternal struggle against the chaotic forces of darkness.

Some versions of this riverside hunting scene also feature a cat. Often described as a kind of 'retriever' (whoever heard of a retriever cat?), the cat is one of the creatures who was believed to defend the sun god on his nightly journey through the underworld. Similarly, the river's teeming fish were regarded as pilots for the sun god's boat and were themselves potent symbols of rebirth. Even the abundant lotus flowers are significant since the lotus, whose petals open each morning, is the flower that symbolised rebirth. Once the coded meaning of ancient Egyptian art is understood, such previously silent images almost scream out the idea of 'life'.

Another common tomb scene is the banquet at which guests enjoy generous quantities of food and drink – see Tombs of Menna & Nakht (p269) and Tombs of Senofer & Rekhmire (p270). Although no doubt reflecting some of the pleasures the deceased had enjoyed in life, the food portrayed was also meant to sustain their souls, as would the accompanying scenes of bountiful harvests which would ensure supplies never ran out. Even the music and dance performed at these banquets indicate much more than a party in full swing – the lively proceedings were another way of reviving the deceased by awakening their senses.

The culmination of this idea can be found in the all-important Opening of the Mouth ceremony, performed by the deceased's heir, either the next king or the eldest son. The ceremony was designed to reanimate the soul (ka), which could then go on to enjoy eternal life once all its senses had been restored. Noise and movement were believed to reactivate hearing and sight, while the sense of smell was restored with incense and flowers. The essential offerings of food and drink then sustained the soul that resided within the mummy as it was finally laid to rest inside the tomb.

The subterranean chambers beneath Zoser's pyramid were decorated with bright turquoise-blue tiles, some of which can be seen in the upper rooms of the Egyptian Museum.

Struggling with their hieroglyphs, student scribes were advised to 'Love writing and shun dancing, make friends with the scroll and palette, for they bring more joy than wine!'

## HIEROGLYPHS

Hieroglyphs, meaning 'sacred carvings' in Greek, are the pictorial script used by the ancient Egyptians. It was first developed as a means of recording produce and recent discoveries at Abydos dating to around 3250 BC make this the earliest form of writing yet found, even predating that of Mesopotamia.

The impact of hieroglyphs on Egyptian culture cannot be overestimated, as they provided the means by which the state took shape. They were used by a civil service of scribes working on the king's behalf to collect taxes and organise vast workforces, and with literacy running at less than 1%, scribes were considered wise and part of society's elite.

Within a few centuries, day-to-day transactions were undertaken in a shorthand version of hieroglyphs known as hieratic, whereas hieroglyphs remained the perfect medium for monumental inscriptions. They were in constant use for more than 3500 years until the last example was carved at Philae temple on 24 August AD 394. Covering every available tomb and temple surface, hieroglyphs were regarded as 'the words of the Thoth', the ibis-headed god of writing and patron deity of scribes, who, like the scribes, is often shown holding a reed pen and ink palette.

The small figures of humans, animals, birds and symbols that populate the script were believed to infuse each scene with divine power. In fact certain signs were considered so potent they were shown in two halves to prevent them causing havoc should they magically reanimate. Yet the ancient Egyptians also liked a joke, and their language was often onomatopoeic – for example, the word for cat was *miw* after the noise it makes, and the word for wine was *irp*, after the noise made by those who drank it.

Evolving from a handful of basic signs, more than 6000 hieroglyphs have been identified, although less than 1000 were in general use. Although they may at first appear deceptively simple, the signs themselves operate on several different levels and can best be understood if divided into three categories – logograms (ideograms), determinatives and phonograms. While logograms represent the thing they depict (eg the sun sign meaning 'sun'), and determinatives are simply placed at the ends of words to reinforce their meaning (eg the sun sign in the verb 'to shine'), phonograms are less straightforward and are the signs that represent either one, two or three consonants. The 26 signs usually described in simple terms as 'the hieroglyphic alphabet' are the single consonant signs (eg the owl pronounced 'm', the zig-zag water sign 'n'). Another 100 or so signs are biconsonantal (eg the bowl sign read as 'nb'), and a further 50 are triconsonantal signs (eg 'nfr' meaning good, perfect or beautiful).

Unfortunately there are no actual vowels as such, and the absence of any punctuation can also prove tricky, especially since the signs can be arranged either vertically to be read down or horizontally to be read left to right or right to left, depending which way the symbols face.

Although they can seem incredibly complex, the majority of hieroglyphic inscriptions are simply endless repetitions of the names and titles of the pharaohs and gods, surrounded by protective symbols. Names were of tremendous importance to the Egyptians and as vital to an individual's existence as their soul (*ka*), and it was sincerely believed that 'to speak the name of the dead is to make them live'.

The loss of one's name meant permanent obliteration from history, and those unfortunate enough to incur official censure included commoners and pharaohs alike. At times it even happened to the gods themselves, a fate which befell the state god Amun during the reign of the 'heretic' pharaoh Akhenaten, who in turn suffered the same fate together with his god Aten when Amun was later restored.

## PHARAONIC CARTOUCHESS



Ramses II (Usermaatetre  
Setepenre)



Amenhotep III (Nebmaatetre)



Tuthmosis III  
(Menkheperre)



Hatshepsut (Maatkare)

For a straightforward approach to ancient Egypt's artistic legacy, Cyril Aldred's *Egyptian Art* (Thames & Hudson, 1985) remains hard to beat, while a useful guide to the way hieroglyphs were used in art is provided by Richard Wilkinson's *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture* (Thames & Hudson, 1994).

Fond of word play, the Egyptians often incorporated hieroglyphs into their designs to spell out names or phrases – the basket, beetle and sun disc featured in some of Tutankhamun's jewellery, for example, spells out his throne name 'neb-kheperu-re'.

In order to prevent this kind of obliteration, names were sometimes carved so deeply into the rock it is possible to place an outstretched hand right inside each hieroglyph, as is the case of Ramses III's name and titles at his funerary temple of Medinat Habu.

Royal names were also followed by epithets such as 'life, prosperity, health', comparable to the way in which the name of the Prophet Mohammed is always followed by the phrase 'peace be upon him'. For further protection, royal names were written inside a rectangular fortress wall known as a *serekh*, which later developed into the more familiar oval-shaped cartouche (the French word for cartridge).

Although each pharaoh had five names, cartouches were used to enclose the two most important ones: the 'prenomen' or 'King of Upper and Lower Egypt' name assumed at the coronation and written with a bee and a sedge plant; and the 'nomen' or 'Son of Ra' name, which was given at birth and written with a goose and a sun sign.

As an example, Amenhotep III is known by his nomen or Son of Ra name 'Amun-hotep' (meaning Amun is content), although his prenomen or King of Upper and Lower Egypt name was Neb-maat-Re (meaning Ra, lord of truth). His grandson had the most famous of all Egyptian names, Tut-ankh-amun, which literally translates as 'the living image of Amun', yet he had originally been named Tut-ankh-aten, meaning 'the living image of the Aten', a change in name that reflects the shifting politics of the time.

Gods were also incorporated into the names of ordinary people, and as well as Amunhotep, there was Rahotep (the sun god Ra is content) and Ptahhotep (the creator god Ptah is content). By changing 'hotep' (meaning 'content') to 'mose' (meaning 'born of'), the names Amenmose, Ramose and Ptahmose meant that these men were 'born of' these gods.

In similar fashion, goddesses featured in women's names. Hathor, goddess of love, beauty and pleasure, was a particular favourite, with names such as Sithathor (daughter of Hathor). Standard names could also be feminised by the simple addition of 't', so Nefer (good, beautiful or perfect) becomes Nefert, which could be further embellished with the addition of a verb, as in the case of the famous name Nefertiti (goodness/beauty/perfection has come).

Others were known by their place of origin, such as Panehesy (the Nubian), or could be named after flora and fauna – Miwt (cat), Debet (hippopotamus) and Seshen (lotus), which is still in use today as the name Susan.

## PHARAONIC GLOSSARY

**akh** – usually translated as 'transfigured spirit', produced when the ka (soul) and ba (spirit) united after the deceased was judged worthy enough to enter the afterlife

**Ammut** – composite monster of the underworld who was part crocodile, part lion, part hippo and ate the hearts of the unworthy dead, her name means 'The Devourer'

**ba** – usually translated as 'spirit', which appeared after death as a human-headed bird, able to fly to and from the tomb and into the afterlife

**Book of the Dead** – modern term for the collection of ancient funerary texts designed to guide the dead through the afterlife, developed at the beginning of the New Kingdom and partly based on the earlier Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts

**Canopic jars** – containers usually made of limestone or calcite to store the preserved entrails (stomach, liver, lungs and intestines) of mummified individuals

**cartouche** – the protective oval shape (the name derived from the French word for cartridge), which surrounded the names of kings and queens and occasionally gods

**cenotaph** – a memorial structure set up in memory of a deceased king or queen, separate from their tomb or funerary temple

**Coffin Texts** – funerary texts developed from the earlier Pyramid Texts, which were then written on coffins during the Middle Kingdom

**coregency** – a period of joint rule by two pharaohs, usually father and son

**cult temple** – the standard religious building(s) designed to house the spirits of the gods and accessible only to the priesthood, usually located on the Nile's east bank

**deshret** – 'red land', referring to barren desert

**djed pillar** – the symbolic backbone of Osiris, bestowing strength and stability and often worn as an amulet

**false door** – the means by which the soul of the deceased could enter and leave the world of the living to accept funerary offerings brought to their tomb

**funerary (mortuary) temple** – the religious structures where the souls of dead pharaohs were commemorated and sustained with offerings, usually built on the Nile's west bank

**Heb-Sed festival** – the jubilee ceremony of royal renewal and rejuvenation, which pharaohs usually celebrated after 30 years' rule

**Heb-Sed race** – part of the Heb-Sed festival when pharaohs undertook physical feats such as running to demonstrate their prowess and fitness to rule

**hieratic** – ancient shorthand version of hieroglyphs used for day-to-day transactions by scribes

**hieroglyphs** – Greek for 'sacred carvings', referring to ancient Egypt's formal picture writing used mainly for tomb and temple walls

**hypostyle hall** – imposing section of temple characterised by densely packed monumental columns

**ka** – usually translated as 'soul', this was a person's 'double', which was created with them at birth and which lived on after death, sustained by offerings left by the living

**kemet** – 'black land', referring to the fertile areas along the Nile's banks

**king lists** – chronological lists of each king's names kept as a means of recording history

**lotus (water lily)** – the heraldic plant of Upper (southern) Egypt

**mammisi** – the Birth House attached to certain Late Period and Graeco-Roman temples and associated with the goddesses Isis and Hathor

**mastaba** – Arabic word for bench, used to describe the mud-brick tomb structures built over subterranean burial chambers and from which pyramids developed

**name** – an essential part of each individual given at birth, and spoken after their death to allow them to live again in the afterlife

**naos** – sanctuary containing the god's statue, generally located in the centre of ancient temples

**natron** – mixture of sodium carbonate and sodium bicarbonate used to dry out the body during mummification and used by the living to clean linen, teeth and skin

**nemes** – the yellow-and-blue striped headcloth worn by pharaohs, the most famous example found on Tutankhamun's golden death mask

**nomarch** – local governor of each of Egypt's 42 nomes

**nome** – Greek term for Egypt's 42 provinces, 22 in Upper Egypt and later 20 added in Lower Egypt

**obelisk** – monolithic stone pillar tapering to a pyramidal top that was often gilded to reflect sunlight around temples and usually set in pairs

**Opening of the Mouth ceremony** – the culmination of the funeral, performed on the mummy of the deceased by their heir or funerary priest using spells and implements to restore their senses

**Opet festival** – annual celebration held at Luxor Temple to restore the powers of the pharaoh at a secret meeting with the god Amun

**papyrus** – the heraldic plant of Lower (northern) Egypt whose reedlike stem was sliced and layered to create paperlike sheets for writing

**pharaoh** – term for an Egyptian king derived from the ancient Egyptian word for palace, *per-aa*, meaning great house

**pylon** – monumental gateway with sloping sides forming the entrance to temples

**Pyramid Texts** – funerary texts inscribed on the walls of late Old Kingdom pyramids and restricted to royalty

**sacred animals** – living creatures thought to represent certain gods – eg the crocodile (identified with Sobek), the cat (identified with Bastet) – and often mummified at death

**sarcophagus** – derived from the Greek for 'flesh-eating' and referring to the large stone coffins used to house the mummy and its wooden coffin(s)

**scarab** – the sacred dung beetle believed to propel the sun's disc through the sky in the same way the beetle pushes a ball of dung across the floor

**Serapeum** – vast network of underground catacombs at Saqqara in which the Apis bulls were buried, later associated with the Ptolemaic god Serapis

**serdab** – from the Arabic word for cellar, a small room in a mastaba tomb containing a statue of the deceased to which offerings were presented

**shabti (or ushabti)** – small servant figurines placed in burials designed to undertake any manual work in the afterlife on behalf of the deceased

**shadow** – an essential part of each individual, the shadow was believed to offer protection, based on the importance of shade in an extremely hot climate

**sidelock of youth** – characteristic hairstyle of children and certain priests in which the head is shaved and a single lock of hair allowed to grow

**solar barque** – the boat in which the sun god Ra sailed through the heavens, with actual examples buried close to certain pyramids for use by the spirits of the pharaohs

**Uraeus** – an image of the cobra goddess Wadjet worn at the brow of royalty to symbolically protect them by spitting fire into the eyes of their enemies

**Weighing of the Heart (The Judgement of Osiris)** – the heart of the deceased was weighed against the feather of Maat with Osiris as judge; if light and free of sin they were allowed to spend eternity as an *akh*, but if their heart was heavy with sin it was eaten by Ammut and they were damned forever



# The Culture

## THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

If there's one characteristic that links the majority of Egyptians, from the university professor in Alexandria to the shoeshine boy in Luxor, it's an immense pride in simply being Egyptian.

It's hard sometimes to see where that pride could come from, given the pervasive poverty, low literacy levels, high unemployment, housing shortages, infrastructure shortfalls and myriad other pitfalls that face the country. But aiding every Egyptian in the daily struggle is every other Egyptian, and indeed there's a sense that everybody's in it together. Large extended families and close-knit neighbourhoods act as social support groups, strangers fall easily into conversation with each other, and whatever goes wrong, somebody always knows someone somewhere who can fix it.

Religion also cushions life's blows. Islam permeates Egyptian life. It's manifested not in a strictly authoritarian manner as in Saudi Arabia – Egyptians love enjoying themselves too much for that – but it's there at an almost subconscious level. Ask after someone's health and the answer is *'Alhamdulillah'* (Fine. Praise to God). Arrange to meet tomorrow and it's *'in sha'Allah'* (God willing). Then, if your appointee fails to turn up, God obviously didn't mean it to be.

And when all else fails there's humour, and Egyptians are renowned for it. Jokes and wisecracks are the parlance of life. Comedy is the staple of the local cinema industry and backbone of TV scheduling. The stock character is the little guy who through wit and a sharp tongue always manages to prick pomposity and triumph over the odds. Laughter lubricates the wheels of social exchange and one of the most enjoyable aspects of travel in Egypt is how much can be negotiated with a smile.

## LIFESTYLE

There's no simple definition of Egyptian society. On the one hand there's traditional conservatism, reinforced by poverty, in which the diet is one of *fuul*, *ta'amiyya* and vegetables; women wear the long, black, all-concealing

The nitty-gritty low-down of what's going on in Egypt is available to the public eye at the CIA World Factbook ([www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html)).

### BACKHAND ECONOMY – THE ART OF BAKSHEESH

Tipping in Egypt is called baksheesh, but it's more than just a reward for services rendered. Salaries and wages in Egypt are much lower than in Western countries, so baksheesh is an essential means of supplementing income. It's far from a custom exclusively reserved for foreigners. Egyptians have to constantly dole out the baksheesh too – to park their cars, receive their mail, ensure they get fresh produce at the grocers and to be shown to their seat at the cinema.

For travellers who are not used to continual tipping, demands for baksheesh for doing anything from opening doors to pointing out the obvious in museums can be quite irritating. But it is the accepted way in Egypt. Just use your discretion, always remembering that more things warrant baksheesh here than anywhere in the West.

In hotels and restaurants, a 12% service charge is included at the bottom of the bill. However, since the money goes into the till, it's necessary to leave an additional tip for the waiter, usually 10% to 20%. Services such as opening a door, delivering room service or carrying your bags warrant at least £1. A guard who shows you something off the beaten track at an ancient site or an attendant at a mosque who looks after your shoes should receive a couple of pounds. Baksheesh is not necessary when asking for directions.

We suggest carrying lots of small change with you (trust us – you'll need it!) and also to keep it separate from bigger bills as flashing your cash will lead to demands for greater baksheesh.

*Shahhat: An Egyptian* by Richard Critchfield has become an anthropology classic, even though much of its content was recently debunked as a copy of a 1930s ethnographic study. So long as you keep this in mind it's still a good read, especially if you're spending time on Luxor's West Bank.

The latest in ground-breaking Egyptology news can be yours to read in digital format at [www.egyptologyblog.co.uk](http://www.egyptologyblog.co.uk).

Fifty per cent of Egyptians live or work within 150km of Cairo.

*abeyya* and men wear the gownlike *galabiyya*; cousins marry cousins; going to Alexandria constitutes the trip of a lifetime; and all is 'God's will'. On the other hand, there are sections of society whose members order out from McDonald's; whose daughters wear slinky black numbers and flirt outrageously; who think nothing of regular trips to the USA; and who never set foot in a mosque until the day they're laid out in one.

The bulk of the Egyptian populace falls somewhere between these two extremes. The typical urban family lives in an overcrowded suburb in a six-floor breeze-block apartment building with cracking walls and dodgy plumbing. If they're lucky they may own a small car (Fiat or Lada), which will be 10 or more years old. Otherwise the husband will take the metro to work or, more likely, fight for a handhold on one of the city's sardine-can buses. He may well be a university graduate (about 40,000 people graduate each year), although a degree is no longer any guarantee of a job. He may also be one of the million-plus paper-pushing civil servants, earning a pittance to while away each day in an undemanding job. This at least allows him to slip away from work early each afternoon to borrow his cousin's taxi for a few hours to bring in some much-needed supplementary income. His wife remains at home cooking, looking after the three or more children, and swapping visits with his mother, her mother and various other family members.

Meanwhile life in rural Egypt, where just over half the country's population lives, is undergoing a transformation. The population density on the agricultural land of the Nile Valley, on which most cities and villages are built, is one of the highest in the world. What little land remains is divided into small plots (averaging just 0.6 hectares), which don't even support a medium-sized family. As much as 50% of the rural population no longer makes its living off the land. For those who do, the small size of their plots prevents the mechanisation needed to increase yields. As a result, they increasingly rely on animal husbandry or are forced to look for other ways of surviving. So the farmer you see working his field is probably spending his afternoons working as a labourer or selling cigarettes from a homemade kiosk in an effort to make ends meet.

The countryside remains the repository of traditional culture and values. Large families are still the norm, particularly in Upper Egypt, and extended families still live together. High rates of female illiteracy are standard. Whether all this will change with the steady diet of urban Cairene values and Western soap operas currently beamed into village cafés and farmhouses each night remains to be seen.

## ECONOMY

Over the last few decades, the Egyptian government has struggled to reform the centralised economy it inherited from Nasser. In recent years, personal and corporate tax rates have been reduced, energy subsidies have been cut and several enterprises have been privatised. Despite these achievements, however, living standards for the average Egyptian are still abysmally low.

In response to the stagnating quality of life, the government has continued to subsidise basic commodities, which has created a spiralling budget deficit. As a result, the economy has been slowly collapsing, which has deterred vital foreign investment. Of course, there is hope that Egypt can recoup these financial losses in the energy sector, particularly since the country is sitting on enormous natural gas reserves that foreign countries such as the US are eagerly eyeing.

## POPULATION

Although the latest census results show that Egypt's population growth rate is falling, the number of citizens continues to increase by around one million every nine months. The Nile Valley is in danger of becoming one giant sprawling city,

and Greater Cairo alone is home to nearly 20 million people. Parts of the city continue to house the world's highest density of people per kilometre. The strain placed on the city's decaying infrastructure is more than it can cope with.

## MULTICULTURALISM

Most Egyptians will proudly tell you that they are descendants of the ancient Egyptians, and while there is a strand of truth in this, any Pharaonic blood still flowing in modern veins has been seriously diluted. The country has weathered invasions of Libyans, Persians, Greeks, Romans and, most significantly, the 4000 Arab horsemen who invaded in AD 640. Following the Arab conquest, there was significant Arab migration and intermarriage with the indigenous population. The Mamluks, rulers of Egypt between the 13th and 16th centuries, were of Turkish and Circassian origins, and then there were the Ottoman Turks, rulers and occupiers from 1517 until the latter years of the 18th century.

Beside the Egyptians, there are a handful of separate indigenous groups with ancient roots. The ancestors of Egypt's Bedouins migrated from the Arabian Peninsula, and settled the Western and Eastern Deserts and Sinai. The number of Bedouin in Egypt these days is around 500,000, but their nomadic way of life is under threat as the interests of the rest of the country increasingly intrude on their once-isolated domains (see p480).

In the Western Desert, particularly in and around Siwa Oasis, are a small number of Berbers who have retained much of their own identity. They are quite easily distinguished from other Egyptians by the dress of the women, who usually don the *meliyya* (head-to-toe garment with slits for the eyes). Although many speak Arabic, they have preserved their own native tongues.

In the south are the tall, dark-skinned Nubians. They originate from Nubia, the region between Aswan in southern Egypt and Khartoum in Sudan, an area that almost completely disappeared in the 1970s when the High Dam was created and the subsequent build-up of water behind it drowned their traditional lands.

## SPORTS

Egypt is football obsessed. The country hosts the Egyptian Premier League, which is regarded as one of the top 20 most competitive leagues in the world. The two most popular clubs are Ahly and Zamalek, both of which are located in Cairo, and inspire fervent loyalty in their fans. The Egyptian national team is also a regular in FIFA World Cup tournaments, though the squad has sadly never made it beyond the first round of competition.

## MEDIA

As in the West the media is big business in Egypt. The biggest daily newspapers are all pro-government or 'nationalist', including *Al-Akhbar*, the biggest seller with a circulation of around one million, *Al-Ahram*, the oldest daily in the Arab world (founded in 1877) and *Al-Gomhurriya*, set up by the military regime following the 1952 coup. Battling against them is an array of independents, including the weekly opposition publications *Al-Arabi* and the Islamist *Al-Ahwar*, as well as the business-slanted *Al-Alam al-Yom*. Although there are red lines not to be crossed (no criticism of the military, no presidential sleaze, nothing detrimental to 'national unity'), editors are given a degree of licence to publish what they will – which they do, often irrespective of whether a story happens to be true or not.

Illiteracy of around 50% means TV is the medium with the most penetration. In addition to the state channels (whose most popular output is Arabic films and home-grown soap operas), Egypt has its own satellite channels (ArabSat, NileSat 101, NileSat 202) including a couple of private operations

The official site of Egypt's Ministry of Tourism ([www.toureygypt.net](http://www.toureygypt.net)) has magazine-type features, news and a huge range of resources and links.

The State Information Service ([www.sis.gov.eg](http://www.sis.gov.eg)) has a huge amount of information on tourism, geography and culture.

For everything you've ever wanted to know about the art of smoking hookah, visit [www.smoking-hookah.com/Guide/Guide.asp](http://www.smoking-hookah.com/Guide/Guide.asp).

(Al-Mehwar and Dream), both set up by well-known, politically connected businessmen. Quality of programming has markedly improved in recent years, forced to evolve by competition from other Arab and foreign channels such as CNN, Al-Jazeera and even transmissions from the old enemy to the north, Israel, whose channels many Egyptians furtively tune to for the better quality US-made soaps and comedies.

## RELIGION

About 90% of Egypt's population is Muslim. Islam prevails in Egyptian life at a low-key, almost unconscious level. Few pray the specified five times a day, but almost all men heed the amplified call of the *muezzin* (mosque official) each Friday noon, when the crowds from the mosques block streets and footpaths. The 10% of Egypt that isn't Muslim is Coptic Christian. The two communities enjoy a more-or-less easy coexistence, although flare-ups in Minya and Alexandria in 2005 seemed to herald the introduction of tensions in this historically peaceful relationship.

### Islam

Islam is the predominant religion of Egypt. It shares its roots with Judaism and Christianity. Adam, Abraham (Ibrahim), Noah, Moses and Jesus are all accepted as Muslim prophets, although Jesus is recognised as a mere prophet and not the son of God. Muslim teachings correspond closely to the Torah (the foundation book of Judaism) and the Christian Gospels. The essence of Islam is the Quran and the Prophet Mohammed, who was the last and truest prophet to deliver messages from God (Allah in Arabic) to the people.

Islam was founded in the early 7th century by Mohammed, who was born around AD 570 in Mecca. Mohammed received his first divine message at about the age of 40. The revelations continued for the rest of his life and were transcribed to become the holy Quran. To this day not one dot of the Quran has been changed, making it, Muslims claim, the direct word of God.

Mohammed started preaching in 613, three years after the first revelation, but could only attract a few dozen followers. Having attacked the ways of Meccan life, especially the worship of a wealth of idols, he made many enemies. In 622 he and his followers retreated to Medina, an oasis town some 360km from Mecca. This Hejira, or migration, marks the start of the Muslim calendar.

Mohammed died in 632 but the new religion continued its rapid spread, reaching all of Arabia by 634 and Egypt in 642.

Islam means 'submission' and this principle is visible in the daily life of Muslims. The faith is expressed by observance of the five so-called pillars of Islam:

- Publicly declare that 'there is no god but God, and Mohammed is His Prophet'.
- Pray five times a day: at sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and night.
- Give *zakat* (alms) for the propagation of Islam and to help the needy.
- Fast during daylight hours during the month of Ramadan.
- Complete the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The first pillar is accomplished through prayer, which is the second pillar and an essential part of the daily life of a believer. Five times a day the muezzins bellow out the call to prayer through speakers on top of the minarets. It is perfectly permissible to pray at home or elsewhere; only the noon prayer on Friday need be conducted in the mosque. It is preferred that women pray at home. (For information about Islamic holidays and festivals, see p511.)

For a general overview of Egyptian culture, look no further than the people's encyclopaedia at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture\\_of\\_Egypt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Egypt).

The fourth pillar, Ramadan, is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, when all believers fast during the day. Pious Muslims do not allow anything to pass their lips in daylight hours. Although many Muslims do not follow the injunctions to the letter, most conform to some extent. However, the impact of the fasting is often lessened by a shift in waking hours: many only get up in the afternoon when there are just a few hours of fasting left to observe. They then feast through the night until sunrise. The combination of abstinence and lack of sleep means that tempers are often short during Ramadan.

Although there are no public holidays until Eid al-Fitr, it is difficult to get anything done during Ramadan because of erratic hours. Almost everything closes in the afternoon or has shorter daytime hours; this does not apply to businesses that cater mostly to foreign tourists, but some restaurants and hotels may be closed for the entire month. Although non-Muslims are not expected to fast, it is considered impolite to eat or drink in public during fasting hours. The evening meal during Ramadan, called *iftar* (breaking the fast), is always a celebration. In some parts of town, tables are laid out in the street as charitable acts by the wealthy to provide food for the less fortunate. Evenings are imbued with a party atmosphere, and there's plenty of street entertainment, often through until sunrise.

One of the most influential Islamic authorities in Egypt is the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, a position currently held by Mohammed Sayeed Tantawi. It is the role of the supreme sheikh to define the official Islamic line on any particular matter from organ donations to heavy metal music.

## Coptic Christianity

Egyptian Christians are known as Copts. The term is the Western form of the Arabic *qibt*, derived from the Greek *aegyptios* (Egyptian).

Before the arrival of Islam, Christianity was the predominant religion in Egypt. St Mark, companion of the apostles Paul and Peter, began preaching Christianity in Egypt around AD 45, and although it did not become the official religion of the country until the 4th century, Egypt was one of the first countries to embrace the new faith.

Egyptian Christians split from the Orthodox Church of the Eastern (or Byzantine) Empire, of which Egypt was then a part of, after the main body of the church described Christ as both human and divine. Dioscurus, the patriarch of Alexandria, refused to accept this description, and embraced the theory that Christ is totally absorbed by his divinity and that it is blasphemous to consider him human.

The Coptic Church is ruled by a patriarch (presently Pope Shenouda III), other members of the religious hierarchy and an ecclesiastical council of laypeople. It has a long history of monasticism and can justly claim that the first Christian monks, St Anthony and St Pachomius, were Copts.

The Coptic language, which has its origins in Egyptian hieroglyphs and Ancient Greek, is still used in religious ceremonies, sometimes in conjunction with Arabic for the benefit of the congregation. Today the Coptic language is based on the Greek alphabet with an additional seven characters taken from hieroglyphs.

The Copts have long provided something of an educated elite in Egypt, filling many important government and bureaucratic posts. Furthermore, they've always been an economically powerful minority, and the vast majority of Copts are wealthy and influential.

With that said, there are also a lot of Copts at the very bottom of the heap: the *zabhalin*, the garbage-pickers of Cairo, who collect and sort through most of the city's rubbish, have always been Copts.

**'The evening meal during Ramadan, called *iftar*, is always a celebration'**

**UNDERSTANDING THE LACK OF VIOLENT CRIME IN EGYPT** *Hassan Ansah*

Social scientists commonly argue that crime and poverty are bedfellows that are intractably interwoven at the hip. However, despite the overwhelming and at times grinding poverty experienced by the majority of Egyptians, the country's violent crime rate is lower than the United States and Britain. Of course, this brings about the question of why Egypt has a relative lack of violent crime, particularly rape and murder. This is especially puzzling in Cairo where millions of people contend daily with dense living conditions, a high unemployment rate and urban malaise. To answer this lingering question, it is important to realise that crime, like any other social dynamic, is the reflection of a country's cultural norms.

While many developed nations in the West have a tendency to view Islamic societies such as Egypt with a wary eye, the fact of the matter is that there is a great deal they can learn from a country that puts faith in a higher power. In Egypt, the majority of the people seem united in their enduring focus on the afterlife (a local holy man once joked that everyone in Egypt lives partly in their coffin!), a conservative tradition that permeates virtually every aspect of life. This conservatism has established and maintained a system of moral values and principles that has in part tapered the violent crime rate in Egypt. Unlike crime in other Western countries, and even in the other two African powerhouses of South Africa and Nigeria, crime in Egypt is rarely random and almost never targeted towards foreigners.

Although the Egyptian government sets out to create a manageable and law abiding society, it is the family and the community that establishes and maintains the safe environment found throughout the country. Within Egypt, nothing functions outside of the realm of religion, which is often regarded as the very fabric that holds the entire country together. The family ethos, maintained and fostered by Islamic law, facilitates channels of cooperation, arbitration, conflict resolution and economic assistance within the greater community. Furthermore, these same interactions are also used as enforcement mechanisms for common moral values, which certainly serve as a deterrent for crime within the community. Not surprisingly, breaking these informal moral ethical codes often comes with a heavy price – certain individuals may not be able to find a job, a spouse, a home, or even negotiate the bureaucracy of state institutions.

Unlike the West where conflicts often take place behind closed doors in the shadows of official court rooms, in Egypt these renegotiations and fights often occur in public with a theatrical hint to them in order to injure, shore up, or improve one's public reputation. For example, a man will pick a quiet evening to shout from the street to a friend reprimanding him for not repaying a personal loan, thus sharing with the entire community that the man is dishonourable and irresponsible. Or, in the instance of spousal abuse, a woman will go to the roof of her building, shouting to the entire neighbourhood that her husband has beaten her.

As a result, this community-enforced moral code creates an extremely discouraging environment for a would-be criminal assailant. In fact, it is arguably these deeply interconnected and informal social networks that temper the towering poverty experienced by most Egyptians. As one Cairene puts it, perhaps it is the 'deeply embedded nosiness' of Egyptians that helps to maintain the peace.

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**Other Creeds**

Other Christian denominations are represented in Egypt, each by a few thousand adherents. In total, there are about one million members of other Christian groups. Among Catholics, apart from Roman Catholics of the Latin rite, the whole gamut of the fragmented Middle Eastern rites is represented, including the Armenian, Syrian, Chaldean, Maronite and Melkite rites. The Anglican communion comes under the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem. The Armenian Apostolic Church has 10,000 members, and the Greek Orthodox Church is based in Alexandria.

Egypt was once home to a significant number of Jews. Historical sources record that there were 7000 Jews living in Cairo as far back as 1168. In

Mamluk times, there was a Jewish quarter, Haret al-Yahud, in the vicinity of the Al-Azhar Mosque.

The first 40 years of the 20th century constituted something of a golden age for Egyptian Jews as their numbers reached an all-time peak of 80,000, and they came to play a bigger role in society and the affairs of state.

However, the reversal began with the creation of Israel in 1948. Not long afterwards, the exodus received further impetus with the nationalisation that followed Gamal Abdel-Nasser's seizure of power. Today, there are no more than 200 Jews left in Egypt.

## WOMEN IN EGYPT

Some of the biggest misunderstandings between Egyptians and Westerners occur over the issue of women. Half-truths and stereotypes exist on both sides: many Westerners assume all Egyptian women are veiled, repressed victims, while a large number of Egyptians just see Western women as sex-obsessed and immoral.

For many Egyptians of both genders, the role of a woman is specifically defined: she is the mother and the matron of the household. The man is the provider. However, as with any society, generalisations can be misleading and the reality is far more nuanced. There are thousands of middle- and upper-middle-class professional women in Egypt who, like their counterparts in the West, juggle work and family responsibilities. Among the working classes, where adherence to tradition is strongest, the ideal may be for women to concentrate on home and family, but economic reality means that millions of women are forced to work (but are still responsible for all the domestic chores).

The issue of sex is where the differences between Western and Egyptian women are most apparent. Premarital sex (or, indeed, any sex outside marriage) is taboo in Egypt. However, as with anything forbidden, it still happens. Nevertheless, it is the exception rather than the rule – and that goes for men as well as women.

For women, however, the issue is potentially far more serious. With the possible exception of the upper classes, women are expected to be virgins when they marry and a family's reputation can rest upon this point. In such a context the restrictions placed on a girl – no matter how onerous they may seem to a Westerner – are to protect her and her reputation from the potentially disastrous attentions of men.

## ARTS

To the Arab world, Egypt (or more specifically Cairo) is a powerhouse of film, TV, music and theatre. While little of this culture has had any impact on the West, a great many Egyptian actors and singers are superstars and revered cultural icons to Arabic-speakers around the world.

## Literature

Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, Naguib Mahfouz can claim to have single-handedly shaped the nature of Arabic literature in the 20th century. Born in 1911 in Cairo's Islamic quarter, Mahfouz began writing when he was 17. His first efforts were influenced by the European greats, but over the course of his career he developed a voice that was uniquely Arab, and drew its inspiration from the talk in the coffeehouses and the dialect of Cairo's streets. In 1994 he was the victim of a knife attack that left him partially paralysed. The attack was a response to a book that Mahfouz had written, which was a thinly disguised allegory of the life of the great religious leaders including Mohammed. In 2006, Mahfouz died after falling and sustaining a head injury.

Though women received the vote in 1956, restrictive personal-status laws prohibited a woman leaving her husband's house without his permission or a court order up until 1979.

On their return from a women's suffrage conference in Rome in 1923, pioneer Arab feminists Huda Sharawi and Saiza Nabarawi threw away their *abeyyas* at Ramses Railway Station in Cairo. Many in the crowd of women who had come to welcome them home followed suit.

Hakmet Abu Zeid became the first woman in the Egyptian cabinet in 1962, assuming the post of social affairs minister.



The Egyptian Center for Culture & Art ([www.egyptmusic.org](http://www.egyptmusic.org)) aims to safeguard, foster and spread oral and traditional arts.

[www.perseus.tufts.edu/GreekScience/Students/Ellen/Museum.html](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/GreekScience/Students/Ellen/Museum.html) presents a detailed overview of the history and culture surrounding the Library at Alexandria.

*Apricots on the Nile: A Memoir* by Collette Rossant brings to life a young girl's childhood in 1930s and '40s Cairo.

On the strength of what's available in English, it's easy to view Egyptian literature as beginning and ending with Mahfouz, but he's only the best known of a canon of respected writers. Others include Taha Hussein, a blind author and intellectual who spent much of his life in trouble with whichever establishment happened to be in power; the Alexandrian Tewfiq Hakim; and Yousef Idris, a writer of powerful short stories. Unfortunately, none of these authors has gained the international attention they deserve, and they're only published in English by the American University in Cairo Press, a small Cairo-based academic publishing house that publishes an impressive line-up of Egyptian novelists as well as a large (and quite excellent) nonfiction list.

Egypt's women writers are enjoying more international success than the men. Nawal al-Saadawi's fictional work *Woman at Point Zero* has been published, at last count, in 28 languages. An outspoken critic on behalf of women, she is marginalised at home – her nonfiction book *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which criticises the role of women in the Arab world, is banned in Egypt. For many years following its publication, Saadawi was forced to stay out of the country after Islamists issued death threats against her. Today, tensions have settled, and she's now one of the few female Egyptian members of parliament. Those interested in learning more about her fascinating and inspirational life should read her autobiography *Walking Through Fire*, which was published in 2002.

Salwa Bakr is another writer who tackles taboo subjects such as sexual prejudice and social inequality. All of this is a world away from Egypt's current best-known cultural export, Ahdaf Soueif. Though Egyptian, born and brought up in Cairo, she's something of an anomaly in that she writes in English. She lives and is published in London, where she's part of the UK literary scene. So far, most of her work has yet to appear in Arabic. Her absolutely wonderful 1999 novel *The Map of Love* was short-listed for the UK's most prestigious literary prize, the Booker. Her other novels are *Aisha*, *Sandpiper* and *In the Eye of the Sun*.

The most controversial novel to hit the Egyptian literary scene in recent years is Sonallah Ibrahim's *Zaat*, a scathing piece of satire on contemporary Egyptian life. Ibrahim became a cause célèbre in 2003 when he declined to accept the country's most prestigious literary prize, the Arab Novel Conference Award, which was being presented by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and the Egyptian Supreme Council for Culture. Ibrahim labelled the award 'worthless'.

If you're new to Egyptian writers then the following is a short list of must-read books, all of which are (or have been) available in English-language translations.

## EGYPTIAN CLASSICS

*Beer at the Snooker Club* by Waguih Ghali is a fantastic novel of youthful angst set against a backdrop of revolutionary Egypt and literary London. It's the Egyptian *Catcher in the Rye*.

*The Cairo Trilogy* by Naguib Mahfouz is usually considered Mahfouz' masterpiece; this generational saga of family life is rich in colour and detail, and has earned comparisons with Dickens and Zola.

Yousef Idris is best known for his short stories, but the novel *City of Love and Ashes* is set in January 1952 as Cairo struggles free of British occupation.

*The Harafish* by Naguib Mahfouz would be our desert-island choice if we were allowed only one work by Mahfouz. This is written in an episodic, almost folkloric style that owes much to the tradition of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Albert Cossery is an Egyptian who has resided in Paris since 1945; his novels are widely available in French, less so in English, not at all in Arabic. His novel *Proud Beggars* is worth a read.

*Zayni Barakat* by Gamal al-Ghitani is a drama set in Cairo during the waning years of the Mamluk era. It was made into an extremely successful local TV drama in the early 1990s.

### EGYPTIAN CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

The 2002 blockbuster *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al-Aswany is a bleak and utterly compelling snapshot of contemporary Cairo and Egypt seen through the stories of the occupants of a Downtown building. The world's best-ever-selling novel in Arabic, it is reminiscent (though not at all derivative) of the novels of Rohinton Mistry. If you read only one contemporary Egyptian novel before or during your visit, make it this one.

With that said, it's important to mention that this book is groundbreaking for its plot and characters, not the actual language. In fact, the story is really just an elaborate soap opera, though it's remarkable in that it depicts Egypt in a particular time and place, and introduces archetypes that hadn't previously been captured in Arabic literature. At the time of writing, a sequel was out in the stores, though it had not yet been translated in to English.

Other recommended books include the following:

*The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr is a short novel in which inmates in a women's prison exchange life stories. It's surprisingly upbeat, funny and even bawdy.

*No One Sleeps in Alexandria* by Ibrahim Abdel Meguid is an antidote to the mythical Alexandria of Lawrence Durrell. It portrays the city in the same period as the *Quartet* but as viewed by two poor Egyptians.

*The Tent* by Miral al-Tahawy is a bleak but beautiful tale of the slow descent into madness of a crippled Bedouin girl.

*Love in Exile* by Bahaa Taher is a meditation on the themes of exile, disillusionment, failed dreams and the redemptive power of love. Taher was born in Egypt in 1935, but lived for many years in Switzerland, and is one of the most outspoken figures within the local literary scene. The novel may be too mannered for some readers' tastes.

*Taxi* by Khalid al-Khamisi is one of the most popular books to hit the Egyptian shelves in years, and is rumoured to have outsold the *The Yacoubian Building*. Written in the Egyptian dialect (the English translation is on its way), the book details the author's conversations with cab drivers, which results in an amusing discourse on the trials and tribulations of daily Egyptian life. For an interview with the author, see the boxed text p183.

### WESTERN NOVELS OF EGYPT

*The Alexandria Quartet* by Lawrence Durrell is essential reading perhaps, but to visit Alexandria looking for the city of the *Quartet* is a bit like heading to London hoping to run into Mary Poppins.

*Baby Love* by Louisa Young is a smart, hip novel that shimmies between Shepherd's Bush in London and the West Bank of Luxor, as an ex-belly dancer, now single mother, skirts romance and a violent past.

*City of Gold* by Len Deighton is a thriller set in wartime Cairo, elevated by solid research. The period detail is fantastic and brings the city to life.

*Death on the Nile* by Agatha Christie draws on Christie's experiences of a winter in Upper Egypt. An absolute must if you're booked on a cruise.

Although the well-known film of the same name bears little resemblance to the novel, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* – a story of love and destiny in WWII – remains a beautifully written, poetic novel.

In *Khul-Khaal: Five Egyptian Women Tell their Stories* by Nayra Atiya (ed), five women from different backgrounds speak out. It's an often harrowing but revealing portrait of women's lives in Egypt.

Author Alaa Al Aswany (*The Yacoubian Building*) is a professional dentist whose first office was located in the real-life Yacoubian Building, which is on Sharia Suleiman Basha in Downtown Cairo.

*The Face in the Cemetery* by Michael Pearce is the latest in an ever-expanding series of lightweight historical mystery novels featuring the 'Mamur Zapt', Cairo's chief of police. A bit like Tintin but without the pictures.

Egypt during the war serves as the setting for the trials and traumas of a despicable bunch of expats in *The Levant Trilogy* by Olivia Manning. It has some fabulous descriptions of life in Cairo during WWII, and was filmed by the BBC as *Fortunes of War* starring Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson.

*Moon Tiger* by Penelope Lively is an award-winning romance, technically accomplished, very moving in parts, with events that occurred in Cairo during WWII at its heart.

*The Photographer's Wife* by Robert Sole is one of three historical romances by this French journalist set in late-19th-century Egypt. They're slow-going but it's worth persevering for the fine period detail and emotive stories.

*Crocodile on the Sandbank* is the first of a bestselling series of crime fiction novels by American Egyptologist, Elizabeth Peters. Lightweight but highly entertaining, it and its successors recount the various adventures of Amelia Peabody Emerson, a feisty archaeologist and amateur sleuth excavating in Egypt at the start of the 20th century.

**'In the 1940s and 1950s, Cairo's film studios turned out more than 100 movies annually'**

## Cinema

### EGYPTIAN CINEMA

In the halcyon years of the 1940s and 1950s, Cairo's film studios turned out more than 100 movies annually, filling cinemas throughout the Arab world. These days, only about 20 films are made each year. The chief reason for the decline, according to the producers, is excessive government taxation and restrictive censorship. Asked what sort of things they censor, one film industry figure replied, 'Sex, politics, religion – that's all'. However, at least one Cairo film critic has suggested that another reason for the demise of local film is that so much of what is made is trash. The ingredients of the typical Egyptian film are shallow plot lines, farcical slapstick humour, over-the-top acting and perhaps a little belly dancing.

One director who consistently stands apart from the mainstream detritus is Yousef Chahine. Born in 1926, he directed 37 films before officially retiring in a career that defies classification. Accorded messiah-like status by critics in Egypt (though he's not a huge hit with the general public), he has been called Egypt's Fellini and was honoured at Cannes in 1997 with a lifetime achievement award. Chahine's films are also some of the very few Egyptian productions that are subtitled into English or French, and they regularly do the rounds of international film festivals.

His most recent works are 1999's *Al-Akhar* (The Other), 1997's *Al-Masir* (Destiny) and 1994's *Al-Muhagir* (The Emigrant), effectively banned in Egypt because of Islamist claims that it portrays scenes from the life of the Prophet. Others to look out for are *Al-Widaa Bonaparte* (Adieu Bonaparte), a historical drama about the French occupation, and *Iskandariyya Ley?* (Alexandria Why?), an autobiographical meditation on the city of Chahine's birth.

### EGYPT IN WESTERN CINEMA

The meticulously painted backdrops of 1998's animated *Prince of Egypt* aside, Egypt hasn't been seen much at the cinema in recent years. True, a large part of the Oscar-sweeping *The English Patient* (1996) was set in the Western Desert and Cairo, but this was silver-screen trickery, achieved with scenic doubles – the Egyptian locations were filmed in Tunisia, and the building interiors were filmed in Venice. The same goes for *The Mummy* (1999), *The Mummy Returns* (2001) and *The Scorpion King* (2002), all of which used Morocco and computer graphics to stand in for Egypt. (The original 1932

version, however, with Boris Karloff, does feature footage shot at Cairo's Egyptian Museum.)

It's not that Egypt is unphotogenic – quite the opposite. Its deserts, temples and colourful bazaars appear beguilingly seductive on a wide screen. So much so that the country experienced a surge in tourism in the wake of *The English Patient*, despite the best attempts of the Tunisian tourist authority to set the record straight. But extortionate taxes levied on foreign film companies keep the cameras away. It wasn't always so, and the 1970s and 1980s in particular resulted in a number of films on location in Egypt, most of which you should still be able to find at the local video library.

*The Awakening* (1980) is a lame, ineffective horror film about an ancient Egyptian queen possessing modern souls, loosely based on Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of the Seven Stars*.

Agatha Christie's whodunit, *Death on the Nile* (1978), has Poirot investigating the murder of an heiress on board a Nile cruiser. It's gorgeous scenery but the real mystery is how the boat manages to sail from Aswan down to Karnak in Luxor and back up to Abu Simbel all in the same day.

*Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) is a wartime espionage thriller directed by Billy Wilder (*Some Like It Hot*) featuring a British corporal holed up in a Nazi-controlled hotel in the Western Desert.

The Aussie film *Gallipoli* (1981) is about the fateful WWI battle with an extended middle section devoted to the young soldiers' training in Egypt in the shadow of the Pyramids.

In the classic wartime thriller *Ice Cold in Alex* (1958), a British ambulance officer and crew flee Rommel's forces across the Western Desert and dream of an ice-cold beer in a little bar in Alexandria.

*Ruby Cairo* (1992), one of the last Hollywood productions to brave the bureaucracy, is the limp tale of a wife who tracks down her missing-presumed-dead husband to a hideaway in Egypt. The real star of the film is Cairo, where no cliché is left unturned, including camels, pyramids and feluccas.

*Sphinx* (1980), adapted from a bestselling novel by Robin Cook (*Coma*), is a tale about antiquities smuggling shot entirely in Cairo and Luxor, but from which no-one emerges with any credit, except the location scout.

In *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) the Pyramids, Islamic Cairo and Karnak provide glamorous backdrops for the campy, smirking antics of Roger Moore as James Bond.

## Music

### CLASSICAL

Classical Arabic music peaked in the 1940s and '50s. These were the golden days of a rushing tide of nationalism and then, later, of Nasser's rule when Cairo was the virile heart of the Arab-speaking world. Its singers were icons, and through radio their impassioned words captured and inflamed the spirits of listeners from Algiers to Baghdad.

Chief icon of all was Umm Kolthum, the most famous Arab singer of the 20th century. Her protracted love songs and *qasa'id* (long poems) were the very expression of the Arab world's collective identity. Egypt's love affair with Umm Kolthum was such that on the afternoon of the first Thursday of each month, streets would become deserted as the whole country sat beside a radio to listen to her regular live-broadcast performance. She had her male counterparts in Abdel Halim Hafez and Farid al-Attrache, but they never attracted anything like the devotion accorded to 'As-Sitt' (the Lady). She retired after a concert in 1972, and when she died in 1975, her death caused havoc, with millions of grieving Egyptians pouring onto the streets of Cairo.

The Umm Kolthum Museum (p122) opened in Cairo in 2002.

The father and son team of screenwriter Wahis Hamed and director Marwan Hamed adapted Alaa Al Aswany's bestselling *The Yacoubian Building* into a feature film. The budget of over US\$3 million was the largest ever seen in Egypt.

## POP

As Egypt experienced a population boom and the mean age decreased, a gap in popular culture developed, which the memory of the greats couldn't fill. Enter Ahmed Adawiyya, who did for Arabic music what punk did to popular music in the West. Throwing out traditional melodies and melodramas, his backstreet, streetwise and, to some, politically subversive songs captured the spirit of the times and dominated popular culture throughout the 1970s.

Adawiyya set the blueprint for a new kind of music known as *al-jeel* (the generation), characterised by a clattering, hand-clapping rhythm overlaid with synthesised twirling and a catchy, repetitive vocal. Highly formulaic, poorly recorded and mass-produced on cheap cassettes, this form of Egyptian pop was always tacky and highly disposable. That's changing fast as in recent years, the Cairo sound is getting ever more chic and slickly produced as the big-name artists look towards the international market. Head of the pack is Amr Diab, the foremost purveyor of Western-style pop, who is often described as the Arab world's Ricky Martin.

Adawiyya's legacy also spawned something called *shaabi* (from the word for popular), which is considered the real music of the working class. Indeed, it's much cruder than *al-jeel*, and its lyrics are often satirical or politically provocative. The acceptable face of *shaabi* is TV-friendly Hakim, whose albums regularly sell around the million mark.

The majority of current big sellers in Cairo cassette shops hail from Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia and even Iraq. The consolation is that Egypt still provides the best backing musicians, songwriters and production facilities in the Arab world, not to mention the biggest audiences.

## Dance

### BELLY DANCING

Tomb paintings in Egypt prove that the tradition of formalised dancing goes back as far as the pharaohs. During medieval times, dancing became institutionalised in the form of the *ghawazee*, a cast of dancers who travelled with storytellers and poets and performed publicly or for hire, rather like the troubadours of medieval Europe. Performances were often segregated, with women dancers either performing for other women or appearing before men veiled.

The arrival of 19th-century European travellers irrevocably changed this tradition. Religious authorities, outraged that Muslim women were performing for 'infidel' men, pressured the government to impose heavy taxes on the dancers. When high prices failed to stop Western thrill-seekers, the dancers were banished from Cairo. Cut off from their clientele, many turned to prostitution to survive.

For intrepid male travellers, this only increased the lure and they went out of their way to fulfil their erotic fantasies. Visitors such as French author Gustave Flaubert, who travelled through Egypt in 1849 and wrote *Flaubert in Egypt*, supplied lurid accounts of their experiences, titillating Victorian Europeans and helping to cement the less-than-respectable reputation of Egyptian dance:

They both wore the same costume – baggy trousers and embroidered jacket, their eyes painted with kohl. The jacket goes down to the abdomen, whereas the trousers, held by an enormous cashmere belt folded over several times, begin approximately at the pubis, so that the stomach, the small of the back and the beginning of the buttocks are naked, seen through a bit of black gauze held in place by the upper and lower garments. The gauze ripples on the hips like a transparent wave with every movement they make.

Amr Diab's *Nour El Ain* (Mind's Eye) is the highest selling album ever released by an Arabic artist.

### RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Together, the following tapes/CDs give a pretty good taste of what Egyptian music is all about. Some of these are available internationally on CD or MP3.

**Aho by Hakim** 'Hey People' – a loud, anthemic shout rooted in a traditional *shaabi* sound.

**Layli Nahari by Amr Diab** The latest catchy album from the Egyptian heart-throb skyrocketed to the top of the charts across the Arab world. Highly sing-along-able.

**Khosara by Abdel Halim Hafez** The riff from this song sounds remarkably like that in the track 'Big Pimpin' by US rapper Jay-Z.

**Inta Omri by Umm Kolthum** One hour long and an absolute classic. Also try *Fakharuni* and *Al-Atfal*.

**Lo Laki by Ali Hameida Pivotal** The 1988 track that set the formula for much of the Egyptian pop to follow.

**Al-Darb fil Iraq by Shaaban Abdel Rahim** A former ironing man and the *shaabi*iest of *shaabi* singers, hugely popular for singing the words that few others in the spotlight would dare say.

**Nagham al-Hawa by Warda** Algerian by birth but an honorary Cairene by residency. This double CD includes one of her best songs, 'Batwanes Beek'.

**Fi'Ishq al-Banat by Mohammed Mounir** Latest album by the thinking-person's pop star, a Nubian who fuses traditional Arabic music with jazz. His lyrics are admired above all others.

**Zakma by Ahmed Adawiyya** Social comment (the title means 'crowded') from the 1970s when Adawiyya's irreverent sound was at the peak of its popularity.

Belly dancing began to gain credibility and popularity in Egypt with the advent of cinema, when dancers were lifted out of nightclubs and put on the screen before mass audiences. The cinema imbued belly dancing with glamour and made household names of a handful of dancers. It also borrowed liberally from Hollywood, adopting Tinseltown's fanciful costumes of hip-hugging bikini bottoms, sequined bras and swathes of diaphanous veils.

Also imported from the Western movie industry was the modern phenomenon of the belly dancer as a superstar capable of commanding Hollywood-style fees for an appearance. Dancers such as Samia Gamal and Tahia Carioca, who became the stars of black-and-white films of the 1930s and '40s, can still be seen today as the old films are endlessly rerun on Egyptian TV. Such is the present-day earning power of the top dancers that in 1997 a series of court cases was able to haul in ££900 million in back taxes from 12 of the country's top artists.

Despite its long history, belly dancing is still not considered completely respectable, and is slowly dying out according to many aficionados. In the early 1990s, Islamist conservatives patrolled weddings in poor areas of Cairo and forcibly prevented women from dancing or singing, cutting off a vital source of income for lower-echelon performers. In an attempt to placate the religious right, the government joined in and declared that bare midriffs, cleavage and thighs were out. At the same time, a number of high-profile entertainers donned the veil and retired, denouncing their former profession as sinful. Since then, bellies have once more been bared but the industry has not recovered.

### Painting

While Egypt has produced one or two outstanding painters, contemporary art is very much in the doldrums. The problem stems from the Egyptian art school system, where a student's success largely depends on their ability to emulate the artistic styles favoured or practised by their professors. Not surprisingly, some of the most interesting work comes from artists with no formal training at all. Such artists are often shunned by the state-run galleries, but there are several private exhibition spaces that are happy to show nonconformist work. Anyone seriously interested in contemporary art should visit the Mashrabia or Townhouse galleries (p153) in Cairo.

One of Egypt's most famous belly dancers, Soheir el-Babli, renounced show business and adopted the Islamic veil in 1993, setting off a wave of religiously motivated resignations among the country's belly-dance artists.

**SISTERS ARE DANCIN' IT FOR THEMSELVES** *Louisa Young*

'Why did you make the heroine of your novels a belly dancer?' I get asked with some regularity. 'Because she gets to hang out in low dives and swanky hotels, wear fabulous outfits and consider the historical background to a woman's power over her own body, from Salome to contemporary prostitution, via Flaubert and sexual tourism in the developing world', I reply.

It's easy to forget, when you're being dragged up onto a tiny nightclub stage by a strapping Ukrainian lass in a sequinned bikini, that belly dancing is older than the hills, deeply private and an icon of postfeminism. Men and foreigners tend to see it as a sexual show but for many Arab women – and an increasing number of Western women – it is a personal activity incorporating identity, history and community alongside fun, exercise and girl-bonding.

The Babylonian goddess Ishtar, when she went down to the underworld to get her dead husband Tammuz back, danced with her seven veils at each of the seven entrances. Ancient Egyptian wall paintings, the Bible, Greek legend and *The Thousand and One Nights* are full of women dancing by and for themselves and each other. Salome's dance for Herod – the seven veils again – was so powerful because she was bringing into public what normally only happened in the women's quarters.

Arab domestic dancing nowadays tends to involve tea, cakes, female friends and relations, little girls and old ladies, a scarf around the hips and a lot of laughter and gossip. Western versions, particularly in the US and Germany, are the bastard children of aerobics classes, women's groups, New Age Goddess awareness, and the perennial female weakness for fancy underwear and showing off in it. Belly dancing is extremely good exercise – for the back, the figure, stamina, sex life. It's also good for the soul – it's an art, and requires the distilled concentration, self-respect and 'heart' necessary to art.

*Louisa Young is the author of Baby Love, Desiring Cairo and Tree of Pearls.*

For more information, see Liliane Karnouk's *Modern Egyptian Art 1910–2003*, or pick up Fatma Ismail's *29 Artists in the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art*.

**Architecture**

Early in the 21st century, architecture in Egypt is in a sad state. In fact, according to one published survey, the highest rate of depression in 2000 in Egypt was among architects.

Besides Cairo's Opera House (p141) and Alexandria's Bibliotheca Alexandrina (p381) – both foreign designs – the country possesses few buildings of architectural worth that postdate the 1950s. The only exceptions are works by the influential Hassan Fathy, author of the seminal work *Architecture for the Poor* and designer of utopian projects such as New Gurna (p275) on Luxor's West Bank and the Fathy-influenced practice of Rami el-Dahan and Soheir Farid, responsible for the pavilion at the new Al-Azhar Park in Cairo (see the boxed text, p140).

This depressing reality wasn't always so. Cairo and Alexandria possess a splendid legacy of late-19th- and early-20th-century apartment blocks, villas and public buildings. Even more splendid is the capital's fantastic legacy of medieval architecture. Starting with the Mosque of Amr ibn al-As (p125) in AD 642, the earliest existing Islamic structure in Cairo, it's possible to trace the development of Muslim architecture through more than 1000 years of history. Sadly, these grand monuments are often overshadowed by chock-a-block brick and concrete high-rises. Unfortunately, a booming population and a lack of space mean that this architectural trend is not likely to be reversed anytime soon.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art ([www.metmuseum.org/exploration/newegypt/html/a\\_index.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/exploration/newegypt/html/a_index.htm)) has an excellent web resource on the art of ancient Egypt.

The Theban Mapping Project ([www.thebanmappingproject.com](http://www.thebanmappingproject.com)) is dedicated to all things to do with the Valley of the Kings – if only all Egyptology websites were this good.



# Environment

## THE LAND

The Nile Valley is home to most Egyptians, with some 90% of the population confined to the narrow carpet of fertile land bordering the great river. To the south the river is hemmed in by mountains and the agricultural plain is narrow, but as the river flows north the land becomes flatter and the valley widens to between 20km and 30km.

To the east of the valley is the Eastern Desert (this is also known as the Arabian Desert), a barren plateau bounded on its eastern edge by a high ridge of mountains that rises to more than 2000m and extends for about 800km. To the west is the Western Desert (also known as the Libyan Desert), which officially comprises two-thirds of the land surface of Egypt. If you ignore the political boundaries on the map, it stretches right across the top of North Africa under its better-known and highly evocative name, the Sahara.

Cairo also demarcates Egyptian geography as it lies roughly at the point where the Nile splits into several tributaries and the valley becomes a 200km-wide delta. Burdened with the task of providing for the entire country, this Delta region ranks among the world's most intensely cultivated lands.

To the east, across the Suez Canal, is the triangular wedge of Sinai. A geological extension of the Eastern Desert, terrain here slopes from the high mountain ridges, which include Mt Sinai and Gebel Katarina (the highest mountain in Egypt at 2642m) in the south, to desert coastal plains and lagoons in the north.

## WILDLIFE

Egypt is about 94% desert – such a figure conjures up images of vast, barren wastelands where nothing can live. However, there are plenty of desert regions where fragile ecosystems have adapted over millennia to extremely hostile conditions. For more information on desert flora, see the boxed text p458.

Egypt has four of the world's five officially identified types of sand dunes, including the *seif* (sword) dunes, so named because they resemble the blades of curved Arab swords.

*Natural Selections: A Year of Egypt's Wildlife*, written and illustrated by Richard Hoath and published locally by the American University in Cairo Press, is a passionate account of the birds, mammals, insects and marine creatures that make Egypt their home.

## RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Tourism is vital to the Egyptian economy and the country would be a mess without it. At the same time, however, millions of visitors a year can't help but add to the ecological and environmental overload. As long as outsiders have been stumbling upon or searching for the wonders of ancient Egypt, they have also been crawling all over them, chipping bits off or leaving their own contributions engraved in the stones. Needless to say, this is not sustainable.

The organised menace of mass tourism threatens to destroy the very monuments that visitors come to see. At sites such as the Valley of the Kings, thousands of visitors a day mill about in cramped tombs designed for one occupant. The deterioration of the painted wall reliefs alarms archaeologists whose calls for limits on the numbers of visitors have largely fallen on deaf ears.

Even the Pyramids, which have so far survived 4500 years, are suffering. Cracks have begun to appear in inner chambers and, in cases like these, authorities have been forced to limit visitors and to close the great structures periodically to give them some rest and recuperation. It can only be a matter of time before similar measures are enforced elsewhere.

In the meantime, it's up to you, the traveller, to behave responsibly. Don't be tempted to baksheesh guards so you can use your flash in tombs. Don't clamber over toppled pillars and statues. Don't touch painted reliefs. It's all just common sense.

## Animals

Egypt is home to about 100 species of mammals, though you'd be lucky to see anything other than camels, donkeys, horses and buffaloes. Although Egypt's deserts were once sanctuaries for an amazing variety of larger mammals, such as the leopard, cheetah, oryx, aardwolf, striped hyena and caracal, all of these have been brought to the brink of extinction through hunting. In fact, there's only one known family of cheetah still alive in Egypt, and many years have passed since a leopard was sighted. Other creatures such as the sand cat, the fennec fox and the Nubian ibex are very rarely sighted.

There are three types of gazelle in Egypt: the Arabian, Dorcas and white. Unfortunately, Arabian gazelles are thought to be extinct, and there are only individual sightings of Dorcas and white gazelles, despite the fact that herds were common features of the desert landscape only 35 years ago.

The zorilla, a kind of weasel, lives in the Gebel Elba region. In Sinai you may see the rock hyrax, a small creature about the size of a large rabbit, which lives in large groups and is extremely sociable.

Less loveable are the 34 species of snake in Egypt. The best known is the cobra, which featured prominently on the headdress of the ancient pharaohs. Another well-known species is the horned viper, a thickset snake that has horns over its eyes. There are also plenty of scorpions, although they're largely nocturnal and rarely seen. Be careful if you're lifting up stones, as they like to burrow into cool spots.

## BIRDS

About 430 bird species have been sighted in Egypt, of which about one-third actually breed in Egypt, while most of the others are passage migrants or winter visitors. Each year an estimated one to two million large birds migrate via certain routes from Europe to Africa through Egypt. Most large birds, including flamingos, storks, cranes, herons and all large birds of prey, are protected under Egyptian law.

The most ubiquitous birds are the house sparrow and the hooded crow, while the most distinctive is the hoopoe. This cinnamon-toned bird has a head shaped like a hammer and extends its crest in a dramatic fashion when it's excited. Hoopoes are often seen hunting for insects in gardens in central Cairo, though they're more common in the countryside.

For information on bird watching in Egypt, see p502.

## MARINE LIFE

See Marine Life (p441) in the Diving the Red Sea chapter for details on Egypt's marine life.

## Plants

The lotus that symbolises ancient Egypt can be found, albeit rarely, in the Delta area, but the papyrus reed, depicted in ancient art as vast swamps where the pharaohs hunted hippos, has disappeared from its natural habitats. Except for one clump found in 1968 in Wadi Natrun, papyrus is now found only in botanical gardens.

More than 100 varieties of grass thrive in areas where there is water, and the date palm can be seen in virtually every cultivable area. Along with tamarisk and acacia, the imported jacaranda and poinciana (red and orange flowers) have come to mark Egyptian summers with their vivid colours.

## NATIONAL PARKS

Egypt currently has 23 'protected areas', although just what the status of 'protected area' means varies wildly. Take for instance the Nile Islands

The Egyptian tortoise, native to the Mediterranean coastal desert, is one of the world's smallest tortoises; most males are less than 9cm long.

Birding Egypt ([www.birdingegypt.com](http://www.birdingegypt.com)) serves the Egyptian birding community by listing top birding sites, rarities and travel tips.

At [www.hepca.com](http://www.hepca.com) you can learn about the efforts of HEPCA (Hurgada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association) to conserve the Red Sea's reefs through public awareness campaigns, direct community action and lobbying efforts.

**ALTERNATIVE ENERGY: EGYPT'S WAVE OF THE FUTURE** *Hassan Ansah*

People have often complained that Egypt is surrounded by some of the world's most lucrative oil producers, yet the country itself isn't endowed with such profitable resources. Yes, Egypt is loaded with historical monuments unmatched by any other country in the world, but some local entrepreneurs would love a little more access to the earth's black gold. Fortunately, the future just may give Egypt a level playing field in terms of energy resources, namely in the form of alternative energy – something that both capitalists and environmentalists can soundly agree upon.

One of Egypt's most acclaimed achievements is the High Dam in Aswan, which gave the country the opportunity to generate a large portion of its electricity cleanly and freely. For a country that still relies heavily on thermal power plants, which are notorious for emitting noxious fumes directly into the atmosphere, increased reliance on hydropower was definitely a step in the right direction. Currently, hydropower projects are under way in towns like Kanater and Nag Hammadi, which will hopefully set a precedent for further investment in this industry.

Another form of alternative energy that has huge potential in Egypt is wind power, more precisely large-scale wind farms. One of the largest wind farms in all of Africa and the Middle East is located in the town of Al-Zafaran, approximately halfway between Cairo and Hurghada. Here, along the windswept Red Sea coast, the average wind speed is 9m/s, which allows a production capability of over 150MW. Due to the success of this project, numerous other plans for construction of wind farms in towns along the coast are under way, with aims to increase the total wind capacity to at least 850MW by 2010.

There is also a growing business sector in Egypt for diverse forms of solar power usage, particularly in remote areas that are unable to access the unified power grid. A good example of this is the use of photovoltaics, which are high-powered reflectors that can produce voltage when exposed to sunlight. Photovoltaics are extremely advantageous in that they can be easily utilised for anything from illuminating roads to strengthening scattered mobile phone signals. Considering that Egypt basks in sunshine virtually year-round, there is an incredible amount of potential in this field.

Of course, despite the progress that has been made so far in the renewable energy industry within Egypt, significant problems and obstacles for its development remain. For instance, there are still heavy government regulations within the energy industry that protect existing large companies and hinder entrepreneurial innovation. Although government officials and businesses argue that nothing can compete with the cheapness and safe returns of electricity or natural gas, it's impossible to deny the impending global energy crisis, rising pollution levels and the threat of global warming.

Fortunately, government regulations may just be a temporary obstacle, especially considering Egypt's mushrooming population and increased energy needs. As more and more countries start to take drastic steps to reach sustainability in a time of depleting resources, there's reason to be optimistic that Egypt will follow suit. Furthermore, as an influential player in both Africa and the Middle East, Egypt is in a unique position to be able to induce a change in attitude beyond its borders.

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Protected Area, which runs all the way from Cairo to Aswan: nobody is clear which islands are included and most are inhabited and cultivated without restriction. Other sites are closed to the public while some, such as Ras Mohammed National Park (p460) in the Red Sea, are popular tourist destinations that have received international plaudits for their eco smarts.

The problem, as always, is a lack of funding. The Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA) has neither the high-level support nor the resources needed to provide effective management of the protectorates. Some help has arrived through foreign donorship and assistance: the Italians at Wadi

## UNDER A BLACK CLOUD

Cairo is close to claiming the dubious title of the world's most polluted city. Airborne smoke, soot, dust, and liquid droplets from fuel combustion constantly exceed World Health Organisation (WHO) standards (up to 259 ug/m<sup>3</sup> when the international standard is 50), leading to skyrocketing instances of emphysema, asthma and cancer among the city's population. A startling feature article by Ursula Lindsey published in a March 2005 edition of *Cairo* magazine asserted that as many as 20,000 Cairenes die each year of pollution-related disease and that close to half a million contract pollution-related respiratory diseases every year.

The government blames the city's pollution on its dry, sandy climate, which leads, it says, to a thick dust rarely cleared by rain. Not surprisingly, it doesn't like to comment on contributing factors such as the increase in dirty industry (a direct result of government economic initiatives) and Cairo's ever-burgeoning population, a result of people moving to the city from rural areas in search of work.

Cars are, of course, a major offender. Some estimates place over two million cars in the greater Cairo area, and it's clear that this number is increasing every year. Very few run on unleaded petrol; most are poorly maintained diesel-run Fiats and Peugeots that spew out dangerous fumes.

Though factories are officially required to undertake environmental impact assessments and the government lays out a system of incentives and penalties designed to encourage industrial polluters to clean up their acts, few have done so and the government is doing little to prosecute offenders. Neither is it enforcing laws designed to have emission levels of vehicles tested. Organisations such as USAID are trying to turn the situation around, funding initiatives such as the US\$200-million Cairo Air Improvement project. To date, however, these welcome initiatives are making little impact.

The seriousness of the situation is particularly apparent each October and November, when the infamous 'black cloud' appears over the city. A dense layer of smog that is variously blamed on thermal inversion, rice straw burning in the Delta, automobile exhaust, burning rubbish and industrial pollution, it is a vivid reminder of an increasingly serious environmental problem.

Rayyan; the EU at St Katherine; and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) at the Red Sea coast and islands.

Egypt has a number of notable national parks:

**Lake Qarun Protected Area** (p211) Scenic oasis lake important for wintering water birds.

**Nabq Protected Area** (p472) Southern Sinai coastal strip with the most northerly mangrove swamp in the world.

**Ras Mohammed National Park** (p460) Spectacular reefs with sheer cliffs of coral; a haven for migrating white storks in autumn.

**Siwa Reserve** (p355) Three separate areas of natural springs, palm groves, salt lakes and endangered Dorcas gazelles.

**St Katherine Protectorate** (p490) Mountains rich in plant and animal life including Nubian ibex and rock hyrax.

**Wadi Rayyan** (p211) Uninhabited Saharan oasis with endangered wildlife.

**White Desert** (p347) White chalk monoliths, fossils and rock formations.

**Zerenike Protectorate** (p497) A lagoon on Lake Bardawil that harbours migrating water birds.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Ill-planned touristic development remains one of the biggest threats to Egypt's environment, particularly along the Red Sea coast and in Sinai. Following decades of frenzied development along the Red Sea coast, damaged coral reefs now run along most of its length. In Sinai, the coastline near Sharm el-Sheikh is already the site of a building boom and half-finished and extremely ugly resorts are clamouring for every speck of beach front. Whether the businesspeople investing here will make good on their

You can download the Wadi Rayyan Protected Area atlas, which contains 15 chapters of photos and maps, at [www.wadielrayan.org](http://www.wadielrayan.org).

promises to protect the reefs around the area remains to be seen. Given their past record there is little reason to believe them.

The opening of the Nile bridge in Luxor (previously there was only a ferry) and the destruction of large parts of the West Bank has finally happened. After more than 50 years of trying to move people off the hillside, the present governor finally succeeded. He is also planning on knocking down some of central Luxor to excavate the avenue of sphinxes that once linked Karnak and Luxor Temple. Luxor residents are quaking at the might of the new ruler.

Fortunately, there have been some positive developments. A National Parks office (see boxed text, p425) has opened in Hurghada and it is hoping to rein in some of the more grandiose development plans in the Marsa Alam area. And new 'green' guidelines for running hotels are being trialled under a joint US-Egyptian Red Sea Sustainable Tourism Initiative (RSSTI). Recommendations focus on energy use, water conservation, and handling and disposal of waste, including simple measures such as installing foot-pedal taps at sinks, which make it harder to leave water running.

Finally, Egypt now has a growing number of high-profile ecolodges – including the fabulous Basata in Sinai (p488) and Adrére Amellal at Siwa (p363) – which may be the harbingers of a new, environmentally responsible trend in Egyptian tourism. We can only hope that this is the case.

# Food & Drink

The reputation of Egyptian cuisine takes a constant battering, largely because it's compared with regional heavyweights such as those of Lebanon, Turkey and Iran. Truth be told, Egypt does not have a well-established culinary heritage, and lacks the diversity and regionalisation of dishes found elsewhere in the Middle East. However, this ill-reputation is unfortunate simply because the food here is good, honest peasant fare that packs an occasional – and sensational – knockout punch.

Whether you're a hard-core carnivore or a devoted vegetarian, Egypt never fails to serve up cheap and hearty fare. True to its Middle East roots, Egyptian meals typically centre on lightly-spiced lamb or chicken, though there's enough coastline to reel in the fruits of the sea. Of course, even meat lovers will wait in line for hot and crispy falafel, the ubiquitous Middle Eastern vegetarian staple. Regardless of your culinary preference however, you can always count on stacks of freshly baked pita and heaping bowls of rice to accompany any meal.

There is always room for dessert in Egypt. This is one culinary arena where the country really shines, especially when you accompany your plate of delectable treats with a cup of dark, thick and knock-your-socks-off-strong coffee. And, just when your stomach is about to explode, signal your waiter to bring you an apple-scented *sheesha* (water pipe) – a few long, drawn out puffs not only settles the stomach but also relaxes the mind and calms the nerves.

## STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

### Mezze

Largely vegetable based and always bursting with colour and flavour, mezze (a selection of hot and cold starters) aren't strictly Egyptian (many hail from the Levant), but they have been customised here in a more limited and economical form. They're the perfect start to any meal, and it's usually perfectly acceptable for diners to order an entire meal from the mezze list and forego the mains.

### Bread

'Aish (bread) is the most important staple of the national diet. Usually made with a combination of plain and wholemeal flour with sufficient leavening to form a pocket and soft crust, it's cooked over an open flame. Locals use it in lieu of cutlery to scoop up dips, and rip it into pieces to wrap around

*A New Book of Middle Eastern Food* by Egyptian-born Claudia Roden brought the cuisines of the region to the attention of Western cooks when it was released in 1968. It's still an essential reference, as fascinating for its cultural insights as for its great recipes.

## TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

- *Fatta* – dish involving rice and bread soaked in a garlicky-vinegary sauce with lamb or chicken, which is then oven cooked in a *tāgen* (clay pot). It's very heavy; after eating retire to a chaise longue.
- *Mahshi kurumb* – these rice- and meat-stuffed cabbage leaves are decadently delightful when correctly cooked with plenty of dill and lots of sinful *semna* (clarified butter).
- *Molokhiyya* – a soup made from mallow. Properly prepared with rabbit broth and plenty of garlic, it's quite delicious.
- *Hamam mahshi* – smaller than European pigeons and usually stuffed with *fireek* (green wheat) and rice, this dish is served at all traditional restaurants but can be fiddly to eat. Beware the plentiful little bones.

morsels of meat. *Shammy*, a version made with plain flour only, is the usual wrapping for *ta'amiyya* (see Quick Eats, p97).

## Salads

Simplicity is the key to Egyptian salads, with crunchy fresh ingredients (including herbs) often tossed in oil and vinegar, and eaten with relish as a mezze or as an accompaniment to a meat or fish main. Two salads are found on menus throughout the country: oriental salad, a colourful mix of chopped tomatoes, cucumber, onion and pepper; and the Middle East's signature salad, *tabbouleh* (bulgur wheat, parsley and tomato, with a sprinkling of sesame seeds, lemon and garlic). Less common, but equally delicious, is a salad made of boiled beetroot with a tangy oil and vinegar dressing.

## Vegetables & Soups

In Egypt, there's none of the silly Western fixation with preparing vegetables that are out of season – here tomatoes are eaten when they're almost bursting out of their skins with sweet juices, corn is picked when it's golden and plentiful, and cucumbers are munched when they're soft and sweet.

There are a number of vegetables that are particular to Middle Eastern cuisine, including *molokhiyya*, a green leafy vegetable known in the West as mallow. Here it's made into a slimy and surprisingly sexy soup with a glutinous texture and earthy flavour. Usually served as an accompaniment to roast chicken, it inspires an almost religious devotion among locals.

Vegetable soups are extremely popular, as are soups made with pulses. *Shourba ads* (lentil soup) is made with red or yellow lentils, and is always served with wedges of lemon on the side. *Fuul nabbed* (broad bean soup) is almost as popular.

## Meats

*Kofta* and kebab are two of the most popular dishes in Egypt. *Kofta*, spiced ground lamb or beef peppered with spices and shaped into balls, is skewered and grilled. It is the signature element of the Egyptian favourite *daoud basha*, meatballs cooked with pine nuts and tomato sauce in a *tāgen* (a clay pot; also used to describe a stew cooked in one of these pots). Kebab is skewered and flame-grilled chunks of meat, normally lamb (the chicken equivalent is called *shish tawouq*). The meat usually comes on a bed of *badounis* (parsley), and may be served in upmarket restaurants with grilled tomatoes and onions; otherwise you eat it with bread, salad and tahini.

*Firekh* (chicken) roasted on a spit is a commonly spotted dish, and in restaurants is typically ordered by the half. *Hamam* (pigeon) is also extremely popular, and is best served as *tāgen* with onions, tomatoes and rice or cracked wheat.

## Seafood

When in Alexandria, along the Red Sea and in Sinai, you'll undoubtedly join the locals in falling hook, line and sinker for the marvellous array of fresh seafood on offer. Local favourites are *kalamaari* (squid); *balti*, which are about 15cm long, flattish and grey with a light belly; and the larger, tastier *bouri* (mullet). You'll also commonly find sea bass, bluefish, sole, *subeit* or *gambari* (shrimp) on restaurant menus. The most popular ways to cook fish are to bake them with salt, grill them over coals or fry them in olive oil.

## Desserts & Sweets

If you have a sweet tooth, be prepared to put it to good use on your travels in Egypt. The prince of local puds is undoubtedly *muhlabiyya*, a concoction

Dozens of recipes for tasty Egyptian dishes can be found at <http://fooddownunder.com/cgi-bin/search.cgi?q=egyptian>.

*The Complete Middle East Cookbook* by Tess Mallos is full of easy-to-follow recipes and devotes an entire chapter to the cuisine of Egypt.

For a basic overview of Egyptian food in addition to recipes for the country's most popular dishes, check out [www.foodbycountry.com/Alergia-to-France/Egypt.com](http://www.foodbycountry.com/Alergia-to-France/Egypt.com).



tion like blancmange, made using ground rice, milk, sugar and rose or orange water and topped with chopped pistachios and almonds. Almost as popular are *ruz bi laban* (rice pudding) and *omm ali* (layers of pastry filled with nuts and raisins, soaked in cream and milk, and baked in the oven). Seasonal fresh fruit is just as commonly served, and provides a refreshing finale to any meal.

Best of all are the pastries, including *kunafa*, a vermicelli-like pastry over a vanilla base soaked in syrup that is often associated with feasts and is always eaten at Ramadan. The most famous of all pastries is baklava, made from delicate filo drenched in honey or syrup. Variations on baklava are flavoured with fresh nuts or stuffed with wickedly rich clotted cream (*eishta*).

## DRINKS

### Tea & Coffee

Drinking *shai* (tea) is the signature pastime of the country, and it is seen as strange and decidedly antisocial not to swig the tannin-laden beverage at regular intervals throughout the day. *Shai* will either come in the form of a teabag plonked in a cup or glass of hot water (Lipton is the usual brand) or a strong brew of the local leaves (the brew of choice is El Arosa).

It is always served sweet; to moderate this, order it *sukar shwaiyya*, with 'a little sugar'. If you don't want any sugar, ask for *min ghayr sukar*. Far more refreshing, when it's in season, is *shai* served with mint leaves: ask for *shai na'na'*. Be warned that you'll risk severe embarrassment if you ask for milk anywhere but in tourist hotels and restaurants. In these places, ask for *b'laban*.

Turkish and Arabic coffee (*ahwa*; the word is also used for coffeehouse) aren't widely consumed in the region; instant coffee (always called *neskaf*) is far more common. If you do find the real stuff, it's likely to be a thick and powerful Turkish-style brew that's served in small cups and drunk in a couple of short sips. As with tea, you have to specify how much sugar you want: *ahwa mazboot* comes with a moderate amount of sugar but is still fairly sweet; if you don't want any sugar ask for *ahwa saada*.

### Beer & Wine

For beer in Egypt just say 'Stella'. It's been brewed and bottled in Cairo now for more than 100 years. A yeasty and highly drinkable lager, it has a taste that varies enormously by batch. Since 1998, the standard Stella has been supplemented by sister brews including Stella Meister (a light lager) and Stella Premium (for the beer snob in us all). Most locals just stick to the unfussy basic brew – it's the cheapest (around £10 in restaurants), and as long as it's cold, it's not bad. Since the late 1990s, there's been a worthy 'competitor' on the market called Saqqara, though this is actually owned by the same brewery as Stella.

There's a growing viticulture industry around Alexandria, but the product is pretty unimpressive; Grand de Marquise is by far the best of a lacklustre bunch, producing an Antipodean-style red and a Chablis-style white. Obelisk is a newcomer to the scene, and has a quaffable Cabernet Sauvignon, a Pinot Blanc and a dodgy rosé. The country's oldest winery Gianacis produces three decidedly headache-inducing tipples: a dry red known as Omar Khayyam, a rosé called Rubis D'Egypte and a gasoline-like dry white called Cru des Ptolémées.

These wines average between £100 and £150 per bottle in restaurants throughout the country. Imported wines are both hard to find and prohibitively expensive.

The popular Egyptian dessert of *omm ali* is said to have been introduced into the country by Miss O'Malley, an Irish mistress of Khedive Ismail.

## Water

Don't even *think* of drinking from the tap in Egypt – the dreaded 'Nile Piles' is enough to ruin any traveller's day. Cheap bottled water is readily available in even the smallest towns.

With that said, there is some debate regarding the drinkability of water in Cairo. Although we'll leave it to you to see whether or not your body can cope, according to one Cairo expat: 'You can drink the water in Cairo, I swear. It just tastes less than delicious.'

## Other Drinks

Over the hot summer months many *ahwa*-goers forgo their regular teas and coffees for cooler drinks such as the crimson-hued, iced *karkadai*, a wonderfully refreshing drink boiled up from hibiscus leaves; *limoon* (lemon juice); or *zabaady* (yogurt beaten with cold water and salt). In winter many prefer *sahlab*, a warm drink made with semolina powder, milk and chopped nuts; or *yansoon*, a medicinal-tasting aniseed drink.

Juice stands are recognisable by the hanging bags of netted fruit (and carrots) that adorn their façades and are an absolute godsend on a hot summer's day. Standard juices (*asiir*) include *moz* (banana), *guafa* (guava), *limoon* (lemon), *manga* (mango), *bortuaan* (orange), *rumman* (pomegranate), *farawla* (strawberry), and *asab* (sugar cane). A glass costs between 50pt and ££2 depending on the fruit used.

Did you know that the delicious drink *karkadai*, made from boiling hibiscus leaves, is famous for 'strengthening the blood' (lowering blood pressure)?

## CELEBRATIONS

Egyptians love nothing more than a celebration, and food plays an important role when it comes to giving thanks for a birth, celebrating an engagement or marriage, bringing in a harvest or marking a significant religious holiday.

The most important religious feasts occur during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month. *Iftar*, the evening meal prepared to break the fast, is a special feast calling for substantial soups, chicken and meat dishes, and other delicacies. It's often enjoyed communally in the street or in large, specially erected tents.

Family celebrations are always accompanied by a flurry of baking. *Ataif* (pancakes dipped in syrup) are eaten on the day of a betrothal and biscuits known as *kahk bi loz* (almond bracelets) are favourites at wedding parties. The birth of a son is marked by serving an aromatic rice pudding with aniseed called *meghlie*. *Moulids* (see p509) also involve copious eating of sweet pastries.

## WHERE & WHEN TO EAT & DRINK

In Egypt, one rule stands firm: the best food is always served in private homes. If you are fortunate enough to be invited to share a home-cooked meal, make sure you take up the offer. Be warned however that you will most likely be stuffed to the point of bursting – the minute you look close to cleaning your plate, you will be showered with more food, which no amount of protesting can stop.

The only place we'd recommend branching out and trying other regional cuisines is Cairo as well as in tourist cities such as Luxor, Sharm el-Sheikh and Dahab. Otherwise, look for where the locals are eating. In Alexandria for instance, you should follow their lead and dine out in the local seafood restaurants – they're some of the best in the region.

When you do eat out, you'll find that locals usually dine at a later hour than is the norm in the West; it's usual to see diners arrive at a restaurant at 10pm or even later in the big cities, particularly in summer. They also dine in large family groups, order up big, smoke like chimneys and linger over their meals.

Looking to learn more about food and drink in ancient Egypt? Be sure to visit [www.civilization.ca/civil/Egypt/egcl02e.html](http://www.civilization.ca/civil/Egypt/egcl02e.html).

## BEFORE THERE WAS STARBUCKS

The coffeehouse or *ahwa* (the Arabic word means both coffee and the place in which it's drunk) is one of the great Egyptian social institutions. Typically just a collection of cheap tin-plate-topped tables and wooden chairs in a sawdust-strewn room open to the street, the *ahwa* is a relaxed and unfussy place where the average Joe (or Ahmed) will hang out for part of each day, whiling away the hours reading the papers, meeting friends or sipping tea. The hubbub of conversation is usually accompanied by the incessant clacking or slamming of *domina* (dominoes) and *towla* (backgammon) pieces, and the burbling of smokers drawing heavily on their *sheeshas* (water pipes).

The *sheesha* is a tradition, an indulgence and a slightly naughty habit all wrapped into one gloriously fragrant and relaxing package. A feature of coffeehouses from Alexandria to Aswan, it's a pastime that's as addictive as it is magical. Traditionally *ahwa*-going has been something of an all-male preserve, and older men at that, but in recent years *sheesha* smoking has become extremely fashionable. It's now common to see young, mixed-sex groups of Egyptians in *ahwas*, especially in Cairo and Alexandria. In fact, *sheesha* is sweeping the world – from New York to London and Tokyo to Sydney, *sheesha* bars are all the rage these days.

When you order a water pipe you'll need to specify the type of tobacco and molasses mix you would like. Most people opt for tobacco soaked in apple juice (*tufah*), but it's also possible to order strawberry, melon, cherry or mixed-fruit flavours. Some purists order their tobacco unadulterated, but in doing this they miss out on the wonderfully sweet and fragrant aroma that makes the experience so memorable. Once you've specified your flavour, a decorated bulbous glass pipe filled with water will be brought to your table, hot coals will be placed in it to get it started and you will be given a disposable plastic mouthpiece to slip over the pipe's stem. Just draw back and you're off. The only secret to a good smoke is to take a puff every now and again to keep the coals hot; when they start to lose their heat the waiter (or dedicated water pipe-minder) will replace them. Bliss!

Of course, it's worth mentioning that even though the smoke from *sheesha* is filtered through water and tastes nothing like the tobacco from cigarettes, it's still smoke nevertheless. Studies vary, but since you're pulling large volumes of smoke into your lungs with each puff, it has been estimated that a one-hour *sheesha* session delivers as much tar as smoking an entire pack of cigarettes. Consider yourself warned. The good news however is that *sheesha* isn't nearly as addictive as cigarettes, so it's unlikely that you'll stealing be away in morning hours to puff one before breakfast. The intoxicating scents of roasted coffee and apple tobacco are a seductive blend, and about as authentically Egyptian as you can get.

The main meal of the day is usually lunch – see p503 for restaurants' and cafés' business hours. Tipping is expected in almost every eatery and restaurant and 10% is the norm.

## Quick Eats

Forget the bland international snack food served up by the global chains: once you've sampled the joys of Egyptian street food you'll never again be able to face dining under golden arches or with the colonel.

The national stars of the snack-food line-up are *fuul* and *ta'amiyya*, and they are both things of joy when served and eaten fresh. *Fuul*, an unassuming peasant dish of slow-cooked fava beans cooked with garlic and garnished with parsley, olive oil, lemon, salt, black pepper and cumin, is the national dish. It's absolutely delicious stuffed into *shammy* and eaten as a sandwich. *Ta'amiyya* (better known outside Cairo as *felafel*) is mashed broad beans and spices rolled into balls and deep fried.

Almost as popular as *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* is *shwarma*, the local equivalent of the Greek *gyros* sandwich or the Turkish *döner kebab*; strips are sliced from a vertical spit of compressed lamb or chicken, sizzled on a hot plate with chopped tomatoes and garnish, and then stuffed into a *shammy*.

[www.foodtimeline.org/foodfaq3.html](http://www.foodtimeline.org/foodfaq3.html) offers an impressive overview of the history of food from Mesopotamia through the Middle Ages.

### OUR FAVOURITE EATERIES

- Qadoura (p388) in Alexandria. The best seafood in the country, especially when the sea has been bountiful.
- Sabaya (p164) in Cairo. Lebanese food as impressive as anything you'll find in Beirut.
- Oasis Café (p283) in Luxor. Sophisticated décor and a colonial ambience complement the eclectic menu at this tourist favourite.
- Al-Fanar (p469) in Sharm el-Sheikh. Arguably the best pizza in Egypt, with stunning ocean views and a chic Bedouin-inspired ambience to match.
- Funny Mummy (p478) in Dahab. A popular seaside tourist spot serving Western and Asian favourites beneath a palm-tree canopy.

You should also look out for shops sporting large metal tureens in the window: these specialise in the vegetarian delight *kushari*, a delicate mix of noodles, rice, black lentils and dried onions, served with an accompanying tomato sauce that's sometimes fiery with chilli. Although the entire concoction is somewhat reminiscent of your mum's leftovers thrown together in a dish, it's extremely cheap and filling, and authentically Egyptian to boot. Don't forget to splash a healthy amount of the provided garlicky vinegar on your *kushari*.

The local variation of the pizza is *fiteer*, which has a thin, flaky pastry base. Try it topped with salty haloumi cheese, or even with a mixture of sugar-dusted fruit.

Picturesque as some of them are, avoid the street carts trundled around by vendors. These guys sell anything from sandwiches to milk puddings, but the food has often been out in the sun all day long, not to mention exposed to fumes, dust and all manner of insect life.

### VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Though it's quite usual for the people of the Middle East to eat vegetarian meals, the concept of vegetarianism is quite foreign. Say you're a vegan, and Egyptians will either look mystified or assume that you're 'fessing up to some sort of socially aberrant behaviour.

Fortunately, it's not difficult to order vegetable-based dishes. You'll find that you can eat loads of mezze and salads, *fuul*, *kushari*, *ta'amiyya*, the occasional omelette or oven-baked vegetable *tāgens* with okra and eggplant. When in doubt, you can always order a stack of pita bread and a bowl of hummus, which can easily be a meal itself. If your diet enables you to eat fish, fresh seafood is nearly always available in tourist towns and along the coasts.

The main source of inadvertent meat eating is meat stock, which is often used to make otherwise vegetarian *tāgens* and soups. Your hosts or waiter may not even consider such stock to be meat, so they will reassure you that the dish is vegetarian. Be vigilant.

### EATING WITH KIDS

It's usual for Egyptians to eat out as a family group, and you'll often see children and teenagers dining with their parents and friends in restaurants until the early hours. Waiters are uniformly accepting of children, and they will usually go out of their way to make them feel welcome (offerings of fried potato chips being a tried and true method). Best of all, the cuisine of the region is very child-friendly, being simple yet varied.

Letting the youngest members of the party choose from the mezze dishes is a good idea, kebabs (particularly *shish tawouq*) are perennial favourites and roast chicken is usually a safe bet, especially when put into fresh bread

Still hungry? More recipes for tasty Egyptian dishes can be found at [www.gourmet.gr/recipes/egyptian/?gid=1&nodeid=23](http://www.gourmet.gr/recipes/egyptian/?gid=1&nodeid=23).

*Egyptian Cooking: A Practical Guide* by Samia Abdennour is published by the American University Press and readily available in Egypt.

## DOS & DON'TS

- Remember to always remove your shoes before sitting down on a rug or carpet to eat or drink tea.
- Avoid putting your left hand into a communal dish if you're eating Bedouin style – your left hand is used for, well, wiping yourself in the absence of toilet paper.
- Be sure to leave the dining area and go outside or to the toilet before blowing your nose in a restaurant.
- Make sure you refrain from eating, drinking or smoking in public during the daytime in the holy month of Ramadan (international hotels are an exception to this rule).
- Always sit at the dinner table next to a person of the same sex unless your host(ess) suggests otherwise.

to make a sandwich. And of course the snack foods tend to go down a treat, particularly *fiteer*, *kushari* and *ta'amiyya*. Fresh juice and soft drinks are almost always available to quench Junior's thirst, too.

Some places have high chairs, but they're in the minority. Kid's menus are usually only seen at Western-style hotel restaurants.

For more information on travelling with children, see p503.

## HABITS & CUSTOMS

Egyptians eat a standard three meals a day. When it comes to breakfast, Kellogg's has yet to make inroads – for much of the populace the morning meal consists of bread and cheese, maybe olives or a fried egg at home, or a *fuul* sandwich on the run. Lunch is the day's main meal, taken from 2pm onwards, but more likely around 3pm or 4pm when dad's home from work and the kids are back from school. Whatever's served, the women of the house (usually the mother) will probably have spent most of her day in the kitchen preparing it, it'll be hot and there'll probably be plenty to go around. Whatever's left over is usually served up again later in the evening as supper.

For younger readers, [www.historyforkids.org/learn/Egypt/food/egyptfood.htm](http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/Egypt/food/egyptfood.htm) is a great kid-friendly overview of food in ancient Egypt.

## EAT YOUR WORDS

Following are some phrases to help you order successfully. For pronunciation guidelines, see p543.

### Useful Phrases

**Table for (five), please.**

**May we see the menu?**

**Is service included in the bill?**

**I'm vegetarian.**

**Do you have any vegetarian dishes?**

**I can't eat dairy products.**

**Please bring us the bill.**

ta-ra-bay-za li (kham-sa) low sa-maHt

mum-kin ni-shoof il mi-nay?

il Hi-saab shaa-mil il khid-ma?

a-na na-baa-tee (male speaker)/

a-na na-ba-tee-ya (female speaker)

'an-dak ak-la na-ba-tee-ya?

ma ba-kulsh il al-baan

low sa-maHt hat-li-na il Hi-saab

## Menu Decoder

### MEZZE

Note that because of the imprecise nature of transliterating Arabic into English, spellings will vary; for example, what we give as *kibbeh* may appear variously as 'kibba', 'kibby' or even 'gibeh'.

**baba ghanoug** (ba-ba gha-noug) – a lumpy paste of mashed eggplant mixed with tomato and onion and sometimes, in season, pomegranate; done well, it has a delicious smoky taste

**besara** (be-sā-ra) – purée of broad beans served as a dip

**hummus** (*Hum-mus*) – cooked chickpeas ground into a paste and mixed with tahini, garlic and lemon; this is available in every restaurant and at its best it should be thick and creamy

**kibbeh** (*kib-beh*) – minced lamb, bulgur wheat and pine seeds shaped into a patty and deep-fried

**kibbeh nayeh** (*kib-beh nay-eh*) – ground lamb and cracked wheat served raw like steak tartare

**kibda** (*kib-da*) – liver, often chicken liver (*kibda firekh*), usually sautéed in lemon or garlic; done correctly it should have an almost pâtélike consistency

**labneh** (*lab-neh*) – a cheesy yogurt paste, which is often heavily flavoured with garlic or sometimes, even better, with mint

**loubieh** (*lou-bieh*) – French bean salad with tomatoes, onions and garlic

**mahshi** (*maH-shi*) – mincemeat, rice, onions, parsley and herbs stuffed into vine leaves (in summer), cabbage (in winter), peppers, courgettes or white and black eggplants; the mixture is baked and is delicious when just cooked and hot, but less so when cold

**mokh** (*mokh*) – brains served crumbed and deep fried or whole, garnished with salad

**muhlabiyya** (*mu-hal-a-biy-ya*) – blanchmangelike concoction made with ground rice, milk, sugar and rose or orange water and topped with chopped pistachios and almonds

**muttabel** (*mut-ta-bel*) – similar to *baba ghanoug* but the blended eggplant is mixed with tahini, yogurt and olive oil to achieve a creamier consistency

**sanbusak** (*san-boo-sak*) – pastry filled with salty white cheese or spicy minced meat with pine kernels

**shanklish** (*shank-leesh*) – a salad of small pieces of crumbled, tangy, eye-wateringly strong cheese mixed with chopped onion and tomato

**tabbouleh** (*tab-bou-leh*) – a salad of bulgur wheat, parsley and tomato, with a sprinkling of sesame seeds, lemon and garlic

**tahina/tahini** (*ta-Hee-na/ta-Hee-nee*) – paste made of sesame seeds and served as dip

**wara einab** (*wa-ra' ai-nab*) – stuffed vine leaves, served both hot and cold

## MAIN COURSES

**fasoolyeh** (*fa-sool-yeh*) – a green-bean stew

**hamam** (*Ham-aam*) – pigeon, usually baked or grilled and served stuffed with rice and spices; it's also served as a stew (*tāgen*), cooked in a deep clay pot

**kebab** (*ke-baab*) – skewered chunks of meat (usually lamb) cooked over a flame grill

**kofta** (*kof-ta*) – mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer

**shish tawouq** (*shish ta-wouq*) – kebab with pieces of marinated, spiced chicken instead of lamb

## DESSERTS

**asabeeh** (*a-sā-beeh*) – rolled filo pastry filled with pistachio, pine and cashew nuts and honey; otherwise known as 'lady's fingers'

**baklava** (*ba-kla-wa*) – generic term for any layered, flaky pastry with nuts, drenched in honey

**barazak** (*ba-ra-zak*) – flat, circular cookies sprinkled with sesame seeds; very crisp and light

**isfinjiyya** (*is-fin-jiy-ya*) – coconut slice

**kunafa** (*ku-naa-fa*) – vermicelli-like strands of cooked batter over a creamy sweet cheese base baked in syrup

**mushabbak** (*mu-shab-bak*) – lace-shaped pastry drenched in syrup

**zalabiyya** (*za-la-beey-ya*) – pastries dipped in rose-water

## Food Glossary

### BASICS

<i>ah-wa</i>	coffeehouse
<i>kub-baa-ya</i>	glass
<i>makh-baz</i>	bakery
<i>ma'-la'-a</i>	spoon
<i>ma-t'am</i>	restaurant
<i>me-nai</i>	menu
<i>shō-ka</i>	fork
<i>si-kee-na</i>	knife
<i>ta-ba'</i>	plate

**COOKING TERMS**

<i>fil-forn</i>	baked
<i>ma'li</i>	fried
<i>mas-loo'</i>	boiled

**DRINKS**

<i>ah-wa</i>	coffee
<i>bee-ra</i>	beer
<i>la-ban</i>	milk
<i>li-moon</i>	lemonade
<i>may-ya</i>	water
<i>may-ya ma'dan-ee-ya</i>	mineral water
<i>shai</i>	tea

**FRUIT & VEGETABLES**

<i>a-na-naas</i>	pineapple
<i>ar-na-beet</i>	cauliflower
<i>ba'doo-nis</i>	parsley
<i>bam-ya</i>	okra
<i>ba-sal</i>	onion
<i>ba-tā-tis</i>	potatoes
<i>bat-teeKh</i>	watermelon
<i>bi-sil-la</i>	peas
<i>bur-tu'-ān</i>	orange
<i>fa-raw-la</i>	strawberry
<i>ga-waa-fa</i>	guava
<i>ga-zar</i>	carrot
<i>'i-nab</i>	grapes
<i>man-ga</i>	mango
<i>mooz</i>	banana
<i>oo-tah/ta-mā-tim</i>	tomato
<i>tom</i>	garlic
<i>tor-shi</i>	pickled vegetables
<i>tuf-faaH</i>	apple

**MEAT**

<i>fir-aakh</i>	chicken
<i>kib-da</i>	liver
<i>laH-ma</i>	meat
<i>laH-ma dā-ni</i>	lamb

**OTHER FOODS & CONDIMENTS**

<i>'a-sal</i>	honey
<i>bayd</i>	eggs
<i>fil-fil</i>	pepper
<i>gib-na</i>	cheese
<i>mal-H</i>	salt
<i>sa-lā-ta</i>	salad
<i>suk-kar</i>	sugar
<i>talq</i>	ice
<i>za-baa-di</i>	yogurt
<i>zib-da</i>	butter

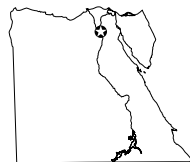
**STAPLES**

<i>'ai-sh</i>	bread
<i>ruz</i>	rice



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# Cairo



Let's address the drawbacks first. The crowds on a Cairo footpath make Manhattan look like a ghost town. You will be hounded by papyrus sellers at every turn. Your life will flash before your eyes each time you venture across a street. And your snot will run black from the smog.

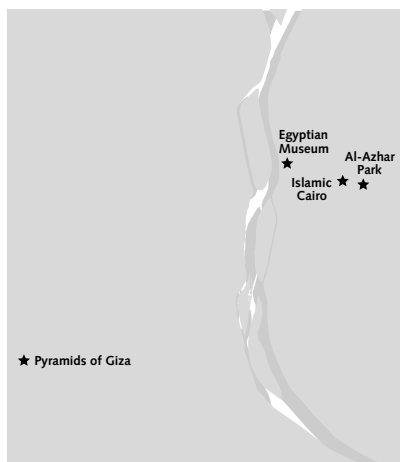
But it's a small price to pay, to visit the city Cairenes call Umm ad-Dunya – 'the mother of the world'. This city has an energy, palpable even at three in the morning, like no other. It's the product of its 20 million inhabitants waging a battle against the desert and winning (mostly), of 20 million people simultaneously crushing the city's infrastructure under their collective weight and lifting the city's spirit up with their uncommon graciousness and humour.

One taxi ride can span millennia, from the resplendent mosques and mausoleums built at the pinnacle of the Islamic empire, to the 19th-century palaces and grand avenues (which earned the city the nickname 'Paris on the Nile'), to the brutal concrete blocks of the Nasser years – then all the way back to the days of the pharaohs, as the Pyramids of Giza hulk on the western edge of the city. The architectural jumble is smoothed over by an even coating of beige sand, and the sand is a social equalizer as well: everyone, no matter how rich, gets dusty when the spring khamsin blows in.

So blow your nose, crack a joke and learn to look through the dirt to see the city's true colours. If you love Cairo, she will love you back.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Tip your head back and gape at the **Pyramids of Giza** (p143); cross an item off your life list
- Give your regards to Tutankhamun and his cohorts in the mazelike **Egyptian Museum** (p185)
- Visit the great medieval mosques of **Islamic Cairo** (p125) – or just get lost in the narrow alleys (p155)
- Relax to the click of backgammon and the bubble of the water pipe at an Egyptian coffeehouse, or **ahwa** (p169)
- Escape the city noise in the greenery of **Al-Azhar Park** (p140) with its splendid sunset view



## HISTORY

Cairo is not a Pharaonic city, though the presence of the Pyramids leads many to believe otherwise. At the time the Pyramids were built, the capital of ancient Egypt was Memphis, 20km southeast of the Giza Plateau.

The core foundations of the city of Cairo were laid in AD 969 by the Fatimid dynasty, but the city's history goes further back than that. There was an important ancient religious centre at On (modern-day Heliopolis). The Romans built a fortress at the port of On, which they called Babylon, while Amr ibn al-As, the general who conquered Egypt for Islam in AD 642, established the city of Fustat nearby. Fustat's huge wealth was drawn from Egypt's excessively rich soil and the taxes imposed on the heavy Nile traffic. Descriptions left by 10th-century travellers tell of public gardens, street lighting and buildings up to 14 storeys high. Yet in the 10th century, when the Fatimids marched in from modern-day Tunisia, they spurned Fustat and instead set about building a new city.

Construction began on the new capital, probably on purpose, when the planet Mars (Al-Qahir, 'the Victorious') was in the ascendant; thus arose Al-Madina al-Qahira, 'the city victorious', which Europeans corrupted to Cairo.

Many imposing buildings from the Fatimid era remain today: the great Al-Azhar Mosque and university is still Egypt's main centre of Islamic study, and the three great gates of Bab an-Nasr, Bab al-Futuh and Bab Zuweila still straddle two of Islamic Cairo's main thoroughfares. The Fatimids were not to remain long in power, but their city survived them and, under subsequent dynasties, became a capital of great wealth, ruled by cruel and fickle sultans. This was the city that was called the Mother of the World.

Cairo finally burst its walls, spreading west to the port of Bulaq and south onto Rhoda Island, while the desert to the east filled with grand funerary monuments. But at heart it remained a medieval city for 900 years, until the mid-19th century, when Ismail, grandson of Mohammed Ali, decided it was time for change. During his 16-year reign (1863–79), Ismail did more than anyone since the Fatimids to alter the city's appearance.

Before the 1860s the future site of modern central Cairo was a swampy plain subject to

the annual flooding of the Nile. When the French-educated Ismail came to power, he was determined to remake his capital into a city of European standing. This could only be done by starting afresh. For 10 years the former marsh became one vast building site as Ismail invited architects from Belgium, France and Italy to design and build a new European-style Cairo beside the old Islamic city.

Since the revolution of 1952 the population of Cairo has grown spectacularly – although at the expense of Ismail's vision. Building maintenance fell by the wayside as apartments were overcrowded. In the 1960s and 1970s, urban planners concreted over the sparsely populated west bank of the Nile for desperately needed new suburbs. In more recent decades, growth has crept beyond Muqattam Hills on the east and the Pyramids on the west. Luxe gated communities, sprawling housing blocks and full satellite cities, complete with malls and megastores, spring up from the desert every year: 6th of October City, New Cairo and others are the new Egyptian dream. Whether the desert and the economy can sustain them remains to be seen.

## ORIENTATION

Finding your way around Cairo's sprawl is not as difficult as it may at first seem. Midan Tahrir is the centre. The noisy, busy Downtown area, where most cheap eating and sleeping options are, lies northeast of Tahrir, centred on Midan Talaat Harb. Midan Ramses, location of the city's main train station, marks the northernmost extent of Downtown. Beyond are teeming middle- and working-class suburbs such as Shubra, perhaps the true soul of modern-day Cairo.

Downtown's eastern edge is Midan Ataba, where Islamic Cairo takes over. This is the medieval heart of the city, still beating strong today. At its centre is the great bazaar of Khan al-Khalili and Al-Azhar Mosque and university. Further east are the Northern and Southern Cemeteries, vast necropolises now inhabited by both the living and the dead.

South of Midan Tahrir, the tree-lined streets of Garden City are prime embassy territory. Then you're out of central Cairo and into a succession of ramshackle neighbourhoods loosely termed Old Cairo, the site of Roman Babylon and Arab Fustat. Buried in here is

## CAIRO IN...

## Two Days

Start day one with the magnificent exhibits at the **Egyptian Museum** (p185). When you've reached Pharaonic overload, leave the museum and wander around the Downtown area, stopping to grab a cheap and delicious lunch at **At-Tabei ad-Dumyati** (p162). In the afternoon, make your way to historic **Khan al-Khalili** (p128) and practise your haggling skills with the cheerful stall owners. While there, don't forget to have a mint tea and a *sheesha* (water pipe) at **Fishawi's** (p169). Return Downtown to eat a simple but delicious Levantine meal at the long-running **Greek Club** (p163) or dine like a pasha at Zamalek's glamorous **Abou el-Sid** (p166).

On day two make an early start and hire a taxi for the day to take you to **Dahshur** (p206), **Memphis** (p196) and **Saqqara** (p200). Bring a picnic to eat at the foot of the **Step Pyramid** (p201) or have a late outdoor lunch at **Andrea** (p167). In the afternoon visit the only remaining Ancient Wonder of the World, the **Pyramids of Giza** (p143). After this, it's on to the **Citadel View** (p165) in Al-Azhar Park for a lavish dinner overlooking the medieval city.

## Four Days

For days one and two, follow the Two Days itinerary.

Start day three by taking a taxi to the **Mosque of Ibn Tulun** (p138) and the **Gayer-Anderson Museum** (p138) in Islamic Cairo. Indulge in a bit of shopping at **Khan Misr Touloun** (p176) before catching a taxi to Midan Hussein to visit historic **Al-Azhar Mosque** (p127) and the **Al-Ghouri Complex** (p133) before stopping at **Abd el-Zaher** (p176) and **Al-Khatoun** (p176) to buy a stylish souvenir or two. Have a late lunch at **Egyptian Pancakes** (p165) in the Khan al-Khalili, then rest up before strolling through **Garden City at twilight** (p155). At sundown, take an hour's **felucca ride** (p154), then head to dinner at **Estoril** (p163); if you're up for more, cap it off with a beer at the **Odeon Palace Hotel bar** (p170).

On your last day take the river bus to **Coptic Cairo** (p123) in the morning, then catch the metro back to Midan Tahrir. Walk over the Qasr el-Nil Bridge to Gezira and check out the **Museum of Modern Egyptian Art** (p141) and the **Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum** (p142) before strolling along the bank of the Nile to the neighbourhood of Zamalek for a late lunch at one of its many cafés and restaurants, and perhaps some shopping. After a rest at your hotel, bid farewell to the city by having a late dinner and watching the best belly dancers in the world shake their stuff on the **Nile Maxim boat** (p174) or at the wonderfully sleazy **Palmyra** (p174).

the small, walled enclave of Coptic Cairo, a feature on many tourist agendas. Well beyond that is the green residential suburb of Ma'adi, an expat enclave.

West of all these districts is the Nile, obstructed by two sizable islands. The more central of these, connected directly to Downtown by three bridges, is Gezira, home to the Cairo Tower and the Cairo Opera House. The northern half of Gezira is an affluent district called Zamalek, historically favoured by the city's European residents and home to many embassies. The southern island is Rhoda, although its northern part goes by the name of Manial.

The west bank of the Nile is newer (lots more concrete) and more residential than areas along the east bank, but it's also the wealthier, trendier part of the city. The

primary districts from north to south are Mohandiseen, Agouza, Doqqi and Giza, which stretches 10km out to the foot of the Pyramids.

## Maps

The American University in Cairo (AUC) Press publishes *Cairo Maps: The Practical Guide* (£30), a book-sized but lightweight collection of 40 street maps, with index.

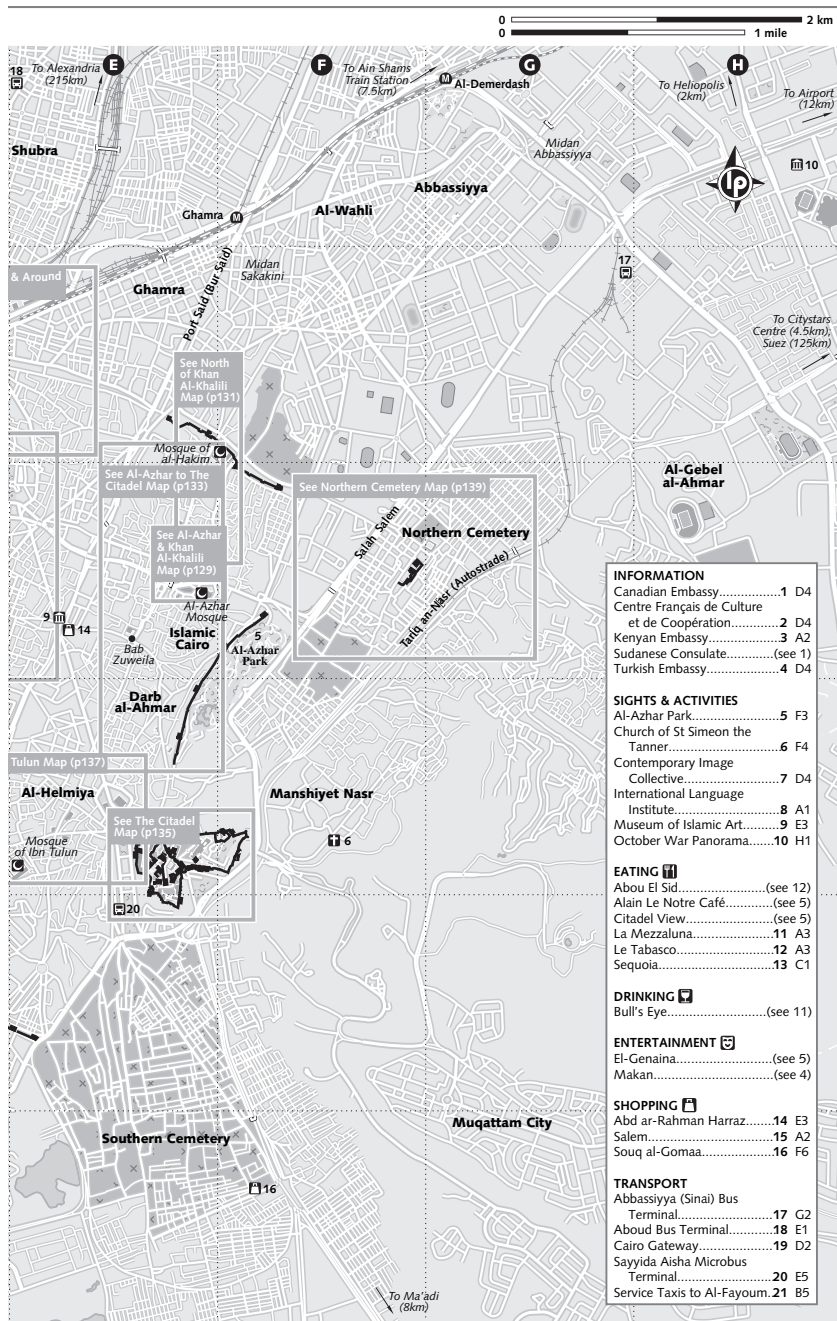
INFORMATION  
Bookshops

**American University in Cairo (AUC) Bookshop**  
Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2797 5370; Sharia Mohamed Mahmoud; ☎ 9am-6pm Sat-Thur); Zamalek (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2739 7045; 16 Sharia Mohammed Thakeb; ☎ 10am-6pm Sat-Thur, 1-6pm Fri) The best English-language bookshop in Egypt, with stacks of material on

## CAIRO







the politics, sociology and history of Cairo, Egypt and the Middle East. Plenty of guidebooks and some fiction.

**Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2391 4337; 165 Sharia Mohammed Farid, Downtown; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4.30-8pm Mon-Sat) Good selection of books on Egypt and the Middle East.

**Diwan** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 2578; 159 Sharia 26th of July, Zamalek; ☎ 9am-11.30pm) Fabulous: English, French and German titles, from novels to travel guides to coffee-table books. It also has a kids' section, large music wing and a small café.

**Lehnert & Landrock** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2392 7606; 44 Sharia Sherif, Downtown; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) A good place for maps, books about Cairo and Egypt (some second-hand), vintage postcards and reprints of old photographs. Branches opposite the Egyptian Museum (Map pp118-19) and outside the Sphinx-side entrance to the Pyramids (Map p150).

**Shorouk** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2393 0643; 1 Midan Talaat Harb, Downtown; ☎ 10am-10pm) Arabic and English bestsellers, plus a lot of magazines at this two-storey shop.

**Zamalek Bookshop** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 9197; 19 Sharia Shagaret ad-Durr, Zamalek; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat) Small but packed with magazines, English-language crime fiction and airport-style novels.

## NEWSSTANDS

Cairo's best newsstands face each other on the corner of Sharias 26th of July and Hassan Sabry in Zamalek (Map pp144-5). You can get just about anything (except nudity) from these stands. Downtown, good newsstands are situated on Sharia Mohammed Mahmoud opposite AUC (Map pp118-19) and on Midan Tahrir (Map pp118-19). The bookshops at the Nile Hilton (Map pp118-19), the Cairo Marriott (Map pp144-5) and the Semiramis InterContinental (Map pp118-19) are also decent.

## Cultural Centres & Libraries

Many centres will ask for ID (preferably your passport) before they will allow you in. For event schedules, check *Al-Ahram Weekly* and the monthly *Egypt Today*, but don't expect much activity during the summer, when many institutions keep limited hours.

**British Council & Library** (www.britishcouncil.org.eg) Agouza (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3300 1666; 192 Sharia el-Nil; ☎ 8am-8pm Sun-Thu, 9am-4.30pm Sat); Heliopolis (Map p153; ☎ 19789; 4 Sharia el-Minia, off Sharia Nazih Khalifa; ☎ 9am-8pm Sun-Wed, 9am-4.30pm Thu) Organises performances, exhibitions and talks and has a useful library; its Agouza office has a strong collection of modern British art.

## THE NUMBERS GAME

In mid-2007, Cairo land lines expanded from seven to eight digits – we mention it here because business cards and signs might be slow to update. Neighbourhoods on the east bank and in Zamalek got a 2 stuck at the front of their numbers, while Giza, Mohandiseen and Doqqi got a 3. Mobile numbers were unchanged.

**Centre Français de Culture et de Coopération** (www.ambafrance-eg.org/cfcc) Heliopolis (off Map p153; ☎ 2419 3857; 5 Sharia Shafik al-Dib, Ard al-Golf; ☎ 10am-10pm Sun-Thu; Mounira (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2794 7679; 1 Sharia Madrassat al-Huquq al-Fransiyya; ☎ 11am-7pm Sun-Tue, Thu & Fri, 11am-8pm Wed) Regularly puts on films, lectures and exhibitions, opens its libraries to the public and screens French-language news from TV5. The Mounira branch also runs French- and Arabic-language courses.

**Egyptian Centre for International Cultural Cooperation** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 5410; 11 Sharia Shagaret ad-Durr, Zamalek; ☎ 10am-3pm & 4-9pm Sat-Thu) Organises concerts of Egyptian composers, as well as good classical and colloquial Arabic classes.

**El Sawy Culture Wheel** (El Sakia; Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 8881; www.culturewheel.com; Sharia 26th of July, Zamalek; ☎ 9am-9pm) Excellent lively space that hosts concerts, art exhibitions, theatre, films and even yoga classes and children's puppet shows. Tickets for shows are on sale at Cilantro coffee shops around town.

**Goethe Institut** (www.goethe.de/eg) Doqqi (Map p148; ☎ 3748 4501; 5 Sharia Hussein Wassef); Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2575 9877; 5 Sharia al-Bustan; ☎ library 1-7pm Sun-Wed) Seminars and lectures in German on Egyptology and other topics, plus visiting music groups, art exhibitions and film screenings. The library has more than 15,000 (mainly German) titles. The Doqqi location focuses on language classes.

**Great Cairo Library** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 2271; 15 Sharia Mohammed Mazhar, Zamalek; ☎ 9am-4pm Sat-Thu) The city's best public library, stocked with a collection of art, science and other reference books, mainly in English. It also has English-language magazines for browsing. Show your passport to enter.

**Instituto Cervantes** (Map p148; ☎ 3337 1962; www.elcairo.cervantes.es; 20 Sharia Boulous Hanna, Doqqi; ☎ 9am-4pm Sun-Thu) Spanish language and cultural institute, screening films and organising lectures.

**Istituto Italiano di Cultura** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 8791; www.iiccairo.esteri.it; 3 Sharia Sheikh al-Marsafy, Zamalek; ☎ library 10am-4pm Sun, Tue & Thu) A busy programme of films and lectures (sometimes in English) and art exhibitions, plus a library.



**Netherlands-Flemish Institute** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2738 2520; [www.nvic.leidenuniv.nl](http://www.nvic.leidenuniv.nl); 1 Sharia Mahmoud Azmy, Zamalek; ☎ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu) This centre hosts art exhibitions and is well regarded for its high-quality weekly lectures, delivered on a wide variety of topics and usually in English.

## Emergency

In the case of an accident or injury, call the As-Salam International Hospital (right). For details on lost credit cards, see p513. For anything more serious, contact your embassy (see p507).

**Ambulance** (☎ 123)

**Fire service** (☎ 180)

**Police** (☎ 122)

The **tourist police office** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2390 6028, emergency 126) is on the 1st floor of a building in the alley just left of the main tourist office in Downtown. This should be your first port of call for minor emergencies, including theft; there are other offices by the Pyramids, across from Mena House (Map p150) and in Khan al-Khalili (Map p129).

## Internet Access

There are internet cafés scattered throughout town, but they're not exactly plentiful. The most conveniently located:

**4U Internet Café** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2575 9304; 1st fl, 6 Midan Talaat Harb, Downtown; per hr E£5; ☎ 24hr) Under the Lialy Hostel.

**Five St@rs Net** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2574 7881; 1st fl, 6 Midan Talaat Harb, Downtown; ☎ 24hr) Opposite 4U Internet; dodgier computers.

**Hany Internet Café** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2395 1985; 16 Sharia Abdel Khalek Sarwat, Downtown; per hr E£2; ☎ 10am-2am) Across from Koshary el-Tahrir; bargain rates and open windows, so relatively smoke-free.

**InterClub** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2579 1860; 12 Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown; per hr E£5; ☎ 8am-2am) Nice flat-screens, with printing, faxing and scanning services; in alley next to Estoril restaurant.

**Memories Net** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 018 169 6471; 12 Sharia Mahmoud Bassiouni, Downtown; per hr E£5; ☎ 10am-2am) Cool cave ambience; down the alley leading to Mahran *ahwa* (coffeehouse).

**Sigma Net** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2738 0516; Sharia Gezirat al-Wusta, Zamalek; per hr E£8; ☎ 24hr) Opposite Flamenco Hotel. Fast connections and good air-con.

**Zamalek Center** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 4004; 25 Sharia Ismail Mohammed, Zamalek; per hr E£5; ☎ 24hr) A bit smoky, but the best rates in the area; offers other business services too.

## Internet Resources

**Cairo, Egypt** ([www.cairotourist.com](http://www.cairotourist.com)) Virtual tours of Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic and modern Cairo; hotel and restaurant listings are not kept up-to-date, however.

**cairolive.com** ([www.cairolive.com](http://www.cairolive.com)) Online news aggregator and magazine with views on Cairo's cultural events, political developments and general news. Useful kids' section.

**Egy.com** ([www.egy.com](http://www.egy.com)) A great website by Egyptian social historian and journalist Samir Raafat: articles on architecture, events and people in 19th- and 20th-century Cairo, with an interesting section on the city's Jewish community.

**Guardians Egypt** ([www.guardians.net](http://www.guardians.net)) Great site covering the Giza, Dahshur and Saqqara pyramid sites. Has photos, articles about recent discoveries, and bulletins from Dr Zahi Hawass, the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

**Yallabina** ([www.yallabina.com](http://www.yallabina.com)) Devoted to the Big Mango's nightlife: restaurant and bar reviews, plus listings for concerts, events and films.

## Media

The monthly magazine *Egypt Today* (E£15; also online at [www.egypttoday.com](http://www.egypttoday.com)) covers major social and economic issues and also includes basic listings. The *Daily Star Egypt* comes as an insert in the *International Herald-Tribune* (E£10); a spin-off of the quality Beirut paper, it's the most informative news in English. The flimsy daily *Egyptian Gazette* (50pt) and the more substantial *Al-Ahram Weekly* (E£1) are the other English-language rags. For a hipper perspective, pick up a free copy of the *Croc*, a monthly listings flyer found at many restaurants and galleries; it includes restaurant reviews and other informative articles.

## Medical Services

### HOSPITALS

Many of Cairo's hospitals suffer from antiquated equipment and a cavalier attitude to hygiene, but there are several exceptions. Your embassy should be able to recommend doctors and hospitals. Other options:

**Anglo-Arabian Hospital** (Map p148; ☎ 2735 6162/5; Sharia Hadayek el-Zuhreyya, Gezira) West of the Cairo Tower.

**As-Salam International Hospital** Ma'adi (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2524 0250, emergency 2524 0077; Corniche el-Nil); Mohandiseen (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3303 0502; 3 Sharia Syria) The Ma'adi branch has a better reputation.

## PHARMACIES

In Egyptian pharmacies almost any medicine can be obtained without prescription. The pharmacies operate 24 hours, have English-speaking staff and will deliver to your hotel.

**Al-Ezaby** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 19600)

**Ali & Ali** Downtown (☎ 2365 3880); Mohandiseen (☎ 3302 1421)

**Delmar** (☎ 2575 1052; Downtown) At the corner of Sharia 26th of July and Sharia Mohammed Farid.

**New Victoria Pharmacy** (☎ 2735 1628; Zamalek)

**Seif Pharmacy** (☎ 19199)

## Money

For general information about money, foreign exchange bureaus and transferring funds, see p512. For banking hours, see p503. The Banque Misr branches located at the Nile Hilton and Mena House Oberoi hotels are open 24 hours. Hotel branches of the big banks are happy to change your cash, but rates are slightly better at independent exchange bureaus of which there are several along Sharia Adly in Downtown and on Sharia 26th of July in Zamalek. These tend to be open from 10am to 8pm Saturday to Thursday.

**American Express** (Amex; www.americanexpress.com .eg; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu) Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2574 7991; 15 Sharia Qasr el-Nil); Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2578 5001; Nile Hilton); Heliopolis (off Map p153; ☎ 2418 2144; 33 Sharia Nabil al-Wakkad, Ard al-Golf) All offices will hold mail for cardholders and give cash advances on gold and platinum cards.

**Citibank** (www.citibankegypt.com) Garden City (Map p148; ☎ 2795 1873; 4 Sharia Ahmad Pasha); Zamalek (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 5622; 4A Sharia al-Gezira)

**Diners Club** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2578 3355; Nile Hilton, Midan Tahrir, Downtown)

**Thomas Cook** (☎ emergency hotline 010 140 1367; www.thomascookegypt.com; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Sat-Thu) Airport (☎ 2265 4447); Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2574 3776; 17 Sharia Mahmoud Bassiouni); Heliopolis (Map p153; ☎ 2416 4000; 7 Sharia Baghdad, Korba); Mohandiseen (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3344 0008; 10 Sharia 26th of July); Zamalek (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 9223; 3 Sharia Abu al-Feda)

## ATMS

ATMs are located on all major streets, in shopping malls and in the foyers of five-star hotels. The only place they're hard to find is in Islamic Cairo – the most convenient machine here is below El Hussein (Map p129) in Khan al-Khalili. The ones in hotels are the most reliable.

## Post

Marked with green-and-yellow signs, post offices are numerous, though not all have signs in English explaining which window is meant for what business.

**Express Mail Service** (EMS; Map pp118-19; ☎ 2390 5874; fax 2390 4250; ☎ 24hr) Opposite the poste restante office. Most post offices also have an EMS counter.

**Main post office** (Map pp118-19; Midan Ataba; ☎ 8am-10pm Sat-Thu)

**Poste restante** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sat-Thu) On the side street to the right of the main post office, with the entrance on the cross street one block down. Mail is usually held for three weeks. It's divided into three sections: letters (window 10), packages (window 1) and registered mail (upstairs). Take your passport.

**Post traffic centre** (Map p122; Midan Ramses; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu) Come here to send packages abroad. Bring your passport. Leave your package unsealed, to be inspected; someone will then wrap the parcel for you for a small charge, or you can supply your own tape. The process is bureaucratic, but not utterly maddening.

**Zamalek post office** (Map pp144-5; Sharia Brazil; ☎ 8am-3pm Sat-Thu)

## Telephone & Fax

**Card phones** Menatel card phones are all over the city, although the practice of placing them on street corners (or streets, for that matter) can make it hard to hear.

**Faxes** These can be sent to/from the telephone centrales on Midan Tahrir, Sharia Adly and Sharia Alf. You can also send and receive them from the EMS main office in Ataba (see above) and from a couple of internet cafés (see p113).

**Telephone centrales** Downtown (Map pp118-19; fax 2578 0979; 13 Midan Tahrir; ☎ 24hr); Downtown (Map pp118-19; fax 2393 3903; 8 Sharia Adly; ☎ 24hr); Downtown (Map pp118-19; fax 2589 7635; Sharia Alf; ☎ 24hr); Downtown (Map pp118-19; Sharia Ramses; ☎ 24hr); Zamalek (Map pp144-5; Sharia 26th of July) The branch on Sharia Alf is next to the Windsor Hotel. The Sharia Ramses branch is opposite Sharia Tawfiqiyya.

## Tourist Information

**Cairo International Airport tourist office** Terminal I (☎ 2265 3642; ☎ 24hr); Terminal II (☎ 2265 2269; ☎ 24hr)

**Main tourist office** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2391 3454; 5 Sharia Adly; ☎ 8.30am-7pm)

**Pyramids tourist office** (Map p150; ☎ 3383 8823; Pyramids Rd; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) Opposite Mena House Oberoi.

**Ramses Station tourist office** (Map p180; ☎ 2579 0767; ☎ 9am-7pm) Next to the Abela Sleeping Train office.

## Travel Agencies

The streets around Midan Tahrir teem with travel agencies, but don't expect amazing deals. Instead, watch out for dodgy operators (see p506). Amex and Thomas Cook (see opposite) offer reliable service. Other recommendations:

**Egypt Panorama Tours** (☎ 2359 0200; www.eptours.com; 4 Rd 79, Ma'adi; ☎ 9am-5pm) Opposite Ma'adi metro station, this is one of the best and most reputable agencies in town, though it's a long way from Downtown. Fortunately it will book tickets, tours and hotel rooms over the phone and courier the documents to you, if necessary, for a reasonable fee. Efficient staff speak excellent English. It's good for cheap air fares, four- and five-star hotel deals and tours within Egypt and around the Mediterranean. Small surcharge for credit cards.

**Misr Travel** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2393 0259; 7 Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown) The official Egyptian government travel agency, which also has offices in most of the luxury hotels.

**Travco** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 2042; www.travcoeg.com; 13 Sharia Mahmoud Azmy, Zamalek) The highly regarded Zamalek branch of an Egypt-wide travel group.

## Visa Extensions

All visa business is carried out at the **Mogamma** (Map pp118-19; Midan Tahrir, Downtown; ☎ 8am-1.30pm Sat-Wed), a 14-storey Egypto-Stalinist monolith that is rumoured to be closing by 2009. In the meantime, foreigners should go to the 1st floor and confirm the following details at the information desk before proceeding. On the 1st floor, go to window 12 for a form, fill it out and then buy stamps from window 43 before returning to window 12 and submitting your form with the stamps, one photograph, and photocopies of the photo and visa pages of your passport (photos and photocopies can be organised on the ground floor). The visa will be processed overnight.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

You can walk almost wherever you like in Cairo, at any time of day or night, as long as you are properly dressed and a little street-wise. That said, single women should still be careful when walking alone at night.

### Theft

Theft is not a big problem, but it pays to be safe. We regularly receive letters from readers who have had items stolen from locked hotel rooms and even from safes, so think about keeping money and valuables on you or

locked in a suitcase. Pickpockets are rare, but do sometimes operate in crowded spots such as Khan al-Khalili, the Birqash camel market, the metro and buses. If anything does get stolen go straight to the tourist police (p113).

## Scams & Hassles

Scams in Cairo are so numerous that there's no way to list them all. There are roughly four types: hotel scams (see p158), overcharging on tours to elsewhere in Egypt, shopping cons and funny business involving tickets to monuments.

The worst scams afflicting Cairo are associated with tours. Rather than making arrangements in Cairo, you are almost always better off booking tours in the place you'll be taking them. Reputable agencies (see left) are nearly outnumbered by dodgy operators. Despite the steady pressure you'll receive, we can't emphasise enough that it's *not* a good idea to book flights, felucca cruises and the like through Cairo hotels – you will inevitably pay more to cover their commission on the transaction. Also be wary of travel agencies in the Downtown area. Many rent space to unscrupulous types who will charge well over the odds for arrangements they make. If you return to complain, the agency will say that you booked through a freelance agent unassociated with the company. And finally: never, *ever* book a tour through a tout you meet on the street or in a souvenir shop.

Shopping scams are nearly as prevalent, but less nefarious. For the most part, they are conversation-starters to lure you into stores. Most of these routines would be dully obvious, if not for the special conviction with which the more talented con men deliver them. Around the Egyptian Museum, for instance, a charming chap approaches foreigners and asks if they are looking for the museum entrance or the bus to the Pyramids. If the answer is yes, he asserts that it's prayer time/lunchtime/any-inventive-reason time and that the museum is temporarily closed and the bus isn't running. Then he suggests that while they're waiting, they may be interested in going to the nearby 'Government Bazaar', which happens to be having its annual sale on that day. Needless to say, there's a sale every day, it's not much of a sale at all, the bazaar isn't government-run and he'll collect a commission on anything you purchase...

When you're in Downtown or Islamic Cairo, locals may start walking next to you, offering help or chatting. These are usually touts who want to direct you into shops where they'll earn a commission. They can be persistent, but telling them you just want to walk and know where you're going, with a joke thrown in to keep everything amicable, will save you a lot of hassle.

Other shopping scams include the old 'two for five pounds' hard sell (when you go to pay, the stallholder will say that he meant five *British* pounds), the dried-banana-leaf-instead-of-papyrus con and the safflower-not-saffron spice trade.

When visiting monuments in Islamic Cairo, it pays to know that, with two exceptions, all mosques are free to enter, as they are places of worship. But some caretakers will claim an admission price – if you're not sure it's legit, ask if there is a ticket ('fee taz-kar-a?') and politely refuse payment if there is none. In officially ticketed monuments, some guards will attempt to resell a previous visitor's ticket (cadged by another guard inside, assuring the visitor it's 'normal' to hand it over). If it is not torn out of the book in front of you, it's reused. As it doesn't affect what you pay, it's up to you whether you object, but doing so might send a larger signal that tourists prefer business on the up-and-up.

Most common is a stream of people asking for *baksheesh* (alms, tip); this is legitimate and expected, but be firm and don't pay more than you want to (£5 per monument is reasonable, plus another £2 or £3 if you climb a minaret).

Finally, be aware that fake International Student Identity Cards (ISIC) are sold by scam artists in Downtown. For more information on ISIC cards see p507.

## SIGHTS

Cairo's sights are spread all over the city, so it makes sense to do things in one area before moving on to the next – but don't try to cram too much into one day, or you'll soon be overwhelmed. The awe-inspiring but cluttered Egyptian Museum requires at least half a day, but could easily merit a second visit. Khan al-Khalili and most of the medieval monuments are in Islamic Cairo, and you'll need a full day or several shorter visits to appreciate them. Definitely allow a few hours of aimless wandering in this area (even if it comes at the

expense of 'proper' sightseeing), as the back lanes give the truest sense of the city. The Pyramids and tombs of Giza, Saqqara and Dahshur require a whole extra day. Coptic Cairo can be toured in a morning – made especially easy by Metro access – and you'll likely soak up Downtown's atmosphere just by going to and from your hotel, or by hanging out there in the evenings.

## Central Cairo

Though the Egyptian Museum is found here, the part of town between Midan Ramses and Midan Tahrir, which locals call Wust al-Balad, is better known for its practical offerings: budget hotels, eateries and a dazzling stream of window displays (don't use that shoe store/lingerie shop/prosthetic-limbs dealer as a landmark; trust us – there's another one just a block away). Occasionally try to look away from the traffic and fluorescent-lit shops and up at the elegant Empire-style office and apartment buildings that drip faded glamour (or is that an air-conditioner leaking?). It's a wonderful part of town to explore – just be prepared for total sensory overload after a few hours.

## MIDAN TAHRIR & AROUND

With half-a-dozen major arteries converging, Midan Tahrir (Liberation Sq) is the fulcrum of modern-day Cairo, and as a result the site of some serious traffic and pedestrian jams. But the square is one of the few central spaces that isn't hemmed in by buildings and overpasses, making it an excellent spot to have a look around and orient yourself.

One of the most distinctive location aids is the Nile Hilton (p160), the blue-and-white slab that stands between Midan Tahrir and the Nile. When it was built in 1959 it was the first modern hotel in Cairo, replacing a former British Army barracks. Due north is the neo-classical bulk of the Egyptian Museum (p185), painted a lurid shade of pink, while south is the **Arab League Building** (Map pp118–19), the occasional gathering place of leaders from around the Middle East.

Continuing around Midan Tahrir anti-clockwise, the ornate white palace is the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs**. Adjacent **Omar Makram Mosque** (Map pp118–19) is the place where anybody who's anybody has a funeral. The rest of the south side is occupied by the monstrous **Mogamma** (Map pp118–19), home to

18,000 semisomnolent civil servants – this is where you come for visa extensions (see p115). If the Soviet-funded Mogamma symbolises Egypt's quasi-socialist past, then the next building around, across four-lane Qasr al-Ainy, represents the current energy of private enterprise: the **American University in Cairo** (AUC; Map pp118–19), the college of choice for the sons and daughters of Egypt's stratospherically wealthy. As of autumn 2008, most students will be at a new campus in the eastern suburbs, but that won't stop average Egyptians from imagining the Western-inspired debauchery that goes on behind the tall fences. This campus has an attractive courtyard and a good bookshop (see p109). You must hand over your passport to enter at the gate on Sharia Mohammed Mahmoud, opposite the enterprisingly sited McDonald's.

The buildings then break for Sharia Tahrir, which leads 300m east to a busy square (Midan Falaki) with the indoor veg-and-meat **Souq Bab al-Luq** to one side. Continuing east brings you to Midan al-Gomhuriyya, a scraggly grass square skirted by speeding traffic. The great building to the east, dominating the square, is Abdeen Palace, former residence of the rulers of Egypt.

### Abdeen Palace

Begun in 1863 and employing Europe's most lavish architects and designers, **Abdeen Palace** (Qasr Abdeen; Map pp118–19; ☎ 2391 0042; Midan al-Gomhuriyya; adult/student E£10/5; ☎ 9am–2.45pm Sat–Thu) was a centrepiece of Khedive Ismail's plan for a modern Cairo, inspired by Paris' recent makeover; the khedive even called in mastermind French planner Baron Haussmann as a consultant. He wanted the palace finished for the 1869 opening of the Suez Canal, to impress visiting dignitaries, but its 500 rooms weren't completed until 1874. It was the royal residence until the monarchy was abolished in 1952, then became the presidential palace. President Mubarak prefers his digs in Heliopolis, but uses Abdeen for official occasions. One section, though not the ritzy royal chambers, is open to the public (enter on Sharia Mustafa Abdel Raziq); its halls are filled with a vast array of weaponry, ranging from ceremonial daggers to howitzers.

### DOWNTOWN

In the commercial heart of Cairo, glitzy shops and thousands of small businesses are wedged

into the ground floors of glorious (if dust-caked) buildings that represent every architectural fantasy of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The two main streets, Sharia Talaat Harb and Sharia Qasr el-Nil, intersect at the traffic circle of Midan Talaat Harb, where cars whiz around a statue of tarboosh-sporting Mr Harb, founder of the National Bank. On the square is Groppi's (p168), in its heyday one of the most celebrated patisseries this side of the Mediterranean, the venue for ritzy society functions and concert dances. Gold mosaics around the doorway are, alas, the only remaining glitter.

Just south of the square on Sharia Talaat Harb, Café Riche (p163) was once a hang-out for Egyptian writers and intellectuals. Nasser allegedly met with his cronies here while planning the 1952 Revolution.

North of the square, shops along Sharia Qasr el-Nil sell a drag queen's dream of footwear. The street itself boasts some particularly fine architecture, notably the **Italian Insurance building** (Map pp118–19), on the corner of Qasr el-Nil and Sharia Sherifeen, and the Cosmopolitan Hotel (p160), a short block off Qasr el-Nil. The area around the hotel and the neighbouring **Cairo Stock Exchange** has been pedestrianised, so you can savour both the turn-of-the-century architecture and some relative quiet.

Over on Sharia Talaat Harb, **Cinema Metro** (Map pp118–19) is a 1930s movie palace: when it first opened, with *Gone with the Wind*, it boasted a Ford showroom and a diner. One block east of the cinema, along Sharia Adly, **Shar Hashamaim Synagogue** (Map pp118–19) is one of the few remaining testaments to Cairo's once-thriving Jewish community. Resembling a set from *Tomb Raider*, its ornate Babylonian exterior was being restored in 2007; when it's done, the place may once again be open on Saturday, the Jewish holy day. Further east on Adly is the faded Groppi Garden (p168) – actually the first Cairo outpost of Italian chocolatier Giacomo Groppi, and site of the city's first outdoor cinema. During WWII it was known as a place where Egyptians and Europeans mixed easily – particularly Allied troops and the local ladies.

A block north of Adly is Sharia 26th of July, named for the date Egypt's last king, Farouk, abdicated. As far as Cairenes are concerned, the street's major attraction is El-Abd Bakery (p164), packed out morning









<b>INFORMATION</b>		Ramses Hilton Mall.....	44 B2	Cafeteria Port Tawfiq.....	88 E1
4U Internet Café.....	(see 55)	Shar Hashamaim		Cafeteria Stella.....	89 D4
American Express.....	1 C4	Synagogue.....	45 F2	Cairo.....	90 E1
American Express.....	2 B4	Souq Bab al-Luq.....	46 D5	Cap d'Or.....	91 E3
American University in Cairo.....	3 C5	Townhouse Gallery.....	47 D3	Cilantro.....	92 C5
American University in Cairo Bookshop.....	4 C5	<b>SLEEPING</b>		Groppi Garden.....	93 F2
Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop.....	5 F2	Carlton Hotel.....	48 E1	Kawkab ash-Sharq.....	94 E2
AUC Library.....	6 D5	Cosmopolitan Hotel.....	49 D4	Le Grillon.....	95 C4
Delmer Pharmacy.....	7 F2	Garden City House.....	50 B5	Mahran.....	96 C4
Diners Club.....	(see 56)	Grand Hotel.....	51 E2	Odeon Palace Hotel.....	97 D3
Express Mail Service.....	8 G3	Hotel Luna.....	52 D3	Windsor Bar.....	(see 61)
Five St@rs Net.....	(see 55)	Hotel Osiris.....	53 E6	Zahret al-Bustan.....	98 D4
Goethe Institut.....	9 C4	Hotel Select.....	54 E2	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>	
Hany Internet Café.....	10 E2	Lialy Hostel.....	55 D3	After Eight.....	99 C4
InterClub.....	11 C4	New Minerva Hotel.....	(see 59)	Cairo Puppet Theatre.....	100 H2
Lehnert & Landrock.....	12 B4	Nile Hilton.....	56 A4	Cinema Metro.....	101 E2
Lehnert & Landrock.....	13 E2	Pension Roma.....	57 F2	Haroun al-Rashid.....	(see 84)
Main Post Office.....	14 G3	Richmond Hotel.....	58 E2	Latex.....	102 A4
Main Tourist Office.....	15 F2	Talisman Hotel.....	59 E2	Palmyra.....	103 E2
Memories Net.....	16 C3	Tulip Hotel.....	60 D4	Scheherazade.....	104 E1
Misr Travel.....	17 C5	Windsor Hotel.....	61 F1	<b>SHOPPING</b>	
Mogamma.....	18 B6	<b>EATING</b>		Ezbekiyya Book Market.....	105 H1
New Zealand Consulate.....	19 C5	Abu al-Hassan al-Haty.....	62 F2	Galerie Hathout.....	106 F3
Newsstand.....	(see 83)	Abu Samra.....	63 E1	L'Orientale.....	107 B4
Newsstand.....	(see 56)	Abu Tarek.....	64 C3	L'Orientaliste.....	108 C4
Newsstand.....	20 C5	Akher Sa'a.....	65 D2	Mobaco.....	(see 2)
Poste Restante.....	21 G3	Akher Sa'a.....	66 F1	Mobaco.....	109 A6
Shorouk.....	22 D4	At-Tabei ad-Dumyati.....	(see 115)	Nomad.....	(see 56)
Telephone Centrale.....	23 F2	Bird Cage.....	(see 84)	Osman Ahmed.....	110 F2
Telephone Centrale.....	24 D1	Café Riche.....	67 D4	Oum El Dounia.....	111 C5
Telephone Centrale.....	25 F1	Centro Recreativo Italiano II		Samir El Sakka.....	112 F3
Telephone Centrale.....	26 C4	Cairo.....	68 C1	Sawt al-Qahira.....	113 G2
Thomas Cook.....	27 C4	El-Abd Bakery.....	69 E2	Sednaoui Department Store.....	114 H1
Tourist Police.....	28 F2	El-Abd Bakery.....	70 D3	Talaat Harb Complex.....	115 D3
Tourist Police Office.....	(see 15)	Emara Hati al-Gish.....	71 D5	<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
US Embassy.....	29 B6	Estoril.....	72 C4	Air France.....	116 D4
Western Union.....	30 D4	Fatatri at-Tahrir.....	73 C5	Airport Bus.....	117 B3
Western Union Money Exchange.....	31 C3	Felfela Restaurant.....	74 D4	Avis.....	(see 56)
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>		Felfela Takeaway.....	75 C4	EgyptAir.....	118 C4
Abdeen Palace.....	32 G6	Gad.....	76 E2	EgyptAir.....	119 B4
Abdeen Palace Museum		Gomhouriya.....	77 D4	EgyptAir.....	120 G2
Entrance.....	33 G6	Greek Club.....	(see 78)	Flag Down Pyramids Bus.....	121 B5
Arab League Building.....	34 B5	Groppi's.....	78 C4	Hertz.....	122 A2
Arabic Language Institute.....	(see 3)	Koshary El Tahrir.....	79 C5	KLM.....	123 C4
Cairo Atelier.....	35 C3	Koshary Goha.....	81 F1	Local Buses & Minibuses.....	124 B3
Egyptian Museum.....	36 B3	Le Bistro.....	82 D4	Local Buses and Minibuses.....	125 H2
Ezbekiyya Gardens.....	37 G2	Nile Hilton Deli.....	(see 86)	Maspero River Bus	
Italian Insurance Building.....	38 E3	Pottery Café.....	83 C5	Terminal.....	126 A2
Karim Francis Art Gallery.....	39 E4	Sabaya.....	84 A5	Pyramids Bus.....	127 B3
Mashrabiya Gallery of Contemporary Art.....	40 C4	Sayed Hanafy.....	85 E1	Qanater Ferries (Government).....	128 A2
Ministry of Foreign Affairs.....	41 B5	<b>DRINKING</b>		Qanater Ferries (Private).....	129 A2
Omar Makram Mosque.....	42 B5	Abu Aly Café.....	86 B4	Royal Jordanian.....	130 C4
Postal Museum.....	43 G3	Cafeteria Horreyya.....	87 D5	SyrianAir.....	131 D3
				Yellow Taxis.....	132 B5

to midnight with locals jostling for cakes, sweets and delicious pastries (there's also a branch on Sharia Talaat Harb).

Another block north, pedestrianised Sharia Saray al-Ezbekiyya and Sharia Alfay are Downtown's nightlife centre, with kebab joints, seedy bars, dubious belly-dancing joints, countless opportunities for sidewalk *sheesha* (water pipe)-smoking and a 24-hour eating

place in Akher Sa'a (p162). Nearby **Tawfiqiyya Souq** (Map pp118–19) is a blocks-long fruit-and-vegetable market, open late, with good coffeehouses in the surrounding alleyways.

East along Sharia 26th of July leads to **Ezbekiyya Gardens** (Map pp118–19), which look nicer than they ever have – but are open only to those who pay (E£2). The famous Shepherd's Hotel was once located opposite –

it was the preferred accommodation of the British colonial classes for a century, until it was destroyed by Black Saturday rioters in 1952 (see p41). Next to the gardens Midan Opera marks the site of the old opera house, which burnt down in 1971 – and rebuilt as a towering car park. Beyond the car park, to the east, is Midan Ataba.

### MIDAN ATABA

Here, 'modern European' Cairo runs up against the old medieval Cairo of Saladin (Salah ad-Din), the Mamluks and the Ottomans. A mass of buses and hawkers, the area seems like one traffic-clogged bazaar – though the goods now are vinyl shoes and acetate ball gowns, not fine silks and gold as in centuries past. Off the southwest side, past the flyover, the domed **main post office** (Map pp118–19) has a pretty courtyard. A window immediately on your right is where you buy tickets to the neighbouring **Postal Museum** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2391 0011; 2nd fl, Midan Ataba; E£2; ☎ 8am–3pm), a beautifully maintained collection of stamps, uniforms and even tiny scale models of great post offices throughout Egypt.

On the north side of the square, behind the modernist white **Puppet Theatre**, are the stalls of the Ezbekiyya Book Market (p175). North beyond that is Midan Khazindar, dominated by **Sednaoui** (Map pp118–19), one of Cairo's prime early-20th-century department stores. Nationalised in 1961, its display cases are now stocked with a weird, almost tragic assortment of third-rate goods. But the place still sports its gorgeous three-storey atrium interior. Running north from Khazindar is Sharia Clot Bey (aka Sharia Khulud) named after a French physician who introduced Western ideas about public health to Mohammed Ali's Egypt. That didn't stop the street from becoming the diseased heart of Cairo's red-light district, known as 'the Berka' ('the blessing', with ladles of irony), an area of brothels, peepshows and cabarets. These days it's a shabby but charming street with arcades over the pavements sheltering sepia-toned coffeehouses and eating places. It eventually emerges onto Midan Ramses.

### MIDAN RAMSES & AROUND

The northern gateway into central Cairo, Midan Ramses (Map p122) is a byword for bedlam. The city's main north–south access collides with overpasses and numerous

arterial roads to swamp the square with an unchoreographed slew of minibuses, buses, taxis and cars. Commuters swarming from the train station add to the melee.

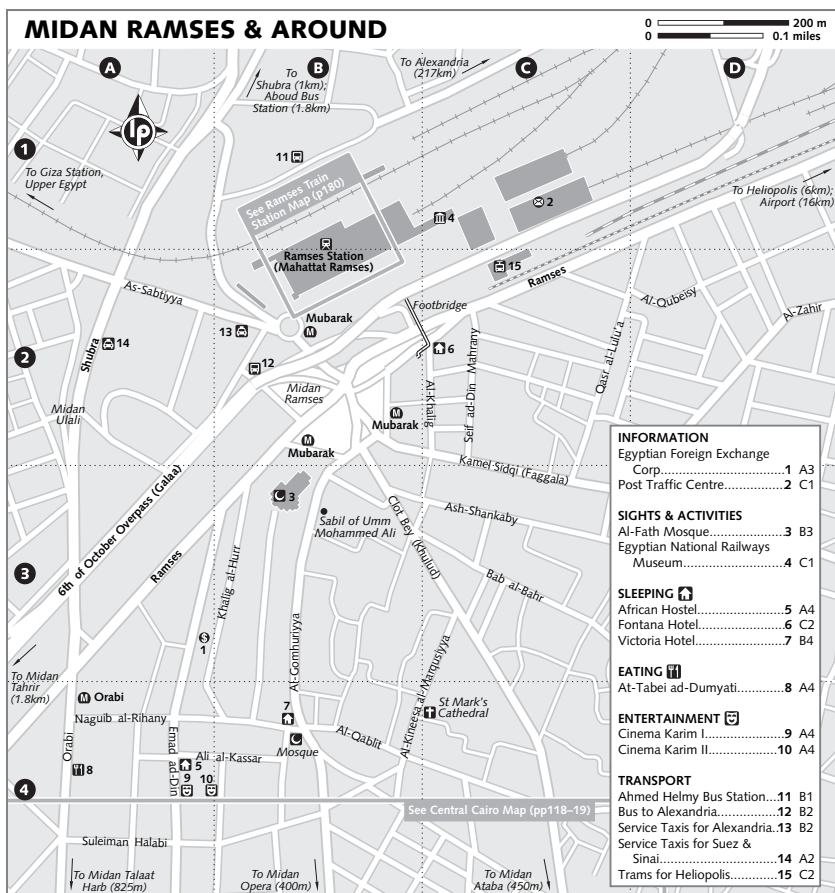
The eponymous Ramses, a multistorey Pharaonic colossus of red granite, stood sentinel amid the traffic to greet new visitors to the city until 2006, when he was removed to protect him from further pollution damage – a process that required major machinery and road closures. He will stand at the entrance of the Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza, slated to open (perhaps) in 2010. **Ramses Station** (Mahattat Ramses; Map p122) is an attractive marriage of Islamic style and industrial-age engineering. At its eastern end it houses the **Egyptian National Railways Museum** (Map p122; ☎ 2576 3793; Midan Ramses; admission E£10, Fri & public holidays E£20; ☎ 9am–2pm Tue–Sun) with a beautiful but somewhat dilapidated collection of old locomotives, including one built for Empress Eugénie on the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal.

On the south side of the square is Cairo's pre-eminent orientation aid, **Al-Fath Mosque** (Map p122). Completed in the early 1990s, the mosque's minaret is visible from just about anywhere in central and Islamic Cairo.

### GARDEN CITY & RHODA

Garden City was developed in the early 1900s along the lines of an English garden suburb. Its curving, tree-lined streets were designed for tranquillity, while its proximity to the British embassy was no doubt intended to convey security. Many of the enclave's elegant villas have fallen prey to quick-buck developers, but enough grand architecture and lush trees survive to make a wander through the streets worthwhile – at sunset, the air of faded romance is palpable (see p155).

Or you can walk directly (if a bit less scenically) south along the noisy Corniche el-Nil. It takes only 20 minutes to walk from Tahrir to the small Manial Bridge. Crossing this, you arrive at the **Manial Palace Museum** (Mathaf al-Manial; Map p148; ☎ 2368 7495; Sharia al-Saray, Manial; adult/student E£10/5; ☎ 9am–4pm, during Ramadan 9am–3pm). Once one of Cairo's most eccentric tourist sites, the palace and its overgrown grounds were being restored at last pass and will likely reopen sometime in 2008 with a less ramshackle feel (and a higher ticket price). The uncle of King Farouk, Prince Mohammed Ali built the palace in the early 20th century.



Apparently he couldn't decide which architectural style he preferred, so he went for the lot: Ottoman, Moorish, Persian and European rococo. The palace contains, among other things, Farouk's horde of hunting trophies and the prince's collection of medieval manuscripts, clothing and other items. The gardens are planted with rare tropical plants collected by the prince on his travels. If you don't want to walk to the museum, a taxi from Midan Tahrir should cost E£4.

A 15-minute walk south along the eastern side of the island, past lush plant nurseries, takes you to its southern tip, home to Monastirli Palace, the Umm Kolthum Museum and a Nilometer. From there, it's an easy walk on to Old Cairo.

### Monastirli Palace & Umm Kolthum Museum

Set in a peaceful Nileside garden, **Monastirli Palace** (Map p124) was built in 1851 for an Ottoman pasha whose family hailed from Monastir, in northern Greece. The *salamlık* (greeting area) that he built for public functions is now an elegant venue for concerts, while the other part is now the **Umm Kolthum Museum** (Map p124; ☎ 2363 1467; Sharia al-Malek as-Salih, Rhoda; admission E£2; ☎ 10am-5pm). Dedicated to the most famous Arab diva, the small museum is more like a shrine, given the reverence with which the singer's signature rhinestone-trimmed glasses and glittery gowns are hung under spotlights in display cases. There's a multimedia room where you can listen to her

music, and a short film shows key moments of her life, from the beginning when she performed disguised as a Bedouin boy, to her magnetic performances that brought Cairo to a standstill, to her funeral, when millions of mourners flooded the streets.

### Nilometer

Built in AD 861, the **Nilometer** (Map p124; Sharia al-Malek as-Salih, Rhoda; E£10; ☞ 10am-5pm) was designed to measure the rise and fall of the river, and thus predict the fortunes of the annual harvest. If the water rose to 16 cubits (a cubit is about the length of a forearm) the harvest was likely to be good, inspiring one of the greatest celebrations of the medieval era; any higher, though, and the flooding could be disastrous, and lower levels presaged hunger. The Turkish-style pencil-point dome is a Farouk-era reconstruction of an earlier one wrecked by Napoleon's troops. The measuring device, a graduated column, sits below the level of the Nile at the bottom of a flight of precipitous steps, which the guard will cheerfully let you descend for a little baksheesh.

### Old Cairo

Broadly speaking, Old Cairo (Misr al-Qadima, with a glottal-stop 'Q'; Map p124) incorporates the area south of Garden City down to the quarter known to foreigners as Coptic Cairo. Most visitors head straight to the latter. From there, you can also visit the Mosque of Amr ibn al-As.

In this traditional part of Cairo appropriate dress is essential. Visitors of either sex wearing shorts or showing their shoulders will not be allowed into churches or mosques. The liveliest time to visit is on a Sunday, when Cairene Copts come for services; but if you want a quiet wander, avoid Sunday and Friday as well. The churches do not charge admission, but most have donation boxes.

The easiest way of getting here is by metro: trains run every few minutes, and Mar Girgis station is right outside the Coptic Cairo compound. It's much better than a crowded bus (though the trip back to Tahrir isn't as bad because you can board the bus at the terminal, beside the Mosque of Amr ibn al-As, and be sure of a seat). A slow but pleasant option is to take the orange-and-green river bus (*autobees nahri*) from the Maspero dock (Map pp118-19) to its last stop at Misr al-Qadima in Old Cairo.

From there it's a 10-minute walk east to the main cluster of churches. The service runs at 8am, 2pm and 9pm and costs E£1.

### COPTIC CAIRO

Coptic Cairo (Map p124) is the heartland of Egypt's indigenous Christian community, a haven of tranquillity and peace that reveals layers of history. Archaeologists have found traces of a small Nileside settlement on this site from as early as the 6th century BC. In the 2nd century AD the Romans established a fortress here, called Babylon-in-Egypt. The name Babylon is most likely a Roman corruption of 'Per-hapi-en-on' (Estate of the Nile God at On), a Pharaonic name for ancient Heliopolis.

Babylon has always been a stronghold of Christianity. At one time there were more than 20 churches clustered within less than 1 sq km, though just a handful survive today. They are linked by narrow cobbled alleyways running between high stone walls: the place feels similar to parts of Jerusalem's Old City. That might not be mere coincidence, because when Jews were exiled from their holy city in AD 70, some found refuge in Egypt; the country's oldest synagogue is here in Coptic Cairo. There are three entrances to the Coptic compound: a sunken staircase beside the footbridge over the metro gives access to most churches and the synagogue; the main gate in the centre is for the Coptic Museum; and another doorway further south leads to the Hanging Church.

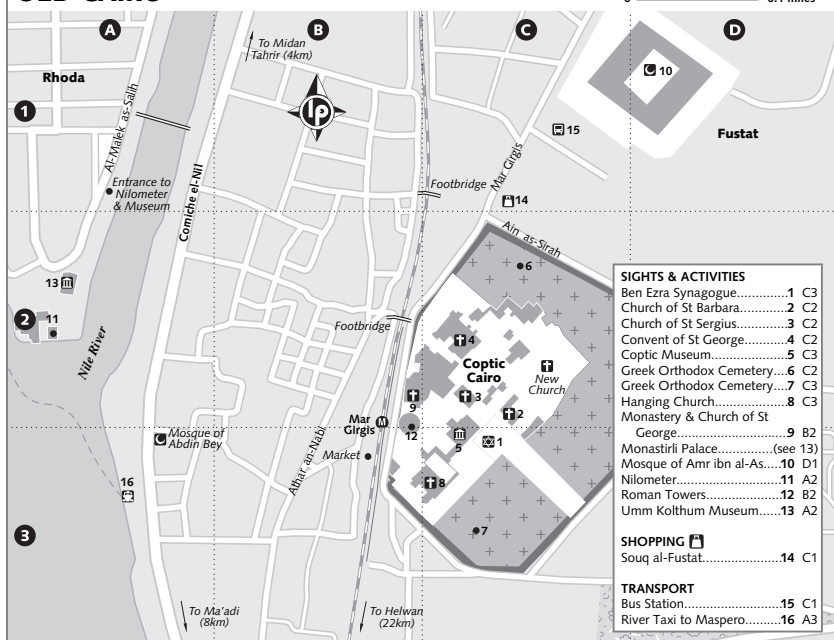
### Roman Towers

The main entrance to the Coptic compound lies between the remains of the two round **towers** (Map p124) of Babylon's western gate. Built in AD 98 by Emperor Trajan, these were part of riverfront fortifications: at the time, the Nile would have lapped right up against them. Excavations around the southern tower have revealed part of the ancient quay, several metres below street level. The Greek Orthodox Monastery and Church of St George sit on top of the northern tower.

### Coptic Museum

This **museum** (Map p124; ☎ 2363 9742; www.coptic-museum.gov.eg; Sharia Mar Girgis; adult/student E£40/20; ☞ 9am-4pm), founded in 1908, houses Coptic art from Greco-Roman times to the Islamic era in a collection drawn from all over Egypt.

## OLD CAIRO



Reopened after thorough renovation in 2006, it is a beautiful place, as much for the elaborate woodcarving in all the galleries as for the treasures they contain. These include a sculpture that shows obvious continuity from the Ptolemaic period, rich textiles and whole walls of monastery frescoes. There's a pleasant garden out front; a small café was not yet open at the time of research.

## Hanging Church

Just south of the museum on Sharia Mar Girgis (the main road parallel with the metro), a stone façade inscribed with Coptic and Arabic marks the entrance to the **Hanging Church** (Al-Kineesa al-Mu'allaga; Map p124; Sharia Mar Girgis; ☒ Coptic mass 8-11am Fri, 9-11am Sun). Still in use for Mass and by parishioners who come to pray over a collection of saints' relics and an icon of Mary, this 9th-century (some say 7th-century) structure is called the Hanging or Suspended Church as it is built on top of the Water Gate of Roman Babylon. Steep stairs lead to a 19th-century façade topped by twin bell towers. In a small inner courtyard, vendors sell taped liturgies and videos of the Coptic pope, Shenouda III.

With its three barrel-vaulted, wooden-roofed aisles, the interior of the church feels like an upturned ark. Ivory-inlaid screens hiding the altar have intricate geometric designs that are distinguishable from Islamic designs only by the tiny crosses worked into the pattern. In front of them, a fine pulpit used only on Palm Sunday stands on 13 slender pillars that represent Christ and his disciples; one of the pillars, darker than the rest, is said to symbolise Judas. In the baptistry, off to the right, a panel has been cut out of the floor to reveal the Water Gate below.

### Monastery & Church of St George

Back on the street, the first doorway north of the museum gate leads to the Greek Orthodox **Monastery and Church of St George** (Map p124). St George (Mar Girgis), is one of the region's most popular Christian saints. A Palestinian conscript in the Roman army, he was executed in AD 303 for resisting Emperor Diocletian's decree forbidding the practice of Christianity. There has been a church dedicated to him in Coptic Cairo since the 10th century; this one dates from 1909. The interior has been gutted

by fires, but the stained-glass windows and blue-green tile ceiling remain bright and colourful. The neighbouring monastery is closed to visitors. The Coptic *moulid* (saints' festival) of Mar Girgis is held here on 23 April.

### Convent of St George

Down a sunken staircase by the footbridge, along the alleyway, the first doorway on your left leads into the courtyard of the **Convent of St George** (Map p124). The convent is closed to visitors, but you can step down into the main hall and the chapel. Inside the latter is a beautiful wooden door, almost 8m high, behind which a small room is still occasionally used for the chain-wrapping ritual that symbolises the persecution of St George during the Roman occupation. Occasionally, visitors wishing to be blessed are wrapped in chains by the resident nuns, who intone the requisite prayers. Usually, though, the nuns will merely offer to show you a chain that they claim was used to bind early martyrs.

### Churches of St Sergius & St Barbara

To get to the **Church of St Sergius** (Abu Serga; Map p124; ☎ 8am-4pm), walk down the lane that the Convent of St George is on, following it around to the right. Duck under the low arch and walk a few steps more to the entrance, below street level. This is the oldest church inside the walls, with 3rd- and 4th-century pillars. It is said to be built over a cave where Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus sheltered after fleeing to Egypt to escape persecution from King Herod of Judea, who had embarked upon a 'massacre of the first born'. The cave in question (now a crypt) is reached by descending steps to the left of the altar. Every year, on 1 June, a special mass is held here to commemorate the event.

Further along the alley, a passage leads to the left, where another church dedicated to St George is being restored; the passage ends at a shiny new church – a surprise in the middle of all the ancient stones (as are its superlative restrooms). Returning to the main walkway, the **Church of St Barbara** (Sitt Barbara; Map p124) is at the corner; she was beaten to death by her father for trying to convert him to Christianity. Her relics supposedly rest in a small chapel left of the nave.

Beyond the church an iron gate leads to the large, peaceful (if a bit litter-strewn) **Greek Orthodox cemetery** (Map p124). Women on their

own should be careful – we've heard reports of flashers lurking among the gravestones.

### Ben Ezra Synagogue

To the right of the cemetery entrance, the 9th-century **Ben Ezra Synagogue** (Map p124; admission free, donations welcome) occupies the shell of a 4th-century Christian church. In the 12th century the synagogue was restored by Abraham Ben Ezra, rabbi of Jerusalem – hence its name. Tradition marks this as the spot where the prophet Jeremiah gathered the Jews in the 6th century after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Jerusalem temple. The adjacent spring is supposed to mark the place where the pharaoh's daughter found Moses in the reeds, and where Mary drew water to wash Jesus. In 1890, a cache of more than 250,000 papers, known as the Geniza documents, was uncovered in the synagogue; from them, researchers have been able to piece together details of the life of the North African Jewish community from the 11th to 13th centuries.

### MOSQUE OF AMR IBN AL-AS

Sharia Mar Girgis leads north past Souq al-Fustat (p177), a covered market with quality crafts shops and a pricey café, to the **Mosque of Amr ibn al-As** (Map p124; Sharia Sidi Hassan al-Anwar, Old Cairo), the first mosque built in Egypt, constructed in AD 642 by the general who conquered Egypt for Islam. On the site where Ibn al-As pitched his tent, the original structure was only palm trunks thatched with leaves. It expanded to its current size in AD 827, and has been continuously reworked since then – most recently, a wood roof was installed to mimic the original style more closely. The oldest section is to the right of the sanctuary; the rest of the mosque is a forest of some 200 different columns, the majority taken from ancient sites. There's little else to see, but the vast space is a pleasant place to rest.

### Islamic Cairo

If you can, walk from Downtown Cairo east to this district, the core of the medieval city. In just 1.5km, centuries fall away – as you near Midan Hussein, traditional *galabiyyas* (men's full-length robes) begin to outnumber modern suits, buildings and crowds press closer on all sides, and the din comes less from car traffic and more from the cries of street vendors and the creak of cart wheels. Here the aromas of mint and cumin mix with the



## ISLAMIC CAIRO HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak up the atmosphere in Al-Azhar Mosque (opposite), the centre of Sunni Islamic education for more than a millennium.
- Take in the view from the south end of Bein al-Qasreen (p132) – with a few camels, you could be in a 19th-century etching.
- Compare the Mosque of Ibn Tulun (p138) to its image on your £5 bill, and pop into the adjacent Gayer-Anderson Museum (p138), a private home furnished with quirky art and collectibles.
- Sip tea at the Platonic ideal of the *ahwa* (coffeehouse), Fishawi's Coffeehouse (p169) – a great place to rest before or after trawling Khan al-Khalili for deals.
- Climb the minarets at Bab Zuweila (p134) to survey the view over the whole medieval district.

stink of livestock, petrol and sewage – the real smell of the city. The effect can be disorientating and the casual visitor can lose not just a sense of direction but also a sense of time. Of all Cairo's districts, this is undoubtedly the most fascinating.

Although the atmosphere is different from Downtown, and certainly there is a profusion of minarets on the skyline, the term 'Islamic Cairo' is a bit of misnomer, as this area is not significantly more religious than other parts of the city. But it is Islamic in the sense that for many centuries, it was one of the power centres of the Islamic empire, a nexus of commerce and political intrigue. And the monuments that remain are some of the most resplendent examples of architecture inspired by the glory of Islam.

The Ministry of Culture is in the middle of an ambitious, costly and slow restoration programme. Some conservation architects are concerned that monuments are being superficially rebuilt, with lashings of cement and no vision as to how the spaces will be used and maintained. Likewise, the new emphasis on tourist-friendliness and tidiness could transform the district from an architecturally significant and intact precinct with a vibrant human presence to a sanitised heritage theme park. Certainly the complaints have merit, but it's also true that some parts of Islamic Cairo are receiving much-needed help in the process. Vast Al-Azhar Park (p140), once an enormous rubbish heap, is hard to argue with as an improvement.

The best way to explore is to spend a couple of days wandering through the narrow streets and twisting alleyways – ideally once on a weekday to feel the throng of commerce at its height, and again on a quieter Friday

morning or Sunday, when most shops are shut (see p155 for a suggested walk) and you can pause to admire a delicately carved minaret without being run down by an overburdened donkey cart.

## VISITING ISLAMIC CAIRO

With more than 800 listed monuments and few signposts or other concessions to the visitor, Islamic Cairo can be a daunting place. We've divided it into six segments with maps, each taking about half a day to cover – plus Al-Azhar Park, which borders the district and makes a good place to rest after touring. The magnificent Museum of Islamic Art (p134) deserves another half-day, but it is not due to reopen for a long time. Al-Azhar Park borders the district and is a good place to rest after touring.

**Al-Azhar & Khan al-Khalili** (opposite) The geographical and symbolic centre of medieval Cairo.

**North of Khan al-Khalili** (p130) A monument-studded walk to the old city gates and back.

**Al-Azhar to the Citadel** (p133) Through the Darb al-Ahmar district to Mohammed Ali's seat of power.

**The Citadel** (p135) Home to Egypt's rulers for 700 years.

**The Citadel to Ibn Tulun** (p137) Two magnificent mosques and a couple smaller gems.

**Northern Cemetery** (p138) Cairo's famous City of the Dead.

**Al-Azhar Park** (p140) Great views from this green space.

Appropriate dress in this traditional part of Cairo is not just polite but necessary if you want to enter mosques, where legs and shoulders must be covered. Shoes must be removed before entering prayer halls, so bring footwear that can be easily slipped off but that is robust enough to survive potholes and odd puddles. Caretakers at mosques and museums expect



tips, so bring plenty of small change – ££5 should be sufficient at each place, but throw in a little extra if someone takes you up a minaret. Some enterprising people have taken to claiming entry fees at mosques, but except for Sultan Hassan and Ar-Rifai, this is not sanctioned – see p115 for how to handle this and other scams.

Caretakers are usually around from 9am until early evening, but may follow their own whims. Mosques are usually closed to visitors during prayer times.

To prepare, check out [www.cim.gov.eg](http://www.cim.gov.eg) or, more thoroughly, the 5th edition of *Islamic Monuments in Cairo: The Practical Guide*, by Caroline Williams (££75), or *Historic Cairo: A Walk Through the Islamic City*, by British architect Jim Antoniou (££75). Those serious about their architecture may like to splurge ££300 on Nicholas Warner's *The Monuments of Historic Cairo: A Map and Descriptive Catalogue*, which covers 500 buildings, complete with historical data and renovation details. All are published by AUC Press.

## GETTING TO ISLAMIC CAIRO

Islamic Cairo covers a large area. The centre of the action, and the easiest place to reach, is Al-Azhar and Khan al-Khalili. The best approach is on foot from Downtown, so you can see the transition from the modern city; head for Midan Ataba then bear east under the elevated motorway along Sharia al-Azhar, or throw yourself into the crowds on Sharia al-Muski. Or hail a taxi and ask for 'Al-Hussein' – the name of the *midan* (square) and the mosque at the mouth of the bazaar (pay ££6 from Downtown). Most places in the following pages can be reached from there, although for the Citadel and Mosque of Ibn Tulun it may be easier to take a taxi (££10 from Downtown) to the Citadel entrance.

## AL-AZHAR & KHAN AL-KHALILI

The best place to become acquainted with Islamic Cairo is the area around Al-Azhar Mosque and the great bazaar, Khan al-Khalili (Map p129), which panders shamelessly to Western preconceptions of the Orient.

### Al-Azhar Mosque

Founded in AD 970 as the centrepiece of the newly created Fatimid city, **Al-Azhar Mosque** (Gami' al-Azhar; Map p129; Sharia al-Azhar; ☎ 24hr) is one of Cairo's earliest mosques and its sheikh is

the highest theological authority for Egyptian Muslims. A madrasa was established in AD 988, growing into a university that is the world's second-oldest educational institution (after the University of al-Kairouine in Fez, Morocco). At one time the university was one of the world's pre-eminent centres of learning, drawing scholars from Europe and across the Arab world, and it is still the most prestigious place to study Sunni theology.

The mosque is a harmonious blend of architectural styles, the result of numerous enlargements over a thousand years. The central courtyard is the earliest part, while, from south to north, the three minarets date from the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries; the latter, with its double finial, was added by Sultan al-Ghuri, whose mosque and mausoleum stand nearby. The tomb chamber, located through a doorway on the left just inside the entrance, has a beautiful mihrab (a niche indicating the direction of Mecca) and should not be missed.

## Midan Hussein

The square between the two highly venerated mosques of Al-Azhar and Sayyidna al-Hussein was one of the focal points of Mamluk Cairo and remains an important space at feast times, particularly on Ramadan evenings and during the *moulids* (see the boxed text p509) of Hussein and the Prophet Mohammed, when people throng the brightly lit *midan*, where music and Sufi chanting blares until the early morning. The square is a popular meeting place at other times too, and the *ahwas* with outdoor seating at the entrance to the khan are often packed with equal parts locals and tourists.

One of the most sacred Islamic sites in Egypt, the **Mosque of Sayyidna al-Hussein** (Map p129) is the reputed burial place of the head of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet whose death in Karbala, Iraq, cemented the rift between the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam. Never mind that the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus claims the same Shiite relic, and that both mosques were established by Sunnis – the site is still so holy that non-Muslims are not allowed inside. Most of the building dates from about 1870, except for the beautiful 14th-century stucco panels on the minaret. The modern-looking metal sculptures in front are elegant Teflon canopies that expand to cover worshippers during Friday prayer times.

## NEIL HEWISON

*Associate director for editorial programs, The American University in Cairo Press, one of the most respected publishers in the field of Egyptian history, archaeology, arts and literature in translation.*

### How long have you lived in Cairo?

I first came to Cairo in 1979 on my way to Al-Fayoum, where I taught English for three years. Then I came to live here in 1982.

### Has the city changed a lot since then?

Cairo is an everchanging, never-changing city. On the surface, it changes all the time: the bridges, the metro, the satellite dishes, the plotter-printed ads and shop signs. But its underlying rhythm – or its multiplicity of rhythms – is the same: the overall chaos that can't possibly work but does, the intense disregard of regulations and immense good humour of the inhabitants, the 24-hour street life...

### You know Islamic Cairo very well. What's your favourite building there?

May I have two? The Sabil-Kuttab of Abdel Rahman Katkhuda (p132) is perfectly sited and perfectly proportioned on a fork in the street. And the Mausoleum of Qaitbey (p139), which has a carved stone dome so exquisite I can look at it and forget to breathe.

### Where's your favourite place to walk or relax in the city?

Walk: from Bab Zuweila to the Citadel via Darb al-Ahmar (p135). And relax? In Cairo?

### Any restaurant recommendations for that part of the city? Or an *ahwa*?

**Farahat** (126A Sharia al-Azhar, Islamic Cairo; ☎ noon-5am), in an alley off Al-Azhar St, serves great stuffed or grilled pigeon. The *ahwa* (coffeehouse) I like best is in Downtown, the one on Bustan between Nubar and Mohammed Farid with the beautiful calligraphy inside. It's clean and quiet, the clientele are old and old-fashioned, and it serves the best *subya* (cold, sweet, fermented-rice drink) in town.

### What do you like best about Cairo?

It's the safest city I know. How many Western cities can you walk in alone at any time of day or night, in any part of the city, and feel completely safe?

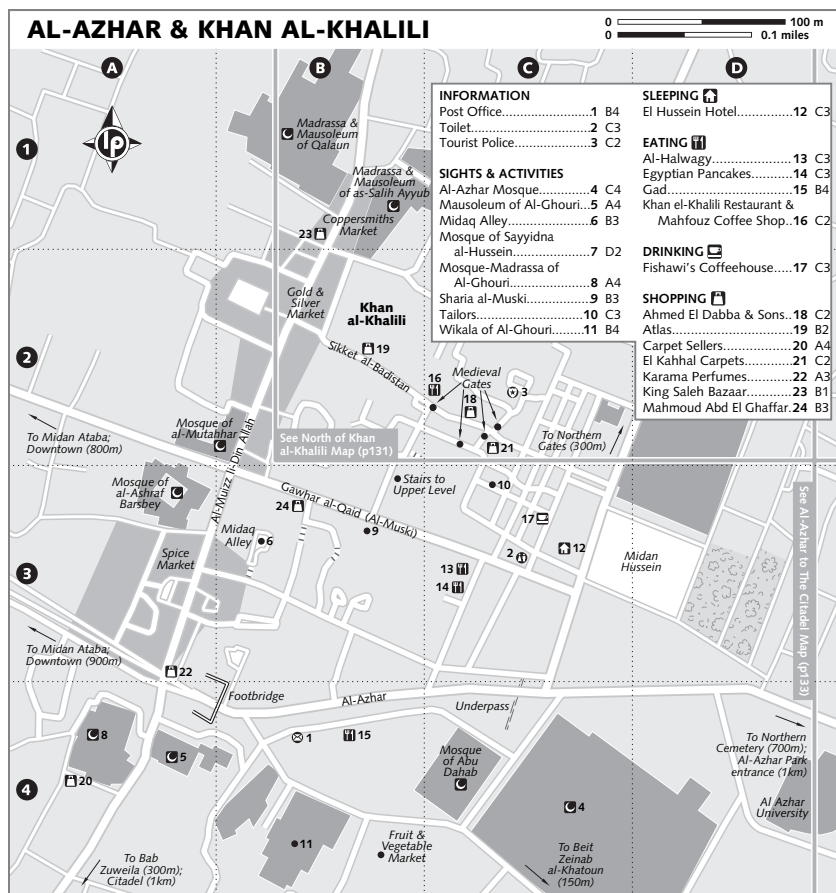
### Do you have a favourite word in Egyptian colloquial Arabic?

I like words that travel. For example: *tuuba* (brick) came into Arabic from Coptic and then was passed on to Spanish as *adobe* (from *at-tuuba*, the brick), which has been adopted directly in English for a style of building in...mud brick. One that's come full circle is the Arabic word the travel companies use to describe an off-road adventure trip in their programmes: *safaari*, from the English *safari* (a hunting trip in the African savannah), from the Swahili *safari* (a journey), from...the Arabic *safar* (journeying).

## Khan al-Khalili

Jaundiced travellers often dismiss **Khan al-Khalili** (Map p129) as a tourist trap, and there's no ignoring the flotillas of tour buses parked on the square, and all the touts and tat that come with them. But it's worth remembering that Cairenes have plied their trades here since the khan was built in the 14th century, and parts of the market, such as the gold district, are still the first choice for thousands of locals to do business.

Open from early morning to sundown (except Friday morning and Sunday), the agglomeration of shops – many arranged around small courtyards, in the original medieval 'minimal' layout – stock everything from soap powder to semiprecious stones, not to mention stuffed-toy camels and alabaster pyramids. The khan used to be divided into fairly rigid districts, but that has been lost since the tourist trade became paramount; the only distinct areas are now



the gold-sellers, the coppersmiths and the spice dealers (see Map p129). Apart from the clumsy 'Hey mister, look for free' touts, the merchants of Khan al-Khalili are some of the greatest smooth-talkers you will ever meet. Almost anything can be bought here and if one merchant doesn't have what you're looking for, he'll happily find somebody who does.

There are few specific things to see in the khan but **Fishawi's Coffeehouse** (Map p129; ☎ 24hr except during Ramadan), in an alley one block west of Midan Hussein, is an absolute must. Hung with huge mirrors and packed day and night, it claims to have been open continuously for the last 200 years, except during Ramadan, when everyone is fasting.

Entertainment comes in the form of roaming salesmen, -women and -children who hawk wallets, carved canes, pistol-shaped cigarette lighters and packet after packet after packet of tissues.

The other landmark, in the southwest area of the khan, is **Midaq Alley** (Zuqaq al-Midaq; Map p129). The title of one of Naguib Mahfouz' best-known works, the tiny stepped alley may not be populated with the same colourful characters as the novel, but the way of life here is little changed from his 1940s depiction. Such is the alley's fame that the street sign is kept in the coffeehouse at the foot of the steps and is produced only on payment of baksheesh.

### Sharia al-Muski

Congested and fabulous, the market street known as **Sharia al-Muski** (Map p129) begins in the khan (where it's formally called Sharia Gawhar al-Qaid) and runs parallel to Sharia al-Azhar to Midan Ataba. It's the 'real life' counterpoint to Khan al-Khalili's touristy maze, lined with carts selling cheap shoes, plastic toys, bucket-sized bras and some truly shocking lingerie.

### NORTH OF KHAN AL-KHALILI

From Midan Hussein walk up the road that leads along the western side of the Mosque of Sayyidna al-Hussein. Stick to it as it doglegs left into the district known as the Gamaliyya. This avenue, **Sharia al-Gamaliyya** (Map p131), was an essential thoroughfare in medieval Cairo; today it looks more like a back alley, with many of the Mamluk-era buildings obscured by restorers' webs of wooden scaffolding.

The 1408 **Mosque of Gamal ad-Din** (Map p131) is a monument that has received the somewhat overzealous restoration attention. It's raised above a row of shops, the rent from which was intended for the mosque's upkeep. Adjacent (go left down the lane) is the fully restored – yet empty – **Wikala al-Bazara** (Map p131; Sharia al-Tombakhiyya; adult/student E£15/10; ☎ 8am–6pm summer, 9am–5pm winter), one of about 20 remaining *wikalas* (merchants' inns) in the medieval city, down from about 360 in the 17th century, when this one was built. The Gamaliyya was the medieval warehouse district, with many of these *wikalas*, all built to the same plan: storerooms and stables surrounding a courtyard, with guestrooms for traders on the upper floors; heavy front gates protected the merchandise at night.

Further north on Sharia al-Gamaliyya, on the opposite side of the street, the Mamluk **Khanqah & Mausoleum of Sultan Beybars al-Gashankir** (Map p131) is distinguished by its stubby minaret, topped with a small ribbed dome. Built in 1310, this is one of the city's first *khanqahs* (Sufi monasteries). Thanks to a multipart 'baffled' entrance, it is serene inside. Beybars al-Gashankir is entombed in a room that shimmers with black-and-white marble panelling and light from stained-glass windows. He ruled for only a year, then wound up strangled – his name was excised from the building façade by order of his successor.

### Northern Walls & Gates

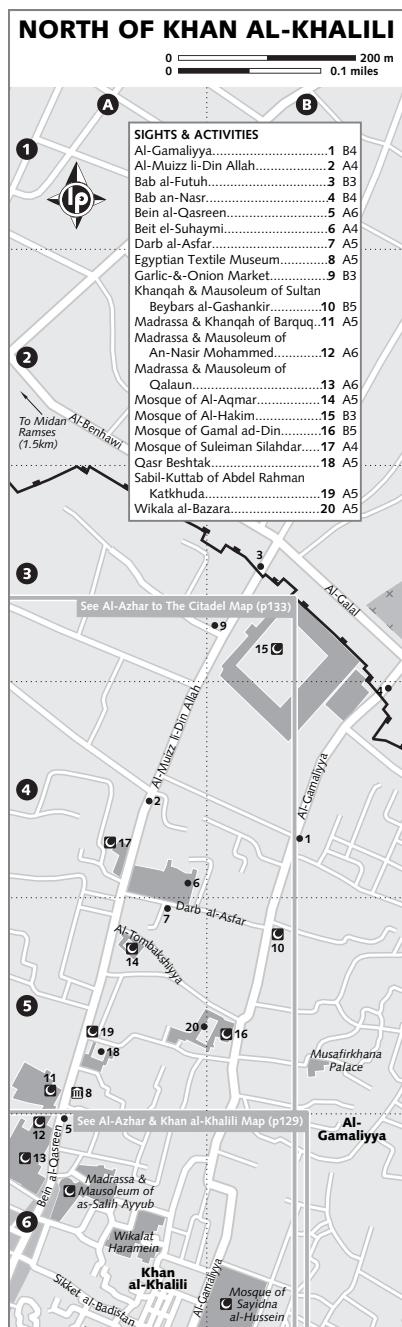
The square-towered **Bab an-Nasr** (Gate of Victory; Map p131) and the rounded **Bab al-Futuh** (Gate of Conquests; Map p131) were built in 1087 as the two main northern entrances to the walled Fatimid city of Al-Qahira. Walk along the outside and you'll see what an imposing bit of military architecture the whole thing is. When current renovations are done (any year now), visitors should be able to get access to the top of the walls and inside the gates themselves, and see inscriptions left by Napoleon's troops as well as carved animals and Pharaonic figures on the stones scavenged from the ruins of ancient Memphis.

### Mosque of Al-Hakim

Al-Hakim became the sixth Fatimid ruler of Egypt at the age of 11. His tutor nicknamed him 'Little Lizard' because of his frightening looks and behaviour. Hakim later had the man murdered, along with scores of others in his 24-year reign. Those nearest to him lived in constant fear for their lives: a victorious general rushing unannounced into the royal apartments was confronted by a bloodied Hakim standing over a disembowelled page boy. The general was beheaded.

Hakim would often patrol the streets in disguise, riding a donkey. Most notoriously, he punished dishonest merchants by having them dealt with by a well-endowed black servant. His death was as bizarre as his life. On one of his solitary nocturnal jaunts up onto the Muqattam Hills, Hakim simply disappeared; his body was never found. To one of his followers, a man called Al-Darizy, this was proof of Hakim's divine nature. From this seed Al-Darizy founded the sect of the Druze that continues to this day.

Completed in 1013, the vast **Mosque of Al-Hakim** (Map p131) is one of Cairo's older mosques but it was rarely used for worship. Instead it functioned as a Crusaders' prison, a stable, a warehouse, a boys' school and, most appropriately, considering its notorious founder, a madhouse. An Ismaili Shiite group restored the mosque in the 1980s, but with its open-plan square and spare decoration, it's not particularly interesting. The real masterpieces are the two stone minarets, the earliest surviving in the city (thanks in part to a postearthquake restoration in 1304 by Beybars al-Gashankir).



## Sharia al-Muizz li-Din Allah

**Sharia al-Muizz** (its shortened name; Map p131), which takes its name from the Fatimid caliph who conquered Cairo in AD 969, is the former grand thoroughfare of medieval Cairo, once chockablock with storytellers, entertainers and food stalls. These days the street is getting totally redone, from new pavement on up to the tips of the minarets of the monuments along its length. During morning vehicle-free hours, visitors may comfortably gawk at the sites without fear of being flattened by traffic. The drawback, though, is that this is now more squarely a tourist destination and touts have found their way up from the khan. First-timers will likely be impressed at the streetscape; return visitors may be taken aback at the extent of the changes.

Heading south from the gates, a **garlic-and-onion market** (Map p131) gives way to a variety of small places selling *sheeshas*, braziers and pear-shaped cooking pots for *fuul* (fava beans). Soon the stock expands to crescent-moon minaret tops, coffee ewers and other copper products, hence its more popular name, **Sharia an-Nahaseen** (Street of the Coppersmiths). On the right, about 200m south, is the **Mosque of Suleiman Silahdar** (Map p131), built comparatively late, in 1839, during the reign of Mohammed Ali. It's distinguished by its thin, Turkish-inspired minaret and the graceful, curvaceous lines along its façade, with a rounded *sabil-kuttab* (water fountain and school) on the corner.

## Darb al-Asfar & Beit el-Suhaymi

Just south of Suleiman's *sabil*, the narrow lane **Darb al-Asfar** (Map p131) runs east. Its new paving stones and elaborate *mashrabiyya* (ornate carved wooden) are a sample of the renovation goals for the whole area. Walking down here conjures the Middle Ages – if the Middle Ages were clean. The first few buildings you pass are part of **Beit el-Suhaymi** (Map p131; Darb al-Asfar; admission E£25; ☎ 9am–5pm), a family mansion and caravanserai (merchants' inn) built in the 17th and 18th centuries. From the street, it's nothing; after jogging through a narrow hall, you arrive at a peaceful courtyard surrounded by a warren of reception halls, storerooms and baths. It has been thoroughly restored, though barely furnished (fire extinguishers, a precaution required by the extensive new woodwork, are the most prominent item on display). As a result it

feels a bit ghostly – especially considering some 30 families were evicted to make way for the renovation.

The changes on Darb al-Asfar have been heavily debated. One definite benefit has been that the street has been reclaimed for residents. As on Sharia al-Muizz, many of the ground-floor spaces used to be small workshops and factories – noisy and sometimes unsafe for kids. Now those who still live here, at least, can enjoy the privacy of the lane as it was originally built.

Back on Sharia al-Muizz, just 50m south of the junction with Darb al-Asfar, is the petite **Mosque of Al-Aqmar** (Map p131). Built in 1125 by one of the last Fatimid caliphs, it is the oldest stone-façaded mosque in Egypt. Several features appear here that became part of the mosque builders' essential vocabulary, including *muqarnas* (stalactite) vaulting and the ribbing in the hooded arch.

### **Sabil-Kuttab of Abdel Rahman Katkhuda**

Further south along the street, where the road splits, the **Sabil-Kuttab of Abdel Rahman Katkhuda** (Map p131) is one of the iconic structures of Islamic Cairo, depicted in scores of paintings and lithographs. Building this fountain-school combo was an atonement for sins, as it provided two things commended by the Prophet: water for the thirsty and enlightenment for the ignorant. This one was built in 1744 by an emir notorious for his debauchery. There's nice ceramic work inside, so it's worth trying to find the caretaker with the key. He often sits in **Qasr Beshtak** (Palace of Amir Beshtak; Map p131), down the little alley to the east, then through the archway at the bottom. The palace is a rare example of 14th-century domestic architecture, originally five floors high, now largely ruined but with splendid rooftop views.

### **Bein al-Qasreen**

The part of Sharia al-Muizz immediately south of the *sabil-kuttab* is known as **Bein al-Qasreen** (Between the Two Palaces; Map p131), a reminder of the great palace complexes that flanked the street during the Fatimid era. The palaces fell into ruin and were replaced by the works of subsequent rulers. Today three great abutting Mamluk complexes line the west of the street, providing one of Cairo's most impressive assemblages of minarets, domes and striped stone façades.

First comes the **Madrasa & Mausoleum of Barquq** (Map p131). Barquq seized power in 1382, when Egypt was reeling from plague and famine; his Sufi school was completed four years later. Enter through the bold black-and-white marble portal into a vaulted passageway. To the right, the inner court has a colourful ceiling supported by four porphyry Pharaonic columns. Barquq's daughter is buried in the splendid domed tomb chamber; the sultan himself preferred to rest in the Northern Cemetery (see p140), surrounded by Sufi sheikhs. Directly across the street from the madrasa, the **Egyptian Textile Museum** (Map p131) is slated to open in 2008.

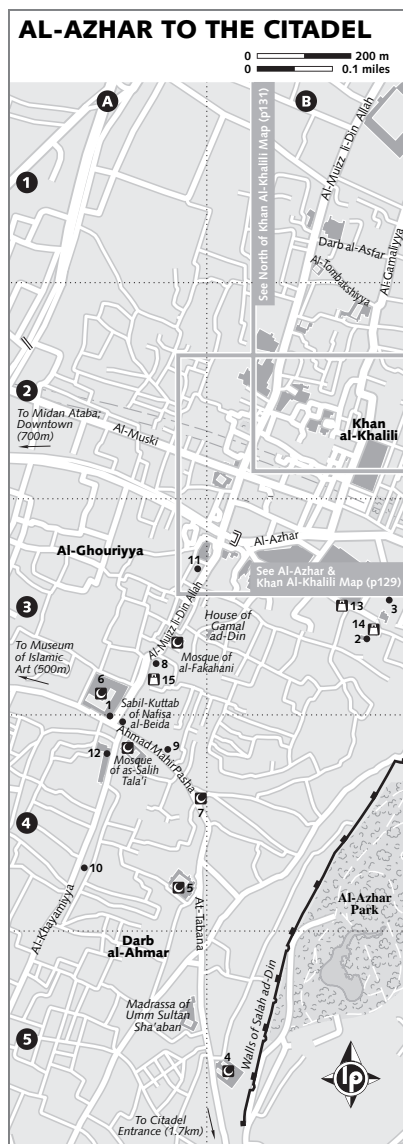
Barquq's neighbour to the south is the **Madrasa & Mausoleum of An-Nasir Mohammed** (Map p131), built in 1304 by a Mamluk sultan both despotic and exceedingly accomplished. The Gothic doorway was plundered from a church in Acre (now Akko, Israel) when An-Nasir and his army ended Crusader domination there in 1290 – note how the word 'Allah' has been inscribed at the point of the arch. The lacy pattern on the carved stucco minaret, a North African style, reveals more foreign influence. Buried in the mausoleum (on the right as you enter but usually locked) is An-Nasir's mother and favourite son; An-Nasir Mohammed is interred next door in the mausoleum of his father, Qalaun.

Built in just 13 months, the 1279 **Madrasa & Mausoleum of Qalaun** (Map p131) is both the earliest and the most splendid of the three buildings. It was still closed for restoration at the time of writing – an early 2008 opening looked likely, however. The mausoleum, on the right, is a particularly intricate assemblage of inlaid stone and stucco, patterned with stars and floral motifs and lit by stained-glass windows. The complex also includes a *maristan* (hospital), which Qalaun ordered built after he visited one in Damascus, where he was cured of colic. The Arab traveller and historian Ibn Battuta, who visited Cairo in 1325, was impressed that Qalaun's hospital contained 'an innumerable quantity of appliances and medicaments'. He also described how the mausoleum was flanked by Quran reciters day and night chanting requiems for the dead within.

### **Bein al-Qasreen to the City Centre**

Soon a last cluster of copper workshops gives way to gold jewellers, signifying re-





## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

Bab Zuweila.....	1	A4
Beit al-Harrawi.....	2	B3
Beit Zeinab al-Khatoun.....	3	B3
Blue Mosque.....	4	B5
Mosque of Al-Maridani.....	5	A4
Mosque of Al-Mu'ayyad.....	6	A3
Mosque of Qijmas al-Ishaqi.....	7	A4
Sabil of Muhammad Ali Pasha.....	8	A3
Sharia Ahmad Mahir Pasha.....	9	A4
Studio Shosha.....	10	A4
Tarboosh (Fez) Maker.....	11	A3
Tentmakers Market.....	12	A4

## SHOPPING

Adb El Zaher.....	13	B3
Al-Khatoun.....	14	B3
Said Delta Papyrus Center.....	15	A3

## AL-AZHAR TO THE CITADEL

South of Sharia al-Azhar, Sharia al-Muizz li-Din Allah continues as a market street 400m down to the twin-minaret gate of **Bab Zuweila** (p134). From there two routes lead to the Mosque-Madrassa of Sultan Hassan: east along Sharia Ahmed Mahir Pasha, or south through Sharia al-Khayamiyya. Either way, it's a long (at least 40 minutes), dusty, interesting walk to the main entrance of the Citadel.

## Ottoman Houses

Leaving Al-Azhar Mosque, turn left and then left again into an alley between the southern wall of the mosque and a row of shops housed in the vaults of a 15th-century merchants' building. At the top of this road lies **Beit Zeinab al-Khatoun** (House of Zeinab Khatoun; Map p133; ☎ 2735 7001; Sharia Mohammed Abduh; admission ££10; ☎ 9am-6pm), a small but interesting Ottoman-era house with a rooftop affording superb views of the surrounding minaret-studded skyline. Across a peaceful little plaza, **Beit al-Harrawi** (Map p133; ☎ 2510 4174; admission ££10; ☎ 9am-6pm) is another fine 18th-century mansion, but too sparse inside to warrant the admission charge. It is sometimes used as a concert venue and houses the Arabic Oud House; you may hear rehearsals. Between the two houses is Al-Khatoun (p176), one of the city's better shops for stylish handicrafts and homewares.

## Al-Ghuri Complex

On the south side of Sharia al-Azhar, opposite the khan, the grand **Mosque-Madrassa of Al-Ghuri** (Map p129), with its red-chequered minaret, and the elegant **Mausoleum of Al-Ghuri** (Map p129) together form an exquisite monument

entry into the precincts of Khan al-Khalili. At the junction with Sharia al-Muski, beside two mosques, a left turn leads back to Midan Hussein, while heading right will eventually take you to Midan Ataba (1.2km); straight ahead is Sharia al-Azhar, the easiest place to find a taxi.



to the end of the Mamluk era. Qansuh al-Ghuri, the penultimate Mamluk sultan, ruled for 16 years. At the age of 78, he rode to Syria at the head of his army to battle the Ottoman Turks. The head of the defeated Al-Ghuri was sent to Constantinople; his body was never recovered. His mausoleum (dating from 1505) contains the body of Tumanbey, his short-lived successor, hanged by the Turks at Bab Zuweila. The mausoleum, which has been under restoration for a number of years, may reopen as a cultural centre. Across the street at the mosque, don't be put off by the scaffolding: the interior, small but with soaring ceilings, is beautifully decorated; it's also possible to climb the minaret (for *bakshesh*; ignore claims of 'tickets'). Also part of the complex, the **Wikala of Al-Ghuri** (Map p129; ☎ 2511 0472; admission E£10; ☎ 9am-8pm Sat-Thur), 100m east, is another of the doomed sultan's legacies. Similar to the Wikala al-Bazara (see p130) but more sympathetically restored, the upper rooms are artists' ateliers while the former stables are craft shops. The courtyard serves as a theatre for Sufi dance performances (see p174).

### Carpet & Clothes Market

The street between the mosque and the mausoleum, as well as the alleys just west and south of the mosque-madrassa, were historically the city's silk market, and the small passageways are still filled with **carpet sellers** (Map p133). Heading south into the district called Al-Ghourriyya, Sharia al-Muizz becomes a busy market for household goods and cheap clothing. On the right, less than 50m south of the mosque, Cairo's last **tarboosh maker** (Map p133) shapes the red felt hats on heavy brass presses. Once worn by every *effendi* (gentleman), the tarboosh is now mainly bought by hotels and tourist restaurants. They sell for between E£15 and E£60. Further down on the left is the delicate Ottoman-style **Sabil of Muhammed Ali Pasha** (Map p133). The 1820 fountain was the first in Cairo to have gilded window grilles and calligraphic panels in Ottoman Turkish. Although it has been meticulously restored, it was closed to the public at last pass; check if it's open, as there is also access to a cistern below. Across the street, the red-and-white-striped **Mosque of Al-Mu'ayyad** (Map p133), built on the site where its patron Mamluk sultan had earlier been imprisoned, displays a particularly grand entrance portal,

dripping with stalactite vaulting. The interior is equally lavish.

### Bab Zuweila

Built at the same time as the northern gates (10th century), beautiful **Bab Zuweila** (Map p133; adult/student E£10/5; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) is the only remaining southern gate of medieval Al-Qahira. Visitors may climb the ramparts, where some intriguing exhibits about the gate's history are in place. The two minarets atop the gate, also open to visitors, offer one of the best available views of the area. In Mamluk times, the space in front of the gate was the site of executions, a popular form of street theatre, with some victims being sawn in half or crucified. The spirit of a healing saint was (and still is) said to reside behind one towering wooden door, which supplicants have studded with nails and teeth as offerings over the centuries.

From here, you can detour to the Museum of Islamic Art or continue to the Citadel by two possible routes.

### Museum of Islamic Art

West of Bab Zuweila 500m, the **Museum of Islamic Art** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2390 1520; Sharia Bur Said) holds one of the world's finest collections of Islamic applied art: a trove of manuscripts, woodwork, textiles and astronomy instruments. Unfortunately it has been shut for restoration for several years, with no end in sight. Should it reopen, consider it nearly as essential viewing as the Egyptian Museum. Coming from Midan Ataba, the museum is 700m southeast, straight down Sharia al-Qala'a. Midan Tahrir is 1.5km west along Sharia Sami al-Barudi (passing by the Mohammed Naguib metro station). Pay E£4 for taxi to or from Downtown.

### Sharia al-Khayamiyya

The 'Street of the Tentmakers', Sharia al-Khayamiyya, takes its name from the artisans who produce the bright fabrics used for the ceremonial tents at funerals, wakes, weddings and feasts. They also make appliqué wall hangings and bedspreads, and print original patterns for tablecloths. The highest concentration of artisans is directly after Bab Zuweila, in the covered **tentmakers market** (Map p133). About 800m south, Sharia al-Khayamiyya intersects Sharia Mohammed Ali; a left turn here will take you directly to the Mosque-Madrassa of Sultan Hassan and

to the Citadel, but the detour along Darb al-Ahmar passes more monuments.

### Darb al-Ahmar

This district grew up during the 14th and 15th centuries and is named for its main thoroughfare, **Darb al-Ahmar** (Sharia Ahmad Mahir Pasha; Map p133), or 'Red Road'. In the district's heyday Cairo had a population of about 250,000, most of whom lived outside the city walls in this tightly packed residential district of twisting streets and dark cul-de-sacs. As the area inside the walls of Al-Qahira was built-up, patrons of new mosques, palaces and religious institutions were forced to build outside the gates. Most of the structures around here date from the late Mamluk era. One of the best examples from this period is the 1481 **Mosque of Qiyas al-Ishaqi** (Map p133). Don't be deceived by the plain exterior: inside are beautiful stained-glass windows, inlaid marble floors and stucco walls.

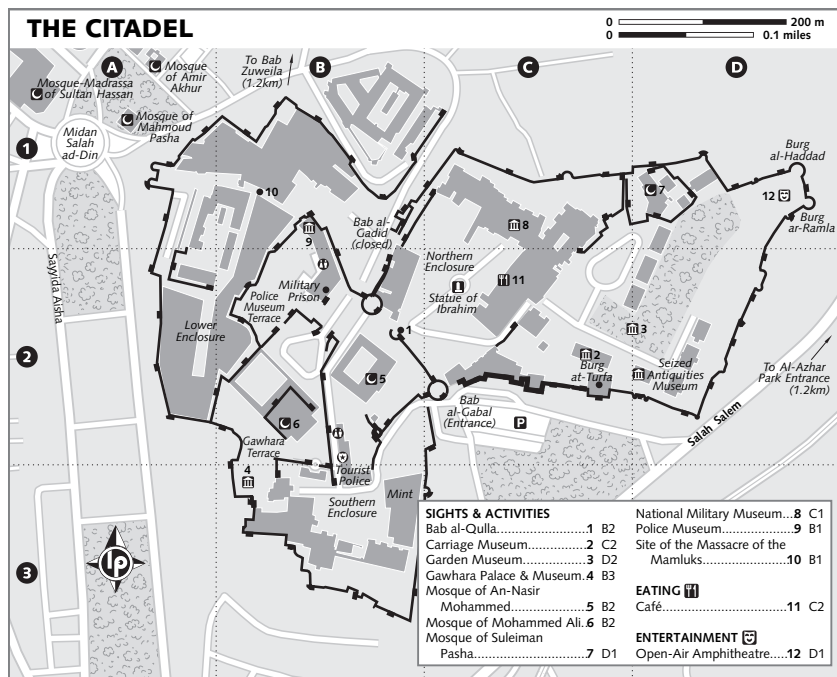
About 150m further on the right, the 1339 **Mosque of Al-Maridani** (Map p133) incorporates architectural elements from several periods: eight granite columns were taken from a

Pharaonic monument; the arches contain Roman, Christian and Islamic designs; and the Ottomans added a fountain and wooden housing. Trees in the courtyard, attractive *mashrabiyya* and a lack of visitors make this a peaceful place to stop.

The **Blue Mosque** (Mosque of Aqsunqur; Map p133), built in 1347, gets its popular name from the combination of blue-grey marble on the exterior and the flowery Ottoman tiling, not applied until 1652, inside. The minaret affords an excellent view of the Citadel, while over to the east, just behind the mosque, you can see the remains of Saladin's city walls, being excavated as part of the Al-Azhar Park project.

### THE CITADEL

Sprawling over a limestone spur on the eastern edge of the city, the **Citadel** (Al-Qala'a; Map p135; ☎ 2512 1735; Sharia Salah Salem; adult/student E£40/20; ♿ 8am-5pm Oct-May, 8am-6pm Jun-Sep, mosques closed during Fri prayers) was home to Egypt's rulers for 700 years. Their legacy is a collection of three very different mosques, several palaces (housing some underwhelming museums; admission



fee included) and a couple of terraces with views over the city. Though this is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Cairo, it is relatively unimpressive and decidedly overpriced, not to mention a slog to get to (see right).

Saladin began building the Citadel in 1176 to fortify the city against the Crusaders, who were then rampaging through Palestine. Following their overthrow of Saladin's Ayyubid dynasty, the Mamluks enlarged the complex, adding sumptuous palaces and harems. Under the Ottomans (1517–1798) the fortress expanded westwards and a new main gate, the Bab al-Azab, was added, while the Mamluk palaces deteriorated. Even so, when Napoleon's French expedition took control in 1798, the emperor's savants regarded these buildings as some of the finest Islamic monuments in Cairo. This didn't stop Mohammed Ali – who rose to power when the French left – from demolishing them. The only Mamluk structure left standing was a single mosque, used as a stable. Mohammed Ali completely remodelled the rest of the Citadel and crowned it with the Turkish-style mosque that currently dominates Cairo's eastern skyline.

After Mohammed Ali's grandson Ismail moved his residence to the Abdeen Palace (p117), the Citadel became a military garrison. The British army was barracked here during WWII, and Egyptian soldiers still have a small foothold, although most of the Citadel has been given over to tourists.

### Mosque of Mohammed Ali

The fortress is dominated by the **Mosque of Mohammed Ali** (Map p135). Modelled along classic Turkish lines, with domes upon domes upon domes, it took 18 years to build (1830–48), and its interior is all twinkling chandeliers and luridly striped stone. Perhaps the most evocative description of it is in Olivia Manning's *The Levant Trilogy*: 'Above them Mohammed Ali's alabaster mosque, uniquely white in this sand-coloured city, sat with minarets pricked, like a fat, white, watchful cat'. Other writers have called it unimaginative and graceless and compared it to a toad. Beyond criticism, the mosque's patron lies in the marble tomb on the right as you enter. Note the glitzy clock in the central courtyard, a gift from King Louis-Philippe of France in thanks for the Pharaonic obelisk that adorns the Place

de la Concorde in Paris. It was damaged on delivery and has yet to be repaired.

Dwarfed by Mohammed Ali's mosque, the 1318 **Mosque of An-Nasir Mohammed** (Map p135) is the Citadel's sole surviving Mamluk structure. The interior is a little sparse because the Ottoman sultan Selim I had it stripped of its marble, but the old wood ceiling and *muqarnas* shows up nicely, and the twisted finials of the minarets are interesting for their covering of glazed tiles, something rarely seen in Egypt.

Facing the entrance of the Mosque of An-Nasir Mohammed, a mock-Gothic gateway leads to a grand terrace, with superb views all the way to the Pyramids at Giza. Immediately below, in the Citadel's Lower Enclosure (closed to the public), the steep-sided roadway leading to Bab al-Azab was the site of the infamous massacre of the Mamluks (see p37). The flyblown **Police Museum** (Map p135), located at the northern end of the terrace, includes displays on famous political assassinations, complete in some cases with the murder weapon.

South of Mohammed Ali's mosque is another terrace with good views. Beyond, the dull **Gawhara Palace & Museum** (Map p135) is a lame attempt to evoke 19th-century court life, and it's often closed anyway.

### Northern Enclosure

Entrance to the Northern Enclosure is via the 16th-century Bab al-Qulla. Past an overpriced café lies Mohammed Ali's one-time Harem Palace, now the lavish **National Military Museum** (Map p135) and perhaps the best-tended exhibition in the country. Endless plush-carpeted halls are lined with dioramas depicting great moments in warfare, from Pharaonic times to the 20th-century conflicts with Israel – kitschy fun to start, then eventually a bit depressing.

East of the café a narrow road leads to an area with a few smaller museums, along the thrilling lines of the **Carriage Museum** (Map p135). Devotees of Islamic architecture might appreciate the 1528 **Mosque of Suleiman Pasha** (Map p135), a far more tasteful example of the Ottoman-style domed mosque.

### Getting To/From the Citadel

To walk from Midan Ataba to the Citadel's entrance gate, it's almost 4km through the furniture and musical-instruments districts. From Midan Ataba go straight down

Sharia al-Qala'a and its continuation, Sharia Mohammed Ali, to Midan Salah ad-Din, then walk to Sharia Salah Salem via Sharia Sayyida Aisha. A taxi will cost E£12. Minibus 150 (E£1.10) runs from Midan Ataba. This and other services drop you only at Midan Salah ad-Din, still a 15-minute walk from the entrance; taking a taxi (E£3) from here is easier on the legs, but only marginally quicker due to the complicated traffic flow on the highway. A microbus to Sayyida Aisha gets you closest, to the intersection with Salah Salem.

### THE CITADEL TO IBN TULUN

The route takes in two of Islamic Cairo's largest mosques, plus a few tiny surprises.

#### Mosque-Madrassa of Sultan Hassan

Massive yet elegant, the great structure of the **Mosque-Madrassa of Sultan Hassan** (Map p137; Midan Salah ad-Din; admission E£20; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-May, 8am-6pm Jun-Sep) is regarded as the finest piece of early-Mamluk architecture in Cairo. It was built between 1356 and 1363 by the troubled Sultan Hassan, a grandson of Sultan Qalaun; he took the throne at the age of 13, was deposed and reinstated no less than three times, then assassinated shortly before the mosque was completed. Tragedy also shadowed the construction when one of the minarets collapsed, killing some 300 onlookers. Beyond the striking, recessed entrance, a dark passage leads into a square courtyard whose soaring walls are punctured by four *iwans* (vaulted halls), one dedicated to teaching each of the

four main schools of Sunni Islam. At the rear of the eastern *iwana*, an especially beautiful mihrab is flanked by stolen Crusader columns. To the right, a bronze door leads to the sultan's mausoleum.

Opposite the grand mosque, the **Mosque of Ar-Rifai** (Map p137; E£20) is constructed on a similarly grand scale. Begun in 1869 and not finished until 1912, it's an Islamic Revival confection. Members of modern Egypt's royal family, including Khedive Ismail and King Farouk, are buried inside, as is the last shah of Iran. Their tombs lie to the left of the entrance.

#### Museo Mevlevi & Amir Taz Palace

Walking west along busy Sharia as-Salbiyya eventually leads to the Mosque of Ibn Tulun. A short detour north on Sharia Suyufiyya brings you to two little-visited but rewarding buildings. The **Amir Taz Palace** (Map p137; ☎ 2514 2581; 17 Sharia Suyufiyya; admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm) is the restored home of one of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad's closest advisers, who later controlled the throne through Sultan Hassan. Now used as a cultural centre, the home is not as extensive as Beit el-Suhaymi, but admission is free, and there are a couple of small exhibits, a beautiful wood ceiling in the loggia and even clean bathrooms. A little further down the street, behind a green door with an Italian Institute sign, the **Museo Mevlevi** (Map p137; Sharia Suyufiyya; admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm) centres on a meticulously restored Ottoman-era theatre for whirling dervishes. Hidden behind



stone façades, the beautiful wood structure feels like a little jewel box. Downstairs, see the remains of the madrasa that forms the building's foundation; the thorough notes are a rare model of thoughtful excavation.

### Mosque of Ibn Tulun

Another 250m west on Sharia as-Salbiyya, the **Mosque of Ibn Tulun** (Map p137; ☎ 8am-6pm) is easily identified by its high walls topped with neat crenellations that resemble a string of paper dolls. Built between AD 876 and 879 by Ibn Tulun, who was sent to rule the outpost of Al-Fustat in the 9th century by the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad, it is the city's oldest intact, functioning Islamic monument. It's also one of its most beautiful, despite a rather ham-fisted restoration using cement on the mud-brick-and-timber structure. Ibn Tulun drew inspiration from his homeland, particularly the ancient Mosque of Samarra (Iraq), on which the spiral minaret is modelled. He also added some innovations of his own: according to architectural historians, this is the first structure to use the pointed arch, a good 200 years before the European Gothic arch. The mosque covers 2.5 hectares, large enough for the whole community of Al-Fustat to assemble for Friday prayers.

The mosque's geometric simplicity is best appreciated from the top of the minaret, which also has magnificent views of the Citadel. Reach the tower from the outer, moatlike courtyard, originally created to keep the secular city at a distance, but at one time filled with shops and stalls.

### Gayer-Anderson Museum

Through a gateway to the south of the main entrance of the mosque, this quirky **museum** (Beit al-Kritliyya, the House of the Cretan Woman; Map p137; ☎ 2364 7822; Sharia ibn Tulun; adult/student ££30/15, video ££20; ☎ 9am-5pm) gets its current name from John Gayer-Anderson, the British major and army doctor who restored the two adjoining 16th-century houses between 1935 and 1942, filling them with antiquities, artwork and Oriental knick-knacks acquired on his travels in the region. On his death in 1945, Gayer-Anderson bequeathed the lot to Egypt. The puzzle of rooms is decorated in a variety of styles: the Persian Room has exquisite tiling, the Damascus Room has lacquer and gold, and the Queen Anne Room displays ornate furniture and a silver tea set. The enchant-

ing *mashrabiyya* gallery looks down onto a magnificent *qa'a* (reception hall) which has a marble fountain, decorated ceiling beams and carpet-covered alcoves. The rooftop terrace has been lovingly restored, with more complex *mashrabiyya*. You may find the interior familiar – the museum was used as a location in the James Bond film *The Spy Who Loved Me*. Across the street, Khan Misr Touloun (see p176) is a good handicrafts emporium.

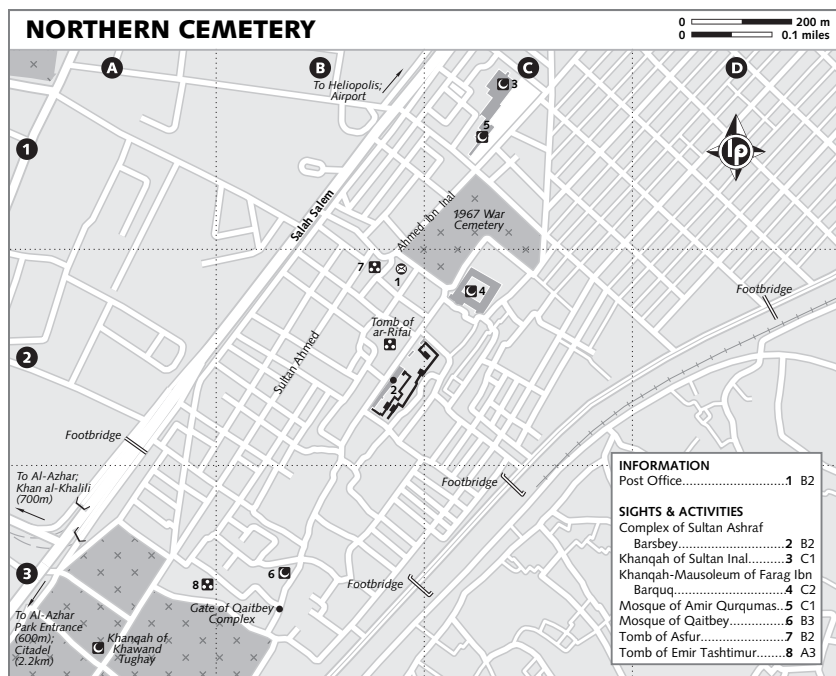
From here, it's rewarding to keep walking another 750m west to the popular quarter of Sayyida Zeinab, where there's a metro station.

### NORTHERN CEMETERY

The Northern Cemetery (Al-Qarafa; Map p139) is the more interesting half of a vast necropolis known popularly as the City of the Dead. The titillating name refers to the fact that the cemeteries are not only resting places for Cairo's dead, but for the living too. Visitors expecting morbid squalor may be disappointed; the area, complete with power lines, a post office and multistorey buildings, is more 'town' than 'shanty'. Some estimates put the number of living Cairenes here at 50,000; others, at 10 times this number. As Max Rodenbeck notes in *Cairo: The City Victorious*, some of the tomb dwellers, especially the paid guardians and their families, have lived here for generations. Others have moved in more recently, trying to make their way back to the centre from bleak low-income suburbs on. On Fridays and public holidays visitors flock here to picnic and pay their respects to the dead – this is undoubtedly the best time to come. At all times, remember that you are in a more private, residential space, which is a very low-income one; dress modestly and don't flaunt costly jewellery or gadgets.

The cemetery first appealed to Mamluk sultans and emirs because it afforded the sort of building space that was unavailable inside the densely packed city. The vast mausoleums they built were more than just tombs; they were also meant as places for entertaining – a continuation of the Pharaonic tradition of people picnicking among the graves. Even the humblest family tombs included a room for overnight visitors. The dead hoped they would be remembered; the city's homeless thanked them for free accommodation. This coexistence of the living and the dead was happening





as far back as the 14th century; in some tomb-houses, cenotaphs serve as tables and washing is strung between headstones.

The easiest way to the Northern Cemetery is heading east from Midan al-Hussein along Sharia al-Azhar. As you breast the top of the hill, bear right, walk below the overpass and go straight along the road between the tombs. Follow this road to the left, then right. You'll pass by the crumbling, domed **Tomb of Emir Tashtimur** (Map p139) on your left. About 150m further on, a narrow lane goes left, passing under a stone archway. This is the gate to the former compound of Qaitbey, whose splendid mosque is immediately ahead.

### Mosque of Qaitbey

Sultan Qaitbey, a prolific builder, was the last Mamluk leader with any real power in Egypt. He ruled for 28 years and, though he was as ruthless as any Mamluk sultan, he was also something of an aesthete. His **mosque** (Map p139), completed in 1474 and featured on the ££1 note, is widely agreed to mark the pinnacle of Islamic building in Cairo. Behind the boldly striped façade, the interior has four

*iwans* around a central court lit by large, lattice-screened windows. Panelled in cool marble, it's one of the most pleasant places in Cairo to sit for a while and relax. The adjacent tomb chamber contains the cenotaphs of Qaitbey and his two sisters. The true glory, however, is above, where the exterior of the dome is carved with interlaced star and floral designs; its intricacy and delicacy were never surpassed in Cairo or anywhere else in the Islamic world – climb the minaret for the best view.

### Other Monuments

From Qaitbey cross the square and continue north. After about 350m the street widens and on the right a stone wall encloses a large area of rubble-strewn ground that was formerly the **Complex of Sultan Ashraf Barsbey** (Map p139). Though not as sophisticated as the one topping the Mosque of Qaitbey, the dome here is carved with a beautiful star pattern. Inside is some fine marble flooring and a beautiful minbar (pulpit) inlaid with ivory. The guard will let you in for baksheesh (ask the ever-present children if he's not around).

Two hundred metres further north is the **Khanqah-Mausoleum of Farag Ibn Barquq** (Map p139), built by a son of Sultan Barquq, whose great madrasa and mausoleum stand on Bein al-Qasreen (p132). Completed in 1411 the *khanqah* is a fortresslike building with high, sheer façades and twin minarets and domes. In the courtyard, monastic cells lead off the arcades. Two tomb chambers – one for women, one for men – are each topped with domes; their ceilings are painted in mesmerising red-and-black geometric patterns.

### Northern Cemetery to Al-Hussein

Two large adjacent complexes northwest – the 1507 **Mosque of Amir Qurqumas** (Map p139) and the 1456 **Khanqah of Sultan Inal** (Map p139) – are beautiful, thanks to restoration work, but they are not always open.

Rather than just retracing your steps from Ibn Barquq, walk straight ahead from the entrance, passing the post office on your left, until you come to the small, elongated **Tomb of Asfur** (Map p139); turn left immediately after. A straight walk 850m down Sharia Sultan Ahmed will bring you back to the road leading to the underpass – or you can continue another kilometre down Sharia Salah Salem to Al-Azhar Park's main entrance.

### AL-AZHAR PARK

Islamic Cairo's eastern horizon changed substantially when **Al-Azhar Park** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2510 7378; www.alazharpark.com; E£10; ☞ 9am-midnight) opened in 2005. With funds from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, what had been a mountain of centuries' worth of collected garbage was transformed into a beautifully landscaped swath of green, the city's first (and only) park of significant size. It's hard to convey just how dramatically different the park is from any other public space in Cairo: a profusion of gardens, emerald grass, even a lake (part of a larger public water-supply system) cover the grounds, while ambient Arabic music drifts softly from speakers and fountains bubble in front of sleek modern Islamic architecture. In addition to a couple of small cafés and an open-air theatre (p173), there's an excellent restaurant here (p165) capitalising on the park's awesome views across the medieval city and beyond – a sunset visit is essential.

Depending on your outlook, the park is a gorgeous respite or a weirdly isolated elite

playground. The atmosphere may change, but as long as the only entrance is on Sharia Salah Salem, which requires a taxi to reach (pay E£12 from Tahrir), it's an expensive trek for most people. The entrances on the downhill side, in the Darb al-Ahmar district, were shut at last visit, allegedly for renovation work on the Ayyubid gates and walls, but also handily keeping the rabble out.

### Zamalek & Gezira

Uninhabited until the mid-19th century, Gezira (Arabic for 'island') was a narrow strip of alluvial land rising up out of the Nile. After he built modern-day Downtown, Khedive Ismail dedicated his energy to a great palace on the island, with the rest of the land as a royal garden. During the development boom of the early 20th century, the palace grounds were sold off, while the palace was made into a hotel (now the core of the Cairo Marriott).

The northern third of the island is the stylish residential district of Zamalek; the rest, still called Gezira, is largely occupied by sports clubs and parks.

### ZAMALEK

A leafy neighbourhood of old embassy mansions and 1920s apartment blocks, Zamalek (Map pp144-5) has few tourist sites, but it's a pleasant place to wander around and an even better place to eat, drink and shop.

The main street, Sharia 26th of July, cuts across the island, and its junction with Sharia Hassan Sabry (heading south) and Sharia Brazil (to the north) is the focal point of the area. Just a couple of doors east of Hassan Sabry on Sharia 26th of July, Simonds (see p168) is one of the city's oldest European-style cafés.

Further east along Sharia 26th of July, towards the bridge to Bulaq, are the excellent bookshop Diwan (p109) and – in the ground floor of a lavish apartment complex built by Swiss hotelier Charles Baehler in 1927 – café Cilantro (p168).

Immediately south of Sharia 26th of July, and overlooking the Nile, is the Cairo Marriott (p161). This converted palace has a good bakery (p168) and a lush, shady garden where you can enjoy your coffee or beer. Behind the hotel, the **Museum of Islamic Ceramics** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2737 3298; 1 Sharia Sheikh al-Marsafy, Zamalek; adult/student E£25/15; ☞ 10am-1.30pm & 5.30-9pm Sat-Thu) is a beautiful small museum. It's housed in a gorgeous 1924 Islamic Revival



## THE MIRACLE ON THE MOUNTAIN

Looking around some parts of Cairo, you'd think garbage is never collected – but it certainly is, by tens of thousands of people known as *zabbaleen*. The *zabbaleen* are Coptic Christians, and their district at the base of the Muqattam Hills contains not only all the city's refuse, sorted into recyclable bits, but also one of the most surprising churches in the country.

In fact, the **Church of St Simeon the Tanner** (Kineesat Samaan al-Kharraz; Map pp110-11; ☎ 2512 3666; Manshiyet Nasr), on a ridge above 'Garbage City', is just a part of a whole complex carved into the cliffs. It seats 5000 (that the buses carrying worshippers fit through the lanes below is a miracle in itself) and is ringed with biblical scenes carved into the rock. Look over the ridge and you can see the whole sprawling city; look down, and you see real, live pigs rooting around the *zabbaleen* backyards, recycling the edible trash.

But this church is not old (nor are any of the others here, though some are tucked in spooky hermits' caves). Completed in 1994, St Simeon is a belated honour for a 10th-century ascetic who prayed to make Muqattam move at the behest of Fatimid caliph Al-Muizz li-Din Allah (per Matthew 17:20: 'If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove...'). Today the church is a major site of Coptic pilgrimage.

To make your own trek to this modern marvel, tell your cab driver 'Manshiyet Nasr' or 'Madeenat az-Zabbaleen'; after turning off the highway toward Muqattam, make the first left, going slightly uphill. Once you're in the *zabbaleen* district (which is surprisingly tidy, considering), anyone you pass will wave you in the right direction – they all know where you're headed. Pay E£60 for a round-trip taxi from Downtown, with an hour's waiting time. If you'd like to go with a guide, consider **Ibrahim Morgan** (☎ 012 347 6343; morgan\_@yahoo.com), recommended by Lonely Planet readers.

villa, where the intricately carved walls (and vintage bathroom!) are as fascinating as the colourful plates, tiles and even 11th-century hand grenades on display. The garden and back of the building are given over to the **Gezira Art Center** (Map pp144-5), with several galleries hosting rotating contemporary exhibitions.

## GEZIRA

Gezira (Map p148) is best approached across Qasr el-Nil Bridge from Midan Tahrir, a popular strolling spot for couples at sunset. This brings you to **Midan Saad Zaghloul**, presided over by the statue of tarbooshed Mr Zaghloul himself, a 1930s nationalist leader. North of the *midan* on the banks of the Nile two lush **formal gardens** (Map p148; admission E£10) have outdoor cafés where local families and young couples partake of tea and *sheesha*. Below the gardens, the **pedestrian cornice** (admission E£2) is lively in the evenings.

Off the west side of the *midan*, the well-groomed **Gezira Exhibition Grounds** (Map p148) are dominated by the **Cairo Opera House** (Map p148; ☎ 2739 8144). Built in 1988 with money from Japan, the building is a modern take on traditional Islamic design. See p173 for details.

Across from the Cairo Opera House, the **Museum of Modern Egyptian Art** (Map p148; ☎ 2736 6667; www.modernartmuseum.gov.eg; E£10; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5.30-10pm Tue-Sun) houses a vast – perhaps too vast – collection of 20th- and 21st-century Egyptian art. Even after a 2005 renovation, it still can be difficult to appreciate the work given the cramped rooms, collected dust and lack of signage. The museum's prize items are all on the ground floor: Mahmoud Mukhtar's Deco-elegant bronze statue *Bride of the Nile* is here, along with Mahmoud Said's *Al Madina* (The City, 1937). Though Said has a slew of kitschy imitators, he was one of the first artists to depict folk life in vivid colour, and his commitment inspired Naguib Mahfouz to pursue his own career in writing. Throughout the museum, it is interesting to observe how Western trends such as Pop Art have manifested themselves in Egypt – almost always with a much sharper social or political message. Upstairs is a small café and a gift shop selling a few postcards and posters.

Elsewhere in the exhibition grounds, the **Hanager Arts Centre** (Map p148; ☎ 2735 6861; ☎ 10am-10pm Tue-Sun) and the **Palace of Arts** (Map p148; ☎ 2737 0603, 736 7627; www.fineart.gov.eg; ☎ 10am-1.30pm

## MUSEUMS: THE BEST OF THE REST

The mammoth Egyptian Museum gets all the fanfare, but the city also holds a number of lesser-known gems – ones that require half an hour or two, rather than a lifetime. And you'll always have the places to yourself. The coolest:

**Agricultural Museum** (below) So frozen in time, this whole museum should be in a museum.

**Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum** (below) Elegant sculpture, elegant building – and there's even a tomb in the basement!

**Mr & Mrs Mahmoud Khalil Museum** (opposite) Never thought you'd see a Picasso in Cairo, did you?

**Museum of Islamic Ceramics** (p140) Simply beautiful, with attractive, uncrowded displays and a gorgeous house as the setting.

& 5.30-10pm Sat-Thu) host rotating exhibits and performances.

Leave the complex from the rear entrance near the Galaa Bridge and you'll see a modest gate across the road, which leads to the **Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum** (Map p148; ☎ 2735 2519; E£5; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 5-10pm Tue-Sun). Mukhtar (1891-1934) was the sculptor laureate of independent Egypt, responsible for Saad Zaghloul on the nearby *midan* and the *Egypt Reawakening* monument outside the Giza Zoo. His collected work ranges from tiny caricatures (look for *Ibn al-Balad*, a spunky city kid) to life-sized portraits that are studies in flowing line. Mukhtar's tomb sits in the basement. Egyptian architect Ramses Wissa Wassef (1911-74) designed the elegant building – originally open, to capture natural light, but this was changed presumably to keep the cleaning budget down.

North of the Cairo Opera House and Ahly Stadium, the **Cairo Tower** (Burg Misr; Map p148; ☎ 2735 7187; Sharia el-Borg; admission E£60, children under 6 free, video E£20; ☎ 8am-midnight) is the city's most famous landmark after the Pyramids. Resembling a 185m-high wickerwork tube, the tower was built in 1961 as a thumb to the nose at the Americans, who had given Nasser the money used for its construction to buy US arms. The 360-degree views from the top are clearest in the late morning, after the haze burns off, or late afternoon. An occasionally revolving restaurant on top serves dodgy-looking food (E£100 lunch or dinner, including entrance), or you can get a soft drink at the cafeteria (E£80, including entrance). You might encounter quite a queue at dusk.

## Mohandiseen, Agouza & Doqqi

A map of Cairo in Baedeker's 1929 guide to Egypt shows nothing on the Nile's west bank other than a hospital and the road to the

Pyramids. The hospital is still there, set back from the cornice in Agouza, but it's now hemmed in on all sides by midrise buildings that shot up during the 1960s and 1970s when Mohandiseen, Agouza and Doqqi were created to house Egypt's emerging professional classes. The three districts remain middle-class bastions, home to families who made good during the years of Sadat's open-door policy – though some sections of Mohandiseen are Cairo's ritziest. Unless you happen to find concrete and traffic stimulating, the main attractions here are some good restaurants (p166), bars and upscale shopping on Sharia Suleiman Abaza and Sharia Libnan.

What little history there is floats on the river in the form of the **houseboats** moored off Sharia el-Nil just north of Zamalek Bridge in Agouza (Map pp144-5). Known as *dahabiyas*, these floating two-storey structures once lined the Nile all the way from Giza to Imbaba. During the 1930s some boats were casinos, music halls and bordellos. Many of the surviving residences still have a bohemian air, as chronicled in Naguib Mahfouz' novel *Adrift on the Nile*.

## AGRICULTURAL MUSEUM

It may sound dull, but the **Agricultural Museum** (Map p148; ☎ 3761 6785; Sharia Wizarat al-Ziraa, Doqqi; admission 10pt, camera 20pt; ☎ 9am-2pm Tue-Sun) is far from it. Spread over several buildings, the displays tell you all you've ever wanted to know about agriculture in Egypt, from Pharaonic times onwards, and so much more: dioramas depict traditional weddings, glass cases are packed with wax cucurbits, and in one mothball-scented wing, every bird in Egypt has been stuffed and pinned to a board. Dusty and a bit spooky, it's a true hall of wonders. The ridiculously cheap admission is offset by the baksheesh you're expected to dispense to the

'guides' – they hold the keys to the best rooms, and they know it. It's about 1km from the Doqqi metro station.

### MR & MRS MAHMOUD KHALIL MUSEUM

A noted politician during the 1940s, Mohammed Mahmoud Khalil amassed one of the Middle East's finest collections of 19th- and 20th-century European work. The wonderful **Mr & Mrs Mahmoud Khalil Museum** (Map p148; ☎ 3338 9720; www.mkm.gov.eg; 1 Sharia Kafour, Doqqi; admission with ID card or passport only, adult/student ££25/12; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun, 10am–3pm holidays) includes sculptures by Rodin and paintings by the likes of Delacroix, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Manet, Monet and Pissarro. There are also some Rubens, Sisleys and a Picasso. The paintings are housed in Khalil's former villa, later taken over by President Sadat. It's just a few minutes' walk south of the Cairo Sheraton.

### Pyramids of Giza

Amid all the hype about the New Wonders of the World, the Pyramids of Giza just sat there – as they have for 4000 years, both outliving the other six ancient wonders and living up to all the hype that has been lavished on them over the millennia. Their extraordinary shape, impeccable geometry and sheer bulk are a moot question: 'How were we built, and why?'

Centuries of research have given us parts of the answer to this double-barrelled question. We know they were massive tombs constructed on the orders of the pharaohs by teams of workers tens-of-thousands strong. This is supported by the discovery of a pyramid-builders' settlement, complete with areas for large-scale food production and medical facilities. Ongoing excavations on the Giza Plateau are providing more evidence that the workers were not the slaves of Hollywood tradition, but a highly organised workforce of Egyptian farmers. During the annual flood season, when the Nile covered their fields, the same farmers could have been redeployed by the highly structured bureaucracy to work on the pharaoh's tomb. The Pyramids can almost be seen as an ancient job-creation scheme, with the flood waters also making it easier to transport building stone to the site.

But despite the evidence, some still won't accept that the ancient Egyptians were capable of such astonishing achievements. Pyramidologists – for the study of the struc-

tures has become a 'science' in its own right – point to the carving and placement of the stones, precise to the millimetre, and argue the numerological significance of the structures' dimensions as evidence that the Pyramids were variously constructed by angels, the devil or visitors from another planet. It's easy to laugh at such seemingly out-there ideas, but visit the Giza Plateau and you'll see why so many people believe such awesome structures could only have unearthly origins.

### THE PYRAMIDS AS FUNERARY COMPLEX

It was neither an obsession with death, nor a fear of it, that led the ancient Egyptians to build such incredible mausoleums as the pyramids. Rather it was their belief in eternal life and their desire to be at one with the cosmos. The pharaoh was the son of the gods, but it was also his role to conduct the gods' powers to his people. Set between the earth and the sky, connecting the worlds mortal and divine, he was therefore honoured in life and worshipped in death. The pyramid was a fitting tomb for such an individual. A funerary temple attached to each pyramid allowed the pharaoh to be worshipped after his demise, with daily rounds of offerings to sustain his soul. A long covered causeway connected the funerary temple to a 'valley temple' built on the quayside, where the flood waters would reach each year (a superb model of the Abu Sir pyramids illustrates all this on the 1st floor of the Egyptian Museum). The complex also provided a constant visible reminder of the eternal power of the gods, as well as the absolute power of the pharaoh for whom it was built.

### PRACTICALITIES

It can be a bit of a shock to visit the **Giza Plateau** (Map p150; adult/student ££50/25; ☎ 7.30am–4pm) and realise that the sandy mound that's home to the pyramids is actually plonked in the middle of the congested city suburb of Giza. There are two entrances: one via a continuation of Pyramids Rd (Sharia al-Haram) at the foot of the Great Pyramid of Khufu, and another below the Sphinx, in the village of Nazlet as-Samaan. Most independent visitors enter from Pyramids Rd, as this is where the bus and minibus from Downtown stop. Follow the road up from the roundabout towards the Pyramids and firmly ignore anyone who tries to distract you (see p146). Continue

## MOHANDISEEN, AGOUZA &amp; ZAMALEK









drivers and other hustlers on the plateau itself. The bad news is that, because the people of Nazlet as-Samaan still rely on renting horses and camels for a living, the line of skirmish has just moved further away from the Pyramids. While your taxi or minibus is stopped in traffic on Pyramids Rd, young men might try to jump in with you to explain that the road ahead is closed – and the best way to proceed, conveniently, is on horseback. They might also tell you the ‘walk-in entrance’ is near their stables, or suggest that they can get you into the Pyramids area without a ticket. Note that genuine tickets have a hologram seal, and ignore everyone until you get one in your hands. Once on the plateau, you just have to negotiate with guys for camel rides and avoid the rogue antiquities cop who will try to usher you into the ‘ruin’ of the old police station.

### CAMELS & HORSES

The blocks just behind the Sphinx-side entrance are filled with milling horses and camels. There’s also a smaller stable area by the Mena House entrance. Considering the extraordinary amount of hassle the horse-owners give tourists, it’s tempting to ignore them completely; however, the distance between the three pyramids is a lot to cover on foot, so the service is a real one, should you be interested.

Tourism authorities have set ‘official’ prices (£35 per hour for camels, horses and horse-carts), but, as one officer said with an apologetic shrug, ‘you’re still expected to bargain’. Women should be a little wary of over-friendly camel-owners trying to clamber up behind them, and everyone should choose to ride only healthy-looking animals. If you are ever held hostage on a camel – asked to pay more than agreed before you’re let down – call over the nearest tourist police, or go to the office by the Mena House and complain (£20 or £25 is a fair fee for a quick trot around and photo op).

If you’re particularly interested in riding, hiring a horse from one of the village stables is a far better option than taking one at the Pyramids. Once you’re mounted, you will be off on your own in the desert with the Pyramids as a background. General expat opinion holds that the best stables near the Sphinx are **NB** (☎ 3382 0435), owned by Naser Breesh, who’s praised for his healthy steeds

and good guides; his place can be tricky to find: head down the street by the Sphinx poster off the main square where horses are gathered, or ask for directions to the Sphinx Club, as the stables are just behind it. **MG** (☎ 3385 3832) and **AA** (☎ 3385 0531), near the coach park, are both decent as well. Expect to pay around £35 per hour (hand over the money after the ride, and tip your guide an additional £5 or £10), and keep your Pyramids site ticket or you’ll be charged again to enter. Moonlight rides around the Pyramids are a favourite outing, but under new regulations, you can’t ride very close to the site after 6pm.

### GREAT PYRAMID OF KHUFU (CHEOPS)

The oldest pyramid in Giza and the largest in Egypt, the **Great Pyramid of Khufu** (Map p150; adult/student £100/50) stood 146m high when it was completed around 2570 BC. After 46 windy centuries, its height has been reduced by 9m. About 2.3 million limestone blocks, reckoned to weigh about 2.5 tonnes each, were used in the construction.

Tickets, sold from a kiosk in front and slightly to the east (city side) of the pyramid, are limited to 300 per day: 150 on sale starting at 7.30am and 150 at 1pm. During the winter you’ll probably need to queue early, especially on Wednesday and Thursday, when tour groups from the Red Sea visit Cairo for the day. Note that only Egyptian pounds are accepted, and cameras are not allowed into the pyramid – you must surrender them to the guards at the entrance, who will ask for baksheesh before returning them (£1 is fine).

There isn’t much to see inside the pyramid, but the experience of climbing through the ancient structure is unforgettable – though impossible if you suffer the tiniest degree of claustrophobia. The elderly and unfit should not attempt the climb, as it is very steep.

Past the entrance, on the north face, a passage descends to an unfinished tomb (usually closed) about 100m along and 30m deep in the bedrock. Before you reach this, about 20m after the entrance, another passage, 1.3m high and 1m wide, ascends for about 40m to reach the Great Gallery, an impressive area 47m long and 8.5m high. At the start of the gallery, a small horizontal passage leads into the so-called Queen’s Chamber.

As you continue through the Great Gallery, notice how precisely the blocks in the ceiling



## DOQQI, GIZA &amp; GEZIRA



<b>INFORMATION</b>								
Anglo-American Hospital.....	1	C2	Formal Garden.....	21	C2	Hard Rock Café.....	35	C4
Citibank.....	2	D3	Hanager Arts Centre.....	22	C2	Nomad.....	36	A3
Egyptian Student Travel Services.....	3	C5	Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum.....	23	C3	Revolving Restaurant Lounge.....	(see 29)	
Ethiopian Embassy.....	4	A4	Manial Palace Museum.....	24	D5	Topkapi.....	37	D4
French Embassy.....	5	B6	Mr & Mrs Mahmoud Khalil Museum.....	25	B4	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b> 📺		
Goethe Institut.....	6	A4	Museum of Modern Egyptian Art.....	26	C2	Cairo Opera House.....	38	C2
Instituto Cervantes.....	7	B3	Palace of Arts.....	27	C2	Cairo Sheraton Cinema.....	39	B3
Iranian Embassy.....	8	A4				Casablanca.....	40	B3
Israeli Embassy.....	9	B5				Cinema Tahrir.....	41	A3
Italian Embassy.....	10	D4	<b>SLEEPING</b> 🛏			Club 35.....	42	B6
Jordanian Embassy.....	11	B3	Four Seasons at Nile Plaza.....	28	D4	Good News Grand Hyatt.....	(see 29)	
Saudi Arabian Embassy.....	12	B5	Grand Hyatt.....	29	C4	<b>SHOPPING</b> 🛍		
Syrian Embassy.....	13	A3				Beymen.....	(see 28)	
UK Embassy.....	14	D3	<b>EATING</b> 🍴			Nagada.....	43	A4
Western Union.....	15	D3	El Sakya.....	(see 29)		Nomad.....	(see 29)	
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>			El-Mashrabiah.....	30	B5			
Agricultural Museum.....	16	A2	Fish Market.....	31	B6	<b>TRANSPORT</b>		
Cairo Tower.....	17	C2	La Gourmandise.....	32	B6	Dok Dok Felucca Point.....	44	D4
Cairo Zoo.....	18	A6	Taboula.....	33	D3	EgyptAir.....	(see 39)	
Cairo Zoo Entrance.....	19	B5				EgyptAir.....	45	B3
Formal Garden.....	20	D2	<b>DRINKING</b> ☕ 🍷			Felucca Mooring Point.....	46	D2
			Cilantro.....	34	A4			

fit together. In the 10m-long King's Chamber at the end, the walls are built of red granite blocks. The ceiling itself consists of nine huge slabs of granite, which weigh more than 400 tonnes. Above these slabs, four more slabs are separated by gaps which are designed to distribute the enormous weight away from the chamber. Good airflow from the modern ventilation system (built into two ancient air shafts) will help you breathe easier as you contemplate the tremendous weight suspended above you.

Outside, on the eastern side of the pyramid, three small structures some 20m high resemble pyramid-shaped piles of rubble. These are the Queens' Pyramids, the tombs of Khufu's wives and sisters. You can enter some of them, but they're quite steamy inside.

### SOLAR BARQUE MUSEUM

South of the Great Pyramid is the fascinating **Solar Barque Museum** (Map p150; adult/student ££40/20; ☎ 9am-4pm Oct-May, 9am-5pm Jun-Sep). Five pits near the Great Pyramid of Khufu contained the pharaoh's solar barques (boats), which may have been used to convey the mummy of the dead pharaoh across the Nile to the valley temple, from where it was brought up the causeway and into the tomb chamber. The barques were then buried around the pyramid to provide transport for the pharaoh in the next world.

One of these ancient cedar-wood vessels, possibly the oldest boat in existence, was unearthed in 1954. It was carefully restored from

1200 pieces of wood and encased in a glass museum to protect it from damage from the elements. Visitors to the museum must help this process by donning protective footwear to keep sand out.

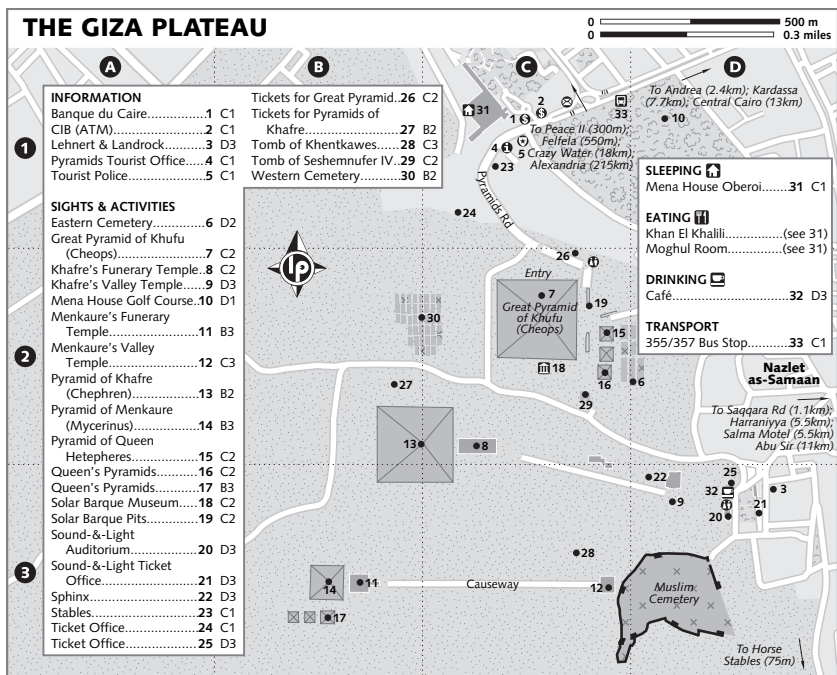
There are plans to move the boat to the nearby Grand Egyptian Museum whenever it opens – perhaps in 2010.

### PYRAMID OF KHAFFE (CHEPHREN)

Southwest of the Great Pyramid, the **Pyramid of Khafre** (Map p150; adult/student ££25/15) seems larger than that of his father, Khufu. At just 136m high, it's not, but it stands on higher ground and its peak is still capped with a limestone casing. Originally all three pyramids were totally encased with polished white stone, which would have made them gleam in the sun. Over the centuries, this casing has been stripped for use in palaces and mosques, exposing the softer inner-core stones to the elements.

The chambers and passageways of this particular pyramid are less elaborate than those in the Great Pyramid, but are almost as claustrophobic. The entrance descends into a passage and then across to the burial chamber, which still contains Khafre's large granite sarcophagus. Tickets are sold at the kiosk in front of the pyramid.

Back outside, to the east of the pyramid, are the substantial remains of **Khafre's funerary temple** (Map p150) and the flagged paving of the causeway that provided access from the Nile to the tomb.



## PYRAMID OF MENKAURE (MYCERINUS)

At 62m (originally 66.5m), this **Pyramid** (Map p150) is the smallest of the trio. A gash in the north face is the result of an attempt by Saladin's son Malek Abdel Aziz to dismantle the pyramid in AD 1186. He gave up after eight months, having achieved little. Outside the pyramid you'll see the excavated remains of **Menkaure's funerary temple** and, further east, the ruins of his **valley temple**, less excavated. Visitors are no longer allowed inside the pyramid, and it's a long slog out here – you're excused if you skip it.

## THE SPHINX

Legends and superstitions abound about the **Sphinx** (Map p150), and the mystery surrounding its long-forgotten purpose is almost as intriguing as its appearance. On seeing it for the first time, many visitors agree with English playwright Alan Bennett, who noted in his diary that seeing the Sphinx is like meeting a TV personality in the flesh: he's smaller than one had imagined.

Known in Arabic as Abu al-Hol (Father of Terror), the feline man was dubbed the Sphinx

by the ancient Greeks because it resembled the mythical winged monster with a woman's head and lion's body who set riddles and killed anyone unable to answer them. (It even has a little tail.)

The Sphinx was carved from the bedrock at the bottom of the causeway to the Pyramid of Khafre; geological survey has shown that it was most likely carved during this pharaoh's reign, so it probably portrays his features, framed by the *nemes* (the striped headcloth worn only by royalty).

As is clear from the accounts of early Arab travellers, the nose was hammered off sometime between the 11th and 15th centuries, although some still like to blame Napoleon for the deed. Part of the fallen beard was carted off by 19th-century adventurers and is now on display in the British Museum in London. These days the Sphinx has potentially greater problems: the monument is suffering the stone equivalent of cancer and is being eaten away from the inside; pollution and rising groundwater are the likeliest causes. A succession of restoration attempts unfortunately sped up the decay rather than halting it. The

Sphinx' shiny white paws are the result of the most recent effort.

Just below the Sphinx an expensive **café** (tea & soda ££15, fresh juice ££20) boasts an outdoor terrace and truly amazing view. It's technically outside the site, but as long as you have your ticket, the guards will let you leave and come back in again.

### TOMB OF KHENTKAWE

This rarely visited but imposing structure (Map p150), opposite the Great Pyramid and south of Khafre's causeway, is the tomb of Menkaure's powerful daughter. The tomb is a rectangular building cut into a small hill. A corridor at the back of the chapel room leads down to the burial chambers, but the descent can be hazardous.

### CEMETERIES

Private cemeteries consisting of several rows of tombs are organised around the Pyramids in a grid pattern. Most tombs are closed to the public, but those of Qar, Idu and Queen Meresankh III, in the **eastern cemetery** (Map p150), are accessible, although it can sometimes be difficult to find the guard who has the keys.

The Tomb of Iasen, in the **western cemetery** (Map p150), contains interesting inscriptions and wall paintings that offer a glimpse of daily life during the Old Kingdom. The **tomb of Seshemnufer IV** (Map p150), just south of the Great Pyramid, also has a burial chamber you can climb down into.

### SOUND-&-LIGHT SHOW

The Sphinx narrates the somewhat cheesy **sound-and-light show** (☎ 3386 3469; www.egyptsandl.com; adult/child 7-12 years ££60/30; ☎ 6.30pm, 7.30pm & 8.30pm winter, 8.30pm, 9.30pm & 10.30pm summer & Ramadan), but it's neat to see the Pyramids so dramatically lit. Though there's officially no student discount, you may be able to negotiate one. Schedules were as follows at the time of writing, but check the website for the latest:

Day	Show 1	Show 2	Show 3
Monday	English	French	Spanish
Tuesday	English	Italian	French
Wednesday	English	French	German
Thursday	Japanese	English	Arabic
Friday	English	French	-
Saturday	English	Spanish	Italian
Sunday	German	French	Russian

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus 355/357 runs from Heliopolis to the Pyramids via central Cairo every 20 minutes. It picks up from the road (not the island) under the overpass at Midan Abdel Moniem Riad. There's no sign so you'll have to ask a local where to stand. Be alert, as you'll probably have to flag the bus down. It also passes through Tahrir, and can usually be flagged down from the bus shelter near the north-western metro stairs; see Map pp118-19 for the exact position. The bus is a white one, with 'CTA' on its side. A ticket costs ££2 and the trip takes about 45 minutes.

Microbuses also go from Midan Abdel Moniem Riad, near the Ramses Hilton; again, just ask for 'Haram' and somebody will point you to the right line of vehicles. The fare is ££1.50 and you'll be dropped off about 250m short of the Mena House Oberoi hotel (also where buses 355 and 357 terminate).

By far the most straightforward way to go is in a yellow metered taxi from the rank on Midan Tahrir. It's usually about ££20, the same price you'd be lucky to bargain a black-and-white-cab driver down to – plus you get air-conditioning. Avoiding the city-centre traffic by taking the metro to the Giza stop (££1) doesn't work so well; from there, a taxi to the Pyramids *should* cost only ££8, but many drivers have caught on to this cost-saving tactic and quickly quote outrageous prices.

Returning to Cairo, taxis leaving from either entrance will try for at least ££40, so you'll need to bargain hard – or else walk down Pyramids Rd until you encounter a less voracious driver, or just take the bus.

### Around the Pyramids

Tours to the Pyramids often include the two communities on the Maryutia Canal, which runs north-south about 1.5km east of the plateau. One is worth your time, perhaps even an independent trip. The other, not so much.

### HARRANIYYA

Along the Maryutia Canal south of Pyramids Rd, Harraniyya is one of several villages that have now blurred into one long stretch of half-developed green farmland. The main (er, only) attraction is **Wissa Wassef Art Centre** (☎ 3381 5746; www.wissa-wassef-arts.com; Saqqara Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm). The mud-brick complex is the work of architect Ramses Wissa Wassef; it won an Aga Khan prize for its refined traditional

style. The artisans who work here in open studios (closed Friday) are known for their distinctive tapestries depicting rural scenes. Crude imitations are standard in souvenir shops; the ones for sale and on display in the museum here are in a completely different class, like paintings in wool. There's pottery and batik fabric, done to equally good effect. The place has the feeling of a sanctuary – quiet and refreshingly green.

To get here, take a microbus (E£1) or taxi (E£10) from Pyramids Rd in the direction of Saqqara and get off when you see the blue 'Harraniyya' sign, after about 3.5km, or 10 minutes. The centre is by the canal on the west side of the road.

### KERDASSA

As the source of many of the scarves, *galabiyas* and weavings sold in the bazaars of Cairo, Kerdassa is often touted as an insider shopping destination, to buy 'direct from the source'. But the dismal setting of semirural poverty adjacent to a new strip mall, plus the price of a cab ride (E£15 from the Pyramids), cancels out the minor savings. You could also flag down a microbus (E£1) heading north on the canal from Pyramids Rd – the village is about 5.5km, or 15 minutes, along.

### Heliopolis

It's only a suburb of Cairo, but were it to stand alone as a town in its own right, Heliopolis (Misr al-Gedida, or 'New Cairo'; Map p153) would be considered one of the gems of North Africa. A Belgian industrialist conceived the district in the early 20th century as a 'garden city', home to the colonial officials who ruled Egypt. With whitewashed Moorish-style buildings with dark wood balconies, grand arcades and terraces, it's the European vision of the Orient in stone. Since the 1950s, overcrowding has filled in the spaces between the graceful villas with apartment buildings festooned with satellite-TV dishes, but the area still has a relaxed, almost Mediterranean air. With all its trees and outdoor cafés, it's a pleasant place for an evening's wander – and many Egyptians think so too, as Heliopolis has become 'downtown' for people living in dull satellite cities further east. Weekend nights can be very lively here.

The main street is Sharia al-Ahram, on which stands the **Uruba Palace** (Map p153),

once a grand hotel graced by the likes of King Albert I of Belgium and now Mubarak's offices – a short commute, as he lives just up the street. From the palace, at the first intersection with the splendid Sharia Ibrahim Laqqany (detour left for some fantastic architecture), is the open-air cafeteria **Amphitron** (Map p153), as old as Heliopolis itself and a popular watering hole for Allied soldiers during the world wars. At the end of the street, the **Basilica** (Map p153) is a miniature version of Istanbul's famous Aya Sofya, dubbed the 'jelly mould' by local expats. Baron Empain, the man who founded Heliopolis, is buried here.

South on Sharia al-Uruba (Airport Rd), you can't miss the extraordinary **Baron's Palace** (Qasr al-Baron; Map p153), a Hindu-style temple modelled on the temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, with Buddhas, geishas, elephants and serpents adorning the exterior. The fantastical look of the place contributed to a citywide panic in 1997 about 'Satanists' allegedly holding rituals here – turned out they were a bunch of upper-class teenage heavy-metal fans. A decade later, the ruin is still very much off-limits.

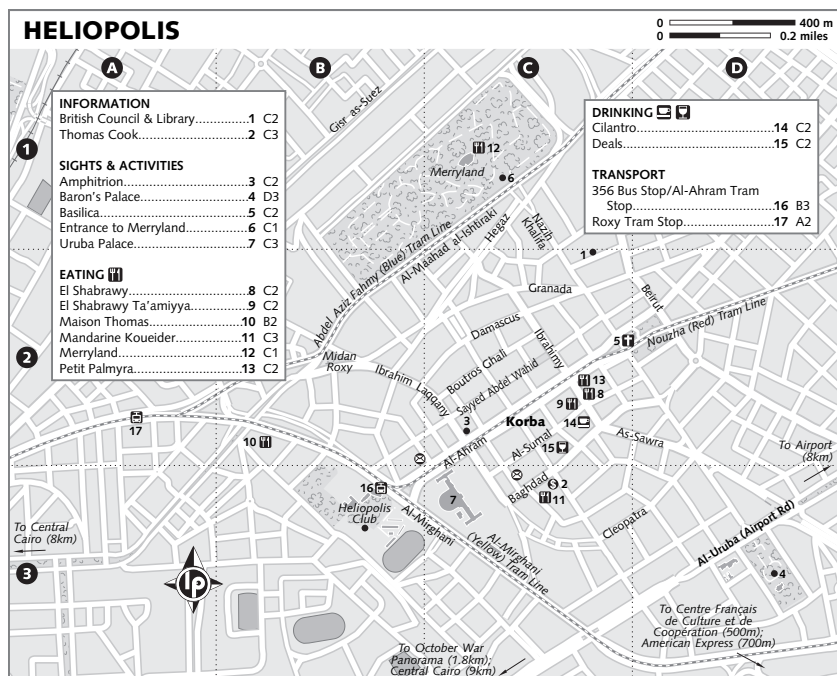
### OCTOBER WAR PANORAMA

Built with help from North Korean artists, the **October War Panorama** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2402 2317; Sharia al-Uruba; admission E£10; ☎ shows 9.30am, 11am, 12.20pm, 6pm & 7.30pm Wed-Mon), a memorial to the 1973 'victory' over Israel, is an extraordinary propaganda effort. A large 3D mural and diorama depicts the Egyptian forces breaching of the Bar Lev Line on the Suez Canal, while a stirring commentary (in Arabic only) recounts the heroic victories, but skips over the successful Israeli counterattacks. Both sides accepted a UN-brokered cease-fire, and Sinai was returned by negotiation six years later. The exhibition is about 2.5km southwest of the Baron's Palace, on the same road; walk, take one of the buses along Sharia al-Uruba or get a taxi.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Cairo's trams (25pt, 30 to 40 minutes) run to Heliopolis from just north of Midan Ramses (see Map p122). They're a little rattletrap, but often faster than the bus. Get off where the line branches, just before Midan Roxy. Or take airport bus 356 (E£2) from Midan Abdel Moniem Riad (see Map pp118-19).





The ride takes between 30 and 45 minutes. Get off outside the Heliopolis Club (the first stop after reaching the street with tram tracks). Trams and buses usually run every 20 minutes.

## ACTIVITIES

For more details of activities around town, check *Al-Ahram Weekly* or the monthlies *Egypt Today* and *the Croc*.

## Art Galleries

With a fresh generation of artists and new media, Cairo's art scene is more active and diverse than it ever has been. In addition to galleries, the city's cultural centres (p112) often mount interesting exhibitions too. Some options:

**Cairo Atelier** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2574 6730; 2 Sharia Karim al-Dawla, Downtown; ☎ 10am-1pm & 5-10pm Sat-Thu) Off Sharia Mahmoud Bassiouni, as much a clubhouse as an exhibition space, frequented by Cairo's art-world old guard.

**Contemporary Image Collective** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2794 1686; www.ciccairo.com; 20 Sharia Safeya Zaghloul, Mounira; ☎ 11am-6pm Sun-Thu) Excellent

exhibits documenting Egyptian life and occasionally shows videos on its rooftop.

**Karim Francis Art Gallery** Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2391 6357; 1 Sharia Sherifeen; ☎ 2-9pm Sat-Thu); Zamalek (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 2183; www.karimfrancis.com; 3rd fl, Baehler's Mansions, 157 Sharia 26th of Jul; ☎ 4-11pm Tue-Sun) Francis is one of Cairo's more influential curators.

**Mashrabiya Gallery of Contemporary Art** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2578 4494; www.mashrabiagallery.com; 8 Sharia Champollion, Downtown; ☎ 11am-8pm Sat-Thu) One of the first independent galleries, Mashrabiya is bit cramped but represents the bigger names in painting and sculpture.

**Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2576 8086; www.thetownhousegallery.com; 10 Sharia Nabrawy, Downtown; ☎ 10am-2pm & 6-9pm Sat-Wed, 6-9pm Fri) Set amid car-repair shops, Townhouse is Cairo's most cutting-edge space, with emphasis on video and multimedia installations. It also has a large workshop situated across the street, for classes and confabs.

**Zamalek Art Gallery** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 1240; www.zamalekartgallery.com; 11 Sharia Brazil, Zamalek; ☎ 10.30am-9pm Sat-Thu) A light-filled space showing contemporary Egyptian artists, usually figurative.

**WILLIAM WELLS***Director of Visual Arts, Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art (p153), established in 1998.***What do you love most about the city?**

The humour, which is a survival technique – every street is a theatre and every action a drama. And the city consists of so many historical districts, and people live and manoeuvre through their past with such ease. Walking into a 15th-century mosque, you step over foundation stones engraved with hieroglyphs. People squat in Ottoman houses, study in old colonial mansions and go about a modern 21st-century life. This historical backdrop tends to define your approach to life.

**Where's the best place to experience this kind of historical backdrop?**

Well, as long as people don't want to relax... The most interesting walk is often the most taxing. I'd suggest a walk from Midan Hussein through the market street of Al-Muski (p130) until they reach Midan Ataba and the Windsor Hotel (p170), where they can sit and enjoy a cold beer. It assaults all your senses and introduces you to the intensity of the city all at once.

**What's your favourite piece of public art in Cairo?**

That would have to be Mahmoud Mukhtar's *Egypt Reawakening* sculpture (see p142 for more on Mukhtar) in front of the zoo in Giza. It's a vision of a people's dreams, rather than just the numerous individuals that once inhabited the city.

**What's your favourite word in Egyptian colloquial Arabic?**

*Ya'ani* (literally, 'It means...'), which has no translation in English but covers most circumstances. It's used by everyone to answer most questions – and to avoid answering most questions!

**No dodging this one: what's your favourite restaurant?**

That has to be Estoril (p164), off Sharia Talaat Harb. It's more for the ambience than the food – it's the place most of the artists and journalists use as a second office.

**And an ahwa?**

My favourite coffeehouse is just in front of the gallery. It's called Ahmed Lipton. He offers the best *sheesha* (water pipe) in Downtown, and he welcomes everyone.

**You've lived here more than 20 years – how has the city changed?**

It has gradually become far more conservative, and that has affected people's lifestyles and opportunities for self-expression. But Cairo is still perhaps the most seductive city in the world for a creative person, and the richest for those with imagination.

**Belly-Dancing Lessons**

The most famous belly-dancing teacher in Cairo (and, indeed, in the whole of Egypt) is **Mme Raqia Hassan** (☎ 3748 2338; raqiahassan@hotmail.com). Many of the country's best dancers have learned their craft from Mme Hassan. She runs a small studio in her Doqqi apartment, where either she or one of her protégés will give you (or a group, if you can get one together) belly-dancing lessons. Some of the city's gyms and health clubs will organise group courses – try **Samia Allouba Dance & Fitness Centre** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3302 0572; 6 Sharia Amr) in Mohandiseen.

**Felucca Rides**

One of the most pleasant things to do on a warm day is to go out on a felucca, Egypt's ancient broad-sail boat, with a supply of beer and a small picnic just as sunset approaches. The best spot for hiring is the Dok Dok landing stage (Map p148) on the corniche in Garden City, across from the Four Seasons. Subject to haggling, a boat and captain should cost about £30 per hour irrespective of the number of people on board; your captain will appreciate additional baksheesh (possibly in liquid form). The mooring point in Gezira just north of the Qasr el-Nil Bridge (Map p148) is less



desirable because the river is crowded here; captains at the dock opposite the Sheppard Hotel (Map pp118–19) tend to be tougher to bargain with.

## Golf

Run by the hotel, the **Mena House Golf Course** (Map p150; ☎ 3383 3222; www.oberoihotels.com; Pyramids Rd, Giza; green fee E£150 plus club rental E£55; ☀ 7am–sunset), beneath the Pyramids, is always busy on Friday and Saturday, so better to tee off midweek. The course was being renovated in 2007, and prices will likely rise.

## Horse Riding

A horse ride out by the Pyramids can be a great way to escape the clamour of Cairo. For details, see p147.

## Pool & Snooker

Pool and snooker are popular in Cairo. Many venues are in the wealthier suburbs away from the city centre. The most central snooker and pool halls are on the top floor of the **Ramses Hilton Mall** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2577 7444; east of the Ramses Hilton, Downtown; ☀ 2pm–4am). In Zamalek **Aristocrat** (Map pp144–5; ☎ 2736 6344; 2nd fl, 15 Sharia Ismail Mohammed; per hr E£22; ☀ 24hr) is a little mellower, and doubles as a bar and restaurant.

## Swimming

Finding a place to cool off in the city can be difficult. Cairenes who can afford it swim in sporting clubs, which do not admit nonmembers. Some hotels allow day use for nonguests, at a price. Best options:

**Atlas Zamalek Hotel** (Map pp144–5; ☎ 3346 7230; atlas\_zamalek\_hotel@hotmail.com; 20 Gamiat ad-Dowal al-Arabiyya, Mohandiseen; minimum charge E£25) You'll often have the rooftop pool here to yourself, and the price can't be beat.

**Cairo Marriott** (Map pp144–5; ☎ 2728 3000; 16 Sharia Saray al-Gezira, Zamalek; day use E£110) The Marriott has a good pool in a garden setting. The fee includes use of the gym and sauna.

**Muhammad Ali Sporting Club** (☎ 010 568 6000; Corniche el-Nil, Sharia Saied Giza, Moneib; day use Fri & Sat adult/child £40/25, Sun–Thu E£25/15) Major social scene – a mix of expats and Egyptians – at this cool Nileside pool with beanbag chairs, beers and bikinis. Way south on the West Bank, about even with Ma'adi – a taxi will cost E£20 from the centre.

**Nile Hilton** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2578 0444; 1113 Corniche el-Nil, Downtown; pool day use E£110) The

Hilton's pool is large, relatively deep and surrounded by shady trees.

## DIY CAIRO

Contrary to first impressions of careening buses and crammed sidewalks, Cairo is an excellent city for walking. Really.

It's especially good for aimless, mapless wandering: districts are relatively compact, the terrain is level and the scenery changes quickly enough to keep things interesting. Streets are safe, and you will never accidentally wander into a 'bad' neighbourhood. We heartily encourage stowing the guide and let yourself get at least a little lost in Cairo's winding back lanes.

Feel free to walk in the street (most people do), be considerate when taking photos, and keep your ears open for local cues such as hissing (see boxed text, p162). And at least once, accept a stranger's invitation to tea or soda. These are some of the best places to stroll, over the course of a day.

## Islamic Cairo in the Morning

Start early – before 7.30am – with tea at Fishawi's (p169) and watch the khan slowly wake up. If you do want to work in a little sightseeing, take a quick stroll up Bein al-Qasreen (p132) to admire the buildings without the crush of traffic and commerce. But the better, more aimless amble is to the south: take the small alley behind Sharia al-Azhar, heading in the direction of Al-Azhar Park, then head south, roughly following the old walls built by Salah ad-Din that are being excavated as part of the park development. The tiny workshops produce shoes, parquet flooring, mother-of-pearl inlay boxes and more. But it's also a residential district, where families on upper floors run baskets down to the *ba'al* for groceries, and knife-sharpeners and junk traders (the men who shout 'Beeeeeeee-kya!') roll through the lanes. Keeping your general bearings with the park to your left, you can wander all the way down to the Citadel. Near the end, you'll wind up on the southern stretch of Darb al-Ahmar (p135). To loop back to Sharia al-Azhar, go via Sharia al-Khayamiyya (p134), where you can get a souvenir photo taken at Studio Shosha (Map p133).

## Garden City at Twilight

The interlocking circles that form the streets of Garden City are maddening if you want to

## HOW TO BLEND IN

Even if your skin colouring allows it, it's next to impossible to 'pass' as a native Cairene. But you can look more like a resident expat, thus deflecting attention onto the more obvious tourists walking behind you – and giving you more opportunity to enjoy the good things about Cairo. Here's how:

- Carry your stuff in a plastic shopping bag or a generic tote. Nothing screams 'tourist' like a multipocketed, extra-zippered, heavy-duty-nylon backpack with visible water bottle.
- Wear impractical shoes. This is a city. Fashion counts.
- Cover up your legs – this goes for men and women. Islamic rules aside, Egyptians simply have a higher level of modesty, and it's clear you haven't been here long if you don't feel embarrassed to show your knees in public.
- Carry a copy of *Al-Ahram Weekly* – or the Arabic *Al-Ahram*, if you want to go deep undercover.
- Learn and use the local nonverbal cues (see boxed text, p162).

get anywhere, but they're perfect for strolling just for the sake of admiring the crumbling mansions in this colonial-era district. The best time to visit is the hour before sundown, when the dust coating the architectural curlicues turns a warm, glamorous gold and the starlings shrill in the fruit trees.

You can start at the north end (get the brutalist concrete Canadian embassy behind you right away!) and wind south. Keep an eye out for wrought-iron dragons on cob-webbed gates, a rare Turkish-style wood-front home and the last real garden in Garden City, behind the Four Seasons hotel.

You'll wind up, conveniently, near the Dok Dok felucca pier (p154) and Nile-side Topkapi (p170).

## Downtown after Midnight

This is less walking than café-hopping, when the air is cool and the streets are thronged. Start at Tawfiqiyya Souq (p117), which will just be shutting down, while the *ahwas* in the side alleys are just warming up. Then wander back to Midan Orabi, where you can perch on any random planter and someone will come and sell you tea. From here Sharia Alf and the smaller streets on either side are your playground for snacking, *sheesha*-smoking and maybe even some lavish tipping of belly-dancers (see p173). Don't miss the Kawkab ash-Sharq café (p169), which is devoted to Umm Kolthum – you might even get caught up in a spirited sing-along. No matter how late you're out, you can wind up the night at the 24-hour Odeon Palace Hotel bar (p170).

## CAIRO FOR CHILDREN

Cairo can be exhausting for kids, but there is much they will enjoy. If you have a few days in the city it may be worth buying *Cairo, the Family Guide*, by Lesley Lababidi and Lisa Sabbahy (AUC Press, ££70), revised in 2006. Most children will enjoy pretending to be a pirate on a Nile felucca (p154), gawking at the treasures of Tutankhamun in the Egyptian Museum (p185), investigating the Pyramids at Giza (p143) and Dahshur (p206), as well as the maze of Khan al-Khalili (p128). A number of child-oriented activities and theme parks are also worth considering.

The long-running **Cairo Puppet Theatre** (Masrah al-Ara'is; Map pp118-19; ☎ 2591 0954; admission ££5; ⌚ 6.30-8.15pm Thu, 10.30am-1pm Fri & Sun) is opposite Ezbekiyya Gardens in Downtown. The shows are in Arabic, but are colourful and animated enough to entertain non-Arabic speakers of all ages.

**Fun Planet** (Map pp144-5; Arkadia Mall, Corniche el-Nil, Bulaq; first 3 games ££10, each subsequent game ££3-5; ⌚ 3-11pm Sat-Thu & 1-11pm Fri) is an indoor amusement centre offering loads of rides and games and will appeal to teenagers. Citystars Centre (see p177) also has a big indoor fun park.

The **National Circus** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3347 0612; Sharia el-Nil, Agouza, near the Zamalek Bridge; admission ££30-50; ⌚ box office 11am-10pm, performances 10pm-midnight) is a traditional circus with clowns, acrobats, lions and tigers and lots of glitter. You'll usually find it here during the cooler months – it tours the country at other times of the year. Not far away, children can feed the hippos, see countless kinds of camels – and meet lots of local kids – at the **Cairo Zoo** (Guineenat al-Haywanet;

Map p148; ☎ 3570 8895; Midan al-Gamaa, Giza; admission 25pt; ☎ 9am-4pm).

The aqua park **Crazy Water** (☎ 3781 4564; admission children 3-10 E£25, children 10 & older E£35-45; ☎ 10am-10pm) has half-a-dozen water slides, a wave pool, a kiddies' pool, and a playground area with sand, slides and tunnels. To get there from the Pyramids, drive 15km on the Cairo-Alexandria road from its intersection with Pyramids Rd, then turn left towards 6th of October City.

The theme park **Dr Ragab's Pharaonic Village** (☎ 3571 8675; [www.pharaonicvillage.com](http://www.pharaonicvillage.com); 3 Sharia al-Bahr al-Azam, Corniche, Moneib; adult E£79-159, child under 5 free, child 5-10 years 20% discount, family with 2 children E£99; ☎ 9am-6pm Sep-Jun, 9am-9pm Jul & Aug) is cheesy but offers a child-friendly glimpse of what life in ancient Egypt would have been like, with a boat trip past actors in Pharaonic costumes, a playground and an art centre where kids can make mini reed boats. Take a taxi (E£20 from Downtown), or walk the 800m from the Sakiat Mekki metro stop.

**Fagnoon Art School** (☎ 3815 1014; Saqqara Rd, Sabil Umm Hashim; per day E£25; ☎ 10am-7pm) is a wonderful art centre in the fields between Giza and Saqqara. Children can slosh paint around, model clay, work with wrought iron or print and paint on textiles, all in the shadow of the Saqqara step pyramid. You can bring your own food and drink, although *fiteer* (pancake/pizza), coffee and water are usually on sale. To get here, take a microbus from the Pyramids Rd 12.5km in the direction of Saqqara and asked to be dropped off at Sabil Umm Hashim.

The pleasant **Gabalaya Park & Aquarium** (Fish Garden; Map pp144-5; Sharia Umm Kolthum, Zamalek; admission E£1; ☎ 10am-5pm) has landscaped gardens with aquariums set in rocks (though not many actual fish). It's a great central spot to escape the crowds.

Overlooking Islamic Cairo, **Al-Azhar Park** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2510 7378; [www.alazharpark.com](http://www.alazharpark.com); E£10; ☎ 9am-midnight) is home to one of the few children's playgrounds in the central city.

When only bribery will help, try Mandarine Koueider (see p168) for delectable, distracting ice cream. Or cut straight to toys at **Mom & Me** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 5751; 20A Sharia Mansour Mohammed, Zamalek) or **Toys R Us** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2578 0820; Ground fl, Arkadia Mall, Bulaq).

## TOURS

Innumerable companies and individuals offer tours of sights within and around

Cairo. We recommend Salah Muhammad's **Noga Tours** (☎ 012 313 8446; [www.first24hours.com](http://www.first24hours.com)), as he employs excellent English-speaking guides, Egyptologists and drivers. Mohamed Anwar's specialised **museum tours** (☎ 012 340 7724) also have a good reputation. To hire a taxi for the day and dispense with a guide, the friendly **Fathy el-Menesy** (☎ 2259 3218, 012 278 1572) owns a well-maintained Peugeot and speaks English, as does **Abu Mu'azz** (☎ 010 563 2078). Alternatively, ask at your hotel. Fathy el-Menesy charges between E£200 and E£250 for a full day, and Noga Tours charges US\$23.50 (plus entry fees) per person for a day-long trip to the Giza Pyramids, Memphis and Saqqara. Its half-day tour of Dahshur costs US\$19.50 (plus entry fees) per person.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

For general information on festivals and public holidays see p508.

**Arabic Music Festival** At the Cairo Opera House in November.

**Belly-dance festival** ([www.nilegroup.net](http://www.nilegroup.net)) At the Mena House Oberoi hotel in June. Check the website for details.

**Cairo International Film Festival** ([www.cairofilmfest.com](http://www.cairofilmfest.com)) At the Cairo Opera House in November/December.

**Mould an-Nabi** Birthday of Prophet Mohammed, 12 Rabi al-Awwal (9 March 2009, 26 February 2010). A citywide party with sweets and kids in new clothes, but in the week beforehand, Midan Hussein is the venue for the most intense Sufi *zikrs* (long sessions of dancing, chanting and swaying carried out to achieve oneness with God).

**Other moulds** The other big saints' festivals in Cairo celebrate Sayyidna al-Hussein (June 2009, mid-March 2010), Sayyida Zeinab (in July 2008, and June in 2009 and 2010) and Imam ash-Shafi (August 2008, July 2009). They are great parties if you are not afraid of rowdy crowds (see boxed text, p509).

**Ramadan** Ninth month of the Islamic calendar (begins 1 September 2008 and 22 August 2009). By day everything slows down: shops and offices open late and close early, and just before sunset the streets empty as everyone goes home to break the fast. But the nights, particularly in Islamic Cairo, buzz until dawn.

**Sham an-Nassim** First Monday after Coptic Easter. Literally meaning 'sniffing the breeze' (ie to welcome spring), it's a ritual that came from Pharaonic tradition via the Copts, and is celebrated by all Cairenes, who picnic at the zoo, in parks, by the Pyramids and on riverbanks and even traffic islands.

## SLEEPING

Cairo has a few gem hotels, and something for every budget, but in the midrange, the choices

## CAIRO HOTEL SCAMS

In short, all scams are attempts to distract you from your lodging of choice. Hotels do not open and close with any great frequency in Cairo, and if it's listed in this book it is very unlikely to have gone out of business by the time you arrive.

At the airport, you may be approached by a man or woman with an official-looking badge. These people are not government tourism reps, they are hotel touts, and they can be shameless. For instance, they'll ask if you've booked a hotel. If you have, they'll offer to call the hotel to confirm that a room is waiting for you. Of course, they don't call the hotel – they call a friend who says that there is no booking and that his establishment is full. Concerned, the tout will offer to find you an alternative...

Some taxi drivers will stall by telling you that they don't know where your hotel is. In that case tell them to let you out at Midan Talaat Harb – from here it's a short walk to most budget hotels. Other lines include telling you the hotel you're heading for is closed/very expensive/horrible/a brothel and suggesting a 'better' place, for which they earn a commission, which will then be added to your bill.

The most complex scam is when a stranger (often on the airport bus) asks you your name and where you're staying. After a chat, the person says goodbye and isn't seen again. What they next do is call a friend, who goes and stands outside the hotel you've booked. When you arrive, he or she will ask 'Are you...?', using the name you volunteered back at the airport. When you answer in the affirmative, you'll be told that the hotel has been flooded/closed by the police/totally booked out and that the owners have organised a room for you elsewhere.

Finally, when checking in, never pay for more than a night in advance. No decent hotel will ever ask for more substantial cash. We've had letters from readers asked to stump up for two nights on arrival and then when they've decided to check out after one night (because of grotty toilets, no hot water, whatever), they've been unable to get a refund.

are not numerous. Paying more may get you satellite TV, but it doesn't guarantee quality – a few budget (under-£100) options outclass some midrange places that coast on package-tour bookings. Breakfast is usually included in the rate in both price categories, and prices are somewhat negotiable, especially in the summer, when tourists are fewer – consider the rates quoted here a guideline.

On the upper end, there are far more luxury hotels in Cairo than we review – they line the banks of the Nile (handy for sightseeing) and cluster by the Pyramids (scenic, but inconvenient). Feel free to treat these establishments as locals do: as places of respite from the city din, with clean bathrooms and other comforts. You can soak up lobby air-con for hours, and many of the pools (available only at this price level, with one exception) are open to nonguests for a fee (see p155). Rates vary according to season and other factors, and the prices quoted here don't include taxes and service charges (which can add up to 25% more), or breakfast.

## Downtown

If you're on a budget, or just want to be in the thick of things, near great cheap eateries,

you're best off in Downtown. Most of the city's hostels and cheap hotels are located on or around Sharia Talaat Harb in old, usually decrepit, apartment blocks. (Grimy stairs and shaky elevators aren't necessarily a reflection of the hotels above.) Many have balconies and windows overlooking noisy main streets; request a rear room if you're a light sleeper. Plumbing sometimes dates from the Pharaonic era; better hotels will have individual hot-water heaters in each bathroom.

## BUDGET

**African Hostel** (Map p122; ☎ 2591 1744; [africanhousehostel@hotmail.com](mailto:africanhousehostel@hotmail.com); 3rd fl, 15 Sharia Emad ad-Din; s/d/tr without bathroom ££35/60/75, d/tr £65/80; ☑) The African offers an affordable way to stay in one of the city's most gorgeous mid-19th-century buildings (First Lady Suzanne Mubarak has her offices here). You want a room on the upper floor, where the balconies are. Paint is peeling in spots, and the toilets occasionally run, but the staff are very nice and the kitchen is enormous. The same crew runs the Richmond (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2393 9358; 5th fl, 41 Sharia Sherif) and the New Minerva (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2392 3273), located in an alley

opposite the Richmond, both with the same bargain rates, though not such glam rooms.

**Our pick Pension Roma** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2391 1088; fax 2579 6243; 4th fl, 169 Sharia Mohammed Farid; s/d without bathroom E£50/82, s/d with shower E£53/91) Run by a French-Egyptian woman with impeccable standards, the Roma brings dignity, even elegance, to the budget-travel scene. Towering ceilings, dark wood floors and filmy white curtains create a feeling of timeless calm. Evening meals are an option. Book ahead, as the place is very popular with repeat guests, many of whom could afford to stay at more expensive hotels but prefer the old-Cairo atmosphere here.

**Lialy Hostel** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2575 2802; 3rd fl, 8 Midan Talaat Harb; s/d E£50/60, s/d/t with air-con E£60/70/90; ☎ ☎) Lialy's position on Midan Talaat Harb puts it right in the thick of the action. Ten simple rooms share three bathrooms; everything is clean but the hot water sometimes runs out. Some rooms have double beds and air-con. There's a small collection of books to read, a large breakfast room with satellite TV and free use of the kitchen.

**Tulip Hotel** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2392 2704; tuliphotel@yahoo.com; 3 Midan Talaat Harb; s with fan E£65-75, d with fan E£95-105, s with air-con E£110, d with air-con E£130-140; ☎ ☎) Divided among three floors, the rooms at this older hotel have high ceilings and clean tile floors. Rates depend on air-con availability and the size of the bathroom. The back rooms are surprisingly quiet for the location, and the staff are polite and friendly.

**Hotel Select** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2393 3707; hostelselect@yahoo.com; 8th fl, 19 Sharia Adly; dm/d/tr E£75/100/130; ☎ ☎) On a breezy upper floor with a wrap-around balcony, the Select has great views across Downtown – particularly from one of the corner doubles or triples. Brightly painted walls and lots of chintz-covered furniture give the place a cheerful, homy feel, and guests can use a small kitchen. Note there are no private singles, however – just one four-bed dorm-style room.

**Hotel Luna** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2396 1020; www.hotel.lunacairo.com; 5th fl, 27 Sharia Talaat Harb; r without bathroom E£100, r E£110-150; ☎ ☎) The owner of this modern, backpacker-friendly place is one of the most fastidious in the city, and his sparkling rooms offer many small comforts, such as bedside lamps and bathmats. In the newer 'Oasis' wing, even the paint and furniture are colour-coordinated in soothing pastels – a rare sight indeed in Egypt. Excellent shared kitchen too.

## MIDRANGE

**Carlton Hotel** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2575 5022; www.carltonhotelcairo.com; 21 Sharia 26th of July; s/d half board E£135/195; ☎ ☎) The rooms at this old-fashioned place near Cinema Rivoli are reasonably priced (and the staff often seem ready to make a deal), but vary in size and degree of dilapidation. The ones that have been renovated have shiny white paint, clean wood floors, satellite TV and private bathrooms. There's a restaurant, a coffeehouse and a welcoming rooftop cafeteria where you can enjoy a cold beer.

**Windsor Hotel** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2591 5277; www.windsorcairo.com; 19 Sharia Alf; s/d with shower & hand basin US\$30/38, s/d US\$42/52, deluxe US\$48/58; ☎ ☎) Practically speaking, the rooms at the Windsor are dim, with low ceilings and noisy air-conditioners. But with the beautifully maintained elevator, worn marble stairs and hotel restaurant where the dinner bell chimes every evening at 7.30pm, the place is hard for nostalgia buffs to resist. The entrance (to both the hotel and the bar) is on the back side, in the narrow street just south of Sharia Alf.

**Fontana Hotel** (Map p122; ☎ 2592 2321; fax 2592 2145; Midan Ramses; s/d US\$32/37; ☎ ☎) Sensible people will avoid this place; kitsch connoisseurs, however, will be uncontrollably drawn to the mind-boggling décor: lurid murals, animal patterns, flowers, layers of rugs and more furniture than you can possibly use in a night's stay. Bathrooms are newish, and there's a big rooftop pool with a view over the square.

**Our pick Hotel Osiris** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2794 5728; <http://hotelosiris.free.fr>; 12th fl, 49 Sharia Nubar; s/d from US\$34/41; ☎ ☎) On the top floor of a commercial building, the Osiris' rooms enjoy views across the city. The French-Egyptian couple who run the place keep the tile floors and white walls spotless, and the pretty hand-sewn appliqué bedspreads tidily arranged on the supercomfy mattresses. Breakfast, served on a side terrace or the roof, involves fresh juice and crepes and omelettes. Its location in Bab al-Luq is quiet at night.

**Grand Hotel** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2575 7700; grandhotel@link.net; 17 Sharia 26th of July; s/d US\$36/46; ☎ ☎) This busy seven-storey palace managed to survive conversion to a midrange place without losing its old-fashioned luxury character – the hundred or so rooms still have good parquet floors, but new, shiny white-tile bathrooms. Entry is around the back in a tiny plaza.

**Victoria Hotel** (Map p122; ☎ 2589 2290; info@victoria.com.eg; 66 Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; s/d US\$37/48; ☎ ☎)

Not far from Ramses Station, the Victoria is grand old palace with the happy addition of utterly silent air-conditioning, as well as comfy beds and satellite TV. Off long halls lined with clouded mirrors, the rooms have antique furniture and nice high ceilings – but no balconies, unfortunately. The place is not in central Downtown, but that keeps prices lower – and you're very close to the Ataba and Orabi metro stops.

**Cosmopolitan Hotel** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2392 384; fax 393 3531; 1 Sharia ibn Talaab; s/d US\$44/55; ☞) Gloomy Spanish Inquisition–look furniture, mysteriously spotted carpeting and reports of surly service would normally get this place dropped from the list. But its prime location, on a tranquil pedestrian street in Downtown, is tough to beat, as is its gorgeous Art Nouveau façade and entry staircase. If you could choose anywhere in Cairo, this might not be it – but if it's already booked as part of a package, you could do worse.

#### TOP END

**Talisman Hotel** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2393 9431; [www.talisman-hotel.com](http://www.talisman-hotel.com); 5th fl, 39 Sharia Talaat Harb; s/d/ste US\$80/107/160; ☞ ☑) Thanks to double-pane windows, Downtown traffic is a distant memory once you're inside this luxurious cocoon, the only boutique hotel in the city. The 24 rooms are an impeccable mix of Egyptian handicrafts, rococo furniture and jewel-tone colours. Turn into the alley opposite the A L'Americaine Coffee Shop; enter the first building entrance on the right and use the lift on the left side of the foyer.

**Nile Hilton** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2578 0444; [www.hilton.com](http://www.hilton.com); 1113 Corniche el-Nil; r from US\$170; ☞ ☑ ☒) A 1959 midcentury-modern monolith, the Nile Hilton has been around long enough that its sleek concrete look is coming back into style. The unbeatable location, off Midan Tahrir and adjacent to the Egyptian Museum, as well as an exceptionally pretty pool, makes up for the smallish, not-very-stylish rooms.

#### Garden City

Just south of Midan Tahrir, this area is in some ways just as convenient as Downtown (still an easy walk away), and a lot quieter. Options are limited, however.

#### BUDGET

**Garden City House** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2542 0600; [www.gardencity.plus.com](http://www.gardencity.plus.com); 23 Sharia Kamal ad-Din Salah; s without

bathroom E£55, d without bathroom E£81-95, s/d E£73/106; ☞) This pension is untouched by time – not great in some ways (rooms could use a fresh coat of paint), but a boon in others, such as the gentlemanly staff (nice for solo women). Shared bathrooms can be small and stifling; private bathrooms are much more spacious. The handy location is steps from Tahrir, but you can walk out and not be immediately accosted by touts.

#### TOP END

**Grand Hyatt** (Map p148; ☎ 2365 1234; <http://cairo.grand.hyatt.com>; Corniche el-Nil, Rhoda; s/d from US\$200/225; ☞) The new favourite of tourists from the Gulf, the Hyatt is suitably glitzy. It has by far the best Nile-side terrace in town and a gargantuan rooftop pool. Rooms are minimalist chic, with brushed-gold trim and large marble bathrooms even in the standard layout.

**Four Seasons at Nile Plaza** (Map p148; ☎ 2791 7000; [www.fourseasons.com](http://www.fourseasons.com); 1089 Corniche el-Nil; s/d from US\$270/300; ☞ ☑ ☒) Of the two Four Seasons properties in Cairo (the other is the First Residence in Giza), this one may be marginally less posh, but it has a much handier location – you can walk to the Egyptian Museum in about 15 minutes. Rooms have lavish bathrooms and windows that actually open. The Omar Nagdi canvas behind reception is just one piece of a big collection of modern Egyptian art.

#### Islamic Cairo

Given crazy crowds, touts like locusts and more than the usual number of mosques with amplified calls to prayer, we can't rationally recommend bunking here. But if you want to plunge in at Cairo's deep end, this is the place.

**El-Hussein Hotel** (Map p129; ☎ 2591 8089; Midan Hussein; s/d E£105/130; ☞) About the only remotely appealing option in the area. Off either side of an open-ended hallway (where street noise reverberates), the rooms are basic, though recently painted a soothing shade of mint green. But if you park yourself in a front-facing one with a balcony, the people-watching below is so mesmerizing you may not want to sleep anyway. There's a top-floor restaurant (no alcohol). Entrance is in the back alley, one block off the square.

#### Zamalek

For a good night's sleep, the relatively quiet enclave of Zamalek is the best in the city.



This is also where many of Cairo's best restaurants, shops, bars and coffee shops are located, and most of the city's sights are a short taxi ride away (or take a ££2 cab to the Gezira metro station). Unfortunately, it's not very budget-friendly.

## BUDGET

**Mayfair Hotel** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 7315; [mayfaircairo@yahoo.com](mailto:mayfaircairo@yahoo.com); 2nd fl, 9 Sharia Aziz Osman; s/d without bathroom ££80/100, s/d ££130/150; 🚻 📺) In an Art Deco building on a quiet street, the Mayfair got a redo in 2006, making it one of the better-value places in the neighbourhood – especially when you're relaxing on the large terrace. Solo travellers will find the single rooms cramped, however, and the young staff perfectly nice but perhaps a tad too attentive. Generous balconies, TVs, fridges and nice wood floors are a plus in the larger rooms.

## MIDRANGE

**Pension Zamalek** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 9318; [pensionzamalek@msn.com](mailto:pensionzamalek@msn.com); 6 Sharia Salah ad-Din; s/d without bathroom ££100/150, with air-con extra ££25; 🚻) With a warm welcome from mum and the kids watching TV in the living room, you'll feel as if you've moved in with a family if you stay at this clean and quiet pension a few blocks off the main drag. It has 14 kitschily furnished, slightly dim rooms (four with air-con) and shared bathrooms. Discounts are available for long stays.

**Hotel Longchamps** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 2311; [www.hotellongchamps.com](http://www.hotellongchamps.com); 5th fl, 21 Sharia Ismail Mohammed; s US\$48-54, d US\$68-75; 🚻) The old-European-style Longchamps has a residential feel. Rooms are spacious and well maintained, and guests gather to chat on the peaceful, greenery-covered rear balcony around sunset or lounge in the restaurant (where alcohol – and a full breakfast buffet – is served). If you want your own balcony and a small bathtub, pay extra for an 'executive' room. Book well ahead.

**President Hotel** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 0718; [pres\\_hotl@thewayout.net](mailto:pres_hotl@thewayout.net); 22 Sharia Taha Hussein; s/d US\$55/65; 🚻 📺) According to the lobby, this is a thoroughly modern three-star place with glittering mirrors and plush carpeting. But rooms don't live up to the promise – the newish bathrooms make the rest look a little shabby. There is, however, a good top-floor bar and a very tasty patisserie in the lobby, which sup-

plies the breakfasts – for the right guest, this makes up for a lot.

## TOP END

**Golden Tulip Flamenco Hotel** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 0815; [www.flamencohotels.com](http://www.flamencohotels.com); 2 Sharia Gezirat al-Wusta; standard s/d US\$105/121, superior s/d US\$121/144; 🚻 📺) This popular business-class place is comfortable and well equipped – as long as you skip the small standard rooms and go for the more spacious 'superior' class, which have balconies overlooking the houseboats on the Nile. Book ahead; a 25% discount applies in May and June.

**Cairo Marriott** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2728 3000; [www.marriott.com/caieg](http://www.marriott.com/caieg); 16 Sharia Saray al-Gezira; s/d from US\$180; 🚻 📺 📺) A 19th-century palace provides the lobby and other public areas, but the rooms are all in two modern towers. Renovated in 2007, with touches such as plasma-screen TVs and extra-plush beds, the rooms are some of the more comfortable in this price bracket, even if the standard bathrooms are as small as prison cells. It also has a popular garden café and a great pool.

## Giza & Harraniyya

Because the Nile's west bank is inconvenient for sightseeing, the only reason to stay here is for absolute luxury – or if you're determined to pitch a tent.

## BUDGET

**Salma Motel** (off Map pp110-11; ☎ 3381 5062, 010 270 4442; Saqqara Rd, Harraniyya; camping per person ££25, cabin ££80) The only camping option in Cairo is miles from the centre, adjacent to the Wassef Art Centre (p151). As it's close to a canal, mosquitoes can be a problem, whether you're in a camping spot or one of the double cabins. Breakfast is not included in the rate, nor offered. To get here, take a microbus or taxi from Pyramids Rd in the direction of Saqqara and get off when you see the blue 'Harraniyya' sign.

## TOP END

**Mena House Oberoi** (Map p150; ☎ 3377 3222; [www.menahouseoberoi.com](http://www.menahouseoberoi.com); Pyramids Rd; r garden wing from US\$165, s/d palace wing from US\$235/280; 🚻 📺 📺) Built in 1869 as Khedive Ismail's hunting lodge, the stately Mena House offers two time warps in one: the public areas sport dazzling Islamic decoration and perpetually smell of jasmine, but the grandest palace-wing rooms

are Barbarella-meets-Ali Baba, with groovy tapestry bedspreads and smoky mirrors. You really have to splash out with a Pyramids view, because 'garden' views take in unsavoury chain-link fencing, while rooms in the new garden wing are dully modern. The swimming pool is suitably capacious.

## EATING

With some of the best restaurants in the country, Cairo is the place to sample not only refined versions of Egyptian classics, but also all the pizza, pasta and even Thai food you've been craving. You can spend ££5 or ££250 on dinner – and if you go for the latter, your fellow guests will appreciate it if you dress the part. Most swank dining options are at the luxury hotels, and the chefs are usually imported straight from the relevant country, along with all the ingredients. At these and some midrange places, expect to pay an additional 22% or so, for tax and service (a few extra pounds' cash tip is always appreciated).

At the other end of the spectrum are the scores of street carts, *kushari* (spicy rice and lentils) counters, and fruit-and-veg markets where the majority of Cairenes feed themselves. You'll see Pizza Hut, KFC and McDonald's, but these glossy places are out of the reach of many locals; for visitors, they're a source of clean bathrooms, at least. But don't write off everything that looks like fast food: Egyptian minichains such as Koshary El Tahrir (opposite) are often some of the most delicious and cheap meals you'll have. Look for them along the main avenues Downtown and along Sharia 26th of July in Zamalek. (Note that at takeout places, you place your order with the cashier, then take your receipt

to the counter man, who wouldn't mind a tiny tip when all is done.)

Many restaurants tend to double as bars and nightclubs, with guests proceeding from multicourse meals into boozing and grooving before the night is over – if a place like this has notably scrumptious food, we list it here, but if the scene's more the thing, it's under Drinking (p170).

Too tired to leave the hotel? You can get just about anything delivered, and even order online through [www.otlob.com](http://www.otlob.com), with service from more than 60 of the city's most popular restaurants.

## Downtown

Forget fine dining. This is predominantly cheap-and-cheerful territory, plus a few nostalgic favourites.

## BUDGET

**our pick** **At-Tabei ad-Dumyati** (Map p122; ☎ 2575 4211; 31 Sharia Orabi; dishes ££1-8; ☎ 7am-1am) About 200m north of Midan Orabi, this place offers some of the best meals in Cairo – and they just happen to be some of the cheapest as well. Start by picking four salads from a large array (the garlic-marinated tomatoes are killer, though they're not always available), then order *shwarma* (££5.50) or *ta'amiyya*, along with some lentil soup or *fuul*. The eggplant sandwiches are also delicious, and a steal at 75pt. There are branches in the food court of the Talaat Harb Complex (Map pp118-19) and in Mohandiseen (Map pp144-5).

**Akher Sa'a** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2575 1668; 8 Sharia Alf; dishes ££1-9; ☎ 24hr) A frantically busy *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* takeaway joint with a no-frills cafeteria next door, Akher Sa'a has a limited

## SILENT COMMUNICATION IN CAIRO

Cairenes have a whole array of nonverbal ways of getting a point across – and if you know some of them, you'll be much less likely to get offended, run over or neglected in a restaurant.

First, 'no' is often communicated with a simple upward nod or a brusque *tsk* sound – which can seem a bit rude if you're not expecting it. But if you use it casually to touts on the street, they're more likely to leave you alone.

Another signal that's often misinterpreted by foreigners is a loud hissing sound. No, that guy isn't commenting on your hot bod (well, OK, sometimes he might be) – he's trying to get your attention so you don't get trampled by his donkey cart coming down the narrow lane. Translate a hiss as 'Heads up – comin' through'.

But the most essential gesture to learn is the one for asking for the bill at a restaurant. Make eye contact with your waiter, hold out your hand palm up, then make a quick chopping motion across it with the side of your other hand, as if to say 'Cut me off'. Works like a charm.

menu but its food is fresh and good. The sign's in Arabic only; there's a Christian bookstore next door. A branch at 14 Sharia Abdel Khalek Sarwat has a fast-food-style setup downstairs (note the genius giant-*ta'amiyya* 'burger') but glacial table service upstairs.

**Gad** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2576 3583; 13 Sharia 26th of July; dishes E£2-12; ☎ 9am-2am) This fast-food eatery is usually packed to the rafters with a constant stream of young Cairenes sampling its fresh and well-priced food. The *fiteer* with Greek cheese is scrumptious and the quarter chicken with rice and salad is both tasty and good value. You can sit upstairs or take away from the front counters. It has branches throughout the city, including opposite Khan al-Khalili (Map p129).

**Koshary El Tahrir** (Map pp118-19; Sharia Tahrir; small/medium/large kushari E£3/4/5) Our independent taste tests confirmed that this place is actually better than Abu Tarek (heresy!). There's a second branch on Sharia Abdel Khalek Sarwat.

**Abu Tarek** (Map pp118-19; 40 Sharia Champollion; small/large kushari E£3/5; ☎ 8am-midnight) 'We have no other branches!' proclaims this veritable *kushari* temple – no, the place has just expanded, decade by decade, into the upper stories of its building, even as it has held onto the unofficial Best Kushari title. The line moves fast; it's worth eating in to get the proper dose of garlicky vinegar, which isn't packed with takeout orders.

**Fatatri at-Tahrir** (Map pp118-19; 166 Sharia Tahrir; dishes E£9-16; ☎ 7am-1am) This tiny place just off Midan Tahrir has been serving sweet and savoury *fiteer* to Downtown residents, AUC students and legions of backpackers for decades. It's reliable and delicious, though it can get very crowded in the afternoon.

Other supercheap options:

**Abu Samra** (Map pp118-19; Tawfiqiyya Souq) Excellent *ta'amiyya*.

**Felfela Takeaway** (Map pp118-19; Sharia Talaat Harb) Also excellent.

**Koshary Goha** (Map pp118-19; 4 Sharia Emad ad-Din; kushari E£2-3; ☎ 10am-midnight) Average *kushari* but gorgeous vintage-Cairo setting.

**Sayed Hanafy** (Map pp118-19; Midan Orabi; small/medium/large kushari E£3/4/5; ☎ 24hr) Good *kushari*, and pavement tables.

## MIDRANGE

**Pottery Café** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2796 0260; 35 Sharia Mohammed Mahmoud; dishes E£8-22; ☎ 7am-11pm) AUC

students set up camp here, chowing down on big salads, stuffed baked potatoes and sandwiches. For coffee, though, you're better off at one of the other cafés on this strip.

**Greek Club** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2575 0822; 3 Sharia Mahmoud Bassiouni; mains E£10-18; ☎ 7pm-2am) About the only thing that's still Greek about this private club is the bazouki music playing on its outdoor terrace, where cats clamber on a shady pergola. But it's a nice place to have a beer and a light meal; the menu is standard Egyptian, with a few Greek items, such as *tzatziki*, thrown in. If you can convince the door staff of your Hellenic heritage, you can skip the E£5 cover charge.

**Abu al-Hassan al-Haty** (Map pp118-19; 3 Sharia Halim; mains E£15-25) With its foggy mirrors, dusty chandeliers and waiters who look older than the building itself, this is a beautiful relic of Downtown – it's often used as a set for period TV shows. The food (all grilled items) is a bit secondary, but perfectly palatable.

**Centro Recreativo Italiano Il Cairo** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2575 9590; 40 Sharia 26th of July; pizza E£15-30; ☎ 7-11pm) In winter, Cairo's Italian social club is in a cosy, wood-panelled room; in summer, it moves out into a vast yard in the centre of the embassy compound. It's the place to savour rarities such as great crisp-crust pizzas, affordable red wine and even pork products. Non-Italians pay an E£10 cover.

**Felfela Restaurant** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2392 2833; 15 Sharia Hoda Shaarawi; entrées E£3-7, mains E£15-40; ☎ 8am-midnight) Packed with tourists, coach parties and locals since 1963, Felfela is an institution that can deliver a reliable, if not wildly delicious, meal and good service. A bizarre jungle theme rules the décor, but the food is straight-down-the-line Egyptian and consistently decent, especially the mezze and grilled chicken. A Stella costs E£12.

**Café Riche** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2392 9793; 17 Sharia Talaat Harb; dishes E£15-40; ☎ 9am-1am) This narrow restaurant was the favoured drinking spot of Cairo's intelligentsia. It's a bit less lively now, but nonetheless a reliable and nostalgic spot to enjoy a meal (even a European-style breakfast) and a glass of wine, surrounded by framed portraits of Cairo luminaries on the wood-panelled walls.

**our pick** **Emara Hati al-Gish** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2796 2964; 32 Sharia Falaki; sandwiches E£10-12, mains E£17-24; ☎ 11am-11pm) Carnivores will salivate instantly upon entering this grill palace, where the air is heavy with the smell of charcoal-cooked

meat, from a quarter-kilo (E£17.50) – up to a full stuffed, roasted sheep on request. The *kastileeta* (lamb chops) are particularly splendid, and the *mouza* (shins) good for gnawing. There's another branch in Mohandiseen, at 164 Sharia 26th of July, off Midan Sphinx (Map pp144–5). No alcohol.

**Gomhouriya** (Map pp118–19; 42 Sharia Falaki; meals E£20; ☎ 1pm–3am) Stuffed pigeon is the only thing on the menu, but it's splendid, served with salad and all-you-can-drink mugs of peppery, lemony broth. No alcohol, and easy to miss because it's small and there's no English sign; look for the big open oven. Out back are a few tables, along with sinks for washing off the grease when you're done nibbling the tasty fowl.

**Sangria** (Map pp144–5; ☎ 2579 6511; Casino ash-Shaggar, Corniche el-Nil, Bulaq; meals E£22–60; ☎ 1pm–3am) Adjacent to the club Absolute and opposite the Conrad hotel, Sangria has great Nile views from its 1st-floor terrace (where the stylish scene is) and a large garden area, which often has a more casual crowd, including children. Hip music adds to the ambience – the place is as much a bar as a restaurant. There's a minimum charge of E£50, but that's not hard to meet when a Sakkara costs E£23, and the menu ranges from spring rolls to garlic mushrooms to *penne alla vodka*. You'll find it in Bulaq, just north of Downtown on the Nile.

**Le Bistro** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2392 7694; 8 Sharia Hoda Shaarawi; mains E£32–36) Tucked away below street level, Le Bistro nonetheless tries to conjure summery France with a blue-and-white colour scheme and Gallic crooners on the stereo. The food may not quite match its European ideal, but Francophone Cairenes love it, and steak frites can make a nice change from kebab.

**Estoril** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2574 3102; 12 Sharia Talaat Harb; mezze E£7–35, mains E£32–59) Walking into Estoril (from an alley next to the Amex office) can be a little awkward: stroll through clouds of cigarette smoke, past booths crammed with Cairo's arts-and-letters set, then get the attention of a waiter, which is no mean feat. Once seated, though, you'll feel like one of the club, scooping up simple mezze and ordering beer after beer. It's not uncommon to see women alone here, and the bar in the back is a good place to perch for a shorter stay.

## SELF-CATERING

For fresh fruit and vegetables try **Tawfiqiyya Souq** (Map pp118–19; Sharia Talaat Harb) or **Souq Bab al-Luq**

(Map pp118–19; off Midan Falaki). Tawfiqiyya Souq is open late, and there's an exceptionally good dairy store for ricotta-style cheese and rice pudding (around the corner on Sharia Talaat Harb) plus numerous *ba'als*, the all-purpose grocers where you can stock up on yogurt, crackers and drinks. For Western-style bread try the **Nile Hilton Deli** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 8am–11pm). For pastries and sweets head for **El-Abd Bakery** (Map pp118–19; 35 Sharia Talaat Harb; pastries E£1–6; ☎ 8am–midnight), Cairo's most famous pastry shop, easily identified by the crowds of people outside tearing into their Oriental sweets and savoury pies. There's another branch on the corner of Sharia 26th of July and Sharia Sherif.

## Garden City

The luxury hotels here have some excellent restaurants. Look on Sharia Qasr al-Ainy for local haunts.

**El Sakya** (Map p148; ☎ 2365 1234; Grand Hyatt Hotel, Corniche el-Nil; dishes E£22–90; ☎ noon–1am) Dotted with big white umbrellas and jutting over the water, the terrace restaurant at the Grand Hyatt is a great place to take in a view of the Nile – and perhaps some local movie stars, as this is a popular place to schmooze. The menu draws from all the hotel's restaurants, so you can take your pick of Indian, Italian, American and more.

**Taboula** (Map p148; ☎ 2792 5261; 1 Sharia Latin America; mezze E£10–30, mains E£30–45; ☎ noon–1am) The Lebanese food at this basement joint isn't as good as Sabaya's (below), but the atmosphere is more fun – here it's all big groups of Cairenes celebrating birthdays around giant communal tables, with lots of cocktails to go around. Mezze such as the *tomiyya* (garlic sauce) are your best bet, but skip the meatballs.

**Bird Cage** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2795 7171; Semiramis InterContinental, Corniche el-Nil; appetisers E£26–85, mains E£42–95; ☎ noon–1am) Spicy means *spicy* at Cairo's best Thai restaurant, a soothing, wood-panelled space that's a favourite with wealthy Cairenes. Standards such as fish cakes and grilled beef salad are delicious and beautifully presented, as are more nouvelle offerings like *pla pow* (sea bass wrapped in banana leaves). Recipes might be a little light on the fish sauce for some tastes, but otherwise show a generous use of traditional Thai flavours. Don't miss the coconut biscotti served with tea – not particularly Thai, but very tasty.

**Sabaya** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2795 7171; Semiramis InterContinental, Corniche el-Nil; mezze E£15–29, mains

££48-108; ☎ 7.30pm-1am) Lebanese cuisine is Egypt's most common 'ethnic' food, but it's rarely done as well as it is here, where the diverse and delicate mezze come with fresh-baked pillows of pita, and mains such as *fattah* are served in individual cast-iron pots. The setting is very sleek, but considering portion sizes are generous and sharing is the norm, the prices are not as high as you would expect.

## Islamic Cairo

There are plenty of fast-food joints around Midan Hussein but the restaurants in this part of town are limited – you really have to like grilled meat, and not be too squeamish about hygiene.

### BUDGET

**Al-Halwagy** (Map p129; Midan Hussein; dishes ££5-30; ☎ 24hr) Not directly on the square, but just behind a row of buildings, this good *ta'amiyya*, *fuul* and salad place has been around for nearly a century. You can eat at pavement tables or hide away upstairs.

**Egyptian Pancakes** (Map p129; Midan Hussein; dishes ££10-15; ☎ 24hr) Adjacent to Al-Halwagy, this popular place serves up made-to-order *fit-eer* topped with your choice of cheese, egg, tomato, olives and ground meat. For dessert, choose your toppings from raisins, coconut and icing sugar.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Khan el-Khalili Restaurant & Mahfouz Coffee Shop** (Map p129; ☎ 2590 3788; 5 Sikket al-Badistan; snacks ££9-20, mains ££14-50; ☎ 10am-2am) The luxurious Moorish-style interiors of this restaurant and adjoining café are a popular haven from the khan's bustle/hassle. The place may be geared entirely to tourists, but the food is reasonably good, the air-con is strong and the toilets are clean. Tea is ££10 and *sheesha* is ££9. Look for the metal detector in the lane, immediately west of the medieval gate.

**our pick Citadel View** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2510 9151; Al-Azhar Park; entrées ££9.50-14, mains ££20-65, minimum ££100; ☎ noon-1am) Eating at this gorgeous restaurant – on a vast multilevel terrace, with Cairo's elite seated around you and the whole city sprawled below – feels almost like visiting a luxury resort. Fortunately, though, the prices are not so stratospheric, and the food, all traditional Egyptian grill items, is quite good. Reservations are recommended, par-

ticularly on the weekend. If you're not up for a full meal, you can have a coffee (££12) at the Alain Le Notre Café upstairs.

## Zamalek

Zamalek has some of Cairo's best and most stylish restaurants. Cheap dining is not one of the island's fortes, but there are a few possibilities, including the Baraka *shwarma* stand (Map pp144-5) on Sharia Brazil and a *kushari* stand (Map pp144-5) on the west side of Sharia Shagaret ad-Durr.

### MIDRANGE

**Didos Al Dente** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 9117; 26 Sharia Bahgat Ali; pasta ££6.50-22.50) A noisy, crowded pasta joint with a small outdoor space, Didos rings with the clatter of dishes and often has crowds waiting out front for a table. It's popular with students from the nearby AUC dorm and it comes pretty close to living up to its claim of making the best noodles in town. No alcohol.

**Maison Thomas** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 7057; 157 Sharia 26th of July; sandwiches ££12-40, pizzas ££23-40; ☎ 24hr) A little slice of Europe, with loads of brass and mirrors, and waiters in long white aprons serving crusty baguette sandwiches. But this institution is best known for its pizza, with generous toppings. There's a branch in Heliopolis (Map p153).

**La Mezzaluna** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 2655; Sharia Aziz Osman; mains ££17-36; ☎ 7am-11pm) Head down a tiny alley to find this funky bilevel space that's frequented by Cairo bohemians. The menu is roughly Italian, from conventional combos such as tomato and basil to the 'Illy pasta' (beef bacon, cream, radicchio and coffee). Salads are enormous. No alcohol, but the little patio out front is a quiet place to take coffee. There's an outpost in Mohandiseen too (Map pp110-11).

**Crave** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 3870; 22A Sharia Taha Hussein; mains ££18-50; ☎ noon-1am) This little black-and-white eatery looks extremely chic, but it has a welcoming (rather than snooty) staff and a reasonably priced menu of pizzas, pasta and the like. Score one of the comfy corner couch setups, and you could find yourself lounging here for quite some time. Many expats think its 'Zombie Burger' (££25) is the best in town, and the megasize, superrich chocolate fondant dessert will satisfy serious cravings (order it with your main meal, to allow for baking time).



**Abou El Sid** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 9640; 157 Sharia 26th of July; mezze E£11-24, mains E£25-57; ☎ noon-2am) Cairo's first hipster Egyptian restaurant, Abou El Sid is as popular with tourists as it is with upper-class natives looking for a taste of their roots – Omar Sharif has been known to savour the chicken with *molokhiyya*, but you can also enjoy a sugar-cane-and-tequila cocktail at the big bar, or a postprandial *sheesha*. It's all served amid hanging lamps, kitschy gilt 'Louis Farouk' furniture and fat pillows. There's another branch in Mohandiseen, on Midan Amman (Map pp110-11; ☎ 3749 7326). Reservations are a must. The entrance is on the west side of the Baehler's Mansions complex; look for the tall wooden doors.

**L'Aubergine** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2738 0080; 5 Sharia Sayyed al-Bakry; entrées E£14-20, mains E£26-36; ☎ noon-2am) This white-walled, candlelit bistro devotes half its menu to vegetarian dishes such as blue-cheese ravioli and aubergine mous-saka – you can't go wrong with most of the cheesier, creamier items, and the mellow jazz soundtrack is soothing.

**Sabai Sabai** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 1846; 21 Sharia al-Shaer Aziz Abaza; entrées E£8-35, mains E£30-85) Even if you're not craving Thai food, you might want to visit this mellow little restaurant for its quiet outdoor terrace. Salads and appetizers have all the requisite lemongrass and herbs, but the curries are a little weak. Taxi drivers may know the street by its old name, Sharia Maahad al-Swissry; the entrance is to the right of the hotel.

**Sequoia** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2576 8086; 3 Sharia Abu al-Feda; mezze E£8, mains E£32-60, minimum Sat-Wed E£50, Thu-Fri E£75; ☎ 1pm-1am) At the very northern tip of Zamalek, this sprawling Nileside lounge is a major scene, with art exhibits by Townhouse Gallery, low cushions for nursing a *sheesha* and everything from Egyptian-style mezze to sushi on the menu. Bring an extra layer – evenings directly on the water can be surprisingly cool. A Stella goes for E£22.

## Gezira

The east side of the island is lined with large boats converted into entertainment extravaganzas, each packed with themed restaurants and clubs. They're generally more style than substance, but a couple stand out.

**Dar El Amar** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 3114, 012 390 0256; Blue Nile Boat, 9A Sharia Saray al-Gezira; mezze E£10-36, grills E£27-47; ☎ noon-3am) The challenge at this popular Lebanese restaurant is drawing your eyes

away from the Nile view long enough to make a choice from the 53 mezze on offer. Unlike many other eateries on the river, prices are reasonable and you don't have to be wearing designer glad rags to score a table. A Stella costs E£24.

**Chili's** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 3122; Nile City Boat, Sharia Saray al-Gezira; entrées E£20-30, mains E£29-60; ☎ 11am-1am) The American pseudo-Mexican chain now occupies a spot on the Nile where Naguib Mahfouz used to hold court – as Cairo goes, so goes the world. All-you-can-eat salsa and chips and a 'build your own fajita' platter satisfy both homesick expats and middle-class Egyptians eager for exotic flavours.

## Mohandiseen & Doqqi

These grey concrete suburbs look bland and flavourless, but it's possible to find some excellent restaurants among the plethora of fast-food outlets.

### BUDGET

**Al-Omda** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3346 2701; 6 Sharia al-Ghazza, Mohandiseen; dishes E£8-30; ☎ noon-2am) A mini-empire taking up the better part of a block, Al-Omda offers numerous ways to put grilled meats into your system. At the takeout joint on the corner, get a *shish tawouq* sandwich with spicy pickles. Or else you can sit down in the old-style 'Oriental' restaurant around the corner to your left, or head upstairs to the neon-lit café and get a *sheesha* with the trendy crowd. Down the block to the right, two other places add *kushari* and pizza. No alcohol served.

### MIDRANGE

**Samakmak** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3302 7308; 24 Sharia Ahmed Orabi, Mohandiseen; dishes E£30-75; ☎ 10am-4am) Shielded from a noisy street by a phalanx of shrubbery, a few tables with blue-checked cloths set a cheery note in a garden at the Cairo branch of the respected Alexandrian fish restaurant. There's no menu – just pick from mullet, crabs, squid and more (priced per kilo) in the iced-up display, then specify how you want it prepared. It arrives at the table accompanied by salads and rice. No alcohol.

**Cedars** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3345 0088; 42 Sharia Geziret al-Arab, Mohandiseen; mezze E£10-22, mains E£45-75; ☎ noon-1am) This chic Lebanese restaurant is a favourite with Mohandiseen's lunching ladies, then with a younger crowd later in



the evening. Rattan chairs dot the spacious terrace, where there's *sheesha* along with the better-than-average food: peppery *muhammara* (red-pepper salad), fresh and salty *ayran* (yogurt drink) and big sandwiches stuffed with French fries. You can also get full meals from the grill.

## Giza & Pyramids Road

There are a number of good eateries in this part of Cairo, though only Andrea, Fish Market and Moghul Room are worth a special trip. The others will serve you well if you happen to be in the neighbourhood.

### BUDGET & MIDRANGE

**El-Mashrabiah** (Map p148; ☎ 3748 2801; 4 Sharia Ahmed Nessim; mains E£12-40; ☎ noon-1am) Excellent Egyptian food is served with formality at this intimate eatery. Located a few steps below street level, the dining room is further darkened by ornate carved panelling, deep leather banquettes and waiters dressed in sombre suits. Meat lovers will find themselves in seventh heaven: the *kofta* and *tagens* are good, as is the rabbit with *molokhiyya* and the duck with starchy taro root. But vegetarians don't get much to work with. No alcohol is served.

**Andrea** (Map p150; ☎ 3383 1133; 59 Tir'at al-Maryutia, Saqqara; entrées E£5-15, mains E£20-25; ☎ 10am-1am) Take a trip to the country at this restaurant 1.5km north of Pyramids Rd on the west side of Maryutia Canal. At the entrance women pat out bread dough and tend the spit-roasted chicken the place is justly famous for. There's little else on the menu aside from this and salads, and cold Stella (E£20). Weather permitting, seating is in a large garden with playground equipment and a swimming pool. But with greenery comes mosquitoes, so lay on the repellent beforehand. A taxi from central Cairo should cost about E£20, or E£6 from the Pyramids/Mena House area. Make sure your driver doesn't take you to the unrelated Andrea Gardenia, south of Pyramids Rd.

**Fish Market** (Map p148; ☎ 3570 9693; Americana Boat, 26 Sharia el-Nil; dishes E£25-50; ☎ noon-2am) After selecting some of the finest and freshest seafood in town from the large display counter, most guests tuck into delicious mezze while their fish is simply but expertly cooked. With its wonderful Nile views (particularly at night), laid-back feel and efficient service, this place is a gem.

Cheap but good-quality eateries within walking distance of the Pyramids are few. Try **Felfela** (off Map p150; ☎ 3383 0234; 27 Cairo-Alexandria Rd; ☎ 8am-2am) or the popular Peace II Seafood Restaurant. Both are beloved by tour groups but also patronised by locals, they're on the main road off the roundabout in front of the Mena House Oberoi hotel.

### TOP END

**La Gourmandise** (Map p148; ☎ 3569 2557; Ground fl, First Place mall, 35 Sharia al-Giza; pastries E£16-33, mains E£42-115, ☎ 10am-11pm) This café-pâtisserie in the glitzy Four Seasons mall comes complete with tuxedoed waiters, potted palms and a grand piano. Its good-quality Mediterranean dishes are perfect for lunch after you've been to the zoo.

**Khan El Khalili** (Map p150; ☎ 3383 3222; Mena House Oberoi, Pyramids Rd; mains E£55-150; ☎ 24hr) With highly functional air-conditioning and a fantastic view of the Pyramids, this is a good spot for a post-sightseeing lunch, even if the food is a bit bland. The menu is broad enough, from spaghetti to Indian dishes (a bright spot), that everyone will find a little something to like. A Stella costs E£20.

**Moghul Room** (Map p150; ☎ 3377 3222; Mena House Oberoi, Pyramids Rd; mains E£75-165; ☎ 7-11.45pm, plus 12.30-2.45pm Fri) Cairo's best Indian restaurant specialises in mild North Indian-style curries and kebabs, with an emphasis on tandoori dishes. Though it's a long taxi ride from Downtown, the opulent décor, good food and live sitar music make the trip worthwhile. There's a wide range of vegetarian options (from E£35 to E£40) and an extensive (and pricey) wine list. At lunch, a limited selection of dishes is available on Khan El Khalili's menu.

## Heliopolis

In addition to the Amphitriton (p152) and branches of major chains, these places are a good break if you happen to be in the neighbourhood.

### BUDGET

**El Shabrawy** (Map p153; ☎ 2258 6954; Sharia Ibrahimy; dishes E£4-15; ☎ 8am-2am) Locals love this place for its *makaroneh* – big bowls of noodles with a rich meat sauce – but the place also serves dishes such as egg-fried cauliflower and *aggah* (a cross between an omelette and a giant *ta'amiyya*), most of which are vegetarian. It's signed in

Arabic only – look for the red awning. The Shabrawy *ta'amiyya* stand (Map p153) on the opposite side of the street is also popular.

## MIDRANGE

**Petit Palmyra** (Map p153; ☎ 2417 1720; 27 Sharia al-Ahram; mezze E£9-17, mains E£16-40; ☎ 11am-2am) Old-school Heliopolis, with stiffly starched serviettes, puffy chairs, sepia-tone photos on the wall and someone tickling the ivories while you eat. Egyptian-Levantine staples such as stuffed pigeon are great; a few European dishes such as *penne puttanesca* are decent.

**Merryland** (Map p153), north of central Heliopolis, is a large park and entertainment centre with kids' rides and lots of places to eat, from TGI Friday's to Egyptian snack joints. It was changing management on last visit, so the restaurants and other entertainment may vary, but in general it's a good place to eat and people-watch.

## SELF-CATERING

Zamalek's best grocery is **Alfa Market** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2737 0801; 4 Sharia al-Malek al-Afdal), with both local foods and imported items, while **Sekem** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2738 2724; Sharia Ahmed Sabry) sells organic products and tofu. There's a 24-hour Metro Supermarket (Map pp144-5) on Sharia Ismail Mohammed, and several shops on Sharia 26th of July sell good-quality produce. Pork products such as prosciutto are available from the deli counter at Maison Thomas (p165) and the **Bakery** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2728 3000; Cairo Marriott, 16 Sharia Saray al-Gezira; caffè latte E£14; ☎ 6.30am-10pm) does good European-style bread.

For a sweet treat, **Mandarine Koueider** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 5010; 17 Sharia Shagaret ad-Durr; per scoop E£3.25; ☎ 9am-11pm) is the place to get your fix of delectable ice cream. Definitely shell out extra for the *zabadi bi-tut* (yogurt with blackberry). There's another branch in Heliopolis (Map p153).

## DRINKING

Cairo isn't a 'dry' city, but locals tend to run on caffeine by day, available at both traditional *ahwas* (coffeehouses) and European-style cafés. Drinking beer or spirits typically doesn't start till the evening hours, and then it's limited to hotel bars and some cheaper dives. Liquor is expensive, and wine is barely drinkable, but beer is widely available and cheap. For self-catering, head for Drinkies

shops (on Sharia 26th of July in Zamalek and on Sharia Talaat Harb in Downtown), which stock beer, wine and the only reliable brands of local booze. Note that drinking on the street is absolutely taboo, and wandering around drunk is in poor taste as well. During Ramadan alcohol is served only to foreigners.

## Cafés & Patisseries

Sometime after the year 2000, espresso crash-landed in Cairo, and the city hasn't been the same since. Every reasonably well-to-do neighbourhood supports several coffee bars offering every kind of caffeinated drink, as well as snacks, sweets and free wi-fi. If it weren't for the gaggles of headscarf-wearing teenage girls who crowd the banquettes after school, you'd be hard pressed to locate yourself in Egypt. Yes, there are even a couple of Starbucks outlets – and there will likely be more by the time you read this. For Egyptian coffeehouses see opposite.

## DOWNTOWN

**Cilantro** (Map pp118-19; 31 Sharia Mohammed Mahmoud; cappuccino E£6, sandwiches E£6-17.50; ☎ 9am-2am) This popular, clean café – part of a locally owned chain – does excellent Italian-style coffee and Twinings tea. Downstairs, order to go and grab a packaged sandwich, fresh juice, cake or salad from the open fridge; for table service head upstairs (smoky, but with a couple of outside balcony seats). There are other branches just about everywhere you turn: Zamalek (Map pp144-5), Heliopolis (Map p153) and Doqqi (Map p148), to name a few. All offer free wi-fi, strong air-con and a stash of magazines and newspapers.

**Groppi's** (Map pp118-19; Midan Talaat Harb; minimum charge E£20; ☎ 7am-midnight) Distinctly *not* part of the new coffee wave, Groppi's high point was more than 50 years ago. Now it just seems haunted. The offerings are poor and overpriced, and the tearoom reeks of cheap tobacco. For nostalgia buffs only.

**Groppi Garden** (Map pp118-19; Sharia Adly; ☎ 7am-midnight) Same uninteresting pastries as the other Groppi, but the garden terrace here (with just a E£10 minimum) is a relatively peaceful place for a cup of tea or *sheesha*.

## ZAMALEK

**Simonds** (Map pp144-5; 112 Sharia 26th of July; café au lait E£7; ☎ 7am-10pm) At this wonderfully

old-fashioned French-style café, the barista looks as if he's been serving for the better part of a century. The Byzantine pay-first system can be difficult to navigate pre-caffeine, as are the crowds – but it's a Cairene tradition to sit at a rickety counter stool and read the morning paper over a flaky, buttery pastry.

**Coffee Roastery** (Map pp144-5; 140 Sharia 26th of July; cappuccino E£7; ☎ 24hr) Its fast-food menu, blaring music videos and young staff make this an extremely popular meeting place for groups of young locals. The coffee, served in 30 different ways, is surprisingly good. Don't bother with the food.

**Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf** (Map pp144-5; 5 Sharia Abu al-Feda; cappuccino E£9; ☎ 9am-2am) At this branch of the American coffee chain most associated with Hollywood celebrity sightings, the clientele wears similarly large sunglasses and jewels. There's a strict no-tipping policy – which may or may not be connected with the occasional complaints of incorrect change-making. Still, the coffee is very good.

**Euro Deli** (Map pp144-5; 22 Sharia Taha Hussein; cappuccino E£9, sandwiches E£12-22; ☎ 24hr) Bright, busy and slick café with free wi-fi and good wraps, pastas and fries. For breakfast, there's chewy Montreal-style bagels – try the local variation, topped with *labneh* (thick yogurt with olive oil) and cucumber.

**Arabica Café** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 7982; 20 Sharia al-Marashly, Zamalek; cappuccino E£7, breakfast E£5.50-9.50, fiteer E£11.50-23; ☎ 9am-11pm) Funky and lived-in, this upstairs café is frequented by teens and older students, who gather to study and doodle on the paper-topped tables. And unlike slicker competitors, you can actually get some Egyptian food here, along with your latte – breakfast options include *fuul* and *shakshouka* (spicy scrambled eggs), and you can order sweet or savoury *fiteer* anytime.

## Ahwas

Cairo's *ahwas* are essential places to unwind, chat and breathe deeply over a *sheesha*. Dusty floors, rickety tables and the clatter of dominoes and *towla* (backgammon) define the most traditional places, but newer, shinier places – where women smoke as well – have expanded the concept, not to mention the array of *sheesha* flavours, which can now extend to guava and mint. Even though coffee (*ahwa*) gave its name to the café, *shai* (tea) is far more common than the inky-black Turkish-style brew, usually drunk in the

morning if at all. Or you can order lemonade, hot herbal infusions or, in the winter, rich, milky *sahlab* (see p96).

There's an *ahwa* for every possible subculture. We list the most famous ones here, but half the joy of the *ahwa* is discovering 'yours'. Look in back alleys all over Downtown (sports fans gather south of Sharia Adly; intellectuals, at Midan Falaki); there's a nice traditional joint down the lane behind Al-Azhar Mosque; and some mall food courts can be surprisingly fun. Most *ahwas* are open from 8am to 2am; a few serve beer, but generally it's a nonalcoholic scene.

**Fishawi's Coffeehouse** (El Fishawy; Map p129; off Midan Hussein, Islamic Cairo; ☎ 24hr except in Ramadan) Probably the oldest *ahwa* in the city, and certainly the most celebrated, Fishawi's is a great place to watch the world go by. Despite being swamped by foreign tourists and equally wide-eyed out-of-town Egyptians, it is a regular *ahwa*, serving up *shai* (E£3) and *sheesha* (E£4.50) to stallholders and shoppers alike. It's especially alluring in the early hours of the morning. During Ramadan it closes from 3am till about 5pm.

**Cafeteria Horreyya** (Map pp118-19; Midan Falaki, Bab al-Luq) The Horreyya (there's no real sign outside – look for a pale-pink façade and plywood over some of the windows) is simultaneously one of the city's most classic *ahwas* and one of its most up-to-the-minute. Not only can you stare dreamily through the *sheesha* smoke up at the high ceilings, down at the sawdust-strewn floor and out across a great cross-section of customers, but you can also check your email on the free wi-fi. Really. Another bonus: beer is also available (E£8). There's a good chess scene here, too, though beer is strictly prohibited near those tables.

Some others to try include the following:

**Abu Aly Café** (Map pp118-19; Nile Hilton, 1113 Corniche el-Nil, Downtown; minimum charge E£20; ☎ 10am-1.30am) Popular with locals: an upscale *sheesha* experience, with live music, traditional food (entrées E£12 to E£15, mains E£46 to E£82) and waiters in *galabiyas*.

**Kawkab ash-Sharq** (Soma Caffé; Map pp118-19; 11 Sharia Saray al-Ezbekiyya, Downtown; ☎ 24hr) Dedicated to the 'Star of the Orient', Umm Kolthum. Look for the huge busts of the singer out front.

**Mahrán** (Map pp118-19; Downtown) Under a tree in an alley off Sharia Mahmoud Bassiouni in Downtown. Women are welcome.

**Tornado** (Map pp144-5; 3 Midan Aswan, Mohandiseen; sheesha E£9; ☎ 10am-2am) Dim lights, TVs and canoodling

couples – but the hardest drink is a smoothie, and the fresh-fruit *sheesha* tastes practically healthy.

**Zahret al-Bustan** (Map pp118-19; off Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown) A sometime haunt of intellectuals and writers – and students and backpackers.

## Bars

### LOCAL BARS

For those who want to see Cairo's underbelly, a few Downtown bars serve beer and local spirits. They can seem unwelcoming: none are suitable for women on their own, and the toilets are pretty foul. It also doesn't help that none is clearly labelled 'bar'; 'cafeteria' is the common euphemism, and the entrances are screened off so passers-by can't see in. A Stella will set you back ££8 or ££10.

**Cairo** (Map pp118-19; 3 Sharia Saray al-Ezbiyya, Downtown; ☎ 24hr) Walk through the restaurant to the 1st-floor bar. The beer is not always icy, but the atmosphere is slightly sleazy and fun.

**Cafeteria Stella** (Map pp118-19; cnr Sharia Hoda Shaarawi & Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown; ☎ until midnight) Marked with a tiny red neon sign, this spit'n'sawdust-style place gets good reviews from Downtown expats, who find it a more cheerful and welcoming place than similar bars nearby.

**Cafeteria Port Tawfiq** (Map pp118-19; Midan Orabi, Downtown) Dark and reasonably inviting.

**Cap d'Or** (Map pp118-19; Sharia Abdel Khalek Sarwat, Downtown) Quite run-down and lit with fluorescent bulbs – but you're not going for the décor. The staff and regulars are used to seeing foreigners.

### WESTERN-STYLE BARS

As in any other busy city, bars open and close and go in and out of favour. The most reliable are those in hotels, but the flavour-of-the-week places can generate the most high-rolling fun. By far the best place to go boozing (if you have the cash) is Zamalek, where several bars are within staggering distance of one another. Many places also have full menus, so you can snack as you go. The fancier places can have door policies as strict as the nightclubs, so dress well and go in mixed groups.

**Windsor Bar** (Map pp118-19; 19 Sharia Alfay, Downtown; ☎ 6pm-1am) Alas, most of the Windsor's regular clientele has passed on, leaving a few hotel guests, a cordial, polyglot bartender and a faint soundtrack of swing jazz and Umm Kolthum. Colonial history has settled in an almost palpable film on the taxidermed antelope heads, the barrel-shape chairs and the dainty wall

sconces. Solo women will feel comfortable here. A Stella costs ££13.

**La Bodega** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 6761; 1st fl, Baehler's Mansions, 157 Sharia 26th of July, Zamalek; ☎ noon-2am) This vast, amber-lit lounge doubles as a restaurant, but the food (mains ££29 to ££50) is inconsistent, so better to stick with cocktails at the long brass-top bar. The place draws most of Cairo's celebrity scenesters, who look gorgeous against the *belle époque* backdrop. One wing is sectioned off and dubbed Barten, where the crowd skews younger and the music louder. Reservations are recommended.

**Odeon Palace Hotel** (Map pp118-19; 6 Sharia Abdel Hamid Said, Downtown; ☎ 24hr) Its green carpet singed from *sheesha* coals, this rooftop bar is favoured by Cairo's heavy-drinking theatre and cinema clique, and is a great place to watch the sun go down (or come up). A Stella costs ££8 and bar snacks start at ££5.

**Marriott Garden Café** (Map pp144-5; Cairo Marriott, 16 Sharia Saray al-Gezira, Zamalek; ☎ 6.30am-10pm) The Marriott's garden terrace is one of the most comfortable spots in town to relax over a drink. Big cane chairs, fresh air and good-quality wine and beer make it deservedly popular. You can eat here, too. The only downside is that it's pricey.

**Topkapi** (Map p148; Corniche el-Nil, Garden City) Tucked below the street opposite the Four Seasons Nile Plaza and behind a moored restaurant boat, this mellow Nileside hang-out is easy to miss. Once down here, though, parked at a picnic bench and enjoying a *sheesha* and beer, it's easy to forget the traffic on the corniche. Inside the tentlike main room, a DJ spins hip international and Arabic tunes, and the menu (mains ££25 to ££42) is a quirky mix of local and Turkish flavours, with nightly specials. It occasionally hosts special, ticket-only parties.

**L'Aubergine** (Map pp144-5; 1st fl, 5 Sharia Sayyed al-Bakry, Zamalek; ☎ noon-2am) Wear your tightest black T-shirt and your sharpest eyewear to this minimalist bar that's just a little hipper than other fab nightspots, catering to jazz cats, expats and moodier AUC students.

**Le Tabasco** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 3336 5583; 8 Midan Amman, Mohandiseen; minimum charge ££50; ☎ 1pm-2am) Perennially chic, Le Tabasco is a basement grotto with good electronica and moody lighting – most of the well-dressed, slightly older patrons are here to air-kiss and nibble on assorted international snacks. Reservations are a help.

**Deals** (Map pp144-5; 2 Sharia Sayyed al-Bakry, Zamalek) A small cellar bar that never looks open actually gets too packed for comfort late in the evening and at weekends. It's pleasant enough at quieter times. There are other branches in Mohandiseen (Map pp144-5) and Heliopolis (Map p153).

**Revolving Restaurant Lounge** (Map p148; ☎ 3365 1234; 41st fl, Grand Hyatt Cairo, Corniche el-Nil, Garden City; minimum charge ££35; ☎ 3pm-2am) Cheesy, yes, but there's a lot to be said for comfortable seats and knock-out views from the tallest structure for miles around. There's a pianist and you'll need to frock up. (The adjacent restaurant doesn't merit the money.)

**Le Grillon** (Map pp118-19; 8 Sharia Qasr el-Nil, Downtown) Nominally a restaurant, this bizarre faux-patio is all about beer, *sheesha* and gossip about politics and the arts scene. The illusion of outdoors is created with wicker furniture, fake vines and lots of ceiling fans. The entrance is in the back of a courtyard between two buildings.

**Bull's Eye** (Map pp110-11; 32 Sharia Jeddah, Doqqi) This faux-English pub is a big stop on the nightlife circuit – an unpretentious place to rest up on nonclubbing nights. It draws a mix of expats and Egyptians, with darts, karaoke Wednesday and, if you're inclined, steak on the menu.

**Nomad** (Map p148; King Hotel, 20 Sharia Abdel Rahim Sabry, Doqqi; ☎ 1pm-4am) The West Bank equivalent of the Odeon Palace rooftop bar, ideal for breezy *sheesha* and beer, with a good view. But befitting its Doqqi location, it's a bit more stylish, and the *sheesha* comes in more flavours. Food here is recommended, though portions are on the snacky side.

**Jazz Up** (Map pp118-19; Nile Hilton, 1113 Corniche el-Nil, Downtown) The ground-floor bar in the Nile Hilton is an odd mix of wood paneling and white vinyl, as well as salsa nights (Sunday and Friday) and the occasional live band (Thursday).

**Hard Rock Café** (Map p148; ☎ 2532 1281; Grand Hyatt Cairo, Corniche el-Nil, Garden City; ☎ noon-4am) Exactly what you'd expect from the global chain.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Western-style clubs, cinemas that screen English-language films and five-star cabarets with floorshows abound in Cairo. Live music is somewhat more limited, but whether you're in for rock, local folk or jazz, it can be a welcoming scene because it's relatively small.

Theatre is mainly in Arabic, so not accessible to many travellers.

## Nightclubs

There aren't enough clubbers in Cairo to pack more than one place at a time, so what's hot varies according to the night of the week. Occasionally a club will host a special one-off party for which a ticket is required; they're free or very cheap, but the challenge is getting one. Keep an ear to the ground, and ask likely Egyptians you meet. Many places start as restaurants and only shift into club mode after midnight, at which point the door policy gets stricter. Big packs of men are always a no-no – go in as mixed a group as you can, and ideally make reservations.

**Absolute** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2579 6512; Corniche el-Nil, Bulaq; minimum charge ££75; ☎ 1pm-3am) One of Cairo's most elite clubs but also one of its best, Absolute absolutely requires reservations. With a big dance floor and solid DJs, it draws a flashy crowd for which bottle service is the norm. If you're not up for the full club scene, you can lounge at adjacent Sangria restaurant (p164).

**Latex** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2578 0444; Nile Hilton, 1113 Corniche el-Nil, Downtown; ☎ 10pm-4am) The grande dame of Cairo's club scene (formerly known as Jackie's), the Nile Hilton's basement party zone still keeps up with the times. The music is always some variation on house, with the occasional Arabic pop hit thrown in, and the crowd is largely 20-somethings. There's a ££100 minimum Tuesday through Friday, except for ladies on Wednesday.

**Club 35** (Map p148; ☎ 3573 8500; Four Seasons First Residence, 35 Sharia Giza, Giza; ☎ 7pm-3am) If you go before midnight, the place doesn't look all that promising, as it's still in soft-jazz Asian-fusion-bistro mode. But later, the light show gets livelier, as does the music, and it rivals Latex for weekend crowds.

Additionally the Hard Rock Café (left) often has a DJ spinning discs, and some kind of dance scene.

## Cinemas

For what's showing, check the listings in *Al-Ahram Weekly* or online at [www.yallabina.com](http://www.yallabina.com); cinemas usually have four or five sessions a day, some starting at 10am and or as late as 12.30am. Tickets typically cost around ££25, and can be cheaper at daytime sessions (when more women attend

**RAMY HABEED**

*Director and co-founder of Kotobarabia.com, the first Arabic e-publishing house in the Middle East.*

**How long have you lived in Cairo?**

Three years. I moved here in 2004 from Japan.

**Whoa – major change!**

Yeah, but I love Cairo. I like not knowing what the day will bring. And the average Egyptian is really friendly. I find myself striking up random conversations with people on the street – a good way of dealing with the claustrophobia. Anyway, I'm half Egyptian, and growing up I came to Cairo every summer to visit my family. It's amazing how fast it grows and changes.

**Anything big recently?**

The yellow cabs – what a step forward! The old black-and-white cabs have no meters, no air-conditioning, and, if you're really unlucky, no door handles. Each ride ends with an epic discussion as to exactly how much the ride is worth versus the complications of traffic, old cars and potential flat tires. But there are still plenty of those around, because the Egyptian mechanic is a MacGyver of automotive technology. Egyptians can fix anything! So if you still want the real Egyptian experience – haggle away!

**What's your favourite monument in Cairo?**

Seeing how I'm in publishing, I suppose my favourite monument is the statue of Naguib Mahfouz in Midan Sphinx [in Mohandiseen]. It was erected not long after he won the Nobel Prize.

**And your favourite restaurant?**

It's a tie between Gad (p163) and **Makani** (9 Sharia Amr, Mohandiseen; ☎ 8am–2am). Gad is real modern Egyptian fast food. You can get traditional *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* sandwiches, or crazy concoctions such as French fries in a pita pocket smothered with tahini.

On the other end of the spectrum, there's Makani: a sandwich and sushi delicatessen. I know that sandwiches and sushi don't exactly mix, but Makani has found the balance, along with a nice atmosphere. And you must try the carrot cake – it's the best I've ever had anywhere. And it has wireless.

**Is there anywhere you go just to relax – and not use the computer?**

Without a doubt, Nomad (p171). It's a rooftop bar with an amazing view – a great place to sit back, have a *sheesha* and enjoy the city from a peaceful, bird's-eye perspective.

But I also like Cilantro (p168). It's a home-grown coffeehouse that's positioned to compete with the Starbucks and Costas of the world. I would love to see something like Cilantro in other parts of the world, to see an Egyptian company compete on an international scale.

**What's your favourite phrase in Egyptian colloquial?**

*Kubbar dimaaghik*. It literally means 'Make your head bigger', but the connotation is 'Chill out' or 'Relax', to defuse a situation. Whenever I'm in an uncomfortable situation, I just say this, and people usually start to laugh and ask me how I learned the phrase – they're really surprised, because I'm often mistaken for a foreigner. By the end of the discussion, we're usually best friends.

shows at the lower-rent places). Also check schedules at the many cultural centres (p112). The following regularly screen English-language films:

**Cairo Sheraton Cinema** (Map p148; ☎ 3760 6081; Cairo Sheraton, Midan al-Galaa, Doqqi) The closest Cairo has to an art-house cinema.

**Cinema Karim I & II** (Map p122; ☎ 2592 4830; 15 Sharia Emad ad-Din, Downtown) Cheap tickets and action flicks make it popular with young males (not a place for unaccompanied women). The entrance to Karim II is around the corner.

**Cinema Metro** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 2393 7061; 35 Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown) Once Cairo's finest, now one of its scruffiest.



**Cinema Tahrir** (Map p148; ☎ 3335 4726; 122 Sharia Tahrir, Doqqi) Comfortable, modern cinema where single females shouldn't receive hassle.

**Citystars Centre** (off Map pp110-11; ☎ 2480 2013; Sharia Omar ibn Khattab, Nasr City) A 13-screen megaplex at the mall.

**Good News Grand Hyatt** (Map p148; ☎ 2532 2800; Grand Hyatt Annex, Nile Corniche, Garden City) Three screens. Occasionally subtitles Arabic films in English.

## Live Music & Theatre

For theatre and classical and folk music schedules, check the 'ET Calendar' in *Egypt Today* or the *Egyptian Gazette*; for bands, pick up a copy of the *Croc* monthly. Also keep an ear out for the SOS Music Festival ([www.sosmusicfestival.com](http://www.sosmusicfestival.com)), a periodic free show of local bands that draws a devoted crowd.

**Cairo Opera House** (Map p148; ☎ 2739 8144; Gezira Exhibition Grounds, Gezira) Of the opera complex's five halls, performances by the Cairo Opera and the Cairo Symphony Orchestra tend to be held in its Main Hall while recitals, theatre and dance from Egypt and the rest of the world in its Small Hall, Gomhouria Theatre, Arab Music Institute and an open-air theatre. Jacket and tie are required by males for Main Hall performances (travellers have been known to borrow them from staff). Programmes are available at the information window (right of the main entrance).

**Cairo Jazz Club** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3345 9939; [www.cairojazzclub.com](http://www.cairojazzclub.com); 197 Sharia 26th of July, Agouza; ☎ 5pm-3am) The city's liveliest stage, with modern Egyptian folk, electronica, Oriental fusion, and more seven nights a week, usually starting around 10pm. You must book a table ahead (online is easiest), and no-one under 25 is admitted.

**After Eight** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2574 0855; [www.after8egypt.com](http://www.after8egypt.com); 6 Sharia Qasr el-Nil, Downtown; minimum charge Fri-Wed ££60, Thu ££90; ☎ 8pm-2am) A funky, poorly ventilated venue that gets packed for everything from jazz trios to a Frank Sinatra impersonator to the wildly popular DJ Dina, who mixes James Brown, '70s Egyptian pop and the latest cab-driver favourites; the clientele is equally eclectic. Reserve online (the website's style in no way reflects the club's).

**Makan** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2792 0878; [www.egyptmusic.org](http://www.egyptmusic.org); 1 Sharia Saad Zaghloul, Mounira) The Egyptian Center for Culture & Art runs this intimate space dedicated to traditional music. Don't miss the Mazaher ensemble, performing the

traditional women's *zar*, a sort of musical trance and healing ritual (usually Wednesday, 9pm; ££20).

**El Genaina Theatre** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2362 6748; [www.mawred.org](http://www.mawred.org); Al-Azhar Park, Sharia Salah Salem, Islamic Cairo) The park's 300-seat open-air theatre hosts touring Western artists, stars from the Middle East and locals; shows are often free (though you must pay the park entrance fee).

Also check the schedule at El Sawy Culture Wheel (p112), where two concert halls host the city's bigger rock and jazz bands. Jazz Up (p171) has bands one or two nights a week, and the Citadel (p135) often has free major concerts in the summer as well.

## Dance

### BELLY DANCING

If you see only one belly dancer in your life, it had better be in Cairo, the art form's true home. The best dancers perform at Cairo's five-star hotels, usually to an adoring crowd of wealthy Gulf Arabs. Shows typically begin around midnight, although the star might not take to the stage until 2am or later. Admission is steep; expect to shell out upwards of ££250, which includes food, but not drinks. Cairo's divas are often getting in tiffs with their host hotels or their managers, so their venues may change from what's given below.

At the other end of the scale, you can watch a less nuanced expression of the art form for just a few pounds at several clubs along Sharia Alfay in Downtown. They're seedy, the mikes are set on the highest reverb, and most of the dancers have the appearance and grace of amateur wrestlers. But it can be fun, especially if you can maintain the right level of inebriation – buzzed enough to join in the dancing onstage (a perk if you shower the dancer and the band with enough ££5 notes) but not so out of it that you fall for the myriad over-charging tactics, such as fees for unordered snacks and even napkins (expect to pay about ££15 for a Stella, after about ££5 cover charge). Like the hotels, nothing happens till after midnight.

**Haroun al-Rashid** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 3795 7171; Semiramis InterContinental, Corniche el-Nil, Garden City; ☎ 11pm-4am Tue-Thu & Sun) This old-fashioned-looking five-star club – all red curtains and white marquee lights – is where the famous Dina undulates (though often not on Wednesday nights – call to check).

**Casablanca** (Map p148; ☎ 3336 9700; Midan al-Galaa, Doqqi) Located in the Cairo Sheraton, where Soraya is the star.

**Palmyra** (Map pp118-19; off Sharia 26th of July, Downtown; admission E£6) The furthest on the 'other end of the scale' is Palmyra, a cavernous, dilapidated 1950s dancehall in an alley off Sharia 26th of July. It has a full Arab musical contingent, belly dancers who get better the more money is thrown at them, and an occasional singer or acrobat. In addition to the entrance fee, there's a minimum charge of E£30, which basically covers a beer and a *sheesha*.

**Scheherazade** (Map pp118-19; 1 Sharia Alf, Downtown; admission E£5) Worth visiting for the gorgeous interior alone, all Orientalist fantasia complete with red velvet drapes – this doesn't inspire a classier air in the patrons, however.

**Nile Maxim** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2728 3000; opposite Cairo Marriott, Sharia Saray al-Gezira, Zamalek; minimum charge E£170; ☎ sailings at 7.30pm & 10.45pm) The best of the Nile cruise boats, run by the Marriott, is a relatively economical way to see a big-name star such as Randa or Asmahan, along with an à la carte menu. Go for the later sailing, as the show is less rushed.

## SUFI DANCING

**Al-Tannoura Egyptian Heritage Dance Troupe** (☎ 2512 1735; admission free; ☎ 7pm winter, 8pm Mon, Wed & Sat summer) Egypt's only Sufi dance troupe – far more raucous and colourful than white-clad Turkish dervishes – puts on a mesmerising performance at the Wikala of Al-Ghuri (p133). It's a great opportunity to see one of the medieval spaces in use; arrive about an hour ahead to secure a seat.

## SHOPPING

Between the mountains of chintzy souvenirs and the over-eager hustlers trying to sell them to you over endless glasses of tea, it's tempting to keep your wallet firmly shut in Cairo. But then you'd be missing out on some of Egypt's most beautiful treasures. The trick is knowing where to look. Though they're touristy and stocked with goods from China, the tiny shops of Khan al-Khalili (p128) do yield a few specific treasures, such as gorgeous silks, reviewed here. Downtown along Sharia Qasr el-Nil is more for checking out street fashion in the mass-market shops. Zamalek is the best place to actually buy – its shady streets have some gem boutiques for housewares and clothing, and not all of them are as expensive as you'd

expect – look especially on Sharia al-Marashly and Sharia Mansour Mohammed. For upscale imported goods (and all the people-watching that affords), Mohandiseen is the place to go, especially along Sharia Suleiman Abaza and Sharia Abd al-Hamid Lotfy.

## Antiques & Interiors

Shop-owners have begun commissioning stylish home items from traditional artisans, with some beautiful results. As for antiques, some are stratospherically priced – but neat Egypt-specific items such as old advertising signs are often a deal. Sikket al-Badistan, the central east-west route through Khan al-Khalili, is home to several notable antiques shops.

**Tao Gallery** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 0480; 15A Sharia al-Marashly, Zamalek; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Fun, not-too-pricey home-décor items, such as custom-printed window sheers, Arabic movie posters, even (terrorist-kitsch alert!) decoupage coasters featuring the bearded mug of Hamas' Sheikh Nasrallah.

**Loft** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 6931; www.loftegypt.com; 12 Sharia Sayyed al-Bakry, Zamalek; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Sat) In a rambling apartment, this eclectic store stocks Oriental curiosities from small brass candlesticks to antique divans. Here's where to pick up large painted tabletop trays like those in chic restaurants around town.

**Ahmed El Dabba & Sons** (Map p129; ☎ 2590 7823; 5 Sikket al-Badistan, Islamic Cairo) The most respected antiques dealer in Khan al-Khalili is a warren of Louis XV furniture and glass cases filled with gleaming jewellery and snuff boxes. This is where the treasures stashed in 19th-century Downtown apartments all end up.

**Makan** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2738 2632; www.makan.egypt.com; 4 Sharia Ismail Mohammed, Zamalek; ☎ 10am-11pm) This cool housewares shop features clever applications of traditional crafts – check out the lights made from tambourines. Some items are minimalist; others, like the painted wood picture frames, have a folk-art aesthetic. Upholstery fabric is sold by the yard.

**Noubi Nabil** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 3233; 106-126 Sharia 26th of July, Zamalek; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-10pm) Elephant sculptures guard the entrance to this corner shop, a trove of antique silk rugs, cut-glass bowls, old silver and fine china. The overflow is in a smaller place just across 26th of July.

Also try the following:

**Home & Beyond** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 012 329 7830; 17 Sharia Mansour Mohammed, Zamalek) Arabic house-

number tiles, striped lampshades and blocks of fragrant *ambar* – a musky moisturizer.

**King Saleh Bazaar** (Map p129; ☎ 2589 2747; 80 Sharia al-Muizz li-Din Allah, Islamic Cairo) Immediately south of the Madrasa & Mausoleum of Qalaun. The more you look through the dust, the more pops out.

**Nostalgia** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2737 0880; 6 Sharia Zakaria Rizk, Zamalek) From framed Arabic ad prints to escargot forks.

## Books & CDs

For new books, look under Information (p109). **L'Orientale/L'Orientaliste** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2576 2440; www.orientalecairo.com; Shop 757, Basement, Nile Hilton Shopping Mall, Corniche el-Nil, Downtown; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) is a great outlet for rare books on Egypt and the Middle East, as well as lithographs, maps and engravings. There's a second shop at 15 Sharia Qasr el-Nil. The 50 or so stalls at **Ezbekiyya Book Market** (Map pp118-19;zbekiyya Gardens, Downtown) have the occasional treasures, but browsing the messy piles is a chore.

The latest hit played in taxi cabs might be available only on cassette; look for sidewalk kiosks selling these. **Sawt al-Qahira** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2392 1916; Midan Opera, Downtown; ☎ 10am-11pm), in an arcade set back from Sharia al-Gomhurriya, stocks the classic crooners on CD. The best music section outside the malls is at **Diwan** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 2582; 159 Sharia 26th of July, Zamalek; ☎ 9am-11.30pm).

## Carpets & Rugs

Unlike Morocco, Turkey or Iran, Egypt has no rich tradition of Oriental carpet weaving. The standard products are brown striped camel-hair Bedouin rugs, and flat-weave kilims with geometric patterns – all stocked by numerous shops in the tight squeeze of alleys behind the Mosque of Al-Ghuri, across the road from Khan al-Khalili, or some of the places mentioned in the Handicrafts & Souvenirs section (p176). The rugs and wall hangings at Wissa Wassef Art Centre (p151) are in a class by themselves. Super-elegant **El Kahhal Carpets** (Map p129; ☎ 2590 9128; Sikket al-Badistan, Islamic Cairo; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat), in the khan, has the finest imported stock in the city, with both antiques and new made-to-order designs.

## Clothing & Jewellery

Egyptian-cotton clothing can be a good buy. For real local fashion (mostly polyester), cruise the main avenues Downtown; the arcade be-

tween Sharia Abdel Khalek Sarwat and Sharia Adly just west of Midan Opera is crammed with hijabs in every pattern imaginable. For jewellery, gold and silver is sold by weight (check the daily rate in the *Egyptian Gazette*), plus a little extra for labour; antique silver can be quite expensive (and unfortunately is easily faked). The centre of Khan al-Khalili is still the main district for gold and silver, and where you should go for a custom cartouche with your name in hieroglyphics. The stores listed here offer something a bit different.

**Mix & Match** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 4640; 11 Sharia Brazil, Zamalek; ☎ 10am-8pm) Well made and locally designed, these separates for women in wool, silk and cotton are reasonably priced and often feature subtle Middle Eastern details. A branch two blocks south, at 11 Sharia Hassan Sabry, stocks larger sizes.

**Mobaco** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2738 2790; 8 Sharia Ahmed Sabry, Zamalek) Not as interesting as Mix & Match in design, but inexpensive and in a great range of colours. There's always a flattering long cotton or linen skirt available, and men can choose from a rainbow of polo shirts sporting a camel logo. There are stores throughout the city, including at the Nile Hilton and the Semiramis.

**Atlas** (Map p129; ☎ 2591 8833; abdelazizsalah@hotmail.com; Sikket al-Badistan, Islamic Cairo) In business since 1948, the Atlas family specialises in silk. Sold by the yard, it's both beautiful and sturdy, and holds its dye better than anything you might find for less. Caftans and slippers are also available, and you can order custom clothing with any of the fabrics.

**Sami Amin** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2738 1837; www.sami-amin.com; 15A Sharia al-Mansour Mohammed, Zamalek) Cool chunky brass-and-enamel jewellery as well as leather bags, belts and shoes, many imprinted with tribal patterns. And all at bargain prices – bags and sandals start at just ££33.

**Friction** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 9204; 18B Sharia al-Marashly, Zamalek; ☎ 11am-8.30pm Sat-Thu) Friction's shop-window mannequins scandalise with underwear-as-outerwear; inside, it's club music and cool clothes from Turkish and Scandinavian designers – still nothing you could wear on the street here, but welcome at better night spots.

**Nagada** (Map p148; ☎ 3748 6663; www.nagada.net; 13 Sharia Refa'a, Doqqi; ☎ 10am-6.30pm) Colour-saturated, handwoven silks, cottons and linens are the mainstay of this luxe shop in a grand villa – buy by the yard, or in boxy, drapery women's

and men's apparel. There's also very pretty handmade pottery from Al-Fayoum.

**Beymen** (Map p148; ☎ 2791 7000; Four Seasons Hotel at Nile Plaza, 1089 Corniche el-Nil, Garden City; ☎ 10am-11pm) This Turkish department store is the last word in luxury shopping in Cairo, stocking Prada et al alongside its chic house brand. Disproportionately huge selection of scarves and perfume, and great people-watching in the café.

**Dina Maghawry** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 012 322 3896; www.dinamaghawry.com; 1st fl, 16 Sharia Sayyed al-Bakry, Zamalek; ☎ 11am-9.30pm Sat-Thu, 3-9.30pm Fri) This boutique showcases the local designer's delicate cascading necklaces trimmed with semiprecious stones and other elegant but modern pieces. Not cheap, but gorgeous work.

Both Nomad (below) and Oum El Dounia (right) sell chunky Bedouin-style silver.

## Handicrafts & Souvenirs

These fixed-price shops often stock familiar Egyptian crafts for not much more than you'd pay in Khan al-Khalili, and often with better quality. Expect *muski* glass (gem-coloured but fragile), inlaid wood and papyrus. For *sheesha* fittings, visit the copper district just north of the Madrasa & Mausoleum of Barquq, or Sharia Ahmad Mahir Pasha east of Bab Zuweila.

**Egypt Crafts Center/Fair Trade Egypt** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 5123; www.fairtradeegypt.org; 1st fl, 27 Sharia Yehia Ibrahim, Zamalek; ☎ 9am-8pm Sat-Thu, 10am-6pm Fri) Crafts sold here are produced in income-generating projects throughout the country. Items for sale include Bedouin rugs, hand-woven cotton, pottery from Al-Fayoum and beaded jewellery from Aswan. The cotton bedcovers and shawls are particularly lovely, and prices are excellent.

**Nomad** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 1917; 1st fl, 14 Sharia Saray al-Gezira, Zamalek; ☎ 10am-7pm) This gem of a place specialises in jewellery and traditional Bedouin crafts and costumes, particularly from Siwa. Standout items include appliquéd tablecloths and cushion covers, dresses made in the oases, woven baskets, silk slippers and chunky silver jewellery. To find it, go past the Egyptian Water Works office to the 1st floor and ring the bell. There are smaller branches in the Cairo Marriott (Map pp144-5), Grand Hyatt (Map p148) and Nile Hilton (Map pp118-19) hotels.

**Abd El Zaher** (Map p133; ☎ 2511 8041; www.abdelzaher.binding.com; 31 Sharia Mohammed Abduh, Islamic Cairo;

☎ 11am-9.30pm) Cairo's last working bookbinder also makes beautiful leather- and oil-paper-bound blank books, photo albums and diaries. Free gold monogramming is included in the prices, which are heartbreakingly low, considering the work that goes into them. Getting your own book bound starts around ££15 and takes a few days.

**Oum El Dounia** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2393 8273; 1st fl, 3 Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown; ☎ 10am-7pm) At a great central location, Oum El Dounia sells an attractive range of locally made glassware, Bedouin jewellery, cotton clothes, bags, embroidered shawls and light fittings. It also stocks a small range of maps, postcards and English- and French-language books about Cairo and Egypt, as well as CDs.

**Al-Khatoun** (Map p133; ☎ 2514 7164; www.alkhatoun.net; 3 Sharia Mohammed Abduh, Islamic Cairo; ☎ 11am-9pm) This gorgeous store stocks an ever-changing array of very chic light-fittings, alabaster pots, tablecloths, jewellery, clothes and shawls, all designed and made in Egypt.

**Khan Misr Touloun** (Map p137; ☎ 2365 2227; Midan Ibn Tulun; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) This shop opposite the Mosque of Ibn Tulun is stacked with a desirable jumble of crafts from all over Egypt, including wooden chests, jewellery, pottery, puppets, scarves and even hip T-shirts emblazoned with popular Egyptian product logos.

**Said Delta Papyrus Center** (Map p133; ☎ 2512 0747; 3rd fl, 21 Sharia al-Muizz li-Din Allah, Islamic Cairo; ☎ 10am-9pm) A spin-off of Dr Ragab (the father of quality papyrus painting), Said has a vast selection, from ancient Egyptian scenes to cool Cairo skylines. He'll do a cartouche with your name done in about half an hour. Prices are negotiable, and quite reasonable, provided you arrive without a tout. (The shop is up two flights and down a dim hallway.)

**Wady Craft Shop** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2738 0826; All Saints Anglican Cathedral, 5 Sharia Michel Lutfallah, Zamalek; ☎ 9am-5pm) This charity store next to the Marriott Hotel sells cotton bags, aprons, tablecloths, inlay coasters and silk-screened tea towels – all work done by organisations of refugees, prisoners and others in need of aid.

**Mahmoud Abd El Ghaffar** (Al Wikalah; Map p129; ☎ 2589 7443; 73 Sharia Gawhar al-Qaid, Islamic Cairo) One of the best dealers in belly-dancing outfits in the city; the really nice stuff is upstairs. Look for the entrance down a little lane just off the main street.

Appliqué work is one case where it can be more rewarding to head to the source: the

tent-makers bazaar, Sharia al-Khayamiyya (p134), where scores of shops sell intricately embroidered bedspreads, pillow covers and wall hangings, as well as canvas-weight striped fabric and thinner stamped cotton (££7 per metre).

## Household Linens

Egyptian cotton is a badge of quality in sheets and towels, though little of it is turned into fine products locally. An exception is the gorgeous hand-embroidered sheets and robes by Malaika at **Mounaya** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2736 4827; 16 Sharia Mohammed Anis, Zamalek; ☎ 11am-8pm Mon-Thu & Sat, noon-8pm Fri). You can also find decent linens for less than you'd pay at home at the frumpy **Galerie Hathout** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2393 6782; 114 Sharia Mohammed Farid, Downtown).

## Malls, Souqs & Markets

Street markets in Cairo are both social and functional – a great place for bargains and interacting with locals in a lively public space. Cairenes are also crazy for malls, and a new one opens every couple of years, inevitably drawing the crowds and shops away from the older places.

**Souq al-Gomaa** (Friday Market; Map pp110-11; Islamic Cairo; ☎ 6am-noon Fri) In the Southern Cemetery south of the Citadel, this sprawling weekly market is all the craziness of a medieval bazaar in a modern setting: under a highway flyover, expect new bicycles, live donkeys, toilets and broken telephones. Savvy pickers can find some great antiques and vintage duds. Go before 10am, when the crush of people can get overwhelming. You'll need a taxi to get there (about ££12 from Downtown); tell the driver 'Khalifa', the name of the neighbourhood.

**Souq al-Fustat** (Map p124; Sharia Mar Girgis, Old Cairo; ☎ 8am-4pm) A new market built for tourists, this is nonetheless a nice collection of shops, with vendors of antique carpets, modern ceramics, richly embroidered *galabiyyas* and wooden toys along with branches of Sami Amin (p175) and the bookbinders Abd El Zaher (opposite). Sales pressure is pleasantly low.

**Wikalat al-Balah** (Souq Bulaq, Bulaq Market; Map pp144-5; north of Sharia 26th of July, Bulaq) The main draw is secondhand clothing, mostly well organised, clean and with marked prices (especially on Sharia al-Wabur al-Fransawi). Further in, you'll find good textiles, car parts and military surplus.

**Citystars Centre** (off Map pp110-11; ☎ 2480 0500; Sharia Omar ibn Khattab, Nasr City; ☎ 11am-1am) Cairo's most lavish mall is the current landing spot for every new international chain, from Starbucks to Wagamama. There's a kids' theme park and a big cinema. It's about 12km east of Downtown – a ££12 taxi ride.

**Arkadia Mall** (Map pp144-5; Corniche el-Nil, Bulaq; ☎ 10am-11pm) The biggest mall in central Cairo, with bars and a top-floor arcade. All the usual international brands, plus a good food court.

## Perfume

Cairenes adore scent, and this is one of the few cities where you'll find perfumers occupying kiosks in the subway – perfectly good (and nonpushy) places to shop, though you can find somewhat better quality at a few specialists, such as **Karama Perfumes** (Map p129; ☎ 2590 2386; 112 Sharia al-Azhar, Islamic Cairo), which is very popular with locals for scent copies as well as its own blends and basic essences; look for the open-sided corner shop at the corner of Sharia al-Muizz. At less reputable places, 'essences' are diluted with vegetable oil – be sceptical if a salesman rubs the scent furiously into your skin while applying a sample.

## Spices

Spices are a good buy, particularly *kuzbara* (coriander), *kamoon* (cumin), *shatta* (chilli), *filfil iswid* (black pepper) and *karkadeh* (hibiscus). Buy whole spices, never ground, for freshness, and skip the 'saffron' – it's really safflower and tastes of little more than dust. The shops that sell these items also deal in henna, soaps and herbal treatments. One interesting place is **Abd ar-Rahman Harraz** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 2512 6349; 1 Midan Bab al-Khalq, Islamic Cairo), the sheikh of herbalist and medicinal plants; look for the neglected taxidermy in the window on the corner. **Attara Ahl al-Beit** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 4955; Sharia Hassan Assem, Zamalek) is a small but excellent shop, just west of Sharia Shagaret ad-Durr. The streets around Midan Falaki also contain several large shops, as does the southwest corner of Khan al-Khalili.

## Tailoring

Given cheap labour and skilled tailors, Cairo is a good place to get a bespoke suit. Bring magazine clips of suit designs, as local tailors aren't always up on trends. You may also need to bring your own fabric (at least 3m for a jacket and a pair of pants, plus another metre



for extra pants). The best quality is at Salem (below); cheaper shops on Midan Opera sell Egyptian-made textiles. Allow three days to a week, plus another day for final adjustments.

**Orange Square** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 2735 2887; 4A Sharia Ibn al-Nabieh, Zamalek; ☎ noon-8pm) With books to select designs from and a decent stock of fabric, this trendy operation is the easiest place to get a suit made. But not the cheapest: prices start at ££1800.

**Samir El Sakka** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2392 6196; 31 Sharia Abdel Khalek Sarwat, Downtown; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 5.30-8.30pm Mon-Fri) This old-school tailor trained in Rome; he stocks a small selection of fabrics. Prices start around ££1000.

**Salem** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 3345 2232; 30 Sharia Libnan, Mohandiseen) The finest suit fabrics from England and Italy are available here.

**Osman Ahmed** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 012 331 8622; 18 Sharia Adly, Downtown; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat) As he doesn't speak English or stock fabrics, Mr Ahmed is the least convenient option, but his skills transcend the language barrier. He's used to foreign customers, and can work off a magazine photo.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

For international airfare details see p521; for domestic flights see p528. For information on airline offices in Cairo see p521.

### CAIRO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

For information on the airport see p180. For flight information call ☎ 0900 77777 from a landline in Egypt or ☎ 27777 from a mobile phone.

### EGYPTAIR OFFICES

**EgyptAir** Airport (☎ 2265 7256); Doqqi (Map p148; ☎ 2748 9122; Cairo Sheraton, Midan el-Galaa); Downtown (☎ 2391 9515; Midan Opera, Sharia al-Gomhuriyya); Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2393 0381; cnr Sharia Talaat Harb & Sharia al-Bustan); Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2392 7680; 6 Sharia Adly); Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2577 2410; Nile Hilton, 1113 Corniche el-Nil)

### Bus

Cairo's main bus station is **Cairo Gateway** (Mina al-Qahira, Turgoman Garage; Map pp110-11; Sharia al-Gizr, Bulaq), 1km northwest of the intersection of Sharia Galaa and Sharia 26th of July. It's a five-minute walk from the Orabi metro stop – or pay ££5 or so for a taxi from Tahrir or Talaat Harb. The flashy new station maintains sepa-

rate windows for each bus company, so you might have to do some comparison-shopping. It is advisable to advance-book most tickets, particularly for popular routes such as Sinai, Alexandria and Marsa Matruh in summer. Companies don't offer student discounts.

There are four other bus stations, less frequently used now that Cairo Gateway has been revamped to handle more traffic:

**Aboud** (Map pp110-11; Sharia El-Tir'a El-Boulakia, Shubra) is the starting point for buses to the Delta; shuttle taxis run between here and Midan Ramses (2km to the south), or you can walk east from the Rod al-Farag metro stop, about 800m.

El-Moneib is the small station where buses from Al-Fayoum terminate. It is located on the Giza corniche after Sharia al-Bahr al-Azam and just south of Dr Ragab's Pharaonic Village. A taxi will cost ££15 from Downtown, or you can walk from Sakiat Mekki metro station, about 800m.

Al-Mazah is in Heliopolis near the airport (a taxi will cost ££30, or you can take the Merghani line of the Heliopolis tram and walk a couple of blocks north). Some international services depart from here, and some other services stop here en route out of Cairo.

**Abbassiyya** (Sinai Station; Map pp110-11; Sharia Ramses, Abbassiyya) is where all of the services from Sinai used to arrive, and there's a very slim chance you might still get dropped here – it's about ££15 in a taxi to the centre.

### AROUND EGYPT

#### Alexandria & the Mediterranean Coast

From Cairo Gateway, **West & Mid Delta Bus Co** (☎ 2432 0049) travels to Alexandria (££21 to ££25, three hours) hourly at 45 minutes past the hour starting at 4.45am and running till 8.45pm; after that, departures go at 15 minutes past, 9.15pm to 1.15am. A couple of extra VIP-class buses run at 9.45am and 12.45pm. Services to Marsa Matruh (££50, five hours) leave at 7.30am, 8.15am, 10.45am, 3.15pm, 9.45pm and 11.30pm.

### Al-Fayoum

Buses and service taxis for Al-Fayoum (££6 to ££8, two hours) leave from El-Moneib station in Giza, as well as from Aboud, every half-hour 6am to 7pm. Fares on Thursday are ££1 more expensive. The buses stop en route at Midan el-Remaya after the Pyramids Rd and just before the Giza-Fayoum road.



## Sinai

All Sinai buses leave from Cairo Gateway, but return to Abbassiya, stopping at Al-Mazah en route.

**East Delta Travel & Tourism Co** (☎ 2574 2814) has services running to Sharm el-Sheikh (E£60 to E£70, seven hours) at 6.30am, 10am, 3pm, 7pm, 11pm, 11.30pm, midnight, 1am and 1.45am. Dahab (E£67 to E£80, nine hours) service goes at 7.15am, 1pm, 5pm and 12.15am.

There are three daily buses to Nuweiba (E£70 to E£80, eight hours) and Taba (E£70 to E£80, nine hours), leaving at 6.30am, 9.30am and 10.15pm. A daily service to St Katherine's Monastery leaves at 10.30am (E£37, 7½ hours).

**Superjet** (☎ 2290 9017) has services to Sharm el-Sheikh at 7.30am, 3.15pm, 10.45pm (all E£80, six hours) and 11.15pm (E£70).

## Suez Canal

All Suez buses depart from Cairo Gateway. East Delta Travel & Tourism Co travels to Ismailia (E£7.25, 2½ hours) and Suez (E£7.25, 1½ hours) every 30 minutes between 6am and 8pm. Buses to Port Said (E£16, three hours) leave every 30 minutes between 6am and 9.30am and then every hour until 9.30pm.

## Luxor & Aswan

**Upper Egypt Travel** (☎ 2576 0261) buses depart from Cairo Gateway. There's one daily service to Luxor (E£91, nine hours) at 5pm and 9pm; the 5pm bus goes on to Aswan (E£91, 12 hours). You're much better off getting the train.

## Red Sea

Superjet departs from Cairo Gateway for Hurghada (E£60, six hours) at 7.30am, 2.30pm and 11.45pm.

Upper Egypt Travel & Tourism Co runs to Hurghada (E£56 to E£61, six hours) departing at 8am, 9.30am, noon, 1.30pm, 3pm, 5pm, 6.30pm, 8pm, 9pm, 10pm, 11pm, 11.30pm, 12.30am and 1am. The 1.30pm, 5pm, 6.30pm, 8pm, 9pm and 10pm services go on to Safaga (E£71, 7½ hours).

There are Upper Egypt Travel services running to Al-Quseir (E£76, nine hours) at 1.30pm, 6.30pm, 8pm, 10pm and 11pm. The 1.30pm, 6.30pm, 8pm and 11pm services go on to Marsa Alam (E£86, 10½ hours).

## Western Oases

All Western Oases buses leave from Cairo Gateway. Note that to get to Siwa you must take a bus to Alexandria or Marsa Matruh, and then another onwards. For journeys to the oases take food and water as sometimes these buses don't stop anywhere useful for breaks.

There are three Upper Egypt Bus Co services per day to Bahariya (E£25, four hours) and Dakhla (E£56, 10 hours) at 7am, 8am and 6pm. The 7am and 6pm buses stop in Farafra (E£40, seven hours). Another bus runs to Al-Kharga (E£51, eight hours) at 9.30pm and 10pm.

## INTERNATIONAL

For information about buses to Libya, Israel and Jordan see p524.

## Service Taxi

Most service taxis depart from lots around Ramses Station and Midan Ulali (see Map p122). Delta and Suez services leave from just north of Midan Ulali, east of Sharia Orabi, running to destinations including Suez (E£7, one hour), Ismailia (E£8, 1½ hours) and Port Said (E£15, two hours).

Service taxis for Alexandria (E£17, 2½ to three hours) leave from south of Ramses Station (Map122), and one large bus (E£17) waits in the skinny lane just behind. Both depart every hour or so; the bus has air-conditioning.

## Train

**Ramses Station** (Mahattat Ramses; Map p122; ☎ 2575 3555; Midan Ramses) is Cairo's main train station. It has a **left luggage office** (Map p180; per piece per day E£2.50; ☎ 24hr), a **post office** (Map p180; ☎ 8am-8pm), ATMs, a pharmacy and a **tourist information office** (Map p180; ☎ 9am-7pm).

For general details about the types of trains and tickets available, including student discounts, see p533. Also try [www.egypttrail.gov.eg](http://www.egypttrail.gov.eg), which may be running fully by the time you read this.

## ALEXANDRIA

The best trains running between Cairo and Alexandria are the air-conditioned *Turbini* (1st/2nd class E£46/29, two hours). Second class in this train is about as good as 1st class in most others. They depart from Cairo at 8am, 2pm and 7pm. The next best trains are the *Espani* (Spanish) services, which cost the same as the *Turbini* and leave at 9am, noon, 5pm, 6pm and

10.30pm; the 9am and 6pm trains go direct, while the others stop at Tanta and sometimes Benha and Damanhur as well. Slower trains known as the *Francesse* (French; 1st/2nd class ££35/19, three hours) leave at 6am, 8.15am, 9.30am, 11am, 3.10pm, 4pm and 8pm. Student discounts are available on all tickets.

## LUXOR & ASWAN

The excellent overnight wagons-lit service to Upper Egypt departs from **Giza Station** (Map pp110–11), right next to the Giza metro stop; you can purchase tickets at the office in a trailer to the right of the station entrance, but the larger **Abela Egypt Sleeping Train Ticket Office** (Map p180; ☎ 2574 9274; [www.sleepingtrains.com](http://www.sleepingtrains.com); ☎ 8.30am–9pm) keeps longer hours and can take credit cards. Tickets for same-day travel must be purchased before 6pm, although in the high season (from about October to April) you should book several days in advance. The offices take payment in cash (euros or dollars only) or, for a small surcharge, credit card (Visa only).

The sleeping car services depart Giza at 8.25pm and 8.45pm daily. The former stops at fewer towns along the way, arriving in Luxor at 5am and in Aswan at 8.05am. The latter train gets in about 40 minutes behind. There is also a third sleeping car, departing at 9.10pm from Ramses and arriving at 6.30am in Luxor and 9.45am in Aswan; the agents try to steer people away from this train because it's slower, but it might be ideal if you want to sleep later. To either Luxor or Aswan,

tickets cost US\$60 per person one-way in a double cabin, US\$80 in a single cabin and US\$45 for kids ages four to 10. There are no student discounts. If you wish to get off at Luxor and continue to Aswan a few days later this must be specified when booking. The price includes an aeroplane-style dinner and breakfast.

Aside from the sleeping train, foreigners can travel to Luxor and Aswan only on train 980, departing Ramses daily at 7.30am; train 996, at 10pm; and train 1902, at 12.30am. To Luxor, 1st/2nd class fares are ££78/42; to Aswan, ££94/47. The trip to Luxor takes 10 hours; to Aswan, around 12. Student discounts of 30% are available in both classes. Tickets on these services can be bought from the windows beside platform 11 (Map p122), on the other side of the tracks from the main hall. You must buy your tickets at least a couple of days in advance.

## SUEZ CANAL

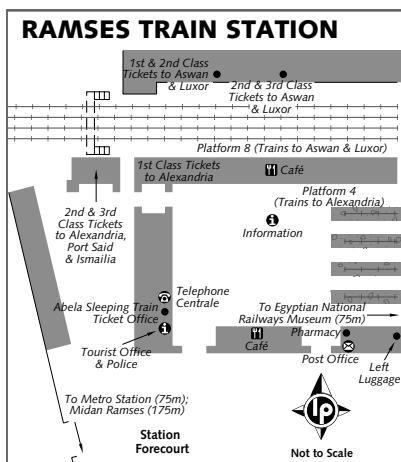
Trains to Port Said (2nd class ££18, 3½ to four hours) and Ismailia (££11 to ££14, 2½ to three hours) leave at 8.45am, 12.30pm, 2.35pm, 5.45pm (Ismailia only) and 7.10pm. For Suez (2nd class ££18, 2½ hours), there are departures at 6.30am, 9.20am, 1.10pm, 4.15pm and 6.45pm – but they go only from Ain Shams station, 15km northeast of Ramses but accessible via the metro. Delays on these routes are common, so going by bus is more efficient, and more comfortable than the non-air-con trains.

## GETTING AROUND

Overcrowded buses and minibuses are the most common form of transport for the majority of Cairenes, anyone with means takes taxis. By Western standards, taxis are very cheap, although the fare can mount up if you travel any distance – to the Pyramids, say – in which case the bus or the excellent metro can be better.

## To/From the Airport

**Cairo International Airport** ([www.cairo-airport.com](http://www.cairo-airport.com)) Terminal 1 (☎ 2265 5000); Terminal 2 (☎ 2265 2222) is on the northeastern fringes of Heliopolis, 20km northeast of the city centre. Terminal 1 services EgyptAir's international and domestic flights and Terminal 2 services all international carriers except Saudi Arabian Airlines. Under construction at the time of



writing, Terminal 3 (immediately adjacent to Terminal 2) is due to open sometime in 2008. You'll find ATMs and exchange booths in all arrivals halls.

## BUS

Don't believe anyone who tells you that there is no bus to the city centre – there are two, plus a minibus.

Air-con bus 356 (£2, plus £1 per large luggage item, one hour) runs at 20-minute intervals from 7am to midnight between Midan Abdel Moniem Riad (behind the Egyptian Museum) in central Cairo and Terminal 1 at the airport (as of 2007; service to both terminals may be restored by the end of 2008). Less comfortable options are minibus 27 (6am to midnight) and the 24-hour bus 400 (both 50pt).

If you arrive at Terminal 1, you'll see the bus parking area to the side of the arrivals hall, beyond the Air Mall. During the construction of Terminal 3, buses are bypassing Terminal 2, so the situation is trickier: catch a shuttle bus to the car park (clearly marked, running constantly), then cross the road and walk left to the bus shelter. Flag down any bus from here; it will carry on to Terminal 1, where you can change if necessary. By the time you read this, though, Terminal 3 may very well be complete, and presumably the buses will stop in the parking area between Terminals 2 and 3.

## TAXI

The going rate for a taxi from the airport to central Cairo is £45 to £60; unfortunately the metered yellow cabs (p183) are seldom seen at this end of the trip. (Heading to the airport from the centre, you can get one of these, or bargain a black-and-white down to £35, taking into account that drivers must pay £5 to enter the airport grounds.) It's better to get away from the arrivals hall and all the touts before talking to anyone, as walking away can sometimes bring the price down. Triple-check the agreed fare, as there is an irritating tendency for drivers to nod at what you say and claim a higher fare later.

If you don't want to bargain and would prefer a clean and comfortable ride, head for the limousine counter, where you can organise a car at a fixed price of £60 to £75. There's a lot to be said for this option, particularly after a long international flight.

## PLAYING CHICKEN IN CAIRO

It may sound silly, but the greatest challenge most travellers face in Egypt is crossing the street in Cairo. Roads are always frantically busy and road rules are something that the average Cairene has heard of, but only in jokes. Our advice is to position yourself so that one or more locals forms a buffer between you and oncoming traffic, and then cross when they do – they usually don't mind being used as human shields. Basically, you have to trust the cars will avoid you – never, ever hesitate once you've stepped off the sidewalk, and cross as if you own the road. But do it fast!

In the traffic-free early hours of the morning (when so many flights seem to arrive), the journey to central Cairo takes 20 minutes. At busier times of the day it can take an hour, with the worst traffic on Sharia Uruba.

## Bus & Minibus

Cairo is thoroughly served by a network of lumbering sardine-cans-on-wheels and smaller, shuttle-size minibuses (on which, theoretically, there's no standing allowed), but visitors will find only a few uses for them: they're good for a slow but cheap trip to the Pyramids or from the airport, but elsewhere you can travel more efficiently and comfortably by metro and/or taxi. Signs are in Arabic only, so you'll have to know your numerals. There is no known map of any of the city's bus routes.

Nonetheless, the view from a window seat on *any* bus is invariably fascinating. For general take-me-anywhere sightseeing, start at the central Midan Abdel Moniem Riad, behind the Egyptian Museum, where services leave for just about everywhere in the city; another major hub is Midan Ataba (see Map pp118–19). Just pick a neighbourhood and ask bystanders where to stand. Tickets cost between 50pt and £2 depending on distance and whether there's air-con (mint-green buses often have it). See above for additional bus tips.

## Car

Driving in Cairo can't in any way be recommended – not only is it harrowing, but you're only contributing to the already hideously

clogged streets. Lane markings are ignored and brakes are scorned; traffic lights are discretionary unless enforced by a policeman. At night some drivers use their headlights exclusively for flashing oncoming vehicles. But Cairo drivers do have road rules: they look out for each other and are tolerant of the type of driving that elsewhere might provoke road rage. Things only go awry when an inexperienced driver – like yourself, perhaps – is thrown into the mix.

For more information about cars and driving in Egypt see p529.

## HIRE

The only reason we expect you might rent a car is to drive directly out of the city. The major options:

**Avis** (www.avisegypt.com) Airport (☎ 2265 4249);

Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2579 2400; Nile Hilton, 1113 Corniche el-Nil)

**Budget** (☎ 2265 2395; Cairo Airport)

**Europcar** (☎ 2267 2439; Terminal 1, Cairo Airport)

**Hertz** (www.hertzeegypt.com) Airport (☎ 2265 2430);

Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 2575 8914; Ramses Hilton, Corniche el-Nil)

The rates of these big guns match international charges and finding a cheap deal with local dealers is virtually impossible. You are much better off organising via the web before you arrive.

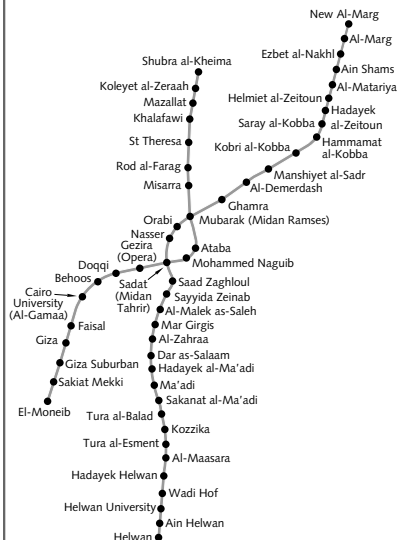
## Metro

The metro is blissfully efficient and the stations are cleaner than many of Cairo's other public places. It's also inexpensive and, outside rush hours (7am to 9am and 3pm to 6pm), not too crowded. Two lines are in operation, with a fabled third line perpetually 'under construction'. The 35-station main line stretches for 43km from the southern suburb of Helwan up to Al-Marg; the second line connects Shubra with Giza, stopping at the Cairo Opera House en route. See the Cairo Metro map, p182.

Metro stations are easily identified by signs with a big red 'M' in a blue star. Tickets cost E£1 to any stop; keep your ticket handy to feed into the turnstile on the way out. Trains run every five minutes or so from around 6am until 11.30pm.

The first (and often second) carriage on each train is reserved for women. If you want to ride in this carriage, make sure you're stand-

## THE CAIRO METRO



ing where the front of the train will stop, as it won't hang around long in the station.

## Microbus

Increasingly Cairenes use private minibuses (*meekro*) – small vans with 10 or so seats – rather than public buses and minibuses. No destinations are marked, which can make them hard to use at first. To catch a *meekro*, position yourself beside the road that leads where you want to go and, as one approaches, yell out your destination. At the same time, a kid is usually leaning off the running board yelling the *meekro*'s end terminal. If it's going where you want to go and there are seats free, it'll stop. Some microbus terminals are near Midan Ataba and in Sayyida Aisha, the closest transit hub to the Citadel. Fares vary according to distance, from 50pt to E£2, paid after you take your seat. This often requires passing your money to passengers ahead and receiving your change the same way (which is always done scrupulously).

## River Bus

The Downtown river-bus terminal (Map pp118-19) is at Maspero, on the Corniche

**KHALED AL-KHAMISI**

*Author of the 2007 best-seller Taxi, a collection of transcribed conversations with Cairo cab drivers. The English translation is available from Aflame Books in the UK ([www.aflamebooks.com](http://www.aflamebooks.com)).*

**You're a Cairo native, right?**

I was born in Downtown Cairo and have lived there my whole life – except for four years in France, for my PhD at the Sorbonne. But when you live in a city like Cairo you feel as if you have lived in it for thousands of years, and not only since your birth.

**How has the city changed?**

Cairo has become much uglier, dirtier and more polluted, and it has expanded more into squatter-type cities. The splendour that used to be has disappeared. Yet, in my eyes, Cairo remains the most beautiful city in the world.

**That's such a Cairene answer! What do you love best about it?**

Every corner of the city conveys the aura of the ancient Egyptian civilisation, the old Coptic civilisation, Islamic history and the enlightenment period after Mohammed Ali Pasha. In Cairo you walk in history.

**So what's your favourite historic building?**

The Sultan Hassan mosque (p137) – it's the Pyramids of Islamic architecture.

**How about restaurants and ahwas?**

About El Sid (p166) in Zamalek is my favourite because it serves great Egyptian food. As for *ahwas* (coffeehouses), definitely Fishawi's (p169) in Al-Hussein. Even though it has a touristy feel, it still has its beauty and its history. Every wall and every chair in it represent Egypt's memories.

**Do you have a place you like to relax?**

Al-Azhar Park (p140) is situated in the middle of the city and it overlooks the Citadel and Egypt's old mosques. You can actually breathe fresh air.

**Back to loving the city... I think a lot of visitors find it very hard to like at first. Any advice?**

Don't rely on your first impression of Cairo, where traffic lanes don't count, car horns are inescapable, people cross the street anywhere they like and buildings are left unfinished so the owners don't have to pay taxes. If you look at its details, it really is one of a kind.

If you feel like the city is too much for you, the solution is very simple: take a felucca ride (p154) on the Nile at sunset, and you will find yourself in a world parallel to paradise.

in front of the big round TV building. Boats depart at 8am, 2pm and 9pm for Manial, Giza and Misr al-Qadima (Old Cairo). The trip takes 50 minutes and the fare is ££1.

so it's important not to get drawn into a dialogue over the fare. Following are some sample fares from Downtown:

**Taxi**

Aside from the midafternoon rush, taxis are readily available and will come to a screeching halt with the slightest wave of your hand. Standard black-and-white taxis are unmetered, and navigating the system requires the confidence that you are paying adequately. Given how cheap the fares are, a cabbie can with a few words plant the seed of doubt that you've paid too little,

Destination	Fare (££)
Airport	30-35
(45-60 airport to Downtown)	
Cairo Gateway	5
The Citadel	12
Heliopolis	10-15
Khan al-Khalili	6
Midan Ramses	4
The Pyramids	25
Zamalek	6

### USEFUL METRO STATIONS

**Ataba** The closest stop to Khan al-Khalili.

**Gezira (Opera)** Underneath the Cairo Opera House, closest to Zamalek.

**Giza** Connected to the Giza train station, for departures to Upper Egypt.

**Mar Girgis** In the middle of Coptic Cairo.

**Mohammed Naguib** Close to the Abdeen Palace and the Museum of Islamic Art.

**Mubarak** Beneath Midan Ramses and Ramses Railway Station.

**Nasser** Sharia 26th of July and Sharia Ramses; closest to Downtown nightlife.

**Sadat** Beneath Midan Tahrir, close to the Egyptian Museum.

Hiring a taxi for a longer period runs between ££15 and ££25 per hour, depending on your bargaining skills. For information on black-and-white taxi etiquette see p532.

But there has been a life-changing shift recently, with the arrival of **yellow taxis** (☎ 19730,

16516), which can be called ahead, have air-conditioning and always use meters. There aren't enough of them to hail in the street, but you can always get one from the rank on the south side of Midan Tahrir. With a minimum charge of ££3.50, they're pricier than black-and-whites for short distances, but for a trip to the Pyramids, for instance, they can actually work out more cheaply (drivers still appreciate a 10% or so tip, though).

### Tram

Known to Cairenes, confusingly, as 'metros', rattly old-fashioned trams run from central Cairo to Heliopolis (25pt, 30 to 45 minutes). The terminal is just north of Midan Ramses (see Map p122); the line goes to Midan Roxy on the southern edge of Heliopolis (see Map p153), at which point it divides into three – Nouzha (through central Heliopolis on Sharia al-Ahram; sign written in red), Al-Mirghani (heads further east; sign in yellow) and Abdel Aziz Fahmy (west side, past Merryland; sign in blue).



# Egyptian Museum

The Egyptian Museum is one of the world's most important museums of ancient history and one of its great spectacles. Here, the treasures of Tutankhamun lie alongside the grave goods, mummies, jewellery, eating bowls and toys of Egyptians whose names are lost to history. To walk around the museum is to embark on an adventure through time.

The museum has its origins in the work of French archaeologist Auguste Mariette. The Egyptian ruler Mohammed Ali had banned the export of antiquities in 1835. In 1858, his successor Said Pasha allowed Mariette to create the Egyptian Antiquities Service and to base its activities around a new museum in Bulaq, which was moved to the current purpose-built museum in 1902.

The number of exhibits long ago outgrew the available space and the place is virtually bursting at the seams. Many stories are told about the museum's basement store, some of whose sculptures have now sunk into the soft flooring and are currently being excavated. A 'Grand Museum of Egypt' has been planned, close to the Pyramids in Giza, but progress has been very slow and it is unlikely to open before 2012. When it does, many of the museum's highlights will be relocated to a state-of-the-art facility whose advantages will include climate control, something sorely lacking in the current building.

Until 1996, museum security involved locking the door at night. When an enterprising thief stowed away overnight and helped himself to treasures, the museum authorities installed alarms and detectors, at the same time improving the lighting on many exhibits. Some improvements have since been made to display cases, but much of the collection remains in early-20th-century cases with poor or nonexistent labels. This, together with the enormity of the collection and the fact that it is arranged chronologically, means that one of the most rewarding ways of visiting is simply to walk around and see what catches your eye. There's no missing the highlights – they usually have crowds around them – but be sure to stop and see some of the lesser items, all of which will help bring the world of the pharaohs back to life.

The design for the planned Grand Museum of Egypt features a spectacular alabaster façade that will be illuminated at night.

## PRACTICALITIES

Don't hope to see everything in the **Egyptian Museum** (Map p187; ☎ 575 4319; [www.egyptianmuseum.gov.eg](http://www.egyptianmuseum.gov.eg); Midan Tahrir, Downtown; adult/student E£50/25; ☎ 9am-6.45pm) in one go. It simply cannot be done. Instead, plan on making at least two visits, maybe tackling one floor at a time, or decide on the things you absolutely must see and head straight for them. In peak season (much of winter and all public holidays), there's no best time to visit as the museum heaves with visitors throughout the day, although lunchtime and late afternoons can be a little quieter.

There are several queues to brave before entering, which in peak season often start to form an hour before opening time. At busy periods, the fivefold admission procedure is as painfully slow as it sounds:

- queue near the gate to pass through a metal detector and have your bags X-rayed
- queue at the booth to your right to buy a ticket
- queue at the cloak room on the left to leave bags, cameras and videos

Despite the enormous international fanfare surrounding the design for the planned Grand Museum of Egypt, the Egyptian government has yet to raise or allocate the estimated US\$500 million needed for its construction. You can follow its progress through the museum's website, [www.gem.gov.eg](http://www.gem.gov.eg).

- queue at the automatic ticket barriers to enter the building
- queue inside for a second metal detector and have your bags searched again.

Note that the **Royal Mummy Room** (adult/student £100/50, tickets from museum upper fl, beside Room 50; ☎ 9am–6.20pm) closes before the rest of the museum.

Official guides can usually be found near the gate or after the cloakroom and will take you around for upwards of £60 per hour. You can also rent audioguides inside (£30) in English, Arabic and French, although with at least three different numbering systems in use, it isn't always easy to match the item to the commentary.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM

www.egyptianmuseum.gov.eg is the Egyptian Museum's own website. It has a games section where you can play with falling lotuses, work with hieroglyphs and complete a Tutankhamun puzzle.

The following are our favourite, must-see exhibits, for which you need at least a half-day, but preferably a little more.

**Tutankhamun Galleries** (1st fl; p191)

**Old Kingdom Rooms** (Ground fl, Rooms 42, 37 & 32; opposite)

**Amarna Room** (Ground fl, Room 3; p189)

**Royal Tombs of Tanis** (1st fl, Room 2; p193)

**Royal Mummy Room** (1st fl, Room 56; p190)

**Graeco-Roman Mummies** (1st fl, Room 14; p193)

**Yuya & Thuyu Rooms** (1st fl, Room 43; p193)

**Ancient Egyptian Jewellery** (1st fl, Room 4; p193)

**Animal Mummies** (1st fl, Rooms 53 & 54; p194)

**Pharaonic Technology** (1st fl, Room 34; p193)

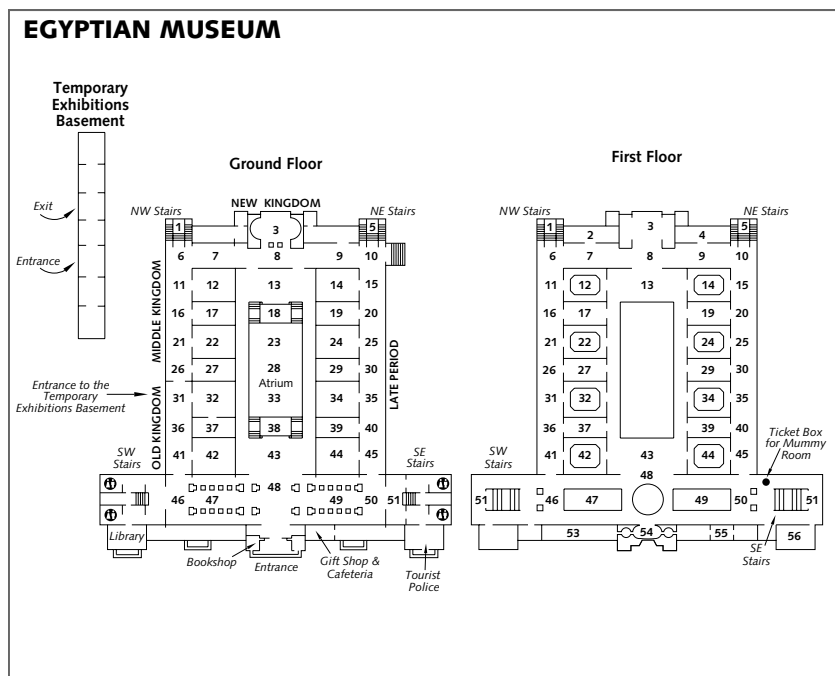
## MUSEUM TOUR: GROUND FLOOR

Before entering the museum, wander through the garden; to your left lies the **tomb of Mariette** (1821–81), with a statue of the man, arms folded, shaded under a spreading tree. Mariette's tomb is overlooked by an **arc of busts** of two dozen Egyptological luminaries including Champollion, who cracked the code of hieroglyphs; Maspero, Mariette's successor as director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service; and Lepsius, the pre-eminent 19th-century German Egyptologist.

The ground floor of the museum is laid out roughly chronologically in a clockwise fashion starting at the entrance hall. For room numbers see Map p187.

### ROOM 43 – ATRIUM

As you enter the museum, the central atrium is filled with a miscellany of large and small Egyptological finds. In the area before the steps lie some of the collection's oldest items. In the central cabinet No 8, the double-sided **Narmer Palette** is of great significance. Dating from around 3100 BC it depicts Pharaoh Narmer (also known as Menes) wearing the crown of Upper Egypt on one side of the palette, and the crown of Lower Egypt on the other, suggesting the first union of Upper and Lower Egypt under one ruler. Egyptologists take this as the birth of ancient Egyptian civilisation and his reign as the first of the 1st dynasty. This, then, is the starting point of more than 3000 years of Pharaonic history in which more than 170 rulers presiding over 30 dynasties and during which time almost everything in this building was fashioned. Seen like this, the Narmer Palette, found at the Temple of Horus in Kom al-Ahmar near Edfu, is the keystone of the Egyptian Museum.



## ROOM 48 – EARLY DYNASTIC PERIOD

In glass cabinet No 16 is the **limestone statue of Zoser (Djoser)**, the 3rd-dynasty pharaoh, whose chief architect Imhotep designed the revolutionary Step Pyramid at Saqqara. The statue, discovered in 1924 in its serdab (cellar) in the northeastern corner of the pyramid, is the oldest statue of its kind in the museum. The seated, near-life-size figure has lost its original inlaid eyes, but is still impressive in a tight robe and striped headcloth over a huge wig.

## ROOMS 47 & 46 – OLD KINGDOM

Look for the three exquisite **black schist triads** that depict the pharaoh Menkaure (Mycerinus), builder of the smallest of the three Pyramids of Giza, flanked either side by a female figure. The hardness of the stone makes the sculptor's skill all the greater and has helped ensure the triads' survival through the ages. The figure to the pharaoh's right is the goddess Hathor, while each of the figures on his left represents a nome (district) of Egypt, the name of which is given by the symbol above their head. These triads (plus one other that is not held by this museum) were discovered at the pharaoh's valley temple, just east of his pyramid at Giza.

## ROOMS 42, 37 & 32 – MASTERPIECES OF THE OLD KINGDOM

In the centre of Room 42 is one of the museum's masterpieces, a smooth, black, dioritic, larger-than-life-size **statue of Khafre (Chephren)**. The builder of the second pyramid at Giza sits on a lion throne, and is protected by the wings of the falcon god Horus. The choice of stone, which is harder than marble or granite, suggests the pharaoh's power and yet this is the

The Egyptian Government established the Service des Antiques de l'Égypte in 1835 to halt the plundering of archaeological sites and to arrange the exhibition of all the artefacts it owned. Its most enduring legacy is this museum.

only survivor out of 23 identical pieces from the pharaoh's valley temple on the Giza Plateau.

Slightly to the left in front of Khafre, the core of the stunning **wooden statue of Ka-Aper** (No 40) was carved out of a single piece of sycamore (the arms were ancient additions, the legs modern restorations). The sycamore was sacred to the goddess Hathor, while Ka-Aper's belly suggest his prosperity. His eyes are amazingly lifelike, set in copper lids with whites of opaque quartz and corneas of rock crystal, drilled and filled with black paste to form the pupils. When this statue was excavated at Saqqara in 1860, local workmen named him Sheikh al-Balad (Headman), for his resemblance to their own headman. Nearby sits the **Seated Scribe** (No 44), a wonderful painted limestone figure, hand poised as if waiting to take dictation, his inlaid eyes set in an asymmetrical face giving him a very vivid appearance.

Room 32 is dominated by the beautiful **statues of Rahotep and Nofret** (No 27), a noble couple from the reign of Sneferu, builder of the Bent and the Red Pyramids at Dahshur. Almost life-sized with well-preserved painted surfaces, the limestone sculptures' simple lines make them seem almost contemporary, despite having been around for a staggering 4600 years.

In a cabinet off to the left, a limestone group shows **Seneb**, 'chief of the royal wardrobe' and his family (No 39). Seneb is notable for being a dwarf: he sits cross-legged, his two children strategically placed where his legs would otherwise have been. His full-size wife Senetites places her arms protectively and affectionately around his shoulders. Rediscovered in their tomb in Giza in 1926, the happy couple and their two kids have more recently been used in Egyptian family-planning campaigns.

Also here is a panel of **Meidum Geese** (No 138), part of an extraordinarily beautiful wall painting from a mud-brick mastaba at Meidum, near the oasis of Al-Fayoum (see p207). Painted around 2600 BC, the pigments remain vivid and the degree of realism (while still retaining a distinct Pharaonic style) is astonishing – ornithologists have had no trouble identifying the species.

Room 37, entered via Room 32, contains furniture from the Giza Plateau **tomb of Queen Hetepheres**, wife of Sneferu and mother of Khufu (Cheops), including a carrying chair, bed, bed canopy and a jewellery box. Her mummy has not been found, but her shrivelled internal organs remain inside her Canopic chest. A glass cabinet holds a miniature ivory statue of her son Khufu, found at Abydos. Ironically, at under 8cm, this tiny figure is the only surviving representation of the builder of Egypt's Great Pyramid.

## ROOM 26 – MONTUHOTEP II

The seated statue in the corridor on your right, after leaving Room 32, represents Theban-born **Montuhotep II** (No 136), first ruler of the Middle Kingdom period. He is shown with black skin (representing fertility and rebirth) and the red crown of Lower Egypt. This statue was discovered by Howard Carter under the forecourt of the pharaoh's temple at Deir al-Bahri in Thebes in 1900, when the ground gave way under his horse – a surprisingly recurrent means of discovery in the annals of Egyptology.

## ROOMS 21 & 16 – SPHINXES

These **grey-granite sphinxes** are very different from the great enigmatic Sphinx at Giza – they look more like the Lion Man from *The Wizard of Oz*, with a fleshy human face surrounded by a great shaggy mane and big ears. Sculpted for Pharaoh Amenemhat III (1855–1808 BC) during the 12th dynasty, they were moved to Avaris by the Hyksos and then to the Delta

*The Illustrated Guide to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo* is written by Zahi Hawass, the secretary-general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, and published by the excellent American University in Cairo Press. Available all over the city, it costs ££150 and features colour photographs and useful itineraries.

city of Tanis by Ramses II (see p215). Also here is an extraordinary wood figure of the ka (spirit double) of the 13th dynasty ruler Hor Auihre.

## ROOM 12 – HATHOR SHRINE

The centrepiece of this room is a remarkably well-preserved vaulted **sandstone chapel**, found near the Theban temple of Deir al-Bahri. Its walls are painted with reliefs of Tuthmosis III, his wife Meritre and two princesses, making offerings to Hathor, who suckles the pharaoh. The life-size cow statue suckles Tuthmosis III's son and successor Amenhotep II, who also stands beneath her chin.

Hatshepsut, who was coregent for part of Tuthmosis III's reign, eventually had herself crowned as pharaoh. Her life-sized **pink granite statue** stands to the left of the chapel. Although she wears a pharaoh's headdress and a false beard, the statue has definite feminine characteristics. The large reddish-painted limestone head in the corridor outside this room is also of Hatshepsut, originally from one of the huge Osiris-type statues that adorned the pillared façade of her great temple at Deir al-Bahri. Also here are wall decorations from the temple showing the famed expedition to Punt, perhaps Somalia or Eritrea.

## ROOM 3 – AMARNA ROOM

Akhenaten (1352–1336 BC), the 'heretic pharaoh', did more than build a new capital at Tell al-Amarna, close the temples of the traditional state god Amun and promote the sun god Aten in his place. He also ushered in a period of great artistic freedom, as a glance around this room will show. Compare these great torsos with their strangely bulbous bellies, hips and thighs, their elongated faces and thick lips, with the sleek, hard-edged Middle Kingdom sculpture of previous rooms.

Perhaps most striking of all is the **unfinished head of Nefertiti** (No 161), wife of Akhenaten. Worked in brown quartzite, it's an incredibly delicate and sensitive portrait and shows the queen to have been extremely beautiful – unlike some of the relief figures of her elsewhere in the room, in which she appears with exactly the same strange features as her husband. The masterpiece of this period, the finished bust of Nefertiti, remains in the Berlin museum.

## ROOM 10 – RAMSES II

At the foot of the northeast stairs is a fabulous large, **grey-granite representation of Ramses II**, builder of the Ramesseum and Abu Simbel. But here in this statue he is tenderly depicted as a child with his finger in his mouth nestled against the breast of a great falcon, in this case the Canaanite god Horus.

## ROOM 34 – GRAECO-ROMAN ROOM

It is best to visit these last rooms after seeing the upper floor, because this is the end of the ancient Egyptian story. By the 4th century BC, Egypt had been invaded by many nations, mostly recently by the Macedonian Alexander the Great. Egypt's famously resistant culture had become porous, as will be obvious from the **stelae** on the back wall, and on the large **sandstone panel** on the right-hand wall inscribed in three languages: official Egyptian hieroglyphics; the more popularly used demotic; and Greek, the language of the new rulers. This trilingual stone is similar in nature to the more famous Rosetta stone (see p397), now housed in London's British Museum, a cast of which stands near the museum entrance (Room 48). Also, notice the **bust** situated immediately to the left as you enter this room: a typically Greek face with curly beard and locks, but wearing a Pharaonic-style headdress.

[www.ancientegypt.co.uk](http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk) is a fabulous website hosted by the British Museum that has loads of interactive online games and information about ancient Egypt for children. It is guaranteed to keep aspiring Egyptologists occupied for hours.

## ROOMS 50 & 51 – ALEXANDER THE GREAT

On the official museum plan this area is labelled 'Alexander the Great' but currently there's nothing here that relates directly to the Macedonian conqueror who became pharaoh. However, there is a beautiful small marble **statuette of the Greek goddess Aphrodite**, carved at the end of the 1st century BC and found in Alexandria. Egyptians identified her with Isis.

## MUSEUM TOUR: FIRST FLOOR

Exhibits here are grouped thematically and can be viewed in any order, but assuming that you've come up the southeast stairs, we'll enter the Tutankhamun Galleries at Room 45. This way, you'll experience the pieces in roughly the same order that they were laid out in the tomb (a poster on the wall outside Room 45 illustrates the tomb and treasures as they were found). But if you are fascinated by mummies, then some of the most amazing ones are on display in the Royal Mummy Room, best visited before entering the Tutankhamun Galleries.

## ROOM 56 – ROYAL MUMMY ROOM

The **Royal Mummy Room** (adult/student ££100/50, ticket office beside stairs off room 50; ☎ 9am–6.20pm) houses the remains of some of Egypt's most illustrious pharaohs and queens from the 17th to 21st dynasties, 1650 to 945 BC. They lie in individual glass showcases (kept at a constant 22°C) in a suitably sombre, tomblike environment. Talking above a hushed whisper is forbidden (somewhat counterproductively, a guard will bellow 'silence' if you do) and tour guides are forbidden to enter, although some do.

Displaying dead royalty has proved highly controversial in the past. Late President Anwar Sadat took the Royal Mummies off display in 1979 for political reasons, but the subsequent reappearance of 11 of the better looking mummies in 1994 has done wonders for tourism figures and a second mummy room has now been added. The extra admission charge is steep, but well worth it if you have any interest in mummies or in ancient Egypt's great rulers. Parents should be aware that the mummies can be a frightening sight for young children.

Take time to study the faces of some of the first room's celebrated inmates, beginning with the brave Theban king **Sequenre II** who died violently, possibly during struggles to reunite the country at the end of the Second Intermediate Period (1650–1550 BC). His wounds are still visible beneath his curly hair and his twisted arms reflect the violence of his death. The perfectly wrapped mummies of **Amenhotep I** and **Queen Merit Amun** show how all royal mummies would once have looked, bedecked with garlands. Hatshepsut's brother-husband **Tuthmosis II** lies close by, as does **Tuthmosis IV** with his beautifully styled hair – he was the first pharaoh to have his ears pierced. Here too is **Seti I**, often described as the best-preserved royal mummy, although his son **Ramses II**, in the middle of the room, might argue with that, his haughty profile revealing the family's characteristic curved nose, his hair dyed in old age with yellow henna. Ramses II's 13th son and successor **Merenptah** has a distinctly white appearance caused by the mummification process.

The new mummy room (same ticket) is located across the building, off room 46. The corridor display relates some of the most famous mummy discoveries, including the 1881 Deir al-Bahri cache of royal mummies. Many of the mummies in this section date from the 20th and 21st dynasties, the end of the New Kingdom and the start of the Third Intermediate

*The Treasures of the Egyptian Museum*, edited by Francesco Tiradritti, is an excellent reference published by the American University in Cairo Press. Available in most of Cairo's English-language bookshops and at the museum bookshop, it features 416 pages of stunning colour photographs and costs ££300.



### MYTH BUSTING

In January 2005 the National Geographic Society arranged for 1700 CT scans of the mummy of Tutankhamun to be taken at his tomb in Luxor's Valley of the Kings. The scans were then given to three teams of researchers (from Paris, New York and Egypt) who used them to model busts showing what the boy pharaoh might have looked like on the day of his death 3300 years ago. Unveiling the startlingly similar-looking busts to a packed international press conference, Zahi Hawass, secretary-general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, stated that the scans had shown that Tut was healthy and well fed at the time of his death and that there was no evidence of foul play, contradicting the oft-repeated theory that he had been murdered at the behest of Ay, the commoner who ruled Egypt as regent while Tut was growing up. The scans showed that one of Tut's legs had been fractured shortly before his death, leading to conjecture that this had led to infection or a fat embolism that eventually killed him.

Period (c 1186–945 BC). In the mummy room, the small raised spots visible on the face of **Ramses V** may have been caused by smallpox. His predecessors **Ramses III and IV** lie nearby. Since her cheeks had burst apart due to overpacking during the mummification process, the appearance of **Queen Henettawy** (c 1025 BC) owes as much to modern restorers as to ancient embalmers, who decorated her linen shroud with an image of Osiris. **Queen Nesikhonsu**'s mummy still conveys the queen's vivid features. **Queen Maatkare** lies nearby with her pet baboon. Also here are the mummies of several youths, including **Prince Djedptahufankh**.

### TUTANKHAMUN GALLERIES

The treasure of the young New Kingdom pharaoh, Tutankhamun, are among the world's most famous antiquities. The tomb and treasures of this pharaoh, who ruled for only nine years during the 14th century BC (1336–1327 BC), were discovered in 1922 by English archaeologist Howard Carter. Its well-hidden location in the Valley of the Kings, below the much grander but ransacked tomb of Ramses VI, had long prevented its discovery (see boxed text, p261). Many archaeologists now believe that up to 80% of these extraordinary treasures were made for Tutankhamun's predecessors, Akhenaten and Smenkhkare – some still carry the names of the original owners. Perhaps with Tutankhamun's death, everything connected with the Amarna Period was simply chucked in with him to be buried away and forgotten.

About 1700 items are spread throughout a series of rooms on the museum's 1st floor, and although the gold shines brightest, sometimes the less grand objects give more insight into the pharaoh's life. The following are some of the highlights.

#### Room 45

Flanking the doorway as you enter are two life-size **statues of Tutankhamun**, found in the tomb antechamber. A large black-and-white photograph shows them *in situ*. Made of wood coated in bitumen, their black skin suggests an identification with Osiris and the rich, black river silt, symbolised fertility and rebirth.

#### Room 40

Note **Tutankhamun's wig box** of dark wood, with strips of blue and orange inlay, the wooden mushroom-shaped support inside once holding the pharaoh's short curly wig.

Moisturising oils were very popular; even troops were anointed with perfumes as a mark of honour. One Spartan king stormed out of a banquet when his fellow Egyptian guests had overdone the perfume. He thought them decadent and effeminate.

Despite the magnificence of his burial artefacts, Tutankhamun only ruled Egypt for nine years and made little impression in the annals of its history.

## Rooms 35 & 30

The **pharaoh's lion throne** (No 179) is one of the museum's highlights. Covered with sheet gold and inlaid with lapis, cornelian and other semiprecious stones, the wooden throne is supported by lion legs. The colourful tableau on the chair-back depicts Ankhnesenamun applying perfume to husband Tutankhamun, under the rays of the sun (Aten), the worship of which was a hangover from the Amarna period. Evidence of remodelling of the figures suggests that this was the throne of his father and predecessor, Akhenaten. The robes are modelled in beaten silver, their hair of glass paste.

Many **golden statues** were placed in the tomb to help the pharaoh on his journey in the afterlife, including a series of 28 gilt-wood protective deities and 413 *shabti*, attendants who would serve the pharaoh in the afterlife. Only a few of them are displayed here.

## Room 20

This room contains exquisite **alabaster jars** and **vessels** carved into the shape of boats and animals.

## Rooms 10 & 9

The northern end of this gallery is filled with the pharaoh's three elaborate **funerary couches**, one supported by the cow-goddess Mehetweret, one by two figures of the goddess Ammit, 'the devourer' who ate the hearts of the damned, and the third by the lioness god Mehet. The huge **bouquet** of persea and olive leaves in Room 10, near the top of the stairs, was originally propped up beside the two black and gold guardian statues in Room 45.

The alabaster chest contains four **Canopic jars**, the stoppers of which are in the form of Tutankhamun's head. Inside these jars, four miniature gold coffins (now in Room 3) held the pharaoh's internal organs. The chest was placed inside the golden Canopic shrine with the four gilded goddesses: Isis, Neith, Nephthys and Selket, all portrayed with protective outstretched arms.

Most people walk right past Tutankhamun's amazing **wardrobe**. The pharaoh was buried with a range of sumptuous tunics covered in gold discs and beading, ritual robes of 'fake fur', a large supply of neatly folded underwear and even socks to be worn with flip-flop-type sandals, 47 pairs of which were buried with him. From these and other objects, the Tutankhamun Textile Project has worked out that pharaoh's vital statistics were 79cm (31in) chest, 74cm (29in) waist and 109cm (43in) hips.

## Rooms 8 & 7

These galleries just barely accommodate four massive **gilded wooden shrines**. These fitted one inside the other, like a set of Russian dolls, encasing at their centre the sarcophagi of the boy pharaoh.

## Room 3

This is the room everybody wants to see as it contains the pharaoh's golden sarcophagus and jewels; at peak times, prepare to queue. Tutankhamun's astonishing **death mask** has become an Egyptian icon. Made of solid gold and weighing 11kg, the mask covered the head of the mummy, where it lay inside a series of three sarcophagi. The mask is an idealised portrait of the young pharaoh; the eyes are fashioned from obsidian and quartz, while the outlines of the eyes and the eyebrows are delineated with lapis lazuli.

No less wondrous are the two **golden sarcophagi**. These are the inner two sarcophagi – the outermost coffin, along with the pharaoh's mummy, remains in his tomb in the Valley of the Kings. The smallest coffin is,

like the mask, cast in solid gold and inlaid in the same fashion. It weighs 110kg. The slightly larger coffin is made of gilded wood.

## ROOM 4 – ANCIENT EGYPTIAN JEWELLERY

Even after Tutankhamun's treasures, this stunning collection of royal jewellery takes the breath away. The collection covers the period from early dynasties to the Romans and includes belts, inlaid beadwork, necklaces, semiprecious stones and bracelets. Among the most beautiful is a **diadem of Queen Sit-Hathor-Yunet**, a golden headband with a rearing cobra inset with semiprecious stones. Also of note is Pharaoh Ahmose's gold dagger and Seti II's considerable gold earrings.

## ROOM 2 – ROYAL TOMBS OF TANIS

This glittering collection of gold- and silver-encrusted objects came from six intact 21st- and 22nd-dynasty tombs found at the Delta site of Tanis (p215). Unearthed by the French in 1939, the tombs' discovery rivalled Carter's finding of Tutankhamun's tomb, but news of the discovery was overshadowed by the outbreak of WWII. The gold **death mask of Psusennes I** (1039–991 BC) is shown alongside his silver inner coffin and another silver coffin with the head of a falcon belonging to the pharaoh Shoshenq II (c 890 BC).

Cosmetics played an important role in the daily life of both women and men; the tomb builders of Deir al-Medina are shown having their eye paint applied during working hours as protection against glare and various eye diseases.

## ROOM 14 – GRAECO-ROMAN MUMMIES

This room contains a small sample of the stunning portraits found on Graeco-Roman mummies, popularly known as the **Fayoum Portraits** (see boxed text, p209). These faces were painted onto wooden panels, often during the subject's life, and placed over the mummies' embalmed faces. These portraits express the personalities of their subjects more successfully than the stylised elegance of most other ancient Egyptian art and are recognised as the link between ancient art and the Western portrait tradition.

## ROOM 34 – PHARAONIC TECHNOLOGY

For gadget buffs, this room contains a great number of everyday objects that helped support ancient Egypt's great leap out of prehistory. Some are still in use in Egypt today. **Pharaonic boomerangs** were apparently used for hunting birds.

## ROOM 43 – YUYA & THUYU ROOMS

Before Tutankhamun's tomb was uncovered, the tomb of Yuya and Thuyu (the parents of Queen Tiy, and Tutankhamun's great-grandparents) had yielded the most spectacular find in Egyptian archaeology. Discovered virtually intact in the Valley of the Kings in 1905, the tomb contained a vast number of treasures, including five ornate sarcophagi and the remarkably well-preserved mummies of the two commoners who became royal in-laws. Among many other items on display are such essentials for the hereafter as beds and sandals, as well as the fabulous gilded **death mask of Thuyu**.

## ROOM 48 – PYRAMID MODEL

This excellent large-scale model of one of the Abu Sir pyramids perfectly illustrates the typical pyramid complex with its valley temple, high-walled causeway, mortuary temple and minisatellite pyramid – well worth studying before a trip to Giza. Case No 82 contains the much-copied blue faïence **hippopotamus** from the Middle Kingdom, a symbol of the Nile's fertility.

## ROOM 53 – ANIMAL MUMMIES

Animal cults grew in strength throughout ancient Egypt, as the battered and dust-covered mummified cats, dogs, crocodiles, birds, rams and jackals in Room 53 suggest.

## ROOM 37 – MODEL ARMIES

Discovered in the Asyut tomb of governor Mesheti and dating from about 2000 BC (11th dynasty), these are two sets of 40 **wooden warriors** marching in phalanxes. The darker soldiers (No 72) are Nubian archers from the south of the kingdom, each wearing brightly coloured kilts of varying design, while the lighter-skinned soldiers (No 73) are Egyptian pikemen.

## ROOMS 32 & 27 – MIDDLE KINGDOM MODELS

These sensational lifelike models were mostly found in the tomb of Meketre, an 11th-dynasty chancellor in Thebes, and, like some of the best of Egyptian tomb paintings, they provide a fascinating portrait of daily life in Egypt almost 4000 years ago. They include fishing boats, a slaughterhouse, a carpentry workshop, a loom and a model of Meketre's house (with fig trees in the garden). Most spectacular is the 1.5m-wide scene of Meketre sitting with his sons, four scribes and various others, counting cattle.

www.animalmummies.com, a website dedicated to the Egyptian Museum's animal mummies, encourages you to adopt one and help pay for a climate-controlled room and special cases to conserve the poor beasts.

# Around Cairo



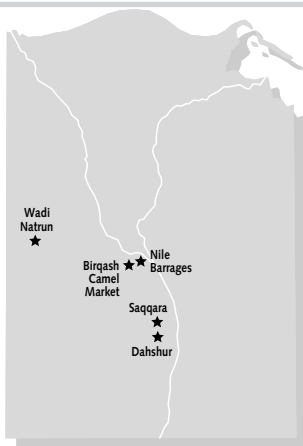
Held hostage by Cairo's endless charms (or perhaps desperate to flee in search of more relaxed locales), too few travellers explore the capital's surrounding countryside. However, those who manage to escape from the urban sprawl discover a serene landscape of luscious green fields and palm groves that end abruptly at the edges of the vast desert. And importantly, the outskirts of Cairo are home to some of the oldest and most impressive ancient sites in Egypt.

On the southern edge of the city limits lies the city of Memphis, which was once the mighty capital of the Old Kingdom. Unfortunately, little remains of this famed city of power and wealth, though the surrounding desert pays eloquent visual testimony to the early pharaohs' dreams of eternal life. Here, on the edge of expansive sand seas, are the impressive necropolises of Saqqara, Abu Sir and Dahshur. Despite being overshadowed by their more famous neighbours at Giza, the Step Pyramid at Saqqara and the Red and Bent Pyramids at Dahshur are among the most stunning monuments of ancient Egypt.

Pyramids aside, the southern outskirts of Cairo are also home to the lush oasis of Al-Fayoum, which harbours ancient monuments, abundant wildlife and a spectacular desert rich in fossils. Northwest of the city, memorable day trips include the Birqash camel market, where Sudanese traders dispose of the last of their camels; and the monasteries of Wadi Natrun, which lure urban Copts to follow in the pilgrimage footsteps of their ancestors. And of course, if you're looking to take a break from sightseeing and unwind with the locals, there's nothing quite like a raucous trip on the Nile Barrages with a boatload of Cairenes kicking up their heels.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the half-buried ruins of **Saqqara** (p200), home to the famous Step Pyramid of Zoser
- Penetrate the heart of the Red Pyramid, part of the ancient pyramid complex at **Dahshur** (p206)
- Immerse yourself in the sights, sounds and (most importantly) smells of the **Birqash camel market** (p212)
- Meet the astonishing monks of the desert monasteries of **Wadi Natrun** (p213)
- Take a music-filled boat ride with a boatload of holiday-making Cairenes on the **Nile Barrages** (p214)



# MEMPHIS & THE EARLY PYRAMIDS

Although most tourists associate Egypt with the Pyramids of Giza, there are approximately 90 ancient pyramids scattered around the country. The majority of these monuments are spread out along the desert between the Gaza Plateau and the oasis of Al-Fayoum, and include the must-see Step Pyramid of Zoser at Saqqara and the Red and Bent Pyramids of Dahshur. These three pyramids, which predate the complex at Giza, represent the formative steps of architecture that reached fruition in the Great Pyramid of Khufu (Cheops).

## MEMPHIS

📍 02

Around 3100 BC, the legendary pharaoh Narmer (Menes) unified the two lands of Upper and Lower Egypt, and founded Memphis, symbolically on the spot where the Nile Delta met the valley. For most of the Pharaonic period, Memphis was the capital of Egypt, though the seat of power was later moved to Thebes (now Luxor) during the era of the New Kingdom.

Originally known as *Ineb-hedj*, meaning 'White walls', the contemporary name of Memphis derives from *Men-nefer*, meaning 'Established and beautiful'. Indeed, the city was filled with palaces, gardens and temples, making it one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. In the 5th century BC, long after its period of power, Greek historian and traveller Herodotus still described Memphis as 'a prosperous city and cosmopolitan centre'. Even after Thebes became the capital during the New Kingdom, Memphis remained Egypt's second city, and prospered until it was finally abandoned during the first Muslim invasions in the 7th century AD.

Although the city was once an area replete with royal pyramids, private tombs and the necropolises of sacred animals, centuries of builders quarrying for stone, annual floods of the Nile and greed-stricken antiquity hunters succeeded where even the mighty Persians failed: Memphis has almost completely vanished. The foundations of the ancient city have long since been ploughed under, and even the enormous temple of the creator god, Ptah, is little more than a

few sparse ruins frequently waterlogged due to the high water table. Today, there are few clues as to Memphis' former grandeur and importance, and, sadly, it's difficult to imagine that any sort of settlement once stood here.

Nonetheless, a visit to Memphis is worthwhile just to stand on the hallowed grounds of one of the world's greatest cities. Furthermore, Memphis is home to a noteworthy open-air **museum** (Mit Rahina; adult/student ££25/15, parking ££5; ☎ 8am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 5pm May-Sep, to 3pm Ramadan) which is built around a magnificent fallen colossal limestone statue of Ramses II. Highlights of the museum include an alabaster sphinx of the New Kingdom, two statues of Ramses II that originally adorned Nubian temples, and the huge travertine beds on which the sacred Apis bulls were mummified before being placed in the Serapeum at Saqqara (p204).

## Getting There & Away

The tiny village of Memphis is 24km south of Cairo and 3km from Saqqara. While it is worth visiting as part of a tour of Saqqara and Dahshur, only those seriously into Egyptology would want to trek down here by public transport – getting to Memphis is a pain in the neck and a lengthy process.

For those determined to do it themselves, the cheapest way is to take a crowded 3rd-class train from Cairo's Ramses station to Al-Badrashein village, then walk for about half an hour, catch a Saqqara microbus and ask to be dropped off at Memphis. Unless you have plenty of time, enjoy discomfort or have overspent, we strongly recommend taking a tour or hiring the taxi for a day instead.

For more information on visiting Memphis and the pyramids at Saqqara and Dahshur by private vehicle, see boxed text, p198.

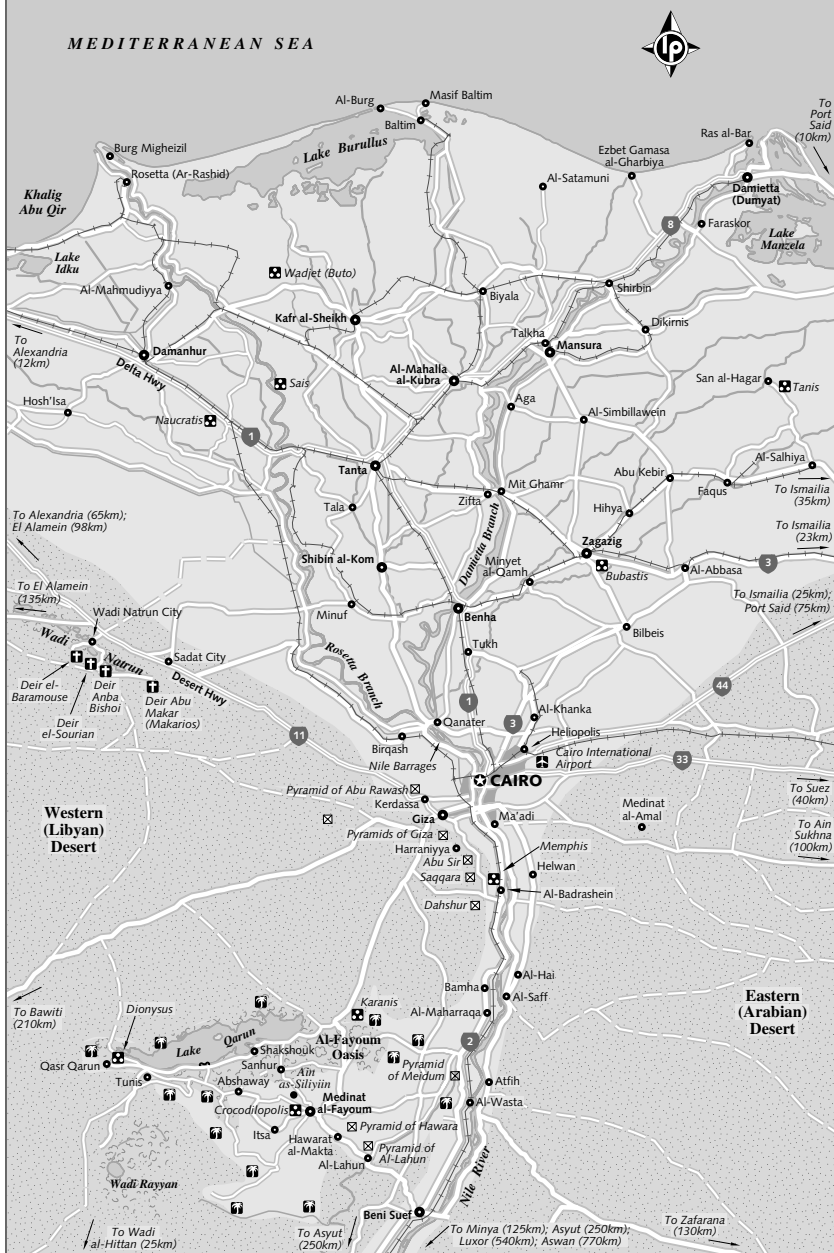
## PYRAMIDS OF ABU SIR

Lying between Giza and Saqqara and surrounded by sand dunes, the **pyramids of Abu Sir** (Saqqara Rd; adult/student ££20/10) form the necropolis of the 5th dynasty (2494–2345 BC). Unfortunately, most of the remains have not withstood the ravages of time as well as their bigger, older brethren at Giza, and today the pyramids are slumped and lack geometric precision.

For a long time few visitors bothered to visit Abu Sir, and although the site was officially



0 50 km  
0 30 miles



### VISITING THE 'OTHER PYRAMIDS'

Even if you're a fiercely independent traveller, the best way to visit the 'other pyramids' – namely the Step Pyramid of Zoser and the Red and Bent Pyramids at Dahshur – is to either take part in an organised tour or hire a taxi for the day. The main reason for giving in to the comfort of a private vehicle is that these pyramids are extremely frustrating to reach via public transportation. Furthermore, a tour shouldn't cost too much money, and you can easily add Memphis and the pyramids of Abu Sir to your itinerary.

If you're looking to escape Cairo for the day, organised tours can be easily arranged through your accommodation, and it's not hard to find a cab driver willing to offer their services for the day. A private car should cost between ££150 and ££200 for the day (around seven hours) excluding entry fees and the obligatory baksheesh.

'opened' at the beginning of 1999 with the construction of a gatehouse, in reality most visitors are denied entry. However, if you find yourself in the area, it's worth stopping by as you're likely to be the only tourist around – even if you don't get in, the crumbling pyramids set against a desert backdrop are still photo-worthy.

### Orientation & Information

There are four pyramid complexes at Abu Sir – Sahure, Nyuserra, Neferirkare and Raneferef. Although the Pyramid of Sahure is in ruins, its funerary complex is the most complete of the four.

Admission to Abu Sir is paid at either of the gatehouses off Saqqara Rd, though remember that it's not guaranteed you will be permitted to enter the site. However, if you're travelling by horse or camel from Giza to Saqqara, you will pass right alongside the pyramids without having to deal with the guards.

Note that there are no facilities at Abu Sir aside from a toilet that you may or may not be allowed to use.

### Sights

#### PYRAMID OF SAHURE

Sahure (2487–2475 BC) was the first of the 5th-dynasty pharaohs to be buried at Abu Sir, although his pyramid, originally 50m high, is now badly damaged. The entrance corridor is only half a metre high, and slopes down to a small room. From there, you can then walk through a 75m-long corridor before crawling 2m on your stomach through Pharaonic dust and spider webs to reach the burial chamber.

The better-preserved remains of Sahure's funerary temple complex stand east of the pyramid. This must have been an impressive temple, with black basalt-paved floors,

red granite date-palm columns and walls decorated with 10,000 sq metres of superbly detailed reliefs (some of these are now in the museums of Cairo and Berlin). It was connected by a 235m-long causeway to the valley temple, built at the edge of the cultivation and bordered by water. From the pyramid, on a clear day, you can see some 10 other pyramids stretching out to the horizon.

#### PYRAMID OF NYUSERRA

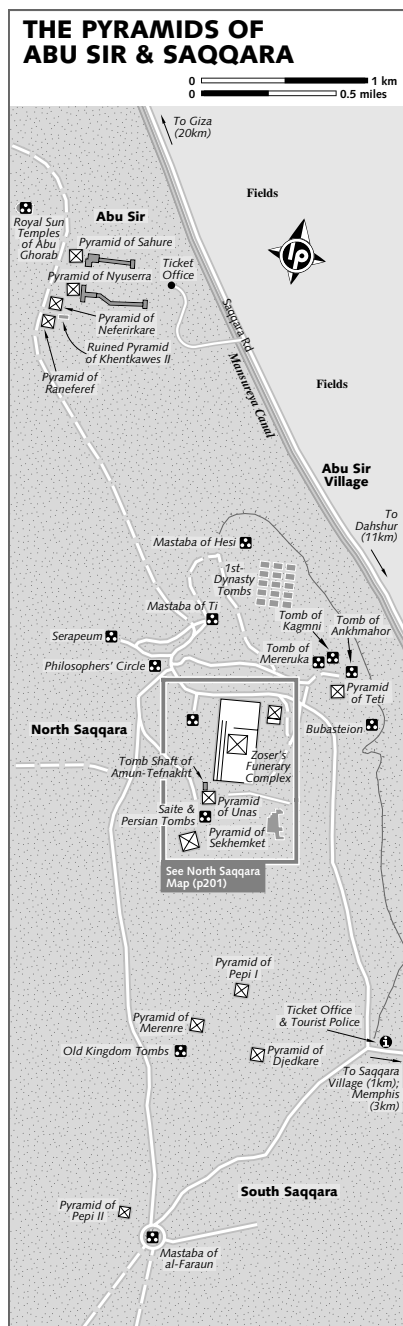
The most dilapidated of the finished pyramids at Abu Sir belonged to Nyuserra (2445–2421 BC). Originally some 50m high, this pyramid has been heavily quarried over the millennia. In fact, Nyuserra reused his father Neferirkare's valley temple, and then redirected the causeway to lead not to his father's pyramid, but to his own.

#### PYRAMID OF NEFERIRKARE

The Pyramid of Neferirkare (2475–2455 BC), the third pharaoh of the 5th dynasty and Sahure's brother, resembles the Step Pyramid at Saqqara. However, the present-day complex is only the core as the original outer casing has been stripped away, reducing the pyramid from its original planned height of 72m to today's 45m.

In the early 20th century in Neferirkare's funerary temple, archaeologists found the so-called Abu Sir Papyri, a highly important archive of Old Kingdom documents written in hieratic, a shorthand form of hieroglyphs. They relate to the cult of the pharaohs buried at the site, recording important details of ritual ceremonies, temple equipment, priests' work rotas and the temple accounts.

South of Neferirkare's pyramid lies the badly ruined **Pyramid of Queen Khentkawes II**, wife of Neferirkare and mother of both Raneferef



and Nyuserra. In her nearby funerary temple, Czech archaeologists discovered another set of papyrus archive documents. In addition, two virtually destroyed pyramids to the south of the queen's pyramid may have belonged to the queens of Nyuserra.

### PYRAMID OF RANEFEREF

On a diagonal, just west of Neferirkare's pyramid, are the remains of the unfinished Pyramid of Raneferef (also known as Neferefre), who reigned for seven years before Nyuserra. However, work was so little advanced at the time of his death that the tomb was only completed as a mastaba (mud-brick structure in the shape of a bench above tombs, which was the basis for later pyramids).

In the adjoining mud-brick cult building, Czech archaeologists found fragments of statuary, including a superb limestone figurine of Raneferef protected by Horus (now in the Egyptian Museum) along with papyrus fragments relating to the Abu Sir temple archives.

### ROYAL SUN TEMPLES OF ABU GHORAB

Just northwest of the Abu Sir pyramids lies the site of Abu Ghorab, which is home to two royal sun temples dedicated to the worship of Ra, the sun god of Heliopolis. The Abu Sir Papyri describe six such temples, but only two, built for Pharaohs Userkaf (2494–2487 BC) and Nyuserra, have ever been discovered.

Both of these temples follow the traditional plan of a valley temple, and contain a causeway and a large stone enclosure. This enclosure contains a large limestone obelisk standing some 37m tall on a 20m-high base. In front of the obelisk, the enormous alabaster altar can still be seen. Made in the form of a solar disc flanked by four 'hotep' signs (the hieroglyphic sign for 'offerings' and 'satisfied'), the altar itself reads 'The sun god Ra is satisfied'.

### Getting There & Away

Abu Sir is some distance off the main Saqqara road and there's no way to reach it by public transport. The best way to visit is as part of an organised tour or by private taxi. The other option is to ride a horse or camel from Giza to Saqqara and visit Abu Sir on the way.

## SAQQARA

Covering a 7km stretch of the Western Desert, Saqqara, the huge cemetery of ancient Memphis, was an active burial ground for more than 3500 years, and is Egypt's largest archaeological site. The necropolis is situated high above the Nile Valley's cultivation area, and is the final resting place for deceased pharaohs and their families, administrators, generals and sacred animals. Old Kingdom pharaohs were buried within Saqqara's 11 major pyramids, while their subjects were buried in the hundreds of smaller tombs found in the great necropolis. Not surprisingly, the name Saqqara is most likely derived from *Sokar*, the Memphite god of the dead.

Most of Saqqara, except for the Step Pyramid, was buried in sand until the mid-19th century, when the great French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette uncovered the Serapeum. Since then, it has been a gradual process of rediscovery: the Step Pyramid's massive funerary complex was not discovered until 1924 and it is still being restored. French architect Jean-Philippe Lauer, who began work here in 1926, was involved in its restoration for an incredible 75 years

until his death in 2001. In 2006 and 2007, a string of new discoveries captured international media attention; these included the mummified remains of three royal dentists, a doctor and a Pharaonic butler (for more information, see boxed text, p206).

Today, although Saqqara is one of the most popular attractions in the Cairo area, independent visitors are few and far between, and the organised tour groups quickly rush in and out during the morning hours. As a result, here on the edge of the desert, you'll find a peaceful quality rarely found at other ancient sites in Egypt.

## Orientation & Information

The main monuments are in an area around the Step Pyramid known as **North Saqqara** (adult/student E£50/25, parking E£2; ☎ 8am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 5pm May-Sep, to 3pm Ramadan). About 1km south of the Step Pyramid is a group of monuments known as South Saqqara, with no official entry fee or opening hours as these are rarely visited.

At North Saqqara, facilities include toilets, drink stands and souvenir stalls, but you shouldn't expect anything but monuments

### LOOKING GOOD FOR ETERNITY *Dr Joann Fletcher*

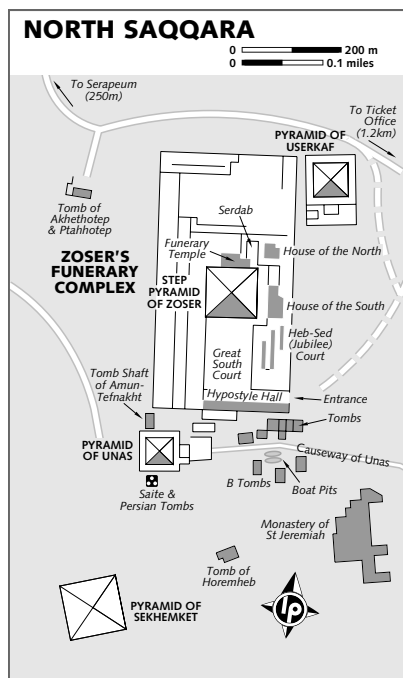
When visiting temples and tombs, the endless scenes of pharaohs – standing sideways, presenting a never-ending line of gods with the same old offerings – can start to get a bit much. Look closer, however, and these scenes can reveal a few surprises.

As the little figures on the wall strike their eternal poses, a keen eye can find anything from pharaohs ploughing fields to small girls pulling at each other's hair. A whole range of activities that we consider modern can be found among the most ancient scenes, including hairdressing, perfumery, manicures and even massage – the treasury overseer Ptahhotep (p203) certainly enjoyed his comforts, and is seen inhaling deeply from a jar of perfume, while his feet are massaged and fingers manicured. There are similar scenes elsewhere at Saqqara, with a group of men in the Tomb of Ankhmahor (p205) enjoying both manicures and pedicures.

With the title 'overseer of royal hairdressers and wigmakers' commonly held by the highest officials in the land, hairdressing scenes can also be found in the most unexpected places. Not only does Ptahhotep have his wig fitted by his manservants, similar hairdressing scenes can even be found on coffins, as on the limestone sarcophagus of 11th-dynasty Queen Kawit (in Cairo's Egyptian Museum, p185), which shows her wig being deftly styled.

Among its wealth of scenes, the Theban Tomb of Rekhmire (p270) shows a banquet at which the female harpist sings, 'Put perfume on the hair of the goddess Maat'. And in the Deir al-Medina tomb of the workman Pashedu (p273), his family tree contains relatives whose hair denotes their seniority, the eldest shown with the whitest hair as opposed to with wrinkles.

As in many representations of ancient Egyptians, black eye make-up is worn by both male and female, adult and child. As well as its aesthetic value, it was also used as a means of reducing the glare of the sun – think ancient sunglasses. Even manual workers wore it: the Deir al-Medina Tomb of Ipy (p273) once contained a scene in which men building the royal tombs were having eye paint applied while they worked. Difficult to imagine on a building site today!



and sand at South Saqqara. Before exploring either complex, check at the ticket office to see which monuments are open – this constantly changes.

## Sights

### ZOSER'S FUNERARY COMPLEX

#### Step Pyramid

In the year 2650 BC, Imhotep, the pharaoh's chief architect (later deified) built the Step Pyramid (Map p201) for Zoser. It is Egypt's (and the world's) earliest stone monument, and its significance cannot be overstated. Previously, temples were made of perishable materials, while royal tombs were usually underground rooms topped with mud-brick mastabas. However, Imhotep developed the mastaba into a pyramid *and* built it in hewn stone. From this flowed Egypt's later architectural achievements.

The pyramid was transformed from mastaba into pyramid through six separate stages of construction and alteration. With each stage, the builders gained confidence in their use of the new medium and mastered the techniques required to move, place and secure the huge

blocks. This first pyramid rose in six steps to a height of 60m, and was encased in fine white limestone.

The Step Pyramid is surrounded by a vast funerary complex, enclosed by a 1645m-long panelled limestone wall, and covers 15 hectares. Part of the enclosure wall survives today at a height of about 5m, and a section near the entrance was restored to its original 10m height. Fourteen false doors, formerly of wood but now carved from stone and painted to resemble real wood, hinges and sockets, allowed the pharaoh's ka, or attendant spirit, to come and go at will.

The complex is entered at the southeastern corner via a vestibule and along a colonnaded corridor into the broad hypostyle hall. The 40 pillars in the corridor are the original 'bundle columns', ribbed to resemble a bundle of palm or papyrus stems. The walls have been restored, but the protective ceiling is modern concrete. The roof of the hypostyle hall is supported by four impressive columns and there's a large, false, half-open ka door.

#### Great South Court

The hypostyle hall leads into the Great South Court (Map p201), a huge open area flanking the south side of the pyramid, with a section of wall featuring a frieze of cobras. The cobra, or uraeus, represented the goddess Wadjet, a fire-spitting agent of destruction and protector of the pharaoh. It was a symbol of Egyptian royalty, and a rearing cobra always appeared on the brow of a pharaoh's headdress or crown.

Near the base of the pyramid is an altar, and in the centre of the court are two stone B-shaped boundary markers, which delineated the ritual race the pharaoh had to run, a literal demonstration of his fitness to rule. The race was part of the Jubilee Festival, or Heb-Sed, which usually occurred after 30 years' reign, and involved the pharaoh's symbolic rejuvenation and the recognition of his supremacy by officials from all over Egypt. The construction of the Heb-Sed featured within Zoser's funerary complex was therefore intended to perpetuate his revitalisation for eternity.

The buildings on the eastern side of the pyramid are also connected with the royal jubilee, and include the **Heb-Sed (Jubilee) Court**. Buildings on the east side of the court represent the shrines of Lower Egypt, and those on the west represent Upper Egypt. All were designed to house the spirits of Egypt's gods

### SAQQARA HALF-DAY ITINERARY

Enter through the hypostyle hall and gaze on the **Step Pyramid**, the world's oldest pyramid. Run the rejuvenation race in Zoser's **Heb-Sed Court**, wonder at the ancient graffiti in the **Houses of the North and South** and stare into Zoser's stone eyes in the eerie **Serdab** (cellar). Walk anticlockwise around the Step Pyramid, visit the mastaba tomb of 5th-dynasty father and son **Akhethotep** and **Ptahhotep**, with its beautiful painted reliefs of animals, battle scenes and the two men receiving offerings, then head south towards the causeway of Unas.

Moving away from the Step Pyramid, descend 25m into the **Pyramid of Teti** to see the famous Pyramid Texts inside, and then pop into the nearby tombs of **Mereruka** and **Ankhmahor**. To complete your visit, move on to the most wonderful tomb of all, the **Mastaba of Ti**, with its fascinating tomb reliefs of daily life in the Old Kingdom, which show people trading, building ships, milking cows and rescuing their livestock from crocodiles. Of course, if you want to extend your stay and get off the beaten path, the rarely visited monuments at **South Saqqara** are just 1km away across the sands.

when they gathered to witness the rebirth of the pharaoh during his jubilee rituals.

North of the Heb-Sed Court are the **House of the South** and **House of the North**, representing the two main shrines of Upper and Lower Egypt, and symbolising the unity of the country. The heraldic plants of the two regions were chosen to decorate the column capitals: papyrus in the north and lotus in the south.

The House of the South also features one of the earliest examples of tourist graffiti. In the 47th year of Ramses II's reign, nearly 1500 years after Zoser's death, Hadnakhte, a treasury scribe, recorded his admiration for Zoser while 'on a pleasure trip west of Memphis' in about 1232 BC. His hieratic script, written in black ink, is preserved behind Perspex just inside the building's entrance.

#### Serdab

A stone structure right in front of the pyramid, the serdab (a small room containing a statue of the deceased to which offerings were presented; Map p201) contains a slightly tilted wooden box with two holes drilled into its north face. Look through these and you'll have the eerie experience of coming face to face with Zoser himself. Inside is a near-life-size, lifelike painted statue of the long-dead pharaoh, gazing stonily out towards the stars. However, it's worth noting that this statue is only a copy – the original is in Cairo's Egyptian Museum.

The original entrance to the Step Pyramid is directly behind the serdab, and leads down to a maze of subterranean tunnels and chambers quarried for almost 6km through the rock. The pharaoh's burial chamber is vaulted in

granite, and others are decorated with reliefs of the jubilee race and feature some exquisite blue faïence tile decoration. Although the interior of the pyramid is unsafe and closed to the public, part of the blue-tiled decoration can be seen in the Egyptian Museum.

#### PYRAMID OF USERKAF

Northeast of the funerary complex is the Pyramid of Userkaf (Map p201), the first pharaoh of the 5th dynasty, which is closed to the public for safety reasons. Although the removal of its limestone casing has left little more than a mound of rubble, it once rose to a height of 49m. Furthermore, its funerary temple was once decorated with the most exquisite naturalistic relief carvings, judging from one of the few remaining fragments (now in the Egyptian Museum) showing birds by the river.

#### PYRAMID & CAUSEWAY OF UNAS

What appears to be another big mound of rubble, this time to the southwest of Zoser's funerary complex, is actually the 2375–2345 BC Pyramid of Unas (Map p201), the last pharaoh of the 5th dynasty. Built only 300 years after the inspired creation of the Step Pyramid, this unassuming pile of loose blocks and debris once stood 43m high.

From the outside, the Pyramid of Unas is not much to look at, though the interior marked the beginning of a significant development in funerary practices. For the first time, the royal burial chamber was decorated, its ceiling adorned with stars and its white alabaster-lined walls inscribed with beautiful blue hieroglyphs.



The aforementioned hieroglyphs are the funerary inscriptions now known as the Pyramid Texts, comprising 283 separate 'spells' chosen by Unas to protect his soul. The inscriptions include rituals, prayers and hymns, as well as lists of items, such as the food and clothing Unas would require in the afterlife. Unfortunately, deterioration of the interior led to the pyramid's permanent closure in 1998.

The 750m-long causeway running from the east side of Unas' pyramid to his valley temple (now marked by little more than a couple of stone columns at the side of the road leading up to the site) was originally roofed and decorated with a great range of painted relief scenes, including a startling image of people starving (now preserved in the Louvre in Paris).

The two 45m-long boat pits of Unas lie immediately south of the causeway, while on either side of the causeway are numerous tombs – more than 200 have been excavated. Of the several better-preserved examples usually open to visitors are the tombs of one of Unas' queens, Nebet, and that of Princess Idut, who was possibly his daughter. There are also several brightly painted tombs of prominent 5th- and 6th-dynasty officials. These include the Tomb of Mehu, the royal vizier (minister), and the Tomb of Nefer, the supervisor of singers.

## B Tombs

Several beautiful tombs (Map p201) have been cleared in the area east of the Pyramid of Unas. Although not quite as famous as the tombs north of the Step Pyramid, this set includes a number of interesting Pharaonic attendants. These include the joint Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, overseers of the royal manicurists to Pharaoh Nyuserra; the Tomb of Neferherenptah, the overseer of the royal hairdressers; and the Tomb of Irukaptah, overseer of the royal butchers.

## Saite & Persian Tombs

Around the sides of the Pyramid of Unas are several large shaft tombs (Map p201) of the Saite (664–525 BC) and Persian (525–404 BC) eras. These are some of the deepest tombs in Egypt, although as with just about everywhere else in the country, the precaution against grave robbers failed. However, the sheer size of the tombs and the great

stone sarcophagi within, combined with their sophisticated decoration, demonstrate that the technical achievements of the later part of Egyptian history were equal to those of earlier times.

To the north of the pyramid is the enormous tomb shaft of the Saite general Amun-Tefnakht. On the south side of the pyramid is a group of three Persian tombs – the entrance is covered by a small wooden hut to which a guard in the area has the key. If you don't have your own torch, he'll lead you down a 25m-deep winding staircase to the vaulted tombs of three officials: the admiral Djenhebu to the west, chief royal physician Psamtik in the centre and Psamtik's son, Pediese, to the east.

## MONASTERY OF ST JEREMIAH

Uphill from the causeway of Unas, south-east of the boat pits, are the half-buried remains of this Coptic monastery (Map p201), which dates from the 5th century AD. Unfortunately, little is left of the structure, which was ransacked by invading Arabs in 950. More recently, the wall paintings and carvings were removed to the Coptic Museum in Cairo (p123).

## PYRAMID OF SEKHEMKET

Closed to the public because of its dangerous condition, the unfinished pyramid (Map p201) of Zoser's successor Sekhemket (2648–2640 BC) is a short distance west of the ruined monastery. The project was abandoned for unknown reasons when the great limestone enclosure wall was only 3m high, despite the fact that the architects had already constructed the underground chambers in the rock beneath the pyramid as well as the deep shaft of the south tomb. An unused travertine sarcophagus was found in the sealed burial chamber, and a quantity of gold, jewellery and a child's body were discovered in the south tomb. Recent surveys have also revealed another mysterious large complex to the west of Sekhemket's enclosure, but this remains unexcavated.

## TOMB OF AKHETHOTEP & PTAHHOTEP

Akhethotep and his son Ptahhotep were senior royal officials during the reigns of Djedkare (2414–2375 BC) and Unas at the end of the 5th dynasty. Akhethotep served as vizier, judge, supervisor of pyramid cities and supervisor of priests, though his titles were eventually inherited by Ptahhotep, along

with his tomb (Map p201). The joint mastaba has two burial chambers, two chapels and a pillared hall.

The painted reliefs in Ptahhotep's section are particularly beautiful, and portray a wide range of animals, from lions and hedgehogs to the domesticated cattle and fowl that were brought as offerings to the deceased. Ptahhotep himself is portrayed resplendent in a panther-skin robe inhaling perfume from a jar. Ever the fan of pampering himself, he is having his wig fitted, his feet massaged and his fingers manicured (some Egyptologists prefer to interpret this detail as Ptahhotep inspecting an important document, which would be in keeping with his official status).

### PHILOSOPHERS' CIRCLE

Nearby is this sad-looking group of Greek statues (Map p199), which are arranged in a semicircle and sheltered by a spectacularly ugly concrete shelter. This is the remnant of a collection of philosophers and poets set up as a wayside shrine by Ptolemy I (305–285 BC) as part of his patronage of learning. From left to right are Plato, Heraclitus, Thales, Protagoras, Homer, Hesiod, Demetrius of Phalerum and Pindar.

### SERAPEUM

The Serapeum (Map p199), which is dedicated to the sacred Apis bull, is one of the highlights of visiting Saqqara. The Apis bulls were by far the most important of the cult animals entombed at Saqqara. The Apis, it was believed, was an incarnation of Ptah, the god of Memphis, and was the calf of a cow struck by lightning from heaven. Once divinely impregnated, the cow could never again give birth, and her calf was kept in the Temple of Ptah at Memphis and worshipped as a god.

The Apis was always portrayed as black, with a distinctive white diamond on its forehead, the image of a vulture on its back and a scarab-shaped mark on its tongue. When it died, the bull was mummified on one of the large travertine embalming tables discovered at Memphis, then carried in a stately procession to the subterranean galleries of the Serapeum at Saqqara, and placed in a huge stone sarcophagus.

The first Apis burial took place in the reign of Amenhotep III (1390–1352 BC), and the practice continued until 30 BC. The enormous

granite and limestone coffins could weigh up to 80 tonnes each. Until the mid-19th century, the existence of the sacred Apis tombs was known only from classical references. But, having found a half-buried sphinx at Saqqara, and using the description given by the Greek historian Strabo in 24 BC, in 1851 Auguste Mariette uncovered the avenue leading to the Serapeum. However, only one Apis sarcophagus was found intact.

### MASTABA OF TI

Northeast of the Philosophers' Circle is the Mastaba of Ti (Map p199), which was discovered by Mariette in 1865. It is perhaps the grandest and most detailed private tomb at Saqqara, and one of our main sources of knowledge about life in Old Kingdom Egypt. Its owner, Ti, was overseer of the Abu Sir pyramids and sun temples (among other things) during the 5th dynasty. In fact, the superb quality of his tomb is in keeping with his nickname, Ti the Rich.

Like Zoser, a life-size statue of the deceased stands in the tomb's offering hall (as with the Zoser statue, the original is in the Egyptian Museum). Ti's wife, Neferhetpes, was priestess and 'royal acquaintance'. Together with their two sons, Demedj (overseer of the duck pond) and Ti (inspector of royal manicurists), the couple appear throughout the tomb alongside detailed scenes of daily life. As men and women are seen working on the land, preparing food, fishing, building boats, dancing, trading and avoiding crocodiles, their images are accompanied by chattering hieroglyphic dialogue, all no doubt familiar to Ti during his career as a royal overseer: 'Hurry up, the herdsman's coming', 'Don't make so much noise!', 'Pay up – it's cheap!'.

### PYRAMID OF TETI

The avenue of sphinxes excavated by Mariette in the 1850s has again been hidden by desert sands, but it once extended to the much earlier Pyramid of Teti (Map p199). Teti (2345–2323 BC) was the first pharaoh of the 6th dynasty, and his pyramid was built in step form and cased in limestone. Unfortunately, the pyramid was robbed for its treasure and its stone, and today only a modest mound remains. However, the interior fared better, and is similar in appearance to that of the Pyramid of Unas (p202). Within the intact burial chamber, Teti's basalt sarcophagus

is well preserved, and represents the first example of a sarcophagus with inscriptions on it.

### TOMBS OF MERERUKA & ANKHMATOR

Near the Pyramid of Teti is the tomb (Map p199) of his highest official, Mereruka, vizier and overseer of priests. It's the largest Old Kingdom courtier's tomb, with 32 chambers covering an area of 1000 sq metres. The 17 chambers on the eastern side belong to Mereruka, and include a magnificent six-columned offering hall featuring a life-size statue of Mereruka appearing to walk right out of the wall to receive the offerings brought to him.

Other rooms are reserved for Mereruka's wife, Princess Seshseshat (Teti's daughter), and their eldest son, Meriteti (whose name means 'Beloved of Teti'). Much of the tomb's decoration is similar to that of the Mastaba of Ti, with an even greater number of animals portrayed – look out for the wide-mouthed, sharp-tusked hippos as you enter – along with a charming scene of domestic bliss as husband and wife are seated joyfully on a bed as Seshseshat plays them music on her harp.

Further east, the tomb (Map p199) of the 6th-dynasty vizier and palace overseer, Ankhmahor, contains more interesting scenes of daily life. Most unusual here are images of surgical procedures, earning the tomb its alternative title, the Doctor's Tomb. As two boys are circumcised the hieroglyphic caption says, 'Hold him firmly so he does not fall'!

### TOMB OF HOREMHEB

Originally designated as the final resting place of General Horemheb, this tomb (Map p201) became irrelevant in 1348 BC when its intended occupant seized power from Pharaoh Ay. Soon afterwards, Pharaoh Horemheb commissioned the building of a new tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Although the tomb at Saqqara was never put to use, it did yield a number of exquisite reliefs that are currently displayed around the world.

### MASTABA OF AL-FARAUN

Known as the Pharaoh's Bench, this unusual funerary complex (Map p199) belongs to the last 4th-dynasty pharaoh, the short-lived Shepseskaf (2503–2498 BC). Shepseskaf was the son of Menkaure, builder of Giza's third

great pyramid, though he failed to emulate the glory of his father. Occupying an enclosure once covering 700 sq metres, Shepseskaf's rectangular tomb was built of limestone blocks, and originally covered by a further layer of fine, white limestone and a lower layer of red granite. Inside the tomb, a 21m-long corridor slopes down to storage rooms and a vaulted burial chamber.

### PYRAMID OF PEPI II

This 2278–2184 BC pyramid (Map p199) once interred the remains of Pepi II, whose 94-year reign at the end of the 6th dynasty may have been the longest in Egyptian history. Despite his longevity, Pepi II's 52m-high pyramid was of the same modest proportions as those of his predecessor, Pepi I. Although the exterior is little more than a mound of rubble, the interior is decorated with more passages from the Pyramid Texts.

### OTHER PYRAMIDS

South Saqqara is also home to the pyramids of **Djedkare**, **Merenre** and **Pepi I** (Map p199). Known as the 'Pyramid of the Sentinel', the 25m-high Djedkare pyramid contains the remains of the last ruler of the 5th dynasty, and can be penetrated from the north side. The pyramids of Merenre and Pepi I are little more than slowly collapsing piles of rock, though the latter is significant as 'Memphis' appears in one of its names.

### Getting There & Away

Saqqara is about 25km south of Cairo and is best visited in a taxi, combined with a visit to Memphis and Dahshur – see boxed text (p198), for more details.

Alternatively, competent riders can hire a horse or camel for the day in Giza, and make the three-hour ride to Saqqara – see p147 for more details.

If you're coming from Cairo or Giza, and are determined to do it on your own, you have several options, including the time-consuming and hassle-rich combination of train, bus and foot via Al-Badrashein. One of the cheapest options is to take a bus or minibus to the Saqqara Rd and get off at the Saqqara road stop. From there, take a microbus to the turn-off to the Saqqara site (Haram Saqqara; don't ask for Saqqara village as you'll end up in the wrong place). You'll then have to walk 1.5km to the ticket office.

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN ACTION

If you thought major Egyptological discoveries were a thing of the past, think again. Saqqara, perhaps more than any other site in Egypt, has been snapping up headlines in recent years following a slew of astonishing findings.

In early 2005, Egyptian archaeologists unearthed a 2300-year-old unidentified mummy buried in sand at the bottom of a 6m shaft. The perfectly preserved mummy was wearing a golden mask, and was encased in a wooden sarcophagus covered in brightly coloured images of gods and goddesses. Describing the find, Dr Zahi Hawass, secretary-general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, said: 'We have revealed what may be the most beautiful mummy ever found in Egypt.'

In late 2006, the graves of three royal dentists were discovered after the arrest of tomb raiders led archaeologists to the site. Just two months later, the mummified remains of a doctor were found alongside surgical tools dating back more than 4000 years.

In early 2007, archaeologists unveiled the tombs of a Pharaonic butler and a scribe that had been buried for more than 3000 years. The scribe's mud-brick tomb contained several wooden statues and a door with intricate hieroglyphics, while the butler's limestone grave contained two painted coffins. Of particular interest were the blue and orange painted murals that adorned the butler's tomb, and depicted scenes of people performing rituals and monkeys eating fruit.

Although archaeologists have been excavating Saqqara for more than a century, it's estimated that only one-third of the burial site has been uncovered. According to Dr Hawass, 'The sands of Saqqara reveal lots of secrets'.

## Getting Around

It's easy to walk around North Saqqara, though it can be a hot and sweaty slog through the sand to South Saqqara. It's also possible to hire a camel, horse or donkey from near the Serapeum to take you on a circuit of the sites for between ££25 and ££50. You'll need to pay more the further into the desert away from North Saqqara you go.

## DAHSHUR

About 10km south of Saqqara in a quiet bit of desert is **Dahshur** (adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 8am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 5pm May-Sep, to 3pm Ramadan), an impressive 3.5km-long field of 4th- and 12th-dynasty pyramids. Although there were originally 11 pyramids at Dahshur, only the two Old Kingdom ones, the incredibly striking Bent and Red Pyramids, remain intact, as well as three Middle Kingdom pyramid complexes.

Pharaoh Sneferu (2613–2589 BC), father of Khufu and founder of the 4th dynasty, built Egypt's first true pyramid here, the Red Pyramid, as well as an earlier version, the Bent Pyramid. These two pyramids are the same height, and together are also the third-largest pyramids in Egypt after the two largest at Giza. Before founding the necropolis at Dahshur, Sneferu also began the Pyramid of Meidum (p210).

Although the entire plain was previously an off-limits military zone, part of the complex was opened to tourism in 1996. Today, many clued travellers are adding Dahshur to their itinerary for three reasons: the pyramids here are just as impressive as their counterparts at Giza, the site is much more peaceful (no camel touts in sight) and the entry fee is significantly cheaper.

## Orientation & Information

Admission is paid at a small gatehouse on the edge of the complex. The Bent Pyramid, and its surrounds, is still a militarised zone, meaning that it can only be admired at a distance. Fortunately, the wonderful Red Pyramid is open to visitors, and penetrating its somewhat dank interior is a true Indiana Jones-esque experience.

Note that there are no facilities at Dahshur aside from a toilet that you may or may not be allowed to use.

## Sights

### BENT PYRAMID

Experimenting with ways to create a true, smooth-sided pyramid, Sneferu's architects began with the same steep angle and inward-leaning courses of stone they used to create step pyramids. When this began to show signs of stress and instability around halfway up its

eventual 105m height, they had little choice but to reduce the angle from 54° to 43° and begin to lay the stones in horizontal layers. This explains why the structure has the unusual shape that gives it its name. Most of its outer casing is still intact, and inside (closed to visitors) are two burial chambers, the highest of which retains its original ancient scaffolding of great cedar beams to counteract internal instability. There is also a small subsidiary pyramid to the south as well as the remains of a small funerary temple to the east. About halfway towards the cultivation to the east are the ruins of Sneferu's valley temple, which yielded some interesting reliefs.

### RED PYRAMID

The world's oldest true pyramid is the North Pyramid, which is better known as the Red Pyramid. It derives its name either from the red tones of its weathered limestone, after the better-quality white limestone casing was removed, or perhaps from the red graffiti and construction marks scribbled on its masonry in ancient times. Having learnt from their experiences building the Bent Pyramid, the same architects carried on where they had left off, building the Red Pyramid at the same 43° angle as the Bent Pyramid's more gently inclining upper section. The entrance – via 125 extremely steep stone steps and a 63m-long passage – takes you down to two antechambers with stunning 12m-high corbelled ceilings and a 15m-high corbelled burial chamber in which fragmentary human remains, possibly of Sneferu himself, were found.

### BLACK PYRAMID

Of the three Middle Kingdom pyramid complexes built by Amenemhat II (1922–1878 BC), Sesostri III (1874–1855 BC) and

his son Amenemhat III (1855–1808 BC), only the oddly shaped Black Pyramid of Amenemhat III is worth a look.

The towerlike structure appears to have completely collapsed due to the pilfering of its limestone outer casing in medieval times, but the mud-brick remains contain a maze of corridors and rooms designed to deceive tomb robbers. Thieves did manage to penetrate the burial chambers, but left behind a number of precious funerary artefacts that were discovered in 1993.

### Getting There & Away

The only way to visit Dahshur is by taxi or organised tour, which can easily be combined with a visit to Memphis, Abu Sir and Saqqara – see boxed text (p210), for more details.

## AL-FAYOUM OASIS

This large semi-oasis, about 70km wide and 60km long, is an extremely fertile basin watered by the Nile via hundreds of capillary canals and is home to more than two million people. The region also harbours a number of important archaeological sites, particularly Qasr Qarun and the Pyramid of Meidum, as well as scenic Lake Qarun and Wadi Rayyan. Unfortunately, tight security restrictions have essentially crushed tourism in the region, which means that independent travel in Al-Fayoum can be frustratingly slow and at times prohibited.

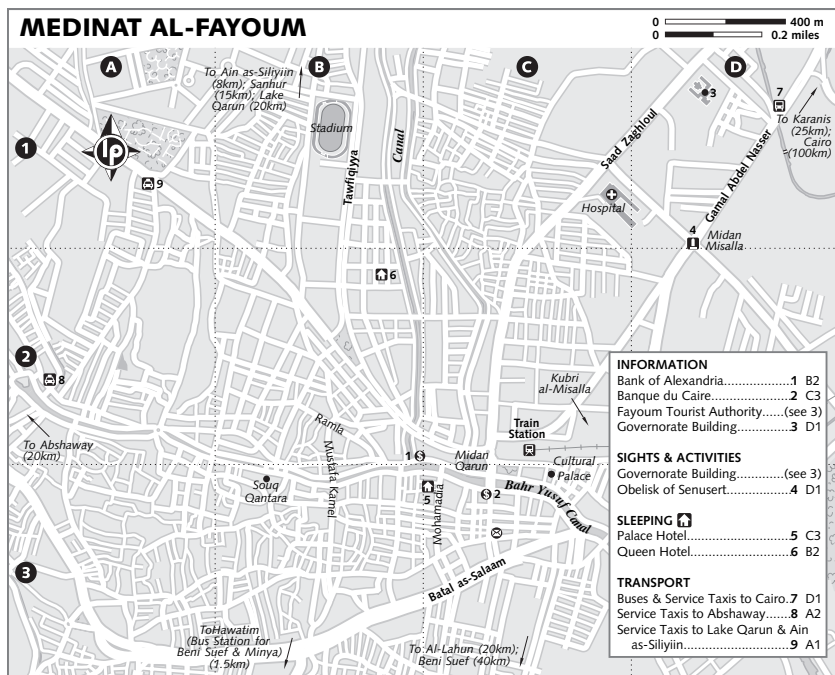
### MEDINAT AL-FAYOUM

☎ 084 / pop 513,000

The largest town on the Al-Fayoum oasis was a favourite holiday spot for 13th-dynasty

### SECURITY IN AL-FAYOUM

This relatively quiet corner of Egypt has the most heavy-handed security restrictions in the whole of the country, a result of the clampdown that occurred after the massacre of tourists in Cairo and Luxor in 1997. Many of the Islamist terrorists involved in the Luxor massacre came from Al-Fayoum, and Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Gama'a al-Islamiyya have a strong local following (check out how many of the local men have a callus on their foreheads, indicating that they are particularly devout and spend a lot of time with their heads bowed in prayer). This poses a real problem for foreigners, who will often find they are not allowed to leave their hotel rooms without a dedicated tourist-police escort or use local transport. If you intend to explore the Al-Fayoum area, be advised that you will have to deal with more hassles than usual, though it's worth suffering a little extra abuse for the chance to explore this little-visited oasis.



pharaohs, who built a series of pleasure palaces in the area. Centuries later, the Greeks, who believed the crocodiles in Lake Qarun were sacred, called the area Crocodilopolis, and built a temple in honour of Sobek, the crocodile-headed god. During Ptolemaic and Roman times, pilgrims came from across the ancient world to feed the sacred beasts.

These days, however, Medinat al-Fayoum (Town of the Fayoum) is a less than appealing mix of crumbling concrete, horn-happy drivers, choking fumes, swirling dust and crowded streets. Needless to say, there is little reason to spend any more time here than is absolutely necessary, though it's a convenient enough base for visiting the major sights in the region.

### Orientation & Information

The Bahr Yusuf canal acts as the city's main artery, and most commercial activities take place along it. Banks in the town include Bank of Alexandria and Banque du Caire.

Located at the Governorate Building, the **Fayoum Tourism Authority** (☎ 634 2313, 010 543 4726; F\_tourism73@hotmail.com; Sharia Saad Zaghloul)

can organise guides to take travellers around the oasis's sites. From Al-Fayoum, you'll be looking at a cost of around E£300 for a guide and taxi for the day, which should allow you to visit the Pyramid of Meidum, Lake Qarun and Wadi Rayyan.

For more information on the oasis, obtain a copy of *The Fayoum: History and Guide* by R Neil Hewison (American University in Cairo Press).

The bus and taxi stations are a short hike from the city centre.

### Sights

As far as sights go, there's the **Obelisk of Senusert**, which you'll pass coming in from Cairo at the centre of a roundabout to the northeast of town. Although it looks lost among the cars and buses, it's supposedly the only obelisk in Egypt with a rounded top, and it also features a cleft in which a golden statue of Ra was placed, reflecting the sun's rays in the four directions of the wind.

The **Governorate Building** (Sharia Saad Zaghloul) houses a modest display on the history and fauna of the oasis.



## PORTRAITS OF THE PAST

Al-Fayoum may not be famous for much these days, but it was here that caches of what are some of the world's earliest portraits were found. These extraordinarily lifelike representations, known as the 'Fayoum Portraits', were painted on wooden panels and put over the faces of the mummies, or painted directly onto linen shrouds covering the corpses. This fusion of ancient Egyptian and Graeco-Roman funerary practices laid the foundation for the Western tradition of realistic portraiture.

Dating from between 30 BC and AD 395, the paintings were executed in a technique involving a heated mixture of pigment and wax. Remarkable for the skill of the anonymous artists who painted them, the realistic and eerily modern-looking faces bridge the centuries. The haunting images are made all the more poignant by their youth (some are only babies) – a reflection of the high mortality rates at the time.

More than 1000 of these portraits have been found, not just in Al-Fayoum but also throughout Egypt. They now reside in numerous museums around the world, including the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (see p193).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Palace Hotel** (☎ 631 1222; Bahr Yusuf; s/d ££30/50, s/d with bathroom, ££40/60, s/d with bathroom & air-con ££60/75; ☼) It's cheap but with a certain air of respectability, and though this ageing relic has seen better dynasties, it'll do in a pinch. The rooms themselves are clean if slightly musty, and you'll get a decent night's sleep if you're not too fussy. The Palace is 200m west of the park; to find it, look up from street level – it's the pink building with a sign on the 2nd floor, and is entered via a tiled open-air arcade behind a watch kiosk.

**Queen Hotel** (☎ 634 6819; Sharia Minshaat Lutfallah; s/d ££160/200; ☼) The Queen is undoubtedly the most comfortable option in town, which is one reason it can be difficult to get a room here. Relatively clean and spacious rooms have private bathrooms, minifridges and satellite TV, and serve as a nice base if you want to spend a day or two exploring the oasis. Even if you're not staying here, the on-site restaurant serves decent food, though don't expect a cold beer in these parts.

There are several very basic cafés and assorted eateries on the canal-side road just west of the park.

## Getting There & Away

Buses to Cairo (££6 to ££8, two to three hours) leave every half-hour from 7am until 7pm from the station on the west side of Gamal Abdel Nasser Rd (the Cairo road). These buses take you to the Ahmed Helmy bus station behind Cairo's Ramses train station, stopping en route at Al-Monieb station on Midan Giza.

From a separate station in an area called Hawatim, about 1.5km from the tourist office in the centre and to the southwest of Medinat al-Fayoum, buses leave regularly for Beni Suef (££3 to ££5, one to two hours) and twice daily for Minya (££8 to ££10, two to three hours).

Crowded trains of questionable safety leave Medinat al-Fayoum en route to Cairo every day at 5pm (3rd class ££4) – you're much better off getting a bus.

Service taxis leave from the bus stations. To Cairo or Giza, they cost ££5 to ££10. You can also take a service taxi to Midan Ramses for about ££10 or Beni Suef for ££5.

## Getting Around

Green-and-white minibuses (25pt) cover all areas of Medinat al-Fayoum between the western and eastern bus stations.

## KARANIS

At the edge of the oasis depression, 25km north of Medinat al-Fayoum on the road to Cairo, lie the ruins of ancient Karanis. Founded by Ptolemy II's mercenaries in the 3rd century BC, the town was once a mud-brick settlement with a population in the thousands.

Today, little of the ancient city remains intact aside from a few walls, though Karanis is home to two well-preserved **Graeco-Roman temples** (adult/student ££20/10; ☼ 8am–4pm) in the southern part of town. The larger and more interesting temple was built in the 1st century BC, and is dedicated to two local crocodile gods, Pnepheros and Petesouchos. The temple is also adorned with inscriptions dating

from the reigns of the Roman emperors Nero, Claudius and Vespasian.

The nearby **Museum of Kom Aushim** (Mathaf Kom Aushim; ☎ 650 1825; Cairo rd; adult/student E£16/8; ⌚ 8am-4pm) has good displays of Old and Middle Kingdom objects, including sacred wooden boats, Canopic jars, and wooden and ceramic statuettes entombed to serve the deceased in the afterlife. Items from the Graeco-Roman period, which give context to Karanis, are exhibited on the 1st floor.

To get here, catch one of the Cairo-bound buses from Medinat al-Fayoum (E£5).

## PYRAMID OF MEIDUM

About 32km to the northeast of Medinat al-Fayoum is the ruin of the first true pyramid attempted by the ancient Egyptians, namely the **Pyramid of Meidum** (adult/student E£25/15; ⌚ 8am-4pm). Beginning as an eight-stepped structure, the steps were later filled in and the outer casing was added, forming the first true pyramid shell. However, there were serious design flaws, and sometime after completion (possibly as late as the last few centuries BC), the pyramid's own weight caused the sides to collapse. Today, only the core of the 'Collapsed' Pyramid of Meidum stands, though it is still an impressive sight to behold.

Pharaoh Huni (2637–2613 BC) was responsible for commissioning the pyramid, although it was his son Sneferu who was responsible for the actual building. Interestingly enough, it is likely that Sneferu's architects learnt from their mistakes since they then went on to build the more successful Bent and Red Pyramids at Dahshur (p206).

The guard at the nearby house will unlock the entrance of the pyramid, from where steps lead 75m down to the empty burial chamber. Near the pyramid are the large mastaba tombs of some of Sneferu's family and officials, including his son Rahotep and wife Nofret. Note that there are no facilities at Meidum.

To reach the pyramid, take any service taxi or bus running between Cairo and Beni Suef, and ask to be dropped off at the Meidum turn-off. From here, you will still have about 6km to go, but it can be difficult to get a lift. Alternatively, consider hiring a taxi from either Cairo or Medinat al-Fayoum to ensure that you have reliable round-trip transportation.

## PYRAMID OF HAWARA

About 8km to the southeast of Medinat al-Fayoum, off the Beni Suef road, stands the dilapidated mud-brick **Pyramid of Hawara** (adult/student E£20/10; ⌚ 8am-4pm). This is the second pyramid of Amenemhat III, his other being the towerlike Black Pyramid at Dahshur (p206). Much like Pharaoh Sneferu 800 years before him, it's believed that Amenemhat III built Hawara at a gentler angle after his first pyramid at Dahshur showed signs of instability.

Although the Pyramid of Hawara was originally covered with white limestone casing, sadly only the mud-brick core remains today, and even the once-famous temple has been quarried. Herodotus described the temple (300m by 250m) as a 3000-room labyrinth that surpassed even the Pyramids of Giza. Strabo claimed it had as many rooms as there were provinces, so that all the pharaoh's subjects could be represented by their local officials in the presentation of offerings.

The Greeks and Romans also used the area as a cemetery: the dead were mummified in an Egyptian way, but the mummies' wrappings incorporated a portrait-style face (see boxed text, p209). Widespread excavations left little more than pieces of mummy cloth and human bones sticking up through the mounds of rubble.

The Pyramid of Hawara is notable among archaeologists for its interior, which revealed several technical developments: corridors were blocked using a series of huge stone portcullises; the burial chamber is carved from a single piece of quartzite; and the chamber was sealed by an ingenious device using sand to lower the roof block into place.

Be advised that it hasn't been possible to enter the pyramid since 1882. Note also that there are no facilities at Hawara.

Buses between Medinat al-Fayoum and Beni Suef pass through Hawarat al-Makta. From there, it is just a short walk to the pyramid.

## PYRAMID OF AL-LAHUN

About 10km southeast of Hawara, on the Nile side of the narrow fertile passage that connects Al-Fayoum to the Nile, are the ruins of the **Pyramid of Al-Lahun** (adult/student E£20/10; ⌚ 8am-4pm), built by Pharaoh Sesotris II (1880–1874 BC). The pyramid was once covered in precious limestone, but ancient tomb robbers

stripped it of all its rock and treasures, except for the amazing solid-gold uraeus that is now displayed in the Jewellery Room (Room 4) of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Note that there are no facilities at Al-Lahun.

To reach the pyramid, take any service taxi or bus running between Cairo and Beni Suef, and ask to be dropped off at the village of Al-Lahun. From here, you will have to walk for another 2km.

## LAKE QARUN

Prior to the 12th-dynasty reigns of Sesostri III and his son Amenemhat III, the Al-Fayoum region was entirely covered by Lake Qarun. In an early effort at land reclamation, however, both pharaohs dug a series of canals linking Qarun to the Nile, and drained much of the lake.

Over the past few centuries, the lake has regained some of its former grandeur due to the diversion of the Nile to create more agricultural land. However, since Lake Qarun presently sits at 45m below sea level, it has suffered from increasing salinity. Remarkably, the wildlife has adapted, and today the self-proclaimed 'world's most ancient lake' supports a unique ecosystem. There's a good chance you'll spot countless varieties of birds here including a large colony of flamingos.

Although few foreign tourists visit the lake, Qarun is a popular weekend spot for vacationing Cairenes looking to cool down. Even if you're not up for a swim, the sight of an expansive lake on the edge of the desert is quite striking, and makes a nice diversion from a morning spent pyramid-hopping.

Most visitors to the lake are content with a day trip, although an interesting place to spend the night is the historic **Auberge du Lac-Fayoum** (☎ 657 2001; s/d from US\$75/100; ☺ ☹). It was here that world leaders met after WWI to decide on the borders of the Middle East. Later, it served as King Farouk's private hunting lodge, though these days it primarily caters to hunting groups out for ducks and geese, as well as wealthy Cairene families looking for some fresh air. Despite its four-star price, Auberge du Lac-Fayoum has seen better decades; still, it's a quiet refuge from the bump and grind of Cairo. Even if you're not spending the night at the hotel, Auberge du Lac-Fayoum is your best option for a hot meal and cold drink.

To reach Lake Qarun, take any service taxi or pick-up from Medinat al-Fayoum to

Shakshouk, the major settlement on the lake. From here, you will see English signs pointing the way to the Auberge du Lac-Fayoum.

## QASR QARUN

The ruins of ancient Dionysus, once the starting point for caravans to the Western Desert oasis of Bahariya, are near the village of Qasr Qarun at the western end of Lake Qarun. Although little remains of this historic settlement, a **Ptolemaic temple** (adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 8am-4pm), built in 4 BC and dedicated to Sobek, the crocodile-headed god of Al-Fayoum, is still standing. If you're feeling adventurous, you can go down to the underground chambers (beware of snakes), and up to the roof for a view of the desert, the sparse remains of Ptolemaic and Roman settlements, and the oasis.

Getting here is a bit of an ordeal, considering the relatively small distances involved. From Medinat al-Fayoum, take a service taxi or pick-up to the town of Abshaway and change for Qasr Qarun. The temple is just off to the left of the road shortly before the village.

## WADI RAYYAN

In the 1960s Egyptian authorities created three lakes in the Wadi Rayyan depression, southwest of Lake Qarun, to hold excess water from agricultural drainage. The lakes were intended to be the first step in an ambitious land-reclamation project, but all has not gone to plan: one of the lakes has dried up, and the other two are becoming increasingly brackish.

That said, **Wadi Rayyan** (admission ££5, vehicle ££5) does serve as a major nesting ground for birds, and is now a protected area. The lake is also a popular weekend picnic spot for escaping Cairenes, especially near 'the Waterfalls', where one lake drains into the other. Here, you'll also find a couple of small cafés and a camp site. Be advised that you officially need permission in advance from the tourist police in Medinat al-Fayoum to stay here, though a little baksheesh can smooth things over.

There is no public transport to get to Wadi Rayyan so you'll either need your own vehicle or have to hire a taxi (from Medinat al-Fayoum expect to pay about ££100 for a half-day; from Cairo it will cost about ££200 for a full day). To get to Wadi Rayyan, follow the road to the end of Lake Qarun and take the wide asphalt road to the left just after

you see the mud-brick domes of the village of Tunis (a rural retreat for Cairo's artists and Westernised intelligentsia) on a ridge to your left. An asphalt road leads right to the lake. The entrance fee is payable at a toll booth on the edge of the protected area.

## WADI AL-HITTAN

Some 55km further south into the desert at Wadi al-Hittan (Whale Valley) are the fossilised skeletons of primitive whales that have been lying here for about 40 million years. To get here is something of an expedition and requires at least two 4WDs, one to help haul the other out in the event of getting stuck in the sand. If you are interested in making the trip, it's best to inquire locally or ask the guards at Wadi Rayyan for detailed directions. And, although this should go without saying, don't underestimate how dangerous desert driving can be – be smart and stay safe!

# THE ROAD TO ALEXANDRIA

The Cairo–Alexandria Desert Hwy (known usually as the Desert Hwy) roughly separates the green fields of the Delta and the harsh sands of the Western Desert. Previously desolate, large swathes of the area's prairie-type expanses have been greened to create farms, and several new satellite towns have been established in order to ease the population pressure on Cairo. However, it's the desert life of the past that draws most tourists to this stretch, namely the famous Birqash camel market and the historic Coptic monasteries of Wadi Natrun.

## BIRQASH CAMEL MARKET

Egypt's largest **camel market** (souq al-gamaal; admission ££5; ☎ 6am–noon) is held at Birqash, a small village 35km northwest of Cairo. Until 1995 the market was held in Cairo's western suburb of Imbaba, but when land became too precious for camels, one of Cairo's age-old institutions was relocated to the edge of the Western Desert. Like all Egypt's animal markets, the Birqash camel market is not for animal lovers, nor for the faint of heart. However, if you've got a strong stomach (and better yet a weak sense of smell), a visit to Birqash is an unforgettable day trip.

While admission to the market is ££5, beware of ticket officers who may try to get you to cough up £20 to enter. The market is an easy half-day trip (one to 1½ hours) from Cairo, and one hour in the hot and dusty market is usually enough for most travellers. Note that things are most lively between 7am and 10am on Fridays.

Hundreds of camels are sold here every day, most having been brought up the Forty Days Rd from western Sudan to just north of Abu Simbel by camel herders and from there to the market in Daraw (see p299). Unsold camels are then hobbled and crammed into trucks for the 24-hour drive to Birqash. By the time they arrive, many are emaciated, fit only for the knacker's yard. Traders stand no nonsense and camels that get out of line are beaten relentlessly.

In addition to those from Sudan, there are camels from various parts of Egypt (including Sinai, the west and the south) and sometimes from as far away as Somalia. They are traded for cash or other livestock, such as goats, sheep and horses, and sold for farm work or slaughter.

While at the market, watch out for pickpockets. Women should dress conservatively – the market is very much a man's scene, with the only female presence other than the occasional traveller being the local tea lady. When you arrive, pick a strategic spot and settle in to watch the negotiations. The best area is around the middle of the lot; there are not as many camels at the entrance and at the very back, and it's noticeably scruffier there.

If you're interested in buying a camel (either for transportation or for meat – what you do with it is up to you), smaller ones cost about ££2000, while bigger beasts sometimes go for as much as ££5000. Negotiations tend to take place early in the day; by early afternoon, the market is quite subdued.

## Getting There & Away

Using public transport, the cheapest way to get to Birqash involves getting yourself to the site of the old camel market at Imbaba, from where minibuses filled with traders and potential buyers shuttle back and forth to Birqash. To get to the old camel market, take a minibus from Midan Abdel Moniem Riad or Midan Ramses to Imbaba (££1), or one to Midan Libnan (in Mohandiseen) from where you can catch a connecting microbus. Easier

still, take a taxi from central Cairo all the way to the old site (about E£10); Imbaba airport (matar Imbaba) is the closest landmark. Once at Imbaba, ask a local to show you where to get the microbus (E£1) to Birqash. From Imbaba, the road winds through fields dotted with date palms, dusty villages, orange orchards and patches of encroaching urban sprawl before climbing the desert escarpment to the market. Microbuses from Birqash back to Imbaba leave when full: depending on the time of the day, you could wait up to two hours or so.

The easiest way to get to and from the market is to hire a private taxi for the morning. This will cost somewhere between E£70 and E£120, depending on your bargaining skills.

## WADI NATRUN

Wadi Natrun, about 100km northwest of Cairo, was of great importance to ancient Egyptians, for this was where they found natron, a substance that was crucial to the mummification process. Natron comes from large deposits of sodium carbonate that are left when the valley's salt lakes dry up every summer.

Today, natron is used on a larger scale by the chemical industry, though Wadi Natrun is primarily known for its historic Coptic Christian monasteries. Besides their solitude and serenity, the monasteries are worth visiting for the Coptic art they contain, particularly at Deir el-Sourian.

## History

A visit to the monasteries of Wadi Natrun reveals clues to the survival of the Coptic Church, for the desert has long been the protector of the faith. It was there that thousands of Christians retreated to escape Roman persecution in the 4th century. They lived in caves, or built monasteries, and developed the monastic tradition that was later adopted by European Christians.

The focal point of the monasteries was the church, around which were built a well, storerooms, a dining hall, kitchen, bakery and the monks' cells. These isolated, unprotected communities were fortified after destructive raids in 817 by Arab tribes on their way to conquer North Africa. Of the 60 monasteries once scattered over the valley, only four remain.

The religious life they helped protect is now thriving. The Coptic pope is still chosen from among the Wadi Natrun monks, and

monasticism is experiencing a revival, with young professional Copts once again donning robes and embroidered hoods to live within these ancient walls in the desert. Even today, some monks still retreat into caves in the surrounding countryside for weeks and months at a time.

## Information

Each monastery has different opening times, with some closed completely during the three annual fasting periods (Lents) at Easter, Christmas and in August. Before going, it is worth checking with their Cairo residences that visits are possible.

As a general rule, you can visit all of the monasteries without prior notice, the only exception being Deir Abu Makar (Makarios). Males wishing to stay overnight (women are not allowed to do so) need written permission from the monasteries' Cairo residences:

**Deir Anba Bishoi** (☎ 02-591 4448)

**Deir el-Baramouse** (☎ 02-592 2775)

**Deir el-Sourian** (☎ 02-592 9658)

## Sights

### DEIR ANBA BISHOI

St Bishoi founded two monasteries in Wadi Natrun: this one (which bears his name) and neighbouring Deir el-Sourian. **Deir Anba Bishoi** (☎ daily incl during Lents) is built around a church that contains the saint's body, said to be perfectly preserved in its sealed, tube-like container. Each year on 17 July, the tube is carried in procession around the church. According to the monks, the bearers clearly feel the weight of a whole body. The church also contains the cell where St Bishoi tied his hair to the ceiling to stop himself sleeping during prayers.

There's a lovely internal garden with an impressive vegetable patch, an enormous new cathedral and an interesting fortified keep that you enter via a drawbridge. This contains a well, kitchens, two churches and storerooms that can hold provisions for a year. On the roof, trap doors open to small cells that acted as makeshift tombs for those who died during frequent sieges. The rooftop is a splendid place to watch the desert sunset.

### DEIR EL-SOURIAN

About 500m northwest of Deir Anba Bishoi, **Deir el-Sourian** (Monastery of the Syrians; ☎ daily, 3-6pm Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun during Lents) is named after



wandering Syrian monks who bought the monastery from the Copts in the 8th century, and is the most picturesquely situated of the monasteries. Since the 16th century it has been solely occupied by Coptic monks. Its Church of the Virgin was built around a 4th-century cave that had been occupied by St Bishoi, and is worth visiting for its superb series of 11th-century wall paintings.

#### DEIR ABU MAKAR (MAKARIOS)

Nearly 20km southeast of Deir Anba Bishoi, **Deir Abu Makar (Makarios)** (☒ daily but only by prior arrangement, closed during Lents) was founded around the cell where St Makarios spent his last 20 or so years. Structurally, it suffered more than other monasteries at the hands of raiding Bedouin, but it is famous as most of the Coptic popes over the centuries have been selected from among its monks. It is the last resting place of many of those popes and also contains the remains of the 49 Martyrs, a group of monks killed by Bedouin in 444. Deir Abu Makar is understandably the most secluded of the monasteries, so permission to visit must be requested in advance by phoning ☎ 048-260 0471/2.

#### DEIR EL-BARAMOUSE

Until recently, when a good road was built to Deir Anba Bishoi to the southeast, **Deir el-Baramouse** (☒ Fri-Sun, closed during Lents) was the most isolated of the Wadi Natrun monasteries. These days, however, more than 100 monks live here, and there are now six modern churches and a restored medieval fortress (not open to the public) within its compound. There are also remnants of 13th-century wall frescoes in its oldest church, the Church of the Virgin Mary.

When you arrive, make your way to the information office; one of the monks will then show you around.

#### Getting There & Away

You can catch a West Delta Co bus to the less than inviting town functioning as the gateway to the monasteries that goes by the grandiloquent name of Wadi Natrun City. These leave from Cairo's Turgoman Garage (p178) every 30 minutes between 6am and 10pm and cost ££5 to ££10. From the bus lot at Wadi Natrun City, you'll have to negotiate with a taxi driver to take you around the monasteries; expect to pay around ££20 per hour. On Fridays and

Sundays, when the monasteries are crowded with pious Copts, you can easily pick up a lift. The last bus back to Cairo leaves at 6pm.

A taxi from Cairo should cost about ££150 to ££200 there and back, including a couple of hours driving around the monasteries. If you have your own vehicle and you're coming from Cairo, take the Saqqara Rd and turn onto the Cairo–Alexandria Desert Hwy. After about 95km (just after the rest house and petrol station), turn left into the wadi, drive another 4km or so to Wadi Natrun City and continue on, following the signs pointing to the monasteries.

## THE NILE DELTA

North of Cairo, the Nile River divides into two branches that enter the Mediterranean at the old ports of Damietta and Rosetta, forming one of the most fertile and, unsurprisingly, most cultivated regions in the world. Laced with countless waterways, the lush, fan-shaped Nile Delta is (and has always been) the agricultural heartland of Egypt. If you have the time, it's worth the effort (and it is an effort) to get off the beaten path and explore the unique environment and culture of the Delta region.

#### NILE BARRAGES

It's great fun taking a ride on one of the ramshackle river buses that ply the Nile between Cairo and Qanater (Arabic for 'Barrages'), 16km to the north of the city where the Nile splits in two. The trip, which takes 90 minutes each way, is best done on Fridays or public holidays, when large groups of young people and smaller family parties pack the boats and the tawdry but highly atmospheric funfair and public gardens at Qanater. On the boats, Arabic pop blares and the younger passengers sing along, clap their hands, dance and decorously flirt. It's an immensely enjoyable half-day jaunt – particularly when the sun is out and the sky is clear.

The barrages were begun in the early 19th century. The series of basins and locks, on both main branches of the Nile and the two side canals, guaranteed a year-round flow of water into the Delta region and led to a great increase in cotton production.

The Damietta Barrage consists of 71 sluices stretching 521m across the river; the Rosetta



## EXPLORING THE DELTA

The Delta region played just as important a part as Upper Egypt in the early history of the country, but few archaeological remains record this. While the desert and dryness of the south helped preserve its Pharaonic sites, the amazing fertility of the Delta region had the opposite effect. Over the centuries, as the ancient cities, temples and palaces of the Delta fell into ruin, they were literally ploughed into oblivion by the fellaheen (peasant farmers).

The attraction of this area, therefore, is the chance to encounter communities rarely visited by foreigners, where you can gain insight into the Egyptian farmer's way of life. The region is also impossibly green and scenic, which can be therapeutic if you've spent too much time surrounded by swirling sand and barren rock. If you do intend spending any time in this region, we strongly recommend reading Amitav Ghosh's excellent *In An Antique Land*, an account of the author's lengthy stay in a Delta village.

Service taxis and buses crisscross the region from town to town but if you want to really explore this incredibly green countryside you'll have to hire a car. Technically speaking, you're not supposed to leave the main roads for security reasons, but in the unlikely event of being hassled by the police you can always say that you're lost. Another great way to explore the Delta is to take a ride on a river bus (see the Nile Barrages, opposite), which is essentially the Egyptian version of the 'booze cruise' (sans booze of course!).

Barrage is 438m long with 61 sluices. The area between the two at Qanater is 1km wide and filled with straggly gardens, riverside cafés and souvenir stands. The Cairene equivalent of Coney Island or Blackpool, it's particularly popular with young males, whose pastime of choice is to hire motor scooters and bikes and ride them at breakneck speed up and down the promenade, dodging indignant pedestrians and scaring the saddles off the poor horses pulling *calèches* (horse-drawn carriages) full of families up and down the Corniche.

The best way to reach the barrages is to take a privately run river bus (£6 return) from the water-taxi station in front of the Radio and TV Building (Maspero station), just north of the Ramses Hilton in central Cairo. The less-popular government-run boat leaves from the same spot but costs £10 return.

## ZAGAZIG & BUBASTIS

Just outside the city of Zagazig – that's pronounced Za'a'zi, not Zag-a-Zig – are the ruins of Bubastis, one of Egypt's most ancient cities. The great deity of the ancient city of Bubastis was the elegant cat goddess Bastet. Festivals held in her honour are said to have attracted more than 700,000 revellers who sang, danced, feasted, consumed great quantities of wine and offered sacrifices to the goddess.

Although there's not much to see in Zagazig itself, serious Egyptology buffs will enjoy a visit to the ruined **Temple of Bubastis** (adult/student ££20/10; ☞ 8am-4pm). The temple was begun by

the great pyramid-builders Khufu and Khafre during the 4th dynasty, and pharaohs of subsequent dynasties made their additions over about 17 centuries. Although this architectural gem once rose above the city, today the temple is now just a pile of rubble. However, the cat cemetery 200m down the road, which consists of a series of underground galleries where many bronze statues of cats were found, is morbidly fun to explore.

Zagazig and Bubastis are only 80km north-east of Cairo, and serve as an easy day trip from the capital. Trains heading for Port Said take about 1½ hours to get here; these leave Cairo's Ramses station (p179) at 8.45am, 11.30am, 2.30pm, 7pm and 10pm. Ticket costs for an adult/student are ££20/15 (2nd class only). From the station in Zagazig, the temple is about 1km southeast along Sharia Farouq road. Taxis (£1) can whisk you away to the site in under a minute.

## TANIS

Just outside the village of San al-Hagar, 70km northeast of Zagazig, are the partly excavated ruins of the ancient city of Tanis. Although its modern name is derived from Greek, this ancient city was Djanet to the Egyptians and Zoan to the Hebrews.

For several centuries Tanis was one of the largest cities in the Delta, and became a site of great importance after the end of the New Kingdom, especially during the Late Period (747-332 BC). Cinema buffs are also quick

to point out that Tanis is where the onscreen persona of Indiana Jones discovered the 'Lost Ark'.

Much like Bubastis, the ruins of Tanis are really only of interest to those with a strong interest in Egyptology, though it is a relatively quick and somewhat painless day trip from Cairo.

Owing to its poor state of preservation, Tanis receives few foreign visitors. However, this means that you won't have to pay an entry charge, and you'll probably have the site to yourself. You can always wander around the ruins as you like, which can be a lonely and somewhat eerie experience.

Although many of the blocks and statues found here date from the Old and Middle Kingdoms, they had been brought from other sites for reuse by later kings. The earliest buildings at Tanis actually date from the reign of Psusennes I (1039–991 BC), who surrounded the temple of Amun with a great enclosure wall. His successors added a temple to Mut, Khons and the Asiatic goddess Astarte, together with a sacred lake, and temple building continued until Ptolemaic times.

Tanis is most famous for its **royal tombs**, created by the kings of the 21st dynasty after the Valley of the Kings was abandoned at the end of the New Kingdom (c 1070 BC). In 1939 the French discovered six royal tombs here, including that of Psusennes I and several of his successors. Although the tombs themselves might seem relatively unimpressive today, they once contained some of the most spectacular treasure ever found in Egypt – gold and silver coffins, mummy masks and jewellery, which can now be seen in the Egyptian Museum (p193).

To reach Tanis, take a service taxi or bus from Cairo (££5 to ££10) to the town of Faqus, which is about 35km south of Tanis. Alternatively, the train heading for Al-Salhiya takes about 1½ hours to get there; these leave Cairo's Ramses station (p179) approximately every two to three hours. Ticket costs for an adult/student are ££20/15 (2nd class only).

From Faqus, take a service taxi or bus (££1) to the village of San el-Hagar, or alternatively hire a taxi (££20) to take you to the site.

## TANTA

The largest city in the Delta, Tanta is a major centre for Sufism, and is home to a large mosque dedicated to Sayyed Ahmed al-Badawi, a Moroccan Sufi who fought the Crusaders in the 13th century. The *moulid* (religious festival) held in honour of Sayyed Ahmed al-Badawi follows the October cotton harvest, and is one of the biggest in Egypt, drawing crowds of more than one million people.

While the city itself is of little interest to foreign travellers, this area of the western Delta was once home to the ancient cities of Sais, Naucratis and Wadjet. Although these cities have been wiped off the map, anyone with a historical interest in the Delta region might be interested in knowing where they once stood.

Northwest of Tanta, on the east bank of the Rosetta branch of the Nile near the village Sa el-Hagar, once stood the legendary city of **Sais**, Egypt's 26th-dynasty capital. Sacred to Neith, goddess of war and hunting and protector of embalmed bodies, Sais dates back to the start of Egyptian history, and was replete with palaces, temples and royal tombs. However, the city was destroyed in 525 BC by the Persian emperor Cambyses, who reportedly exhumed the mummies of previous rulers from the ground and had them publicly whipped and burned.

West of Tanta, more than halfway along the road to Damanhur, once stood the city of **Naucratis**, which was given to the Greeks to settle during the 7th century BC.

Northeast of Damanhur and northwest of Tanta was the Egyptian cult centre of **Wadjet** (known as Buto to the Greeks), which honoured the cobra goddess of Lower Egypt. Cobras were once worshipped here by devout followers.

Tanta is 90km from Cairo and 110km from Alexandria. Should you have a burning interest in seeing where these cities once stood, you can take a superjet bus to Tanta (££7 to ££12); these leave Turgoman Garage (p178) every hour between 7am and 7pm. From there, you will need to hire a taxi for an hour or so to drive you around the area.

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# Nile Valley: Beni Suef to Qena



He who rides the sea of the Nile must have sails woven of patience.

*Egyptian Proverb*

In a hurry to reach the treasures of Luxor and the pleasures of the south, it is easy to dismiss this first segment of Upper Egypt. But the less-visited parts of Egypt almost always repay the effort of a visit and the valley from Cairo to Luxor is no exception.

The green and brown land south of Cairo is still worked by hand, often using tools known to the ancients, although even in remote rural areas of the Nile Valley, farmers must learn to grapple with the issues of modernity, particularly problems with pumps and water shortages.

The region's sprawling provincial towns were the scene of considerable violence during the Islamist unrest of the 1990s and although they may no longer deserve their reputation for trouble, they are considerably less developed than cities such as Cairo and Luxor.

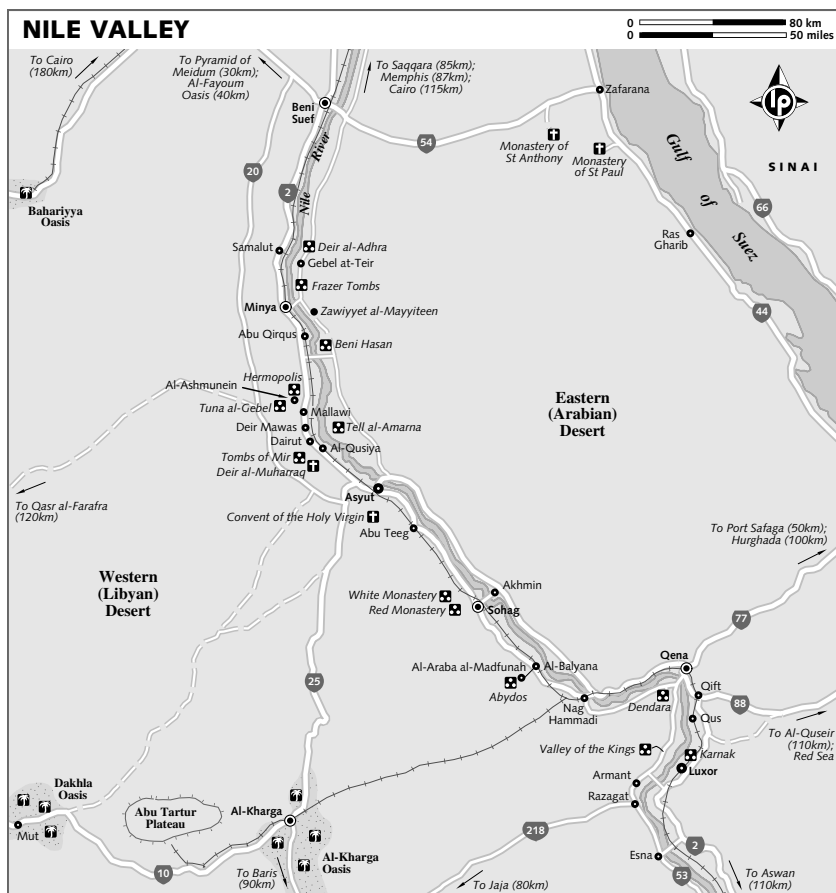
But however much a backwater this part of the valley is now, it still carries vivid reminders of the huge role it played in Egypt's destiny. From the lavishly painted tombs of early provincial rulers to the remains of the doomed city Akhetaten and the monasteries of the early Christian period, these sites are reminders of the area's past importance. Close to Qena is Dendara, one of the most complete surviving temple complexes. But most mysterious of all is Abydos, the supposed resting place of the god Osiris' head and a sacred Egyptian burial ground.

Because of the violence of the 1990s, security remains tight in places and individual travel is often difficult, sometimes impossible.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Admire lithe dancing girls and muscular wrestlers in the finely painted **tombs of Baqet and Kheti** (p223) in Beni Hasan
- Visit the early Coptic monastery of **Deir al-Muharraq** (p227), to see why the Copts claim to be heirs to the ancient Egyptians.
- Gaze upon some of ancient Egypt's finest temple reliefs at the **Temple of Seti I** (p233) in Abydos
- Marvel at one of the best-preserved temple complexes in Egypt in Dendara's magnificent **Temple of Hathor** (p235)
- Hang out in the elegant colonial centre of **Minya** (p221)





## History

For the ancient Egyptians, Upper Egypt began south of the ancient capital of Memphis, beyond present-day Saqqara.

The ancients divided the area that stretched between Beni Suef and Qena into 15 nomes or provinces, each with its own capital. Provincial governors and notables built their tombs on the desert edge. Abydos, located close to modern Sohag, was once the predominant religious centre in the region as well as one of the country's most sacred sites: Egypt's earliest 1st dynasty rulers were interred there and it flourished well into the Christian era.

The New Kingdom Pharaoh Akhenaten tried to break the power of the Theban priest-

hood by moving his capital to a new city, Akhetaten (near modern Mallawi), one of the few places along the Nile not already associated with a deity.

Christianity arrived early in Upper Egypt. Sectarian splits in Alexandria and the popularity of the monastic tradition established by St Anthony in the Eastern Desert encouraged priests to settle in the provinces. The many churches and monasteries that continue to function in the area are a testament to the strength of the Christian tradition: this area has the largest Coptic communities outside Cairo.

Dependant on agriculture, much of the area remained a backwater throughout the Christian and Islamic periods, although Qena

and Asyut flourished as trading hubs: Qena was the jumping-off point for the Red Sea port of Safaga, while Asyut linked the Nile with the Western Desert and the Darb al-Arba'een caravan route.

Today much of the region remains poor. Agriculture is still the mainstay of the economy, but cannot absorb the population growth. The lack of any real industrial base south of Cairo has caused severe economic hardship, particularly for young people who drift in increasing numbers into the towns and cities in search of work. Resentment at their lack of hope, compounded by the loss of remittances from Iraq, where many people from this region had found work in the 1980s, exploded into violence in the 1990s. Religious militants exploited the situation and directed the violence towards the government in a bid to create an Islamic state. The security forces responded by dishing out some heavy-handed tactics, the violence eventually petered out but the causes of the unrest – poverty and thwarted hopes – remain.

### Getting There & Away

Trains are recommended for getting in and out of this part of the country. There are frequent services heading both north to Cairo and south to Luxor and Aswan. Private vehicles and taxis are the only viable alternative, although they can be slower, thanks to heavy-handed police measures; for more information, see below, and the boxed text, p220.

### Getting Around

Wherever possible, try to stick to trains in this part of Egypt. A good network of buses, service taxis and pick-up taxis links towns and villages, but the police may put them off limits to foreigners. If you have to travel by vehicle, armed police may accompany you. If they do, you should try to allow extra time for delays at the checkpoints, where the escort will need to change vehicles (see boxed text, p220).

### BENI SUEF

☎ 082 / pop 3.8 million

Beni Suef is a provincial capital, 120km south of Cairo. From antiquity until at least the 16th century it was famous for its linen, and in the 19th century was still sufficiently

important to have an American consulate, but there is now little to capture the traveller's interest. It is close to the Pyramid of Meidum (p210) and the oasis area of Al-Fayoum (p207), but both places can be just as easily visited from Cairo. There's a small **museum** (adult/student E£20/10; ☎ 9am-4pm), next to the governorate building. The lower floor displays local antiquities, the upper floor contains Coptic and Islamic objects from the area.

There is a **post office** (Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu) and a **Bank of Alexandria** (Sharia Sa'ad Zaghloul, just off Midan al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Semiramis Hotel** (☎ 232 2092; fax 231 6017; Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; s/d/tr E£51.50/75.50/83.50; ☎ ) The best place to stay in town, as it has been for at least 80 years, is this two-star hotel just north of the train station. Rooms have private bathrooms and TV. Those without air-con are about E£20 cheaper. Its restaurant serves a filling kebab or chicken meal for around E£30. There are cheap *kushari*, *fuul* (fava bean paste) and *ta'amiyya* stands around the train station.

### Getting There & Away

There are frequent train connections north to Cairo and Giza, and south to Minya.

Should you be allowed to board a bus, the bus station is along the main road, Sharia Bur Said, south of the town centre. Buses run from about 6am to 6pm to Cairo, Minya and Al-Fayoum.

From Beni Suef, a road runs east across the desert to Zafarana on the Red Sea. There is a daily bus to Zafarana (E£20, three to four hours). The bus will stop at the turn-off to the Monastery of St Anthony (p418), about 130km east of Beni Suef. From there it is a further 12km to the monastery.

### GEBEL AT-TEIR & FRAZER TOMBS

The clifflike Gebel at-Teir (Bird Mountain) rises on the east bank of the Nile, some 93km south of Beni Suef and 20km north of Minya. **Deir al-Adhra** (Monastery of the Virgin) is perched 130m above the river. The mountain takes its name from a legend that all Egyptian birds paused here on the monastery's annual feast day. The monastery was formerly known as the Convent of the Pulley, a reminder of the

time when rope was the only way of reaching the cliff top.

Coptic tradition claims that the Holy Family rested here for three days on their journey through Egypt. A cave-chapel built on the site in the 4th century AD is ascribed to Helena, mother of Byzantine Emperor Constantine. A 19th-century building encloses the cave, whose icon of the virgin is said to have miraculous powers. The monastery, unvisited for most of the year, is mobbed during the week-long Feast of the Assumption, 40 days after Coptic Easter.

The village is closest to Minya and, if the police allow it, a service taxi or microbus from Minya to Samalut costs ££5 to ££10. From Samalut, pick-ups run to the Nile boat landing (££1), where you can take the car

ferry or, if it is running, the felucca (both ££2). Pick-ups run from the east-bank landing to Deir al-Adhra, but there are usually not many passengers, so prepare to pay extra to avoid a long wait. A private taxi from Minya should cost ££30 to ££55 for the return trip but may be as much as ££100, depending on your haggling ability and the driver's mood.

Five kilometres south of Tihna al-Gebel, the **Frazer Tombs** date back to the 5th and 6th dynasties. These Old Kingdom tombs are cut into the east-bank cliffs, overlooking the valley. Only two tombs are open and both, very simple, contain eroded images and hieroglyphs but no colourful scenes and are likely to appeal only if you have a passion for rarely visited sites.

### NILE VALLEY TROUBLES

Northern Upper Egypt was the centre of an Islamist insurgency that saw more than a thousand deaths, mostly of policemen and militants in the early and mid-1990s. Tourists were often caught up in this violence, victims of Gama'a al-Islamiyya, the 'Islamic Group', who tried to topple the government by attacking one of its main foreign-currency sources, tourism. Unsurprisingly, tourism ground to a halt and Nile cruise boats stopped running between Cairo and Luxor after several incidents of militants shooting at people on their open upper decks. The few foreigners who did venture here were accompanied by heavily armed police escorts.

No foreigners have been attacked in the area since the late 1990s. The group's more moderate leaders declared the use of violence to be a mistake and Western embassies in Egypt have lifted their travel advisories, but security continues to be heavy handed and cruises between Cairo and Luxor are still banned. Recently the Interior Ministry eased restrictions on foreigners travelling in the region. But ultimate responsibility rests with local officials, many of whom prefer to err on the side of caution. So while you may be able to board a bus or take a taxi in Minya, you may be refused permission to leave your hotel in Qena. And to make things more confusing, the situation can change day by day: what was law at the time of writing may not be law when you go travelling.

This situation will affect your journey. A group of heavily armed policemen may make your journey safer (although some believe they make you more of a target), but they will also restrict your movements and alter the experience of your visit. They may also add to the expense of your trip because if you are escorted, you are likely to be forced to travel by private taxis, not shared taxis or minibuses. Many travellers have criticised this intrusive police presence, one person complaining that a long-awaited trip to Abydos was ruined by policemen insisting that visitors stay together in the temple and only allowing them an hour for their visit. 'Don't go' was his advice.

But security is relaxing in places and our experience of travelling between Luxor and Cairo was mixed. In some places we were picked up by police as we stepped off a train or bus and not even allowed to walk out of our hotel without an escort (although we managed to insist on a plain-clothed agent, who hid his weapon and radio). In others, we were surprised to find little insistence: escorted to a hotel, we then managed to slip the surveillance. And in a few places we were left alone completely. Our advice is to go only if you are prepared for setbacks and extra expense and have time for delays: this is not a place to be worrying about getting to Cairo in time for your flight home. A sense of humour will also help.

For more information on the 'curse of the convoys', see boxed text (p530).



## MINYA

☎ 086 / pop 261,872

Minya, the 'Bride of Upper Egypt' (Arous as-Sa'id), sits on the boundary between Upper and Lower Egypt. A provincial capital 245km south of Cairo, it was the capital of the Upper Egyptian cotton trade, but its factories now process sugar and produce soap and perfume.

When Minya was caught up in the 1990s Islamist insurgency, the government sent tanks and armoured personnel carriers. Some police posts from that period still dot the town centre, but the violence has abated and security stepped down, which is good news for visitors because Minya has one of the most pleasant town centres in

Upper Egypt. With broad tree-lined streets, a wide corniche and some great, if shabby, early-20th-century buildings, central Minya has retained the feel of a more graceful era. At the time of our visit, this was one of the most relaxed places to visit between Cairo and Luxor.

## Information

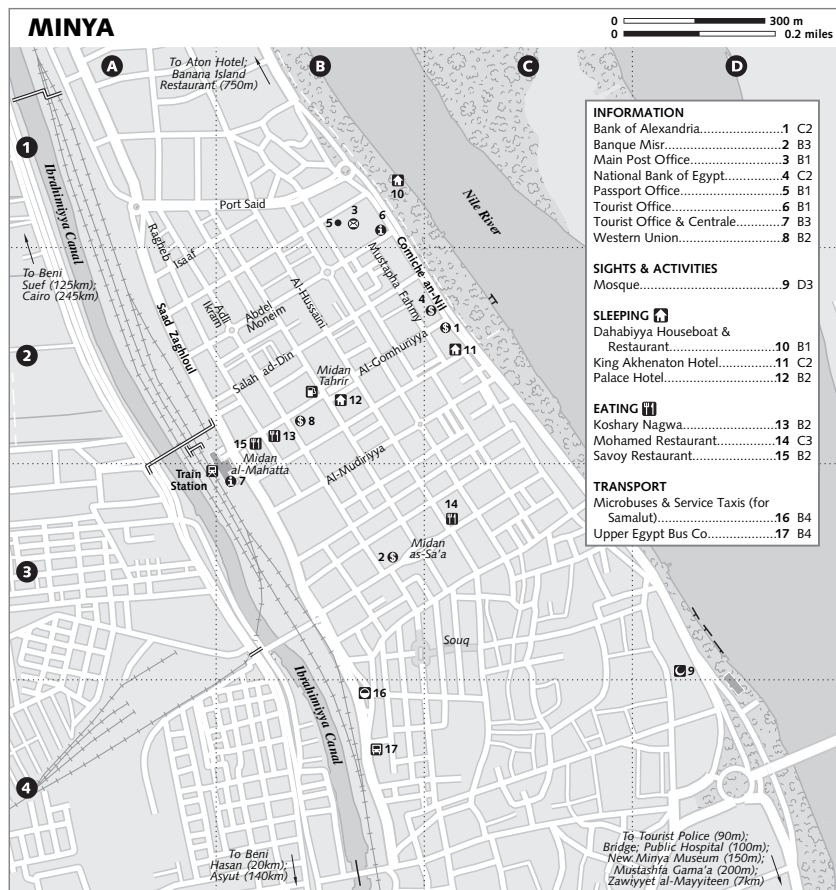
### EMERGENCY

**Ambulance** (☎ 123)

**Tourist police** (☎ 236 4527; Amarat el-Gama'a)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Mustashfa Gama'a** (University Hospital; ☎ 236 6743, 234 2505; Midan Suzanne Mubarak/Sharia Corniche an-Nil)



**MONEY**

**Bank of Alexandria** (Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 9am–2pm Sun–Thu) Changes foreign currency.

**Banque Misr** (Midan as-Sa'a; ☎ 8.30am–2pm Sun–Thu) Has an ATM.

**National Bank of Egypt** (Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 9am–2pm Sun–Thu) Has an ATM.

**Western Union** (☎ 236 4905; Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 9am–7pm Sat–Thu)

**POST**

**Main post office** (☎ 8.30am–2pm Sat–Thu) Off Sharia Corniche an-Nil.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Tourist office** Sharia Corniche an-Nil (☎ 236 0150; ☎ 9am–3.30pm Sat–Thu); train station (☎ 234 2044) Supposedly 24hr but rarely staffed.

**VISA EXTENSIONS**

**Passport office** (☎ 236 4193; 2nd fl, above Main post office; ☎ 8.30am–2pm Sat–Thu) Off Sharia Corniche an-Nil.

**Sights & Activities**

Beyond the pleasure of walking around the town centre and watching the Nile flow against the background of the Eastern Hills, Minya doesn't have many sights. The new **Minya Museum**, slowly rising on the east bank, is due to open in 2010. If the Egyptian authorities can swing it, it will be home, for some months at least, to the iconic bust of Queen Nefertiti, now in Berlin, as well as other treasures from nearby Tell al-Amarna.

**Hantours** (horse-drawn carriages; per hour ££25 to ££35) can be rented for a leisurely ride around the town centre or along the corniche. There is a souq (market) at the southern end of the town centre and the streets that run from it to Midan Tahrir are among the liveliest. **Lunches** (motorboats, per hour ££50) and **feluccas** (per hour ££30) can be rented at the landing opposite the tourist office for trips along the river and to Banana Island, which is good for a picnic.

On the east bank about 7km southeast of town, a large Muslim and Christian cemetery, called **Zawiyet al-Mayyiteen** (Place of the Dead), consists of several hundred mud-brick mausoleums. Stretching for 4km from the road to the hills and said to be one of the largest cemeteries in the world, it is a strange and thought-provoking sight.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Minya has a decent selection of hotels, but these days many are not accepting foreigners. Eating options are few. Apart from the basic places listed here, your best bet is to eat in the hotels.

**Palace Hotel** (☎ 324 021; Midan Tahrir; s/d ££25/40) Central location, high ceilings, hand-painted Pharaonic murals, old tourism posters and time-warp atmosphere should make this Minya's best budget hotel. But rooms are noisy, bathrooms communal and the owners are sometimes reluctant to accept foreigners.

**Dahabiyya Houseboat & Restaurant** (☎ 236 3596/5596; Corniche an-Nil; s/d ££30/60) This old Nile sailing boat has been moored along the Corniche near the tourist office for many years, but recently refurbished, it is Minya's most unusual address, with a restaurant on the upper deck and accommodation below. The small cabins are all equipped with fan and TV, but tend to be noisy as the restaurant (dishes ££8 to ££15) works until the last person leaves.

**King Akhenaton Hotel** (☎ 236 5917/8; www.kingakhenaton.8m.com; Corniche an-Nil; s/d with Nile view ££98/128; ☎) One of two hotels in town that are booming, the 48-room Akhenaton is comfortable and central, although there have been complaints about the service here. Rooms have satellite TV and fridges, and breakfast is buffet style. Staff may be able to arrange transport.

**Aton Hotel** (☎ 234 2993/4; fax 234 1517; Corniche an-Nil; s/d US\$30/40; ☎) Still referred to locally as the Etap (its former incarnation) and still Minya's top hotel, the friendly, comfortable Aton is about 1km north of the town centre, on the west bank of the Nile and across the road from the more expensive and less interesting Mercure Nefertiti, with which it was formerly associated. Many of the well-equipped bungalow rooms have great Nile views. There are two good restaurants, a bar and pool.

**Banana Island Restaurant** (☎ 234 2993/4; Corniche an-Nil; dishes ££20–35) The main restaurant of the Aton Hotel is year-round dependable for friendly service and good Egyptian cuisine, from lentil soup and grills to *om ali* (hot bread and milk pudding). Alcohol is served. If the weather is good, the outdoor terrace grill makes a good alternative, though with the addition of widescreen TV.

**Savoy Restaurant** (Midan al-Mahatta; dishes ££5–20), a busy corner restaurant, serves good rotis-

serie chicken and kebabs in the fan-cooled restaurant or you can take away. Just down the street, **Koshary Nagwa** (Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; dishes E£2-12) serves good, basic *kushari*. The popular **Mohamed Restaurant** (Sharia al-Hussaini; dishes E£5-15) serves basic grills and salads on a street packed with food options, from juice stands to a bakery and patisserie.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The **Upper Egypt Bus Co** (☎ 236 3721; Sharia Saad Zaghloul) has hourly services to Cairo (E£12, four hours) from 6am and to Asyut (E£10, two hours), where you can catch buses to Luxor and New Valley. Buses leave for Hurghada at 10.30am, 4pm and 11pm (E£14, six hours).

### SERVICE TAXI

At the time of writing, the police and drivers were discouraging foreigners from using service taxis because of possible delays at checkpoints.

### TRAIN

Trains to Cairo (three to four hours) have only 1st- and 2nd-class carriages and leave at 5.55am, 6.30am, 8.50am, 4.30pm (which goes on to Alexandria) and 6.50pm. Tickets in 1st-class cost E£30 to E£40, in 2nd-class E£27 to E£29.

Trains heading south leave fairly frequently, with the fastest trains departing from Minya between around 11pm and 1am. Although foreigners are supposed to take only the two 'special' trains that come from Cairo, none stops you from taking the one you want. Seven 1st-/2nd-class trains go all the way to Luxor (E£49/32) and Aswan (E£60/39), stopping at Asyut (E£13/8), Sohag (E£21/13) and Qena (E£31/19).

## BENI HASAN

The necropolis of **Beni Hasan** (adult/student E£25/15; ☎ 8am-5pm) occupies a range of east-bank limestone cliffs some 20km south of Minya. It is a superb and important location. Most tombs date from the 11th and 12th dynasties (2125-1795 BC), the 39 upper tombs belonging to local governors or 'nomarchs'. Many remain unfinished and only four are currently open to visitors, but they are worth the trouble of visiting for the glimpse they provide of daily life and political tensions of the period.

A guard will accompany you from the ticket office, so baksheesh is expected (at least E£10). Try to see the tombs chronologically, as follows.

### Tomb of Baqet (No 15)

Baqet was an 11th-dynasty governor of the Oryx nome (district). His rectangular tomb chapel has seven tomb shafts and some well-preserved wall paintings. They include Baqet and his wife on the left wall watching weavers and acrobats – mostly women in diaphanous dresses in flexible poses. Further along, animals, presumably possessions of Baqet, are being counted. A hunting scene in the desert shows mythical creatures among the gazelles. The back wall shows a sequence of wrestling moves that are still used today. The right (south) wall is decorated with scenes from the nomarch's daily life, with potters, metalworkers and a flax harvest, among others.

### Tomb of Kheti (No 17)

Kheti, Baqet's son, inherited the governorship of the Oryx nome from his father. His tomb chapel, with two of its original six papyrus columns intact, has many vivid painted scenes that show hunting, linen production, board games, metalwork, wrestling, acrobatics and dancing, most of them watched over by the nomarch. Notice the yogalike positions on the right-hand wall, between images of wine-making and herding.

### Tomb of Amenemhat (No 2)

Amenemhat was a 12th-dynasty governor of Oryx. His tomb is the largest and possibly the best at Beni Hasan and, like that of Khnumhotep, its impressive façade and interior decoration mark a clear departure from the more modest earlier ones. Entered through a columned doorway and with its six columns intact, it contains beautifully executed scenes of farming, hunting, manufacturing and offerings to the deceased, who can also be seen with his dogs. As well as the fine paintings, the tomb has a long, faded text in which Amenemhat addresses the visitors to his chapel: 'You who love life and hate death, say: Thousands of bread and beer, thousands of cattle and wild fowl for the ka of the hereditary prince...the Great Chief of the Oryx Nome...'.

### Tomb of Khnumhotep (No 3)

Governor during the early 12th dynasty, Khnumhotep's detailed 'autobiography' is inscribed on the base of walls that contain the most detailed painted scenes. The tomb is famous for its rich, finely rendered scenes of plant, animal and bird life. On the left wall farmers are shown tending their crops while a scribe is shown recording the harvest. Also on the left wall is a representation of a delegation bringing offerings from Asia – their clothes, faces and beards are all distinct.

If the police allow it, a cliffside track leads southeast for about 2.5km, then some 500m into a wadi to the rock-cut temple of **Speos Artemidos** (Grotto of Artemis). Known locally as Istabl Antar (the Stable of Antar, an Arab warrior-poet and folk hero), it deserves neither its Greek nor Arab names for it dates back to the 18th dynasty. Started by Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BC) and completed by Tuthmosis III (1479–1425 BC), it was dedicated to the lion-goddess Pakht. There is a small hall with roughly hewn Hathor-headed columns and an unfinished sanctuary. On the walls are scenes of Hatshepsut making offerings and, on its upper façade, an inscription describing how she restored order after the Hyksos, even though she reigned long after the event.

### Getting There & Away

A taxi from Minya will cost anything from ££50 to ££100, depending on your bargaining skills and how long you stay at the site. Currently private taxis are not escorted by police. It may also be possible to take a microbus from Minya to Abu Qirqus and a pick-up from there to the ferry landing. Return boat tickets are on a sliding scale from ££2 per person if there are eight or more passengers, to ££10 if you're by yourself.

### BENI HASAN TO TELL AL-AMARNA

Forty-eight kilometres south of Minya on the west bank, **Mallawi** is infamous in Egypt as the home town of President Sadat's assassin (see p42), Khalid al-Islambouli. A centre of armed rebellion throughout the early 1990s, the town is now calmer, but there's little to linger over, even in the two-storey **museum** (admission ££20/10; ☎ 9am–2pm Sat–Tue & Thu, to noon Fri), which displays tomb paintings, glassware, sculpture including a limestone statue of a Ptolemaic priest, baboon and pencil-thin ibis mummies, and other artefacts from nearby

Hermopolis and Tuna al-Gebel, in no particular chronological order.

Eight kilometres north of Mallawi, near the town of Al-Ashmunein, **Hermopolis** is the site of the ancient city of Khemenu. Capital of the 15th Upper Egyptian nome, its name (Eight Town) refers to four pairs of snake and frog gods that, according to one Egyptian creation myth, existed here before the first earth appeared out of the waters of chaos. This was also an important cult centre of Thoth, god of wisdom and writing, whom the Greeks identified with their god Hermes, hence the city's Greek name, 'Hermopolis'.

Little remains of the wealthy ancient city, the most striking ruins being two colossal 14th-century-BC quartzite statues of Thoth as a baboon. These supported part of Thoth's temple, which was rebuilt throughout antiquity. A Middle Kingdom temple gateway and a pylon of Ramses II, using stone plundered from nearby Tell al-Amarna, also survive. The most interesting ruins are from the Coptic basilica, which reused columns and even the baboon statues, though first removing their giant phalluses. The 'open-air museum' is officially free, but if you arrive with a police escort you will be expected to pay bakshesh.

Several kilometres south of Hermopolis and then 5km along a road into the desert, **Tuna al-Gebel** (admission ££25; ☎ 8am–5pm) was the necropolis of Hermopolis. Given the lack of tourists in the area, check with the Minya tourist office (p222) that the site is open.

At one time Tuna al-Gebel belonged to Akhetaten, the short-lived capital of Pharaoh Akhenaten (see opposite), and along the road you pass one of 14 stelae marking the boundary of the royal city. The large stone stele carries Akhenaten's vow never to expand his city beyond this western limit of the city's farmlands and associated villages, nor to be buried anywhere else. To the left, two damaged statues of the pharaoh and his wife Nefertiti hold offering tables; the sides are inscribed with figures of three of their daughters.

South of the stele, which is located about 5km past the village of Tuna al-Gebel, are the **catacombs** and tombs of the residents and sacred animals of Hermopolis. The dark catacomb galleries once held millions of mummified ibis, the 'living image of Thoth', and thousands of mummified baboons, sacrificed and embalmed by the Ptolemaic and Roman faithful. The subterranean cemetery extends

for at least 3km, perhaps even all the way to Hermopolis. You need a torch to explore the galleries.

The nearby **Tomb of Petosiris** was built by a high priest of Thoth from the early Ptolemaic period. His templelike tomb, like his sarcophagus in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, shows early Greek influence. The wonderful coloured reliefs of farming and the deceased being given offerings also show Greek influence, with the figures wearing Greek dress.

The guard may open several other tombs (for a tip), the most interesting being the **Tomb of Isadora**, a wealthy woman who drowned in the Nile during the rule of Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161). The tomb has few decorations, but does contain the unfortunate woman's **mummy**, its teeth, hair and fingernails clearly visible.

## Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get around these three sites is by taxi from Minya, perhaps continuing on to Asyut. Expect to pay £100 to £200, depending on the time you want to spend and your bargaining skills.

All buses to or from Minya and Asyut stop in Mallawi, as do the slow 2nd- and 3rd-class trains. If the security situation allows, for Hermopolis you can take a local microbus or service taxi from Mallawi to Al-Ashmunein; the turn-off to the site is 1km from the main road. From the junction you can either walk the short distance to Hermopolis or coax your driver to go a bit further. Tuna al-Gebel is 7km west of Hermopolis and, depending on the security situation and the time of day, you should be able to flag down a pick-up truck.

## TELL AL-AMARNA

In the fifth year of his reign, Pharaoh Akhenaten (1352–1336 BC) and his queen Nefertiti abandoned the gods and priests of Karnak and established a new religion based on the worship of Aten, god of the sun disc.

They also built a new city, Akhetaten, Horizon of the Aten, on the east bank of the Nile, in the area now known as Tell al-Amarna, a beautiful yet solitary crescent-shaped plain, which extends about 10km from north to south. Bounded by the river and backed by a bay of high cliffs, this was the capital of Egypt for some 30 years.

Akhetaten was abandoned for all time after Akhenaten's death. His successor, a son by a minor wife, changed his name from Tutankhaten to Tutankhamun (1336–1327 BC), moved the capital back to Thebes, re-established the cult of Amun at Thebes, restored power to the Theban priesthood and brought to an end what is known as the 'Amarna Period'. Akhetaten fell into ruin, its palaces and temples quarried during the reign of Ramses II for buildings in Hermopolis and other cities.

Archaeologists value the site because, unlike most places in Egypt, it was occupied for just one reign. Many visitors are attracted by the romance of Akhenaten's doomed project, but the ruins, scattered across the desert plain, are hard to understand, the tombs nowhere near as interesting or well preserved as others along the Nile, and the visit can be disappointing.

## Tell al-Amarna Necropolis

Two groups of cliff tombs, about 8km apart, make up the **Tell al-Amarna necropolis** (adult/student £25/15; ☞ 8am–4pm Oct–May, to 5pm Jun–Sep), which features some coloured, though defaced, wall paintings of life during the Aten revolution. Remains of temples and private or administrative buildings are scattered across a wide area: this was, after all, an imperial city.

There used to be a bus for touring the site but it was not running at the time of our visit. As the site is so large, the only viable way of visiting is to come by private taxi or with your own car.

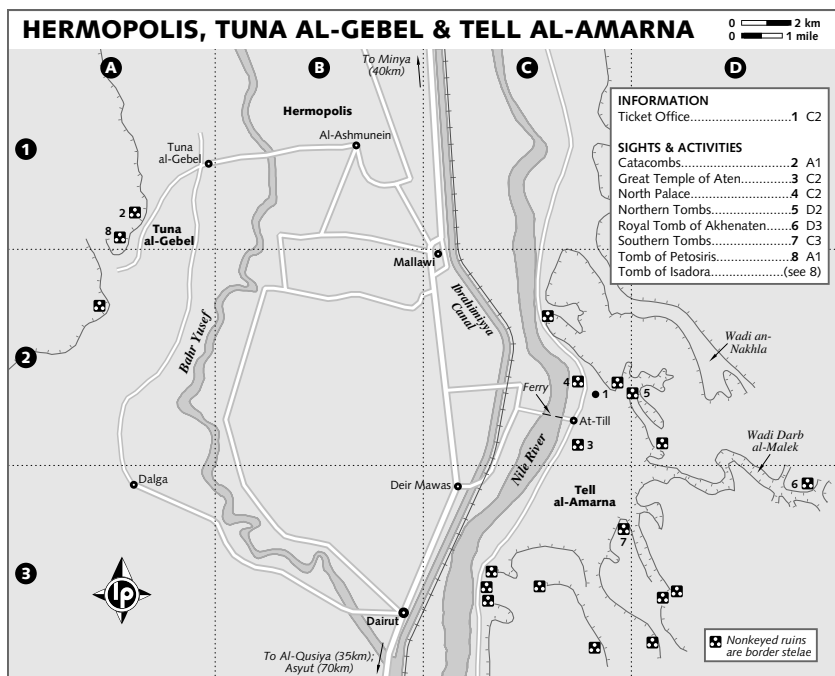
In all, there are 25 tombs cut into the base of the cliffs, numbered from one to six in the north, and seven to 25 in the south. Not all are open to the public and only five (No 3 to 6 and the royal tomb) currently have light. Even if you have transport, the guards may be unwilling to open the unlighted tombs and even if they will take you, the lighted tombs contain some of the best reliefs. Many visitors find the southern tombs a disappointment after the hassle of getting there. Be sure to bring water as there is currently no possibility of buying any at the site.

## NORTHERN TOMBS

### Tomb of Huya (No 1)

Huya was the steward of Akhenaten's mother, Queen Tiye, and relief scenes to the right and left of the entrance to his tomb show Tiye dining with her son and his family. On





the right wall of this columned outer chamber, Akhenaten is shown taking his mother to a small temple he has built for her and, on the left wall, sitting in a carrying chair with Nefertiti.

### Tomb of Meryre II (No 2)

Meryre II was superintendent of Nefertiti's household, and to the left of the entrance, you will find a scene shows Nefertiti pouring wine for Akhenaten.

### Tomb of Ahmose (No 3)

Ahmose's title was 'Fan-bearer on the King's Right Hand'. Much of his tomb decoration was unfinished: the left-hand wall of the long corridor leading to the burial chamber shows the artists' different stages. The upper register shows the royal couple on their way to the Aten temple, followed by armed guards. The lower register shows them seated in the palace listening to an orchestra.

### Tomb of Meryre I (No 4)

High priest of the Aten, Meryre is shown, on the left wall of the columned chamber, being

carried by his friends to receive rewards from the royal couple. On the right-hand wall, the royal couple are shown making offerings to the Aten disc; note here the rare depiction of a rainbow.

### Tomb of Pentu (No 5)

Pentu, the royal physician, was buried in a simple tomb. The left-hand wall of the corridor is decorated with images of the royal family at the Aten temple and of Pentu being appointed their physician.

### Tomb of Panehsy (No 6)

The tomb of Panehsy, chief servant of the Aten in Akhetaten, retains the decorated façade most others have lost. Inside, scenes of the royal family, including Nefertiti driving her chariot and, on the right wall of the entrance passage, Nefertiti's sister Mutnodjmet, later married to Pharaoh Horemheb (1323–1295 BC), with dwarf servants. Panehsy appears as a fat old man on the left wall of the passage between the two main chambers. Two of the first chamber's four columns were removed by the Copts, who added a nave to the inner wall



and created a chapel – the remains of painted angel wings can be seen on the walls.

## SOUTHERN TOMBS

### Tomb of Mahu (No 9)

One of the best preserved southern tombs, the paintings show interesting details of Mahu's duties as Akhenaten's chief of police, including taking prisoners to the vizier (minister), checking supplies and visiting the temple.

### Tomb of Ay (No 25)

The finest tomb at Tell al-Amarna. Ay's titles were simply 'God's Father' and 'Fan-bearer on the King's Right Hand' and he was vizier to three pharaohs before becoming one himself (he succeeded Tutankhamun and reigned 1327–1323 BC). His wife Tiye was Nefertiti's wet nurse. The images here reflect the couple's importance, with scenes including Ay and Tiye worshipping the sun and Ay receiving rewards from the royal family, including red-leather riding gloves. Ay wasn't buried here, but in the west valley beside the Valley of the Kings (p266) at Thebes.

## ROYAL TOMB OF AKHENATEN

Akhenaten's own **tomb** (additional ticket adult/student ££20/10) is in a ravine about 12km up the Royal Valley (Wadi Darb al-Malek), the valley that divides the north and south sections of the cliffs and where the sun was seen to rise each dawn. A well-laid road leads up the bleak valley. The guard will need to start up the tomb's generator. Very little remains inside the tomb. The right-hand side chamber has damaged reliefs of Akhenaten and his family worshipping Aten. A raised rectangular outline in the burial chamber once held the sarcophagus, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Akhenaten himself was probably not buried here, although members of his family certainly were. Some believe he was buried in KV55 in Luxor's Valley of the Kings, where his sarcophagus (newly returned from Germany to the Egyptian Museum, Cairo) was discovered. The whereabouts of his mummy remains are a mystery.

## Getting There & Away

Even if the security situation allows it, getting to Tell al-Amarna by public transport remains a challenge and, until the site bus starts running, is pointless: the site is so large that it is impossible to visit on foot. So

for now you need to take a taxi from either Asyut, Minya or Mallawi and cross on the irregular car ferry (per car ££15). Expect to pay as much as ££100 to ££200 depending on where you start and how long you want to stay. Be sure to specify which tombs you want to visit, or your driver may refuse to go to far-flung sites.

## AL-QUSIYA

Located about 8km southwest of the small rural town of Al-Qusiya, 35km south of Mallawi, is the Coptic complex of Deir al-Muharrag. About 7km further northwest, on an escarpment at the edge of the desert, lie the Tombs of Mir. There are no hotels in Al-Qusiya and police are unlikely to let you stay at the large guesthouse just outside the pseudo-medieval crenellated walls of Deir al-Muharrag. Happily, both sites can be visited in an easy day trip from Minya or Asyut, the latter being just an hour away by car.

## Sights

### DEIR AL-MUHARRAQ

Deir al-Muharrag, the **Burnt Monastery**, is a place of pilgrimage, refuge and vows where the strength of Coptic traditions can be experienced. The 120 resident monks believe that Mary and Jesus inhabited a cave on this site for six months and 10 days after fleeing from Herod. This was their longest stay at any of the numerous places where they are said to have rested in Egypt. Coptic tradition claims the **Church of al-Azraq** (Church of the Anointed) sits over the cave and is the world's oldest Christian church, consecrated around AD 60. More certain is the presence of monastic life here since the 4th century. The current building dates from the 12th to 13th centuries. Unusually, the church contains two iconostases. The one to the left of the altar came from an Ethiopian Church of Sts Peter and Paul, which used to sit on the roof. Other objects from the Ethiopians are displayed in the hall outside the church.

The **keep** beside the church is an independent 7th-century tower, rebuilt in the 12th and 20th centuries. Reached by drawbridge, its four floors can serve as a minimonastery, complete with its own small **Church of St Michael**, a refectory, accommodation and even burial space behind the altar.

Monks believe the monastery's religious significance is given in the Book of Isaiah.

In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of Host in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them.

*Isaiah 19:19-21*

The monastery has done much to preserve Coptic tradition: monks here spoke the Coptic language until the 19th century (at that time there were 190 of them) and while other monasteries celebrate some of the Coptic liturgy in Arabic (for their Arabic-speaking congregation), here they stick to Coptic.

Also in the compound, the **Church of St George** (or Mar Girgis) was built in 1880 with permission from the Ottoman sultan, who was still the official sovereign of Egypt. It is decorated with paintings of the 12 apostles and other religious scenes, its iconostasis is made from marble and many of the icons are in Byzantine style. Tradition has it that the icon showing the Virgin and Child was painted by St Luke.

Remember to remove shoes before entering either church and respect the silence and sanctity of the place. For a week every year (usually 21–28 June), thousands of pilgrims attend the monastery's annual feast, a time when visitors may not be admitted.

You will usually be escorted around the monastery and while there is no fee, donations are appreciated. Visits sometimes finish with a brief visit to the new church built in 1940 or the nearby gift shop or, sometimes, with a cool drink in the monastery's reception room.

## TOMBS OF MIR

The necropolis of the governors of Cusae, or the **Tombs of Mir** (adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 9am–5pm Sat–Wed) as they are commonly known (sometimes also Meir), were dug into the barren escarpment during the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Nine tombs are decorated and open to the public; six others were unfinished and remain unexcavated.

Tomb No 1 and the adjoining tomb No 2 are inscribed with 720 Pharaonic deities, but as the tombs were used as cells by early Coptic hermits, many faces and names of the gods were destroyed. In tomb No 4 you can still see the original grid drawn on the wall to assist the artist in designing the layout of the wall decorations. Tomb No 3 features a cow giving birth.

## Getting There & Away

At the time of writing it was easier taking a bus from Minya than Asyut. The Minya–Asyut bus will drop you at Al-Qusiya, about 50 minutes' drive from Asyut. From Al-Qusiya you may be able to get a local microbus to the monastery.

Few vehicles from Al-Qusiya go out to the Tombs of Mir, so you'll have to hire a taxi to take you there. Expect to pay ££25 to ££35, depending on your bargaining skills and how long you spend at the site. Ideally, you could combine this with a visit to the monastery.

## ASYUT

☎ 088

Asyut, 375km south of Cairo, was settled during Pharaonic times on a broad fertile plain bordering the west bank of the Nile and has preserved an echo of antiquity in its name. As Swaty, it was the ancient capital of the 13th nome of Upper Egypt. Surrounded by rich agricultural land and sitting at the end of one of Africa's great caravan routes, from sub-Saharan Africa and Sudan to Asyut via Al-Kharga Oasis (see the boxed text, p333), it has always been important commercially, if not politically. For centuries one of the main commodities traded here was slaves: caravans stopped here for quarantine before being traded, a period in which slavers used to prepare some of their male slaves for the harem.

Much of modern Asyut is an agglomeration of high-rises that resemble an Eastern European new town rather than an ancient Egyptian entrepôt. In the late 1980s this was one of the earliest centres of Islamist fomentation. Although the town has now been quiet for several years, the police continue to maintain a visible presence around hotels. You may still find yourself lumbered with a police escort.



donations appreciated. Microbuses from the centre of town will take you close for 50pt; a taxi will cost ££5. Ask for 'Malga Trasher'.

**Banana Island** (Gezirat al-Moz), at the end of Sharia Salah Salem, is a shady, pleasant place to picnic. You'll have to bargain with a felucca captain for the ride: expect to pay around ££30 an hour.

### CONVENT OF THE HOLY VIRGIN

At Dirunka, located some 11km southwest of Asyut, this **convent** was built near another of the caves where the Holy Family are said to have taken refuge during their flight into Egypt. Some 50 nuns and monks live at the convent, built into a cliff situated about 120m above the valley. One of the monks will happily show you around. During the Moulid (saints' festival) of the Virgin (held in the second half of August), up to a million pilgrims come to pray, carrying portraits of Mary and Jesus.

### Sleeping

As a large provincial centre, Asyut has a selection of hotels, but many are overpriced and noisy and the police may 'encourage' you towards one where they already have a presence.

**Youth Hostel** (☎ 232 4846; Lux Houses, 503 Sharia al-Walidiyya; dm with/without student card ££3.25/5.25) The youth hostel, with its entrance off a side street, is Asyut's best budget option, with friendly staff. Avoid Egyptian college breaks, when it gets very crowded.

**Hotel al-Hussein** (☎ /fax 234 2532; Midan el-Mahatta; s/d ££60/80) The Hussein is comfortable and conveniently overlooks the bus station, but noise means you won't want to stay longer than overnight.

**Assiut Hotel** (☎ 231 2121; fax 231 2122; 146 Sharia al-Nil; s/d ££89/110; ☼) Overlooking the Nile, this three-star hotel is the best place in town and has comfortable rooms with satellite TV, fridge and private bathroom. It has a restaurant (mains ££15 to ££25), as well as one of Asyut's only bars.

**Casa Blanca Hotel** (☎ 233 7762; fax 233 1600; Sharia Mohammed Tawfiq Khashba; s/d ££132/176; ☼) Sharing an air of neglect and underuse with the similarly rated Akhenaten Hotel across the road, rooms are gloomy but clean, with private bathroom and TV. Friendly staff. The disco is currently not running.

### Eating

Most hotels have restaurants, the best being at the Assiut Hotel (left), currently the only place in town serving alcohol. Cafeteria Majestic, opposite the train station, has decent food and there are the usual *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* stands around.

**Kushari Galal** (Sharia Talaat Harb; dishes from ££4) The most reliable carbohydrate intake in town. Delicious, convenient and open late.

**Casablanca Sweet Restaurant** (☎ 234 2727; Sharia Tawfik Khashba; dishes ££5-10) Savoury *fit-eer* (Egyptian pancakes), pizzas (though nothing to do with the Italian variety) and sweet crepes.

**Shayk Shepherd Akbar** (Sharia Saad Zaghloul; dishes ££5-15) A few minutes' walk from the train station, this popular café-restaurant serves good salads, chicken and grills.

### Getting There & Away

Asyut is a major hub for all forms of transport, but the police will encourage you to take the train or a private taxi. Should this change, the **bus station** (☎ 233 0460) near the train station has services to Cairo, Luxor, west to the New Valley and east to the Red Sea.

### TRAIN

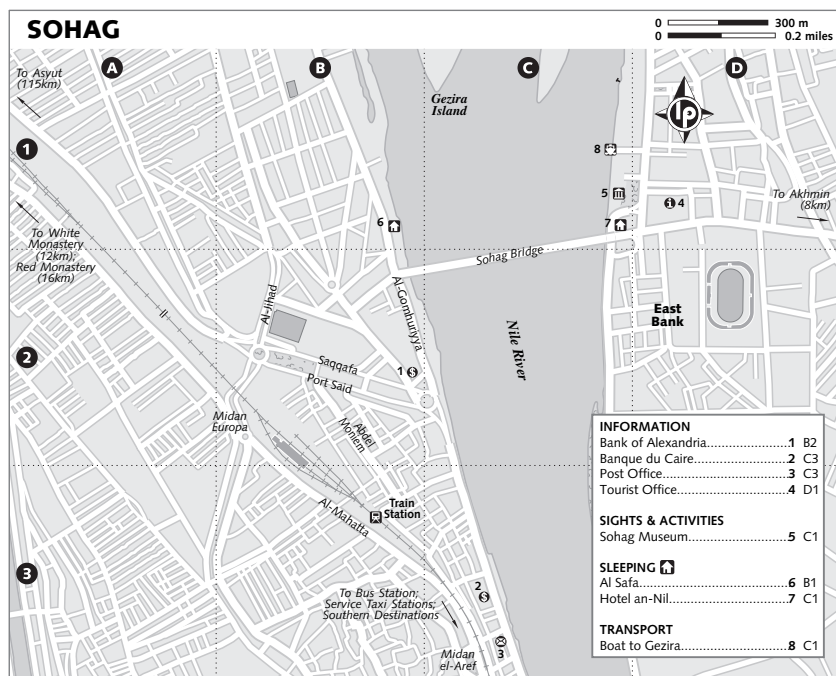
The train station is being renovated, but the **information desk** (☎ 233 5623) is still operating. There are several daytime trains to Cairo (1st/2nd class ££39/22, four to five hours) and Minya (££16/8, one hour), and about 10 daily south to Luxor (££44/30, five to six hours) and Aswan (££54/36, eight to nine hours). All stop in Sohag (££21/14, one to two hours) and Qena (££30/21, three to four hours).

### SOHAG

☎ 093 / pop 221,543

The city of Sohag, 115km south of Asyut, is one of the major Coptic Christian areas of Upper Egypt. Although there are few sights in the city, the nearby White and Red Monasteries, and the town of Akhmin across the river, are all of interest. Police presence here is stronger than in Asyut and Minya and travellers are discouraged from staying. You will be escorted wherever you go and may be banned from leaving your hotel after dark. It may be better to visit Sohag as a day trip from Luxor.

The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 460 4913; Governorate Bldg; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sun-Thu), in the building beside



the new museum on the east bank, can help arrange visits to the monasteries. Sohag tourist police can be contacted on ☎ 460 4800. There are ATMs and cash or travellers cheques may be changed at the **Bank of Alexandria** (Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu) or the **Banque du Caire** (Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu). There is also a **post office** (Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu).

## Sights

At the time of writing construction had almost finished on the new **Sohag Museum**, which will display local antiquities, including those from ongoing excavations of the temple of Ramses II in Akhmim. Until then, apart from the weekly Monday morning livestock market, there is little in town to delay visitors.

Currently the best reason to stop at Sohag is to visit two early Coptic monasteries, which trumpet the victory of Christianity over Egypt's pagan gods. The **White Monastery** (Deir al-Abyad; ☎ 7am-dusk), on rocky ground above the old Nile flood level, 12km northwest of Sohag, was founded by Saint Shenouda around AD 400. White limestone from Pharaonic temples

was reused, and ancient gods and hieroglyphs still look out from some of the blocks. It once supported a huge community of monks and boasted the largest library in Egypt, but today the manuscripts are scattered around the world and the monastery is home to 23 monks. The fortress walls still stand, though they failed to protect the interior, most of which is in ruins. Nevertheless, it is easy to make out the plan of the church inside the enclosure walls. Made of brick and measuring 75m by 35m, it follows a basilica plan, with a nave, two side aisles and a triple apse. The nave and apses are intact, the domes decorated with the Dormition of the Virgin and Christ Pantocrator. Nineteen columns, taken from an earlier structure, separate the side chapels from the nave. Visitors wanting to assist in services may arrive from 4am.

The **Red Monastery** (Deir al-Ahmar; ☎ 7am-midnight), 4km southeast of Deir al-Abyad, is hidden at the rear of a village. Founded by Besa, a disciple of Shenouda who, according to legend, was a thief who converted to Christianity, it was dedicated to St Bishoi. The older of the monastery's two chapels,



St Bishoi's dates from the 4th century AD and contains some rare frescoes. At the time of writing these were being restored by a team sponsored by the American Research Center in Egypt and USAID. While most of the chapel is hidden by scaffolding, frescoes visible in the right-hand nave suggest the superior quality of this early work. The chapel of the Virgin, across the open court, is a more modern and less interesting structure. To get to the monasteries you'll have to take a taxi (about ££25 per hour).

The satellite town of **Akhmin**, on Sohag's east bank, covers the ruins of the ancient Egyptian town of Ipu, itself built over an older predynastic settlement. It was dedicated to Min, a fertility god often represented by a giant phallus, equated with Pan by the Greeks (who later called the town Panopolis). The current name contains an echo of the god's name, but more definite links to antiquity were uncovered in 1982 when excavations beside the Mosque of Sheikh Naqshadi revealed an 11m-high **statue of Meret Amun** (adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 8am-6pm). This is the tallest statue of an ancient queen to have been discovered in Egypt. Meret Amun (Beloved of the Amun) was the daughter of Ramses II, wife of Amenhotep and priestess of the Temple of Min. She is shown here with flail in hand, wearing a ceremonial headdress and large earrings. Nearby, the remains of a seated statue of her father still retains some original colour.

Little is left of the temple itself, and the statue of Meret Amun now stands in a huge excavation pit, among the remains of a Roman settlement and houses of the modern town. Another excavation pit has been dug across the road.

Akhmin was famed in antiquity for its textiles – one of its current weavers calls it 'Manchester before history'. The tradition continues today and opposite the statue of Meret Amun, across from the post office, a green door leads to a small **weaving factory** (knock if it is shut). Here you can see weavers at work and buy hand-woven silk and cotton textiles straight from the bolt (silk ££65 to ££75 per metre, cotton ££30) or packets of ready-made tablecloths and serviettes.

Currently you will be escorted to Akhmin and will need to go by taxi (around ££25 per hour). Otherwise, a microbus from Sohag to Akhmin costs ££1 and takes 15 minutes.

Check the security situation with the Sohag **tourist police** (☎ 460 4800).

## Sleeping & Eating

Until the new upmarket east-bank Hotel an-Nil is finished, only one hotel was accepting foreigners in Sohag.

**Al Safa** (☎ 230 7701/2; fax 230 7704; Sharia al-Gomhuriyya, West Bank; s/d/tr ££200/300/400; ☎) A relatively new West Bank block. Rooms are comfortable and the riverside terrace is popular in the evening for snacks, soft drinks and water pipes.

Whatever choice there is in the way of food is off limits to foreigners. If this changes, there are budget *kushari*, *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* places near the train station. For something fancier, try the floating café tied up on the east bank, south of the bridge, which is good for grills. More romantic, there is a café on an island, reached by boat from the north side of the new Hotel an-Nil.

## Getting There & Away

With service taxi and bus travel forbidden to foreigners, the only way of leaving Sohag is by train. There is a frequent service north and south along the Cairo-Luxor main line, with a dozen daily trains to Asyut (1st/2nd class ££21/14) and Luxor (££35/21). The service to Al-Balyana is very slow (3rd class only ££4.50).

## AL-BALYANA

☎ 093

Al-Balyana is the jumping-off point for the village of **Al-Araba al-Madfuna**, 10km away, site of the necropolis of Abydos and the magnificent Temple of Seti I, one of the most beautiful monuments in Egypt. Security here tends to be heavy-handed and if you haven't been escorted thus far, you'll certainly pick up policemen here. Although they may limit the time you can spend there, they do not have the right to stop you seeing the temple.

Should you need to change money, there's a tiny Banque Misr kiosk at the entrance to Abydos Temple, which may open when tourists arrive, but cannot be relied upon.

As you're unlikely to be able to stay in Al-Balyana, you will be limited to travelling here by private taxi or on a day trip, most easily from Luxor.



## Abydos

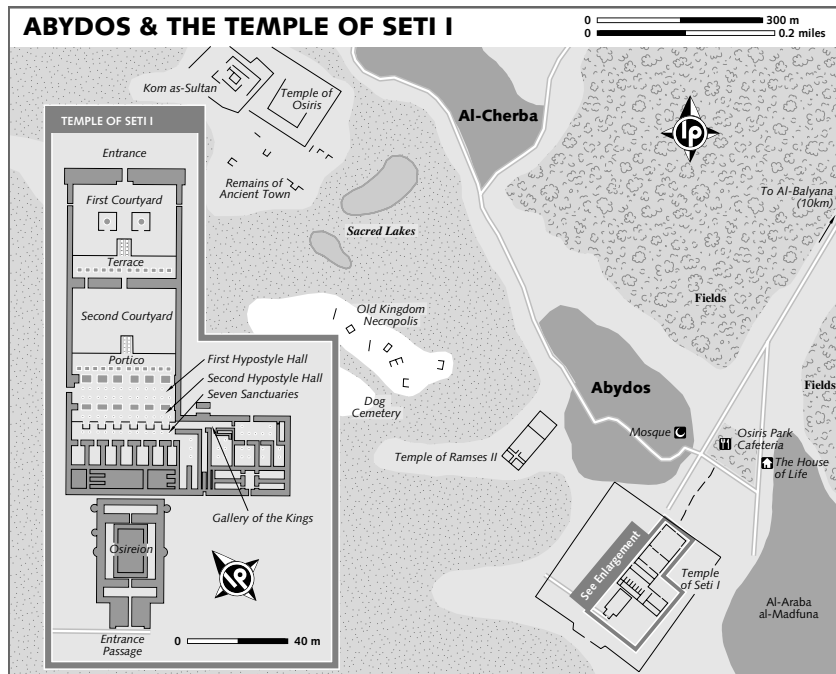
As the main cult centre of Osiris, god of the dead, **Abydos** (ancient name Ibdj; adult/student ££25/15; ☺ 7am-6pm) was *the* place to be buried in ancient Egypt. It was used as a necropolis from predynastic to Christian times (c 4000 BC–AD 600), more than 4500 years of constant use. The area now known as Umm al-Qa'ab (Mother of Pots) contains the mastaba tombs of the first pharaohs of Egypt, including that of the third pharaoh of the 1st dynasty, Djer (c 3000 BC). By the Middle Kingdom his tomb had become identified as the tomb of Osiris himself.

Abydos maintained its importance because of the cult of Osiris, god of the dead (see boxed text, p235). Although there were shrines to Osiris throughout Egypt, each one the supposed resting place of another part of his body, the temple at Abydos was the most important, being the home of his head, a place that most Egyptians would try to visit in their lifetime or have themselves buried here. Failing that, they would be buried with small boats to enable their souls to make the journey after death.

One of the temple's more recent residents was Dorothy Eady. An Englishwoman better known as 'Omm Sety', she believed she was a reincarnated temple priestess and lover of Seti I. For 35 years she lived at Abydos and provided archaeologists with information about the working of the temple, in which she was given permission to perform the old rites. She died in 1981 and was buried in the desert.

## TEMPLE OF SETI I

The first structure you'll see at Abydos is the striking Cenotaph or Great Temple of Seti I, which, after a certain amount of restoration work, is one of the most complete temples in Egypt. This great limestone structure, unusually L-shaped rather than rectangular, was dedicated to the six major gods – Osiris, Isis and Horus, Amun-Ra, Ra-Horakhty and Ptah – and also to Seti I (1294–1279 BC) himself. In the aftermath of the Amarna Period, it is a clear statement of a return to the old ways. As you roam through Seti's dark halls and sanctuaries an air of mystery surrounds you.



**KING LISTS** *Dr Joann Fletcher*

Ancient Egyptians constructed their history around their pharaohs. Instead of using a continuous year-by-year sequence, events were recorded as happening in a specific year of a specific pharaoh: at each pharaoh's accession they started at year 1 until the pharaoh died, then began again with year 1 of the next pharaoh.

So it was vital to have reliable records listing each reign. While a number of so-called king lists can be seen in Cairo's Egyptian Museum, the Louvre in Paris and the British Museum, the only one remaining in its original location was created by Seti I in his Abydos Temple. With an emphasis on the royal ancestors, Seti names 75 of his predecessors beginning with the semi-mythical Menes (usually regarded as Narmer), yet in typical Egyptian fashion he rewrites history by excluding those considered 'unsuitable', from the foreign Hyksos pharaohs of the Second Intermediate Period and the female pharaoh Hatshepsut to the Amarna pharaohs: Amenhotep III is immediately followed by Horemheb, and thus Akhenaten, Smenkhkare, Tutankhamun and Ay are simply erased from the record.

The temple is entered through a largely destroyed **pylon** and two **courtyards**, built by Seti I's son Ramses II, who is depicted on the portico killing Asiatics and worshipping Osiris. Beyond is the **first hypostyle hall**, also completed by Ramses II. Reliefs depict the pharaoh making offerings to the gods and preparing the temple building.

The **second hypostyle hall**, with 24 sandstone papyrus columns, was the last part of the temple to have been decorated by Seti, although he died before the work was completed. The reliefs that were finished are of the highest quality. Particularly outstanding is a scene on the rear right-hand wall showing Seti standing in front of a shrine to Osiris, upon which sits the god himself. Standing in front of him are the goddesses Maat, Renpet, Isis, Nephthys and Amentet. Below is a frieze of Hapi, the Nile god.

At the rear of this second hypostyle hall are **sanctuaries** for each of the seven gods (right to left: Horus, Isis, Osiris, Amun-Ra, Ra-Horakhty, Ptah and Seti), which once held their cult statues. The Osiris sanctuary, third from the right, leads to a series of inner chambers dedicated to the god, his wife and child, Isis and Horus, and the ever-present Seti. More interesting are the chambers off to the left of these seven sanctuaries: here, in a group of chambers dedicated to the mysteries of Osiris, the god is shown mummified with the goddess Isis hovering above him as a bird, a graphic depiction of the conception of their son Horus.

Immediately to the left of this, the corridor known as **Gallery of the Kings** is carved with the figures of Seti I with his eldest son,

the future Ramses II, and a long list of the pharaohs who preceded them (see the boxed text, above).

**THE OSIREION**

Directly behind Seti's temple, the Osireion is a weird, wonderful building that continues to baffle Egyptologists, though it is usually interpreted as a cenotaph to Osiris. Originally thought to be an Old Kingdom structure, on account of the great blocks of granite used in its construction, it has now been dated to Seti's reign, its design is believed to be based on the rock-cut tombs in the Valley of the Kings. At the centre of its columned 'burial chamber', which lies at a lower level than Seti's temple, is a dummy sarcophagus. This chamber was originally surrounded by water, but thanks to a rising water table, the entire structure is now flooded, making inspection of the funerary and ritual texts carved on its walls hazardous.

**TEMPLE OF RAMSES II**

Just northwest of Seti I's temple is the smaller and less well-preserved structure built by his son Ramses II (1279–1213 BC). Although following the rectangular plan of a traditional temple, it has sanctuaries for each god Ramses considered important, including Osiris, Amun-Ra, Thoth, Min, the deified Seti I and, of course, Ramses himself. Although the roof is missing, the reliefs again retain a significant amount of their colour, clearly seen on figures of priests, offering bearers and the pharaoh anointing the gods' statues. You may not be allowed to visit this site.

## Sleeping & Eating

You are unlikely to be allowed to stay in Al-Balyana, given the nervousness of the local police. Should the situation change, there are a couple of hotels and some cafés and food stands around the town.

**House of Life** (☎ 012 733 0071; [www.ancientegyptianhealing.com](http://www.ancientegyptianhealing.com); opposite Temple of Seti I; B&B/full board per person €15/25) The only hotel functioning at the time of our visit, this simple Dutch, Egyptian and US-run house overlooking the temple has six rooms, sharing three bathrooms. There's a big terrace, and guests can access the internet and washing machine. Mr Horus, the Egyptian partner, claims to have been trained in ancient Egyptian healing, and various essential oils and other products are available. Desert trips can also be arranged.

**Osiris Park Cafeteria** (Temple of Seti I; ☎ 7am-10pm) Right in front of the temple, this is the only option you are likely to be allowed to use. The food is overpriced and consists mostly of snacks, although chicken meals (££35) are sometimes available and the welcome is friendly and the drinks cold. There is also a surprisingly good range of books and brochures about the temple.

## Getting There & Away

The most common way of getting to Al-Balyana is by tour bus or private taxi in the 8am convoy from Luxor (see boxed text, p314). You can also catch a train from Luxor at 9.15am (1st/2nd class ££16/13, three hours).

Expect to be picked up by the police and put into a private taxi to the temple (return about ££40 to ££50). There is a train back to Luxor at 5pm (3rd class only ££8). Impatient police may also push you onto the bus of a tour group going to Luxor.

## QENA

☎ 096 / pop 201,996

Ninety-one kilometres east of Al-Balyana, 62km north of Luxor, Qena sits at the intersection of the main Nile road and the road running across the desert to the Red Sea towns of Port Safaga and Hurghada. A scruffy market town and provincial capital, Qena has little to recommend it to the visitor, which is just as well because current security measures make it impossible to visit. The only reason to stop is to get to the spectacular temple complex at Dendara, located just outside the town, although this is best done as a day trip from Luxor. Train or private taxi are the only viable ways of travelling independently and then you will be given a police escort as soon as you arrive. If you need money, you may be allowed to visit the **Bank of Alexandria** (off Sharia Luxor; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu) or **Banque du Caire** (Sharia Luxor; ☎ 9am-2.30pm Sun-Thu).

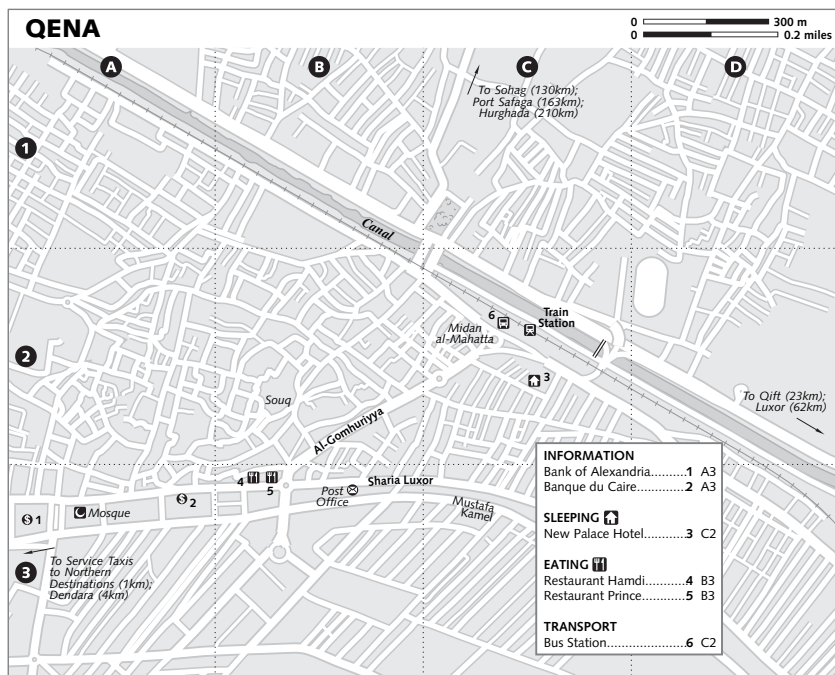
## Dendara

Although built at the very end of the Pharaonic period, the **Temple of Hathor** (adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 7am-6pm) at her cult site of Dendara is one of

### THE CULT OF OSIRIS

The most familiar of all ancient Egypt's myths is the story of Isis and Osiris, preserved in the writings of the Greek historian Plutarch (c AD 46-126) following a visit to Egypt. According to Plutarch, Osiris and his sister-wife Isis ruled on earth, bringing peace and prosperity to their kingdom. Seething with jealousy at their success, their brother Seth invited Osiris to a banquet and tricked him into climbing inside a chest. Once Osiris was inside, Seth sealed the coffin and threw it into the Nile, drowning his brother. Following the murder, the distraught Isis retrieved her brother-husband's body, only to have it seized back by Seth who dismembered it, scattering the pieces far and wide. But Isis refused to give up and, taking the form of a kite, searched for the separate body parts, burying each piece where she found it, which explains why there are so many places that claim to be Osiris' tomb.

Another version of the story has Isis collecting the parts of Osiris and reassembling them to create the first mummy, helped by Anubis, god of embalming. Then, using her immense magic, she restored Osiris to life for long enough to conceive their son Horus. Raised to avenge his father, Horus defeated Seth. While Horus ruled on earth, represented by each pharaoh, his resurrected father ruled as Lord of the Afterlife. A much-loved god, Osiris came to represent the hope for salvation after death, a concept as important to life-loving ancient Egyptians as it was to early Christians.



the iconic Egyptian buildings, mostly because it remains virtually intact, with a great stone roof and columns, dark chambers, underground crypts and twisting stairways all carved with hieroglyphs.

Dendara was an important administrative and religious centre as early as the 6th dynasty (c 2320 BC). The goddess Hathor had been worshipped here since the Old Kingdom. But this great temple was only begun in the 30th dynasty, with much of the building undertaken by the Ptolemies and completed during the Roman period.

Few deities have such varied characteristics. Hathor was the goddess of love and sensual pleasures, patron of music and dancing; the Greeks appropriately associated her with their goddess Aphrodite. Like most Egyptian gods, Hathor was known by a range of titles, including 'the golden one', 'she of the beautiful hair' and 'lady of drunkenness', representing the joyful intoxication involved in her worship. As the 'Lady of the West' she was also protector of the dead. She is usually represented as a woman, a cow or a woman with a headdress of cow's horns

and sun disc, as she was the daughter of the sun-god Ra. She was also a maternal figure and as wife of Horus was often portrayed as the divine mother of the reigning pharaoh. In a famous statue from Deir al-Bahri in Luxor she even appears in the form of a cow suckling Amenhotep II (1427–1400 BC). Confusingly, she shared many of these attributes with the goddess Isis, who was also described as the mother of the king. In the end Isis essentially overshadowed Hathor as an über-mother when the legend of Isis and Osiris expanded to include the birth of Horus.

### TOURING THE TEMPLE

All visitors must pass through the new visitors centre, with ticket office and bazaar. While it is currently unoccupied, before long this will involve running the gauntlet of hassling traders in order to get to the temple. One advantage is a clean, working toilet. At the time of our visit it was not possible to buy food or drinks at the site.

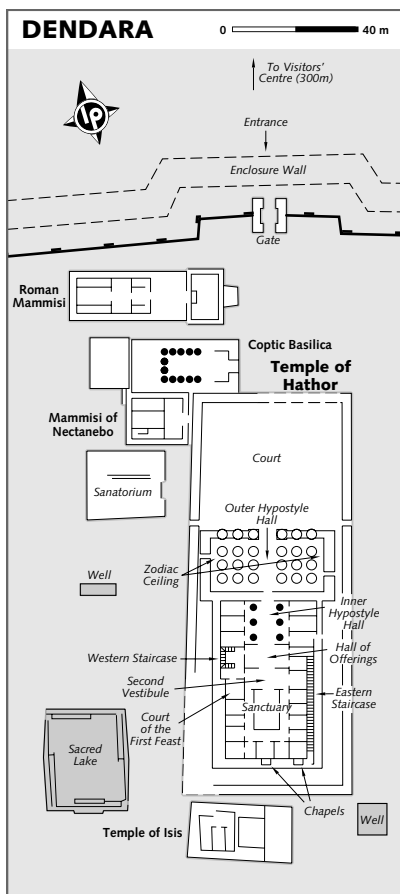
Beyond the towering gateway and mud walls, the temple was built on a slight rise.

The entrance leads into the **outer hypostyle hall**, built by Roman emperor Tiberius, the first six of its 24 great stone columns adorned on all four sides with Hathor's head, defaced by Christians but still an impressive sight. The walls are carved with scenes of Tiberius and his Roman successors presenting offerings to the Egyptian gods: the message here, as throughout the temple, is the continuity of tradition, even under foreign rulers. The ceiling at the far left and right side of the hall, currently being cleaned, is decorated with zodiacs.

The inner temple was built by the Ptolemies, the smaller **inner hypostyle hall** again has Hathor columns and walls carved with scenes of royal ceremonies, including the founding of the temple. But notice the 'blank' cartouches that reveal much about the political instability of late Ptolemaic times – with such a rapid turnover of pharaohs, the stonemasons seem to have been reluctant to carve the names of those who might not be in the job for long. Things reached an all-time low in 80 BC when Ptolemy XI murdered his more popular wife and stepmother Berenice III after only 19 days of co-rule. The outraged citizens of Alexandria dragged the pharaoh from his palace and killed him in revenge.

Beyond the second hypostyle hall, you will find the **Hall of Offerings** leads to the **sanctuary**, the most holy part of the temple, home to the goddess' statue. A further Hathor statue was stored in the crypt beneath her temple, and brought out each year for the New Year Festival, which in ancient times fell in July and coincided with the rising of the Nile. It was carried into the Hall of Offerings, where it rested with statues of other gods before being taken to the roof. The western staircase is decorated with scenes from this procession. In the open-air kiosk on the southwestern corner of the roof, the gods awaited the first reviving rays of the sun-god Ra on New Year's Day. The statues were later taken down the eastern staircase, which is also decorated with this scene.

The theme of revival continues in two suites of rooms on the roof, decorated with scenes of the revival of Osiris by his sister-wife, Isis. In the centre of the ceiling of the northeastern suite is a plaster cast of the famous 'Dendara Zodiac', the original now in the Louvre, Paris. Views of the surrounding



countryside from the roof are magnificent. The graffiti on the edge of the temple was left by Napoleon's commander Desaix, and other French soldiers, in 1799.

The **exterior walls** feature lion-headed gargoyles to cope with the very occasional rainfall and are decorated with scenes of pharaohs paying homage to the gods. The most famous of these is on the rear (south) wall, where Cleopatra stands with Caesarion, her son by Julius Caesar.

Facing this back wall is a small **temple of Isis** built by Cleopatra's great rival Octavian, the Emperor Augustus. Walking back towards the front of the Hathor temple on the west side, the palm-filled Sacred Lake supplied the temple's water. Beyond this, to

the north, lie the mud-brick foundations of the **sanatorium**, where the ill came to seek a cure from the goddess.

Finally there are the two **mammisi** (birth houses), the first built by the 30th-dynasty Egyptian pharaoh, Nectanebo I (380–362 BC), and decorated by the Ptolemies, the one nearest the temple wall built by the Romans and decorated by Emperor Trajan (AD 98–117). Such buildings celebrated divine birth, both of the young gods and of the pharaoh himself as son of the gods. Between the *mammisi* lie the remains of a 5th-century AD **Coptic basilica**.

Dendera is 4km southwest of Qena on the west side of the Nile. Most visitors arrive from Luxor in convoy (see boxed text, p314). A return taxi from Luxor will cost you about ££150 to ££200 return. There is also a day cruise to Dendera from Luxor (see p276). If you arrive in Qena by train, police will put you in a taxi (££20 to ££30 to the temple and back with some waiting time). Expect a police escort.

### Sleeping & Eating

The police will not allow you to stay the night, but even if you could, the choices are limited and Qena is close enough to Luxor for commuting.

**New Palace Hotel** (☎ 332 2509, 010 303 5514; near Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; s/d ££90/110; ♿) Behind the Mobil petrol station, this hotel is a poor option when you could be staying in Luxor.

Food choices are similarly limited, with several *fuul*, *kushari* and *ta'amiyya* places around Midan al-Mahatta. If you can get to them, **Restaurant Hamdi** (Sharia Luxor; dishes ££10–20) and **Restaurant Prince** (Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; dishes ££7–18) both serve meals of soup, chicken, kofta and vegetables. But a picnic at the temple might be preferable.

### Getting There & Away

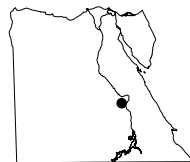
The **Upper Egypt Bus Co** (☎ 532 5068; Midan al-Mahatta), opposite the train station, runs services to Cairo, Luxor, Hurghada and Suez, but at the time of our visit foreigners were only allowed to leave Qena by organised tour, private taxi or train. All main north–south trains stop at Qena. There are 1st-/2nd-class air-con trains to Luxor (££18/12, 40 minutes) and trains to Al-Balyana (2nd/3rd class ££12/6, two hours), if you want to visit Abydos.

### Getting Around

Your only option at the moment is to travel by private taxi. A ride to Dendera should cost ££5, but with police help is currently double the rate.



# Nile Valley: Luxor



Royal Thebes, Egyptian treasure-house of countless wealth, Who boasts her hundred gates, through each of which, With horse and car, two hundred warriors march.

*Homer, The Iliad, Book IX*

The city's governor claims that Luxor is the world's greatest open-air museum, but that doesn't come close to describing this amazing place. There's nothing like the grandeur of ancient Thebes. Florence Nightingale called it 'the deathbed of the world' and likened it to the writings of Shakespeare. It's one of the few places in the world that deserves to be called unforgettable.

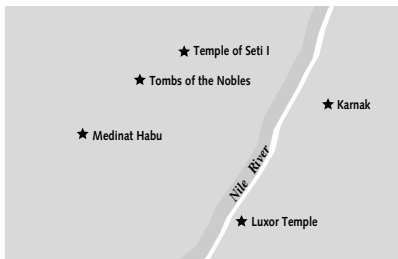
Although the modern East Bank city has grown rapidly in recent years, the setting is still breathtakingly beautiful, the Nile flowing between the modern town and the West Bank necropolis, backed by the enigmatic Theban escarpment. Scattered across the landscape is an embarrassment of riches, from the temples of Karnak and Luxor on its East Bank to the temples of Deir al-Bahri and Medinat Habu, the Colossi of Memnon and the Valley of the Kings.

Thebes's wealth and power was legendary in antiquity, its god Amun feared across the Mediterranean and Asia. By the late 18th century, its legend lured travellers from Europe. Since then, fuelled by tales of treasure and pharaoh's curses, huge numbers have made pilgrimages here

Today's visitor risks being surrounded by coachloads of tourists as they are herded through tombs and temples at a furious pace, and lost amid a sea of jostling groups. But with a little planning and flexibility the biggest crowds can be avoided and the magic of the Theban landscape and its unparalleled archaeological heritage can be enjoyed in relative peace.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Imagine yourself in an exotic garden with gigantic papyrus-shaped stone columns in the **great hypostyle hall** (p247) at Karnak
- Glimpse the good life of an ancient Egyptian aristocrat, so good he wanted it represented on his tomb walls, in the **Tombs of the Nobles**, (p269) hoping it would continue after his death
- Marvel at the wonderful architecture of the **Luxor Temple** (p249) and return later at night for a detailed view of the beautifully lit carvings on the walls
- Wander through the best-preserved Theban temple, **Medinat Habu** (p274), in the soft, late-afternoon light
- Sense the spirituality in an uncrowded ancient temple, at the beautifully restored and rarely visited **Temple of Seti I** (p257)



## HISTORY

Palaeolithic tools found in the Theban hills indicate that there have been human settlements in the area for at least half a million years, but Thebes (ancient Waset) only became important in the Middle Kingdom period (2055–1650 BC). During the chaos of the First Intermediate Period (2160–2025 BC), the small village of Thebes eventually grew strong enough to overpower the northern capital Heracleopolis. The 11th-dynasty Theban prince Montuhotep II (2055–2004 BC) reunited the country, moved his capital to Thebes and increased Karnak's importance as a cult centre to the local god Amun with a temple dedicated to him. Montuhotep's funerary temple at Deir al-Bahri served as an inspiration for Queen Hatshepsut's temple 500 years later. The 12th-dynasty pharaohs (1850–1795 BC) moved their administrative capital back north to al-Lisht, situated about 30km south of Memphis, but much of their immense wealth from expanded foreign trade and agriculture, and tribute from military expeditions made into Nubia and Asia, went to the priesthood of Amun and Thebes, which remained the religious capital. This 200-year period was one of the richest times throughout Egyptian history, which witnessed a great flourishing of architecture and the arts, and major advances in science.

After the Second Intermediate Period (1650–1550 BC), when much of Egypt was ruled by Asiatic tribes known as the Hyksos, it was the Thebans again, under Ahmose I, who drove out the foreigners and unified Egypt. Because of his military victories and as the founder of the 18th dynasty, Ahmose was deified and worshipped at Thebes for hundreds of years. This was the beginning of the glorious New Kingdom period (1550–1069 BC), when Thebes reached its apogee. It was home to tens of thousands of people, who helped construct many of its great monuments.

Amenhotep III (1390–1352 BC) was probably the greatest contributor of all to Thebes. He continued to accumulate wealth from foreign expeditions and spent vast sums on building, including substantial additions to the temple complex at Karnak, his great palace, Malqata, on the West Bank, with a large harbour for religious festivals and the largest memorial temple ever built. Very little of the

latter is left beyond the so-called Colossi of Memnon, the largest monolithic statue ever carved. His son Amenhotep IV (1352–1336 BC), who later renamed himself Akhenaten, moved the capital from Thebes to his new city of Akhetaten (Tell al-Amarna), worshipped one god only (Aten the solar god), and brought about dramatic changes in art and architecture. The temples in Thebes were closed until his death, but the powerful priesthood was soon after reinstated under Akhenaten's successor, Tutankhamun, who built very little but became the best-known pharaoh ever when his tomb was discovered full of treasure in 1922. Ramses II (1279–1213 BC) may have exaggerated his military victories, but he too was a great builder and added the magnificent hypostyle hall to Karnak, other halls to Luxor Temple, and built the Ramesseum and two magnificent tombs in the Valley of the Kings for him and his many sons.

The decline of Pharaonic rule was mirrored by Thebes' gradual slide into insignificance: when the Persians sacked Thebes, it was clear the end was nigh. Mud-brick settlements clung to the once mighty Theban temples, and people hid within the stone walls against marauding desert tribes. Early Christians built churches in the temples, carved crosses on the walls and scratched out reliefs of the pagan gods. The area fell into obscurity in the 7th century AD after the Arab invasion, and the only reminder of its glorious past was the name given to it by its Arab rulers: Al-Uqsar (The Fortifications), giving modern Luxor its name. By the time European travellers arrived here in the 18th century, Luxor was little more than a large Upper Egyptian village, known more for its 12th-century saint, Abu al-Haggag, buried above the mound of Luxor Temple, than for its half-buried ruins.

The growth of Egyptomania changed that. Napoleon arrived in 1798 wanting to revive Egypt's greatness but, with the publication of the *Description de l'Égypte*, did manage to revive interest in Egypt. European exhibitions of mummies, jewellery and other spectacular funerary artefacts from Theban tombs (often found by plundering adventurers rather than enquiring scholars) made Luxor an increasingly popular destination. By 1869, when Thomas Cook brought his first group of tourists to Egypt, Luxor was

one of the highlights. Mass tourism had arrived and Luxor regained its place on the world map.

## ORIENTATION

Luxor today divides into three separate areas for visitors: the town of Luxor itself, the temple complex at Karnak, a couple of kilometres to the northeast, and the monuments and necropolis of ancient Thebes on the west bank of the Nile.

In Luxor town (Map pp244–5) there are five main thoroughfares: Sharia as-Souq, Sharia al-Mahatta, Sharia al-Karnak, Corniche an-Nil, and Sharia Televizyon, a bustling area around which many of the town's budget hotels are clustered.

On the West Bank (Map p255) the village of Al-Gezira, close to the ferry landing, is becoming a hub of shops, midrange hotels and restaurants. Most monuments are further west, with tombs and temples strung out at the edge of the desert.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

Luxor has two excellent English-language bookshops. Opposite Aboudi and the New Winter Palace, on the Corniche, is a kiosk selling a good selection of foreign press.

**AA Gaddis Bookshop** (Map pp244–5; ☎ 238 7042; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am–10pm Mon–Sat, 10.30am–10pm Sun) Between Old and New Winter Palace Hotels; extensive selection of books on Egypt, postcards and souvenirs.

**Aboudi Bookshop** (Map pp244–5; ☎ 237 3390; Tourist Bazaar, Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am–10pm) Has an excellent selection of guidebooks, maps, postcards and fiction.

## Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 123)

**Police** (Map pp244–5; ☎ 237 1500, 237 3845; cnr Sharias Karnak & al-Matafy)

**Tourist police** (Map pp244–5; ☎ 237 6620; Corniche an-Nil) Next to the tourist office.

## Internet Access

You can find internet access everywhere in Luxor, including in many hotels. Prices range from ££5 to ££10 per hour.

## EAST BANK

**Aboudi Bookshop** (Map pp244–5; ☎ 237 3390; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am–10pm)

**Gamil Centre** (Map pp244–5; lower level, Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 24hr) In front of the Old Winter Palace Hotel.

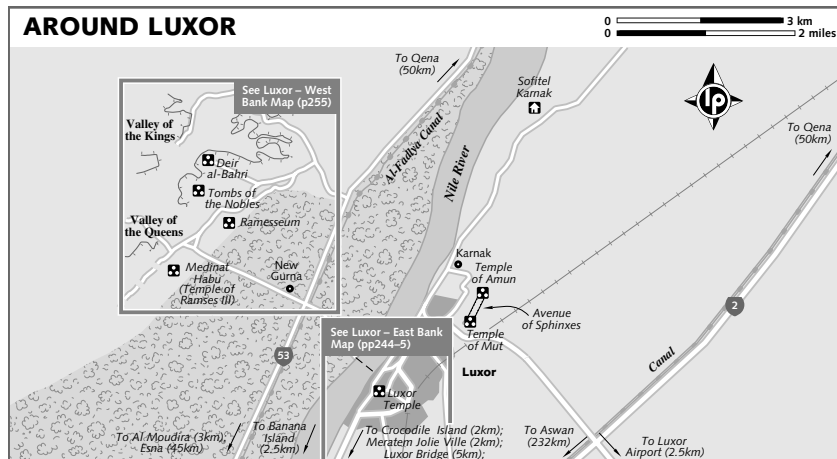
**GBC Internet** (Map pp244–5; ☎ 236 5519; lower level, Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9.30am–6pm) In front of the New Winter Palace Hotel.

**Heroes Internet** (Map pp244–5; Sharia Televizyon; ☎ 24hr)

**Salem Net** (Map pp244–5; ☎ 236 4652; ☎ 24hr) Good connection and air-conditioned room next to the train station, opposite the Anglo Hotel.

## WEST BANK

**Europa Internet** (Map pp244–5; ☎ 012 866 5558; main street, Gezira; ☎ 8am–2am) Very fast connection.



**Nile Centre** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 3482; Gezira; ☎ 9am-midnight)

## Medical Services

**General Hospital** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2025, ☎ 382 698; Corniche an-Nil) As a last resort.

**International Hospital** (☎ 238 7192/3/4; Sharia Televizyon) The best place in town.

## Money

Most major Egyptian banks have branches in Luxor. Unless otherwise noted, usual opening hours are 8.30am to 2pm and 5pm to 6pm, Sunday to Thursday. ATMs can be found all over town, including at most banks and five-star hotels.

**American Express** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 8333; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) Beside entrance to Old Winter Palace Hotel.

**Bank of Alexandria** (Map pp244-5; Corniche an-Nil) Near Hotel Mercure.

**Banque du Caire** (Map pp244-5; Corniche an-Nil)

**Banque Misr** (Map pp244-5; Sharia Labib Habashi) Around the corner from the Mercure. There is another branch on Sharia Televizyon.

**National Bank of Egypt** (Map pp244-5; Corniche an-Nil)

**Thomas Cook** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2196; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-8pm) Below entrance to Old Winter Palace Hotel.

## Post

**Main post office** (Map pp244-5; Sharia al-Mahatta; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

**Tourist Bazaar post office** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 6620; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu) Next to the tourist office.

## Telephone

There are cardphones scattered throughout the town. Cards are available from kiosks and shops. There are several mobile phone shops on Sharia al-Mahatta and Sharia Televizyon that sell tourist SIM cards.

**Central telephone office** (Map pp244-5; Sharia al-Karnak; ☎ 24hr)

**Telephone office** (Map pp244-5; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-8pm) Below entrance to Old Winter Palace Hotel.

## Tourist Information

**Airport office** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2306; 8am-9pm)

**Tourist office** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2215; fax 237 3294; Tourist Bazaar, Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-9pm)

**Train station office** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 0259; ☎ 8am-9pm)

## Visa Extensions

**Passport office** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0885; Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu, 2-8pm for information only)

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Until recently Luxor was considered the hassle capital of Egypt but the new governor is cleaning up the town in every possible way. Some scams remain, including asking for extra baksheesh at the monuments, overcharging for a *calèche* (horse-drawn carriage) or felucca, and touts in the souq or station still target new arrivals. The tourist office will need a written report from you if anything happens, and will try to take action.

If you are looking for student cards in Luxor, make sure you get to the correct office; one office issues ISE (International Student & Youth Exchange) cards, which do not provide as many discounts as the International Student Identity Card (ISIC). For more details, see p507.

## SIGHTS – EAST BANK

Luxor's East Bank is still a busy provincial city, despite the presence of increasing numbers of tourists. But the new governor seems more interested in the needs of visitors than citizens and, at the time of writing, was courting much controversy with his efforts to clean up the centre of town. Sharia al-Mahatta now has a slight Parisian air, the souq is clean and partly covered, and buildings are being cleared from around the temples of Luxor and Karnak. His next project is to clear the 3km-long alley of the sphinxes between the two temples, pulling down a number of historic, though not ancient buildings on the way, including the French House next to Karnak Temple.

The city centre, where the hotels, bars and restaurants are concentrated, is easily walkable when the heat is not intense. At its heart is Luxor Temple, an elegant architectural masterpiece, its courtyards and sanctuaries dedicated to the Theban triad. Rather than start here, it makes sense to visit the awe-inspiring temple complex of Karnak early in the morning. Here, for more than 1500 years, pharaohs vied for the gods' attention by outdoing each other's architectural feats. Luxor Temple can be visited later.

Complementing the monuments are two excellent museums. Luxor Museum has a fascinating collection of artefacts discovered in this antiquities-rich area, while the Mummification Museum displays animal and human mummies and explains in detail how the ancient Egyptians perfected the embalming process.

## Temples of Karnak

More than a temple, **Karnak** (Map p241; Sharia al-Karnak; adult/student ££50/25; ☎ 6am–5.30pm Oct–Apr, to 6pm May–Sep) is an extraordinary complex of sanctuaries, kiosks, pylons and obelisks dedicated to the Theban gods and the greater glory of pharaohs. Everything is on a gigantic scale: the site covers over 2 sq km, large enough to contain about 10 cathedrals, while its main structure, the Temple of Amun, is the largest religious building ever built. This was where the god lived on earth, surrounded by the houses of his wife Mut, and their son Khonsu, two other huge temple complexes on this site. Built, added to, dismantled, restored, enlarged and decorated over nearly 1500 years, Karnak was the most important place of worship in Egypt during the New Kingdom. It was called Ipet-Sut, meaning ‘The Most Esteemed of Places’; Karnak is its Arabic name meaning ‘fortified settlement’. New Kingdom records show that the priests of the Temple of Amun had 81,000 people working in or for the temple, owned 421,000 head of cattle, 65 cities, 83 ships and 691,000 acres of agricultural land, giving us an idea of its economic, as well as spiritual, significance.

With so many additions, the site can be very confusing; trying to understand this immense monument has vexed travellers for centuries. As Amelia Edwards, the 19th-century writer and artist who journeyed up the Nile, succinctly put it:

It is a place that has been much written about and often painted; but of which no writing and no art can convey more than a dwarfed and pallid impression ... The scale is too vast; the effect too tremendous; the sense of one's own dumbness, and littleness, and incapacity, too complete and crushing.

The most important place of worship was the massive **Amun Temple Enclosure** (Precinct

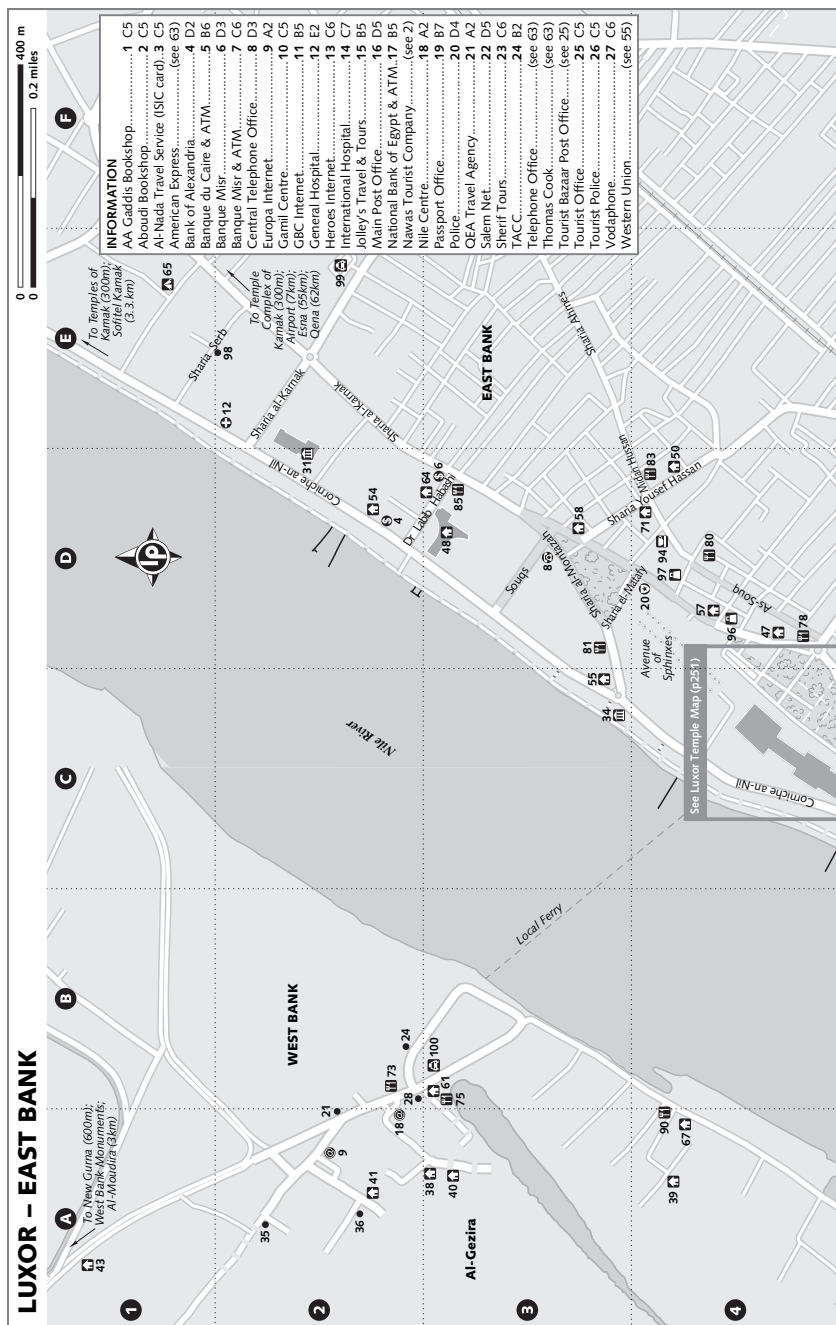
of Amun; Map pp246–7), dominated by the great Temple of Amun-Ra, which contains the famous hypostyle hall, a spectacular forest of giant papyrus-shaped columns. On its southern side is the Mut Temple Enclosure, once linked to the main temple by an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes. To the north is the Montu Temple Enclosure, which honoured the local Theban war god. The 3km-long paved avenue of human-headed sphinxes that once linked the great Temple of Amun at Karnak with Luxor Temple, is now again being cleared.

The earliest structures at Karnak go back to the Middle Kingdom period: the White Chapel of Sesostri I (1965–1920 BC), reconstructed in the open-air museum, and the 12th-dynasty foundations of what was the most sacred part of the Temple of Amun, the sacred barque sanctuary and the Middle Kingdom Court (behind the sixth pylon). However most of what you can see was built by the powerful pharaohs of the 18th to 20th dynasties (1570 and 1090 BC), who spent fortunes on making their mark in this most sacred of places. Later pharaohs extended and rebuilt the complex, as did the Ptolemies and the early Christians. Basically the further into the complex you venture, the older the structures.

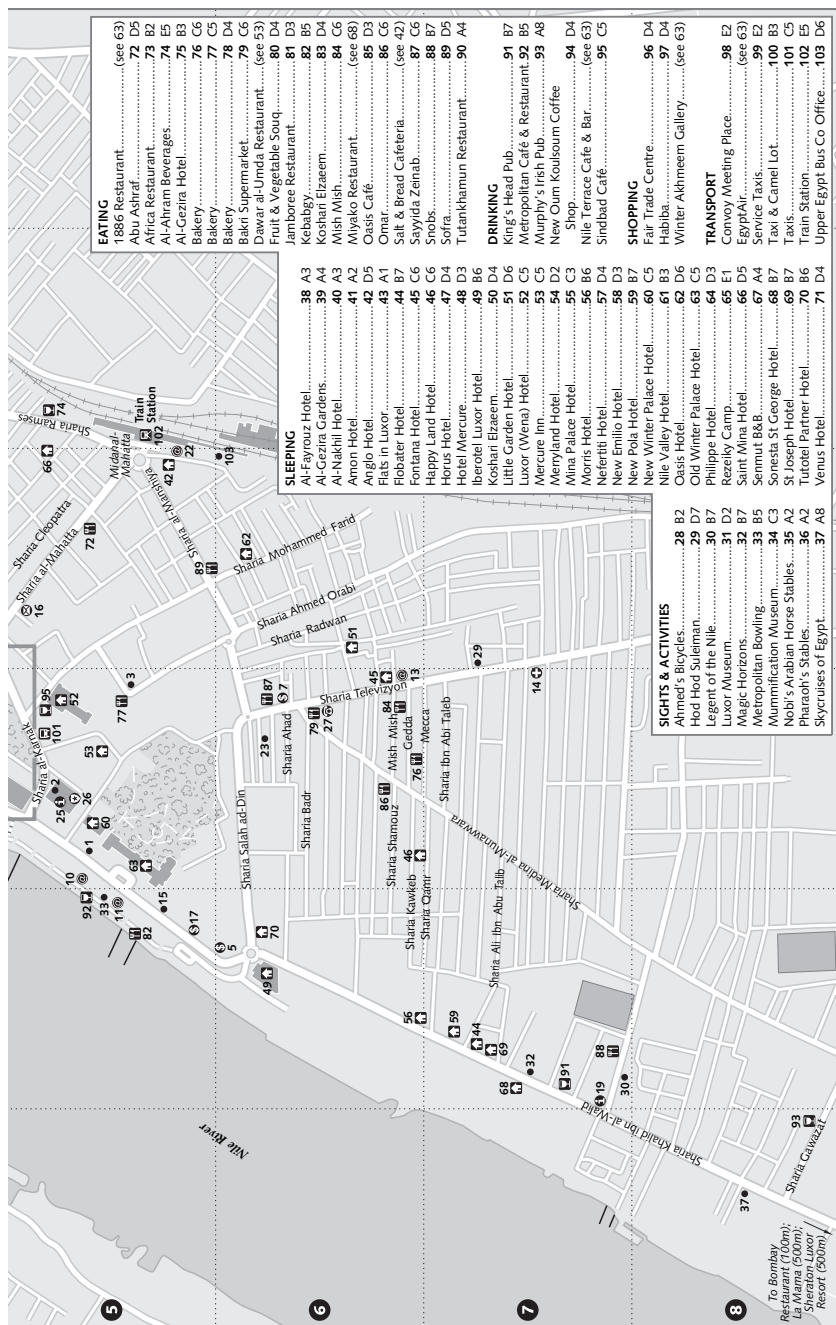
Wandering through this gigantic complex is one of the highlights of any visit to Egypt. The light is most beautiful in the early morning. It is also worth bearing in mind that the convoy from Hurghada arrives around 10.30am and as many as 150 coaches unload their cargo for an hour or two. It pays to visit more than once, to be able to make sense of the overwhelming jumble of ancient remains. As almost every pharaoh left his or her mark here, it can feel like a crash course in the evolution of ancient Egyptian artistic and architectural styles.

## AMUN TEMPLE ENCLOSURE – MAIN AXIS

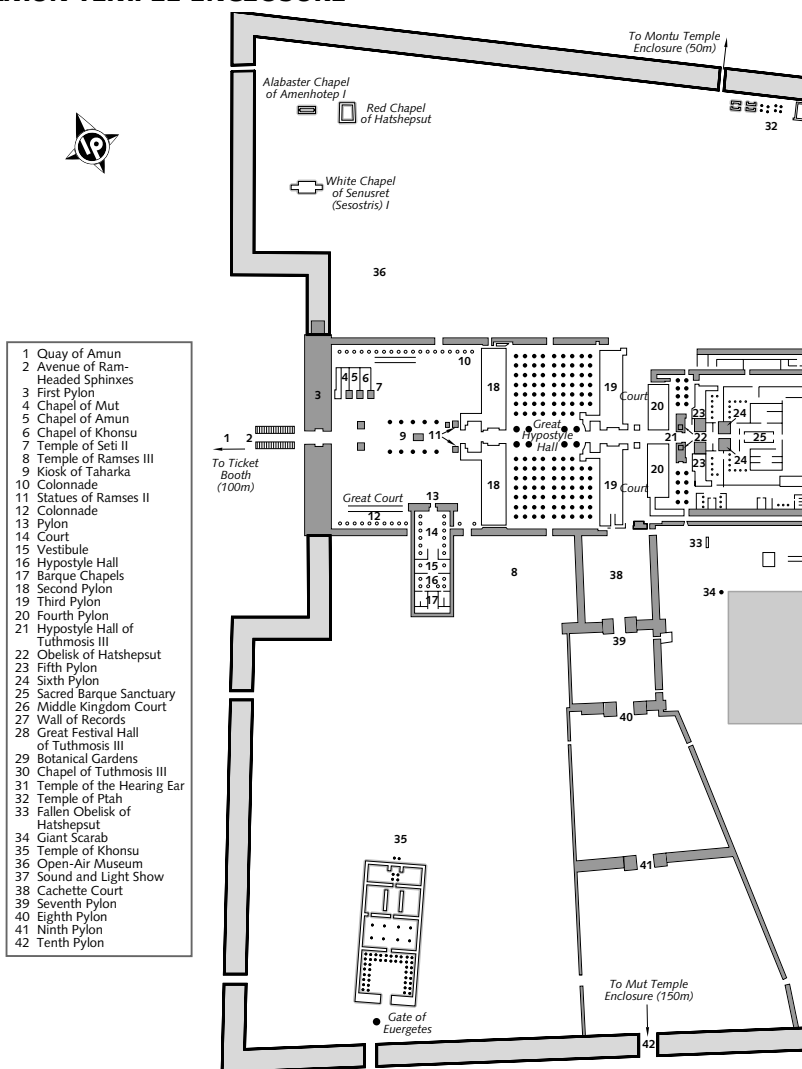
The **Quay of Amun** was the dock where the large boats carrying the statues of the gods moored during the festivals. From tomb paintings such as those in the Tomb of Nakht (see p269) we know that there were palaces to the north of the quay surrounded by lush gardens. On the east side is a ramp sloping down to the processional **avenue of ram-headed sphinxes** which leads to the massive unfinished **first pylon**, built by Nectanebo I of the 30th dynasty. On the inside is a massive mud-brick construction ramp, onto which the blocks of stone for the pylon







## AMUN TEMPLE ENCLOSURE

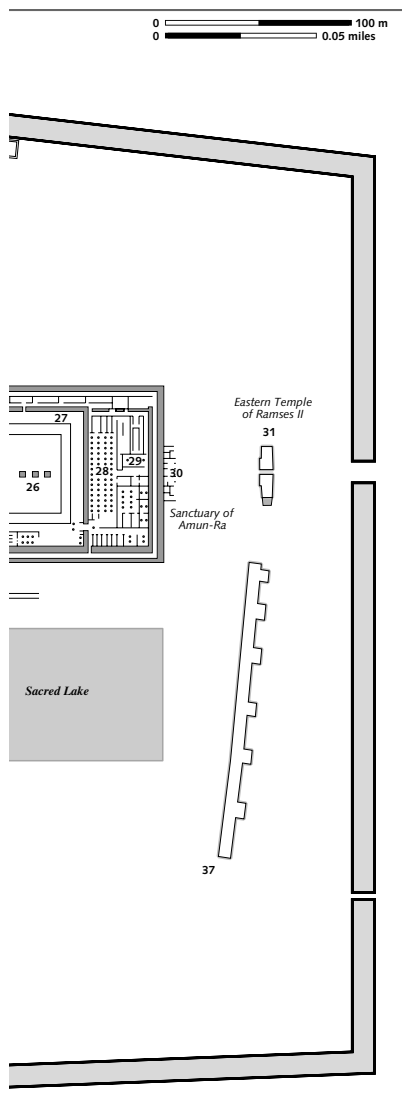


were dragged up with rollers and ropes. When Napoleon's expedition visited there were still blocks on the ramp.

## Great Court

Behind the first pylon lies the Great Court, the largest area of the Karnak complex. To the left is the **Temple of Seti II** with three small

chapels that held the sacred barques of Mut, Amun and Khonsu during the lead up to the Opet Festival. In the southeastern corner (far right) is the well-preserved **Temple of Ramses III**, a miniature version of the pharaoh's temple at Medinet Habu. The temple plan is simple and classic: pylon, open court, vestibule with four Osirid columns and four columns,



hypostyle hall with eight columns and three barque chapels for Amun, Mut and Khonsu. At the centre of the court are two rows of five columns. Only one still stands 21m tall with a papyrus-shaped capital, and a small alabaster altar at the middle: all that remains of the **Kiosk of Taharka**, the 25th-dynasty Nubian pharaoh.

The **second pylon** was begun by Horemheb, the last 18th-dynasty pharaoh, and continued by Ramses I and Ramses II, who also raised three colossal red-granite **statues** of himself on either side of the entrance; one is now destroyed.

### Great Hypostyle Hall

Beyond the second pylon is the awesome **Great Hypostyle Hall** (Map pp246–7), one of the greatest religious monuments ever built. Covering 5500 sq metres – enough space to contain both Rome’s St Peter’s and London’s St Paul’s Cathedral – the hall is an unforgettable forest of 134 towering papyrus-shaped stone pillars. It symbolised a papyrus swamp, of which there were so many along the Nile. Ancient Egyptians believed that these plants surrounded the primeval mound on which life was first created. Each summer when the Nile began to flood, this hall and its columns were under several feet of water. Originally, it would have been brightly painted – some colours remain – and roofed, making it pretty dark away from the lit main axis. The size and grandeur of the pillars and the endless decorations are overwhelming: take your time, sit for a while and stare at the dizzying spectacle.

The hall was planned by Ramses I and built by Seti I and Ramses II. Note the difference in quality between the delicate raised relief in the northern part, by Seti I, and the much cruder sunken relief work, added by Ramses II in the southern part of the hall. The cryptic scenes on the inner walls were intended for the priesthood and the royalty who understood the religious context, but the outer walls are easier to comprehend, showing the king’s military prowess and strength, his ability to bring order to chaos.

On the back of the **third pylon**, built by Amenhotep III, to the right the pharaoh is shown sailing the sacred barque during the Opet festival (see the boxed text, p250). Tuthmosis I (1504–1492 BC) created a narrow court between the third and fourth pylons, where four obelisks stood, two each for Tuthmosis I and Tuthmosis III (1479–1425 BC). Only the bases remain except for one, 22m high, raised for Tuthmosis I.

### Inner Temple

Beyond the **fourth pylon** is the Hypostyle Hall of Tuthmosis III built by Tuthmosis I in precious wood, and altered by Tuthmosis III with 14

columns and a stone roof. In this court stands one of the two magnificent 30m-high obelisks erected by Queen Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BC) to the glory of her ‘father’ Amun. The other is broken but the upper shaft lies near the sacred lake (right). The **Obelisk of Hatshepsut** is the tallest in Egypt, its tip originally covered in electrum (a commonly used alloy of gold and silver). After Hatshepsut’s death, her stepson Tuthmosis III eradicated all signs of her reign (see the boxed text, p270) and had them wallled into a sandstone structure.

The ruined **fifth pylon**, constructed by Tuthmosis I, lead to another colonnade now badly ruined, followed by the small **sixth pylon**, raised by Tuthmosis III, who also built the pair of red-granite columns in the vestibule beyond, carved with the lotus and the papyrus, the symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt. Nearby are two huge statues of Amun and the goddess Amunet, carved in the reign of Tutankhamun.

The original **sacred barque sanctuary** of Tuthmosis III, the very core of the temple where the god Amun resided, was replaced by a granite one, that was built and decorated with well-preserved painted reliefs by Alexander the Great’s successor and half-brother: the fragile, dim-witted Philip Arrhidaios (323–317 BC).

East of the shrine of Philip Arrhidaios, is the oldest known part of the temple, the **Middle Kingdom Court**, where Sesostri I built a shrine, of which the foundation walls were found. On the northern wall of the court is the **Wall of Records**, a running tally of the organised tribute the pharaoh exacted in honour of Amun from his subjugated lands.

### Great Festival Hall of Tuthmosis III

At the back of the Middle Kingdom Court is the Festival Hall of Tuthmosis III, the Akh-Menou, Brilliant of Monuments. It is an unusual structure with uniquely carved stone columns imitating tent poles, perhaps a reference to the pharaoh’s life under canvas on his frequent military expeditions abroad. The columned vestibule that lies beyond, generally referred to as the **Botanical Gardens**, has wonderful, detailed relief scenes of the flora and fauna that the king had encountered during his campaigns in Syria and Palestine, and had brought back to Egypt.

For the many people not allowed inside the temple’s sacred enclosure, Tuthmosis

III built a small **chapel** onto the back of the temple wall behind his festival hall, at either side of which can be seen the enormous bases for two of Hatshepsut’s obelisks that once stood here. Beyond this, further to the southeast, Ramses II built a similar chapel, the **Temple of the Hearing Ear**, again with a base for a single obelisk standing 32.2m tall and which Ramses usurped from Tuthmosis III. Removed from Karnak on the orders of the Emperor Constantine (AD 306–337) and bound for Constantinople, the obelisk was redirected to Rome to stand in the Circus Maximus. It was re-erected in 1588 on the orders of Pope Sixtus V where it now stands, in front of the church of St John (Giovanni) Lateran.

Against the northern enclosure wall of the Amun Temple Enclosure is the well-preserved cult **Temple of Ptah**, started by Tuthmosis III and finished by the Ptolemies and Romans. Access to the inner chambers is through a series of five doorways, which lead to two of the temple’s original statues. The headless figure of Ptah, the creator god of Memphis, is in the middle chapel behind a locked door – the custodian will often unlock it for some baksheesh. To his left is the eerily beautiful black granite statue of his goddess-wife Sekhmet (the spreader of terror), bare-breasted and lioness-headed.

### AMUN TEMPLE ENCLOSURE – SOUTHERN AXIS

The secondary axis of the Amun Temple Enclosure, running south from the third and fourth pylons, is a walled processional way from the seventh to the 10th pylon, leading to the Mut Temple Enclosure. The courtyard between the Hypostyle Hall and the **seventh pylon**, built by Tuthmosis III, is known as the **cachette court**, as thousands of stone and bronze statues were discovered here in 1903. The priests had the old statues and temple furniture they no longer needed buried around 300 BC. Most statues were sent to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, but some remain, standing in front of the seventh pylon, including four of Tuthmosis III on the left.

The well-preserved **eighth pylon**, built by Queen Hatshepsut, is the oldest part of the north–south axis of the temple, and one of the earliest pylons in Karnak. Carved on it is a text she falsely attributed to Tuthmosis I, justifying her taking the throne of Egypt.

The **ninth** and **10th pylons** were built by Horemheb, who used some of the stones of a demolished temple that had been built to the east by Akhenaten (before he decamped to Tell al-Amarna), some of which can be seen on display in the wonderful Luxor Museum (p252).

East of the seventh and eighth pylons is the **sacred lake** (Map pp246–7), where, according to Herodotus, the priests of Amun bathed twice daily and nightly for ritual purity. On the northwestern side of the lake is part of the **Fallen Obelisk of Hatshepsut** showing her coronation, and a **Giant Scarab** in stone dedicated by Amenhotep III to Khepri, a form of the sun god.

In the southwestern corner of the enclosure is the **Temple of Khonsu**, god of the moon, and son of Amun and Mut. It can be reached from a door in the southern wall of the Hypostyle Hall of the Temple of Amun, via a path through various blocks of stone. The temple, mostly the work of Ramses III and enlarged by later Rameside rulers, lies north of Euergetes' Gate and the avenue of sphinxes leading to Luxor Temple. The temple pylon leads via a peristyle court to a hypostyle hall with eight columns carved with figures of Ramses XI and Herihor. The next chamber housed the sacred barque of Khonsu.

### MUT TEMPLE ENCLOSURE

From the 10th pylon an avenue of sphinxes leads to the partly excavated southern enclosure – the Precinct of Mut. The badly ruined Temple of Mut was built by Amenhotep III and consists of a sanctuary, a hypostyle hall and two courts. Amenhotep also set up more than 700 black granite statues of the lioness goddess Sekhmet, Mut's northern counterpart, believed to form a calendar, with two statues for every day of the year, receiving offerings each morning and evening.

### MONTU TEMPLE ENCLOSURE

A gate, usually locked, on the wall near the Temple of Ptah (in the Amun Temple Enclosure) leads to the Montu Temple Enclosure. Montu, the falcon-headed warrior god, was one of the original deities of Thebes. The main temple was built by Amenhotep III and modified by others. The complex is very dilapidated.

### OPEN-AIR MUSEUM

Off to the left of the first court of the Amun Temple Enclosure is Karnak's **open-air museum** (Map pp246–7; tickets at main ticket office; adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 6am–5.30pm summer, 6am–4.30pm winter), missed by most visitors, but definitely worth a visit. The well-preserved chapels include the **White Chapel of Sesotris I**, one of the oldest and most beautiful monuments in Karnak, which has wonderful Middle Kingdom reliefs; the **Red Chapel of Hatshepsut**, its red quartzite blocks reassembled in 2000; and the **Alabaster Chapel of Amenhotep I**. The museum also contains a collection of statuary found throughout the temple complex.

### SOUND-&LIGHT SHOW

Karnak's highly kitsch **sound-and-light show** (Map pp246–7; ☎ 237 2241; www.sound-light.egypt.com; adult/student ££60/45; ☎ 6.30pm, 7.45pm & 9pm winter, 8pm, 9.15pm & 10.30pm summer) is a 1½-hour Hollywood-style extravaganza that recounts the history of Thebes and the lives of the many pharaohs who built here in honour of Amun. It's worth a visit particularly for the walk through the beautifully lit temple at night.

This was the schedule at the time of writing but check before heading there.

Day	Show 1	Show 2	Show 3
Monday	English	French	Spanish
Tuesday	Japanese	English	German
Wednesday	German	English	French
Thursday	English	French	Arabic
Friday	English	French	Russian
Saturday	French	English	
Sunday	German	English	Italian

### Luxor Temple

Largely built by the pharaohs Amenhotep III (1380–1352 BC) and Ramses II (1279–1213 BC), this **temple** (Map p251; Corniche an-Nil; adult/student ££40/20; ☎ 6am–9pm Oct–Apr, to 10pm May–Sep) is a strikingly graceful monument in the heart of the modern town. Visit during the day, perhaps later afternoon, but make sure to return at night when the temple is lit up, creating an eerie spectacle as shadow and light play off the reliefs and colonnades.

The temple, also known as the Southern Sanctuary, was once the dwelling place of Amenemopet, the ithyphallic Amun of the Opet, and was largely built for the Opet celebrations, when the statues of Amun, Mut and Khonsu were annually reunited during

### THE BEAUTIFUL FESTIVAL OF THE OPET

The most important annual religious festival in Thebes and Egypt was the Opet festival, when the barque shrines of the Theban triad, Amun, Mut and Khonsu were taken in a procession from Karnak temple to their home at Luxor Temple. The festival lasted two to four weeks during the summer, the second month of the Nile flood, and was particularly important during the New Kingdom. The cult images were carried on the shoulders of the priests along the avenue of sphinxes, stopping for ceremonies and to rest at six barque shrines on the way, or taken by boat up the Nile, as seen on the reliefs in Amenhotep III's Colonnade in Luxor Temple and the outer wall of the Temple of Ramses III in the Great Court in Karnak. The statue of Amun was reunited with his ithyphallic form Amunemopet, symbolising fertility and rejuvenation. The ceremony reaffirmed the pharaoh's authority and his close ties with the 'King of Gods' Amun. The pharaoh, after all, was the living embodiment of the god Horus on earth. These days, during the *moulid* (a saint's festival) of Abu al-Haggag (see the boxed text, p252), one of the highlights of this three-day-long festival is a felucca pulled in procession through town and circulating the temple, a modern survival of the ancient Opet festival.

the inundation season with that of Amun of Opet (see the boxed text, above). Amenhotep III greatly enlarged an older shrine built by Hatshepsut, and rededicated the massive temple as Amun's southern *ipet* (harem), the private quarters of the god. The structure was further added to over the centuries by Tutankhamun, Ramses II, Alexander the Great and various Romans. The Romans constructed a military fort around the temple that the Arabs later called Al-Uqsar (The Fortifications), giving modern Luxor its name.

In ancient times the temple would have been surrounded by a warren of mud-brick houses, shops and workshops which now lie under the modern town, but after the decline of the city people moved into the – by then – partly covered temple complex and built their city within it. In the 14th century, a mosque was built in one of the interior courts for the local sheikh (holy man) Abu al-Haggag. Excavation works, begun in 1885, have cleared away the village and debris of centuries to clear what can be seen of the temple today, but the mosque remains. The new governor is determined to clear the avenue of sphinxes from here to Karnak.

### WALKING TOUR

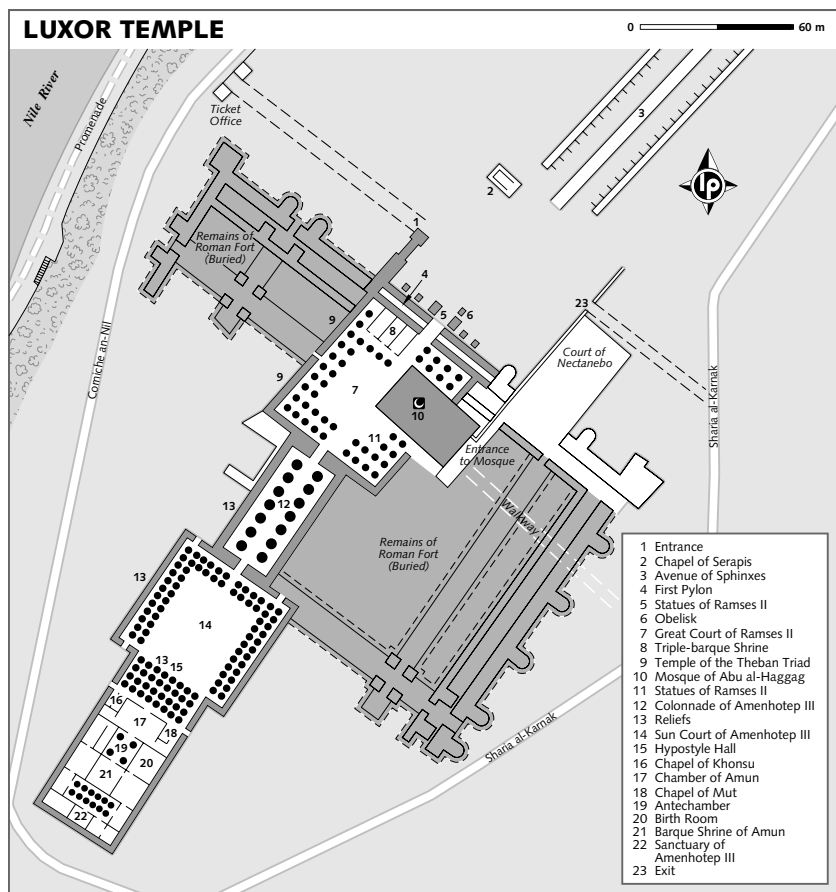
The ticket office was on the Corniche at the time of writing, but the entire area around the temple is being cleared and the entrance will be from the square at the other side of the temple, near the mosque of Abu al-Haggag. The temple is less complex than Karnak, but here again we walk back in time the deeper

we go into it. In front of the temple is the beginning of the **avenue of sphinxes** that ran all the way to the temples at Karnak 3km to the north.

The massive 24m-high **first pylon** was raised by Ramses II and decorated with reliefs of his military exploits, including the Battle of Kadesh. The pylon was originally fronted by six colossal **statues of Ramses II**, four seated and two standing, but only two of the seated figures and one standing one remain, and a pair pink granite **obelisks**, of which one remains and the other stands in the Place de la Concorde in Paris. Beyond lies the **Great Court of Ramses II**, surrounded by a double row of columns with lotus-bud capitals, the walls of which are decorated with scenes of the pharaoh making offerings to the gods. On the south (rear) wall is a procession of 17 sons of Ramses II with their names and titles, and in front of them a beautiful relief, the first pylon of the temple with statues, obelisks and flags, reliefs of his military successes. In the north-western corner of the court is the earlier **triple-barque shrine** built by Hatshepsut and usurped by her stepson Tuthmosis III for Amun, Mut and Khonsu. Over the south-eastern side hangs the 14th-century **Mosque of Abu al-Haggag**, dedicated to a local sheikh, entered from Sharia al-Karnak, outside the temple precinct.

Beyond the court is the older splendid **Colonnade of Amenhotep III**, built as the grand entrance to the Temple of Amun of the Opet. The walls behind the elegant open papyrus columns were decorated during the reign of





the young pharaoh Tutankhamun and celebrate the return to Theban orthodoxy following the wayward reign of the previous pharaoh, Akhenaten. The Opet Festival is depicted in lively detail, with the pharaoh, nobility and common people joining the triumphal procession. Look out for the drummers and acrobats doing back bends.

South of the Colonnade is the **Sun Court of Amenhotep III**, once enclosed on three sides by double rows of towering papyrus-bundle columns, the best preserved of which, with their architraves extant, are those on the eastern and western sides. In 1989 workmen found here a cache of 26 statues, buried by priests in Roman times, now moved to the Luxor Museum (see p252).

Beyond lies the **Hypostyle Hall**, the first room of the original Opet temple, with four rows of eight columns each, leading to the temple's main rooms. The central **chamber** on the axis south of the Hypostyle Hall, was the cult sanctuary of Amun, stuccoed over by the Romans in the 3rd century AD and painted with scenes of Roman officials. Through this chamber, either side of which are **chapels** dedicated to Mut and Khonsu, is the four-columned **Antechamber**, where offerings were made to Amun, and immediately behind it the **Barque Shrine of Amun**, rebuilt by Alexander the Great, with reliefs portraying him as an Egyptian pharaoh.

To the east a doorway leads into two rooms. The first is Amenhotep III's **birth room** with

## MOULIDS AROUND LUXOR

At a *moulid* (saint's festival) you can see Sufis of different orders endlessly repeating the name of Allah in order to go into a trance, hear real Saidi music and see *tahtib* (male dance performed with wooden staves). The largest one is the Moulid of Abu al-Haggag (see the boxed text, p250), who is believed to have brought Islam to Luxor eight centuries ago. This three-day carnival draws thousands of visitors over several days and the streets around the temple are lined with stalls selling sweets and toys.

There are several smaller *moulids* around Luxor, mostly during the month of Sha'aban, immediately before Ramadan. **Abu'l Gumsan**, named after a religious man who died in 1984, is a small *moulid* that takes place on 27 Sha'aban near the West Bank village of Taref, just south of the road to the Valley of the Kings. **Sheikh Musa** and **Abu al-Jud** both take place in the sprawling village of Karnak. Other local *moulids* include **Sheikh Hamid** on 1 Sha'aban and **Sheikh Hussein** a couple of days later.

The week-long Christian *moulid* of **Mar Girgis** (St George) takes place at the monastery of the same name at the village of Razagat, culminating on 11 November. This area is officially forbidden to foreigners, but the service taxis ferrying the hundreds of people to the *moulid* often avoid the checkpoint by taking a desert track.

Women attending *moulids* should dress very conservatively and preferably be accompanied by a man, as groping and harassment do occur in the party spirit.

Ask at the tourist office (p242) for exact dates.

scenes of his divine birth. You can see the moment of his conception, when the fingers of the god touch those of the queen and 'his dew filled her body', according to the accompanying hieroglyphic caption. The **sanctuary of Amenhotep III** is the last chamber; it still has the remains of the stone base on which Amun's statue stood, and although it was once the most sacred part of the temple, the busy street that now runs directly behind it makes it less atmospheric.

## Luxor Museum

This wonderful **museum** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0269; Corniche an-Nil; adult/student EE70/35; ☎ 9am-9pm Oct-Apr, 9am-1pm & 5-10pm May-Sep) has a beautifully displayed collection, from the end of the Old Kingdom right through to the Mamluk period, mostly gathered from the Theban temples and necropolis.

The ground-floor gallery has several masterpieces including a well-preserved limestone **relief of Tutmosis III** (No 140), an exquisitely carved **statue of Tutmosis III** in greywacke from the Temple of Karnak (No 2), an alabaster **figure of Amenhotep III** protected by the great crocodile god Sobek (No 155) and, one of the few examples of Old Kingdom art found at Thebes, a **relief of Unas-ankh** (No 183), found in his tomb on the West Bank.

A new wing was opened in 2004, dedicated to the glory of Thebes during the New

Kingdom period. The highlight and the main reason for the new construction are the two **royal mummies**, Ahmose I (founder of the 18th dynasty), and the mummy some believe to be Ramses I (founder of the 19th dynasty and father of Seti I), beautifully displayed in dark rooms without their wrappings. Other well-labelled displays illustrate the military might of Thebes during the New Kingdom, the age of Egypt's empire-building, including chariots and weapons. On the upper floor the military theme is diluted with scenes from daily life showing the technology used in the New Kingdom. **Multimedia displays** show workers harvesting papyrus and processing it into sheets to be used for writing. Young boys are shown learning to read and write hieroglyphs beside a display of a scribe's implements and an architect's tools.

Back in the old building, moving up via the ramp to the 1st floor, you come to face a seated **granite figure** of the legendary scribe Amenhotep (No 4), son of Hapu, the great official eventually deified in Ptolemaic times and who, as overseer of all the pharaoh's works under Amenhotep III (1390-1352 BC), was responsible for many of Thebes' greatest buildings. One of the most interesting exhibits is the **Wall of Akhenaten**, a series of small sandstone blocks named *talatat* or 'threes' by workmen – probably because their height and length was about three hand lengths – that came from

Amenhotep IV's contribution at Karnak before he changed his name to Akhenaten and left Thebes for Tell al-Amarna. His building was demolished and about 40,000 blocks used to fill in Karnak's ninth pylon were found in the late 1960s and partially reassembled here. The scenes showing Akhenaten, his wife Nefertiti and temple life are a rare example of decoration from a Temple of Aten. Further highlights are treasures from Tutankhamun's tomb, including *shabti* (servant) figures, model boats, sandals, arrows and a series of gilded bronze rosettes from his funeral pall.

A ramp back down to the ground floor leaves you close to the exit and beside a black-and-gold wooden head of the cow deity Mehit-Weret, an aspect of the goddess Hathor, which was also found in Tutankhamun's tomb.

On the left just before the exit is a small hall containing 16 of 22 statues that were uncovered in Luxor Temple in 1989. All are magnificent examples of ancient Egyptian sculpture but pride of place at the end of the hall is given to an almost pristine 2.45m-tall quartzite statue of a muscular Amenhotep III, wearing a pleated kilt.

## Mummification Museum

Housed in the former visitors centre on Luxor's Corniche, opposite the Mina Palace Hotel, the small **Mummification Museum** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 1501; Corniche an-Nil; adult/student E£40/20; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-9pm Oct-Apr, 9am-1pm & 5-10pm May-Sep) has well-presented exhibits explaining the art of mummification. On display are the well-preserved mummy of a 21st-dynasty high

### MAKING MUMMIES *Dr Joann Fletcher*

Although the practice of preserving dead bodies can be found in cultures across the world, the Egyptians were the ultimate practitioners of this highly complex procedure that they refined over a period of almost 4000 years. Their preservation of the dead can be traced back to the very earliest times, when bodies were simply buried in the desert away from the limited areas of cultivation. In direct contact with the sand that covered them, the hot, dry conditions allowed the body fluids to drain away while preserving the skin, hair and nails intact. Accidentally uncovering such bodies must have had a profound effect upon those who were able to recognise people who had died sometimes years before.

As burial practices for the elite became more sophisticated, people who would once have been buried in a hole in the ground demanded purpose-built tombs befitting their status; however, this meant that instead of drying out in the sand, bodies rapidly decomposed. An artificial means of preserving the body was therefore required, and so began the long process of experimentation. It wasn't until around 2600 BC that they finally cracked it, and began to remove the internal organs where putrefaction actually begins.

As the process became increasingly elaborate, all the organs were removed except the kidneys, which were hard to reach, and the heart. The heart was considered the source of intelligence rather than the brain, which was generally removed by inserting a metal probe up the nose and whisking to reduce it to a liquid that could be easily drained away. All the rest – lungs, liver, stomach, intestines – were removed through an opening cut in the left flank. Then the body and its separate organs were covered with piles of natron salt and left to dry out for 40 days, after which they were washed, purified and anointed with a range of oils, spices and resins. All were then wrapped in layers of linen, with the appropriate amulets set in place over the various parts of the body as priests recited the incantations needed to activate the protective functions of the amulets.

With each internal organ placed inside its own burial container (one of four Canopic jars), the wrapped body complete with its funerary mask was placed inside its coffin. It was then ready for the funeral procession to the tomb, where the vital Opening of the Mouth ceremony reanimated the soul and restored its senses; offerings were given, while wishing the dead 'a thousand of every good and pure thing for your soul and all kinds of offerings on which the gods live'.

The ancient Egyptians also used mummification to preserve animals, both as a means of preserving the bodies of much-loved pets and the far more widespread practice of mummifying animals to present as votive offerings to the gods with which they were associated. The Egyptians mummified everything from huge bulls to tiny shrews, with cats, hawks and ibis mummified in their millions by Graeco-Roman times; recent research reveals that such creatures were killed for that purpose.

priest of Amun, Maserharti, and a host of mummified animals. Vitrines show the tools and materials used in the mummification process – check out the small spoon and metal spatula used for scraping the brain out of the skull. Several artefacts that were crucial to the mummy's journey to the afterlife have also been included, as well as some picturesque painted coffins. Presiding over the entrance is a beautiful little statue of the jackal god, Anubis, the god of embalming who helped Isis turn her brother-husband Osiris into the first mummy.

## SIGHTS – WEST BANK

The West Bank is a world away from the noise and bustle of Luxor town on the east bank. Taking a taxi across the bridge, 6km south of the centre, or crossing on the old ferry, you are immediately in the lush Egyptian countryside, with bright green sugarcane fields along irrigation canals and clusters of colour-

ful houses, all against the background of the desert and the Theban hills. Coming towards the end of the cultivated land you start to notice huge sandstone blocks lying in the middle of fields, gaping black holes in the rocks and giant sandstone forms on the edge of the cultivation below. Magnificent memorial temples were built on the flood plains here, where the illusion of the pharaoh's immortality could be perpetuated by the devotions of his priests and subjects, while his body and worldly wealth, and the bodies of his wives and children, were laid in splendidly decorated hidden tombs excavated in the hills.

From the New Kingdom onwards, the necropolis also supported a large living population of artisans, labourers, temple priests and guards, who devoted their lives to the construction and maintenance of this city of the dead, and who protected the tombs full of treasure from eager robbers. The artisans perfected the techniques of tomb building, decoration and concealment, and passed the secrets down through their families. They all built their tombs here.

Until a generation ago, villagers used tombs to shelter from the extremes of the desert climate, and until recently many lived in houses built over the tombs, some even derived their livelihood from trafficking the ancient artefacts that they found in their 'basement'. For at least 100 years the Antiquities Department has tried to relocate the inhabitants of al-Gurna, whose beautifully painted houses were built over the Tombs of the Nobles, a picturesque sight to anyone visiting the West Bank. A new village was built for them by Hassan Fathy at New Gurna (see p275), but all those years they refused to move as their livelihood was just there: trading in trinkets, alabaster work and tour-guiding.

In spring 2007 their houses were bulldozed one by one, and the families moved to a huge new village of small breeze-block houses a few kilometres north of the Valley of the Kings. Some families are happy, particularly the young ones who can now live in their own house rather than their parents' one as tradition had it, but most miss their cooler large mud-brick houses, the community spirit they had and being close to the job – public transport is only slowly becoming available to and from the new villages. This is all part of the governor's master plan to make Luxor the largest open-air museum in the world.

### BEST OF THE WEST

Our pick of the top West Bank sights that are currently open:

#### BEST TOMBS

##### Valley of the Kings

- Tutmosis III (p264)
- Amenhotep II (p263)
- Horemheb (p263)

##### Valley of the Queens

- Amunherkhepshef (p273)

##### Tombs of the Nobles

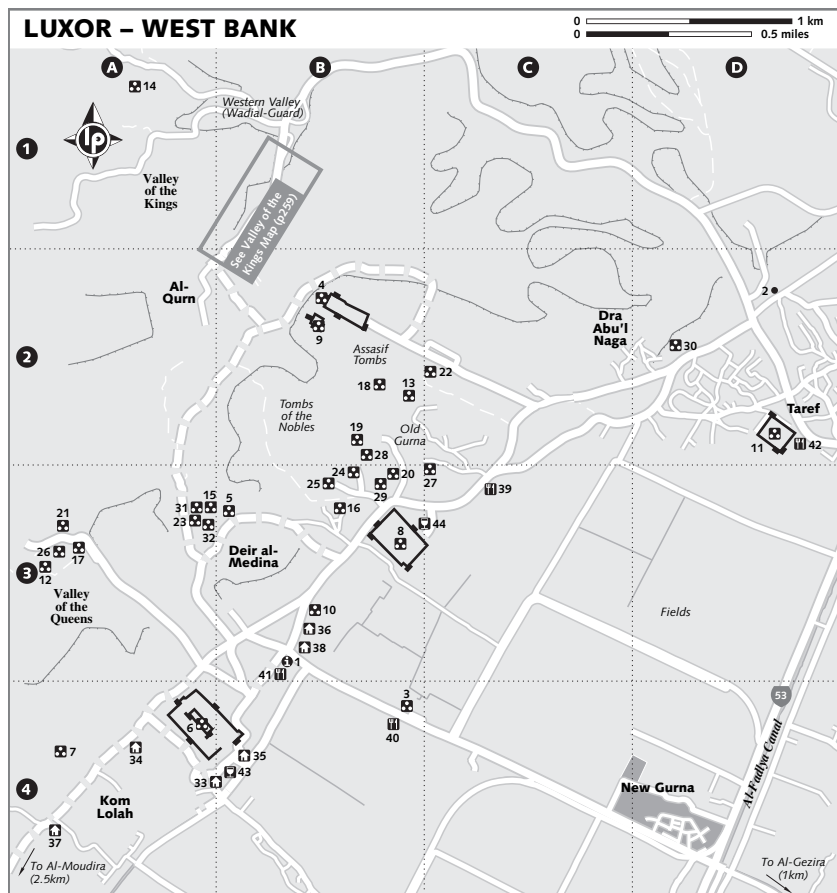
- Nakht (p269)
- Sennofer (p270)
- Ramose (p269)

##### Deir al-Medina

- Sennedjem (p273)

#### BEST MEMORIAL TEMPLES

- Deir al-Bahri (Hatshepsut; p267)
- Medinat Habu (Ramses III; p274)
- Ramesseum (Ramses II; p271)
- Seti I (p257)

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## TACKLING THE WEST BANK

Little shade can be found at the archaeological remains on the West Bank and the midday heat is intense from April to October. Early-morning visits are therefore ideal, but that is unfortunately also when most tour groups visit the Temple of Deir al-Bahri or the Valley of the Kings. In winter you can visit the two sites without the crowds during the afternoon, but they get very hot. This is our advice for getting the most out of your time on the West Bank:

- Don't try to see it all in a day: if your time is limited, don't cram in too much or at the end of the day, you will be unable to distinguish a sarcophagus from a scarab. Choose a few tombs, perhaps in the Valley of the Nobles instead of the Kings to avoid the crowds, and a temple.
- Keep tomb-viewing time to a minimum: visiting deep-cut tombs is exhausting and the air in some is far from fresh. Twenty minutes is ample time for most, bearing in mind that the humidity created by the breath of so many visitors creates a fungus that destroys the ancient pigments.
- Take breaks: sipping a cold drink with view of a temple can be as sublime an experience as seeing your first tomb.

With all this in mind, here are some itineraries for those with limited time. The one- and two-day plans need a brisk pace and assume you have some sort of a vehicle.

- One day: go via the Colossi of Memnon on the way to the Valley of the Kings. See some tombs, then spend an hour at Deir al-Bahri. Have lunch near the Tombs of the Nobles, after which you can visit a few tombs in that area for an hour. Late afternoon spend an hour at Medinat Habu.
- Two days: the above at a slower pace, seeing more tombs, taking longer breaks and adding the Ramesseum.
- Three days: spread out the previous offerings, walking along the mountain path from the Valley of the Kings to Deir al-Bahri; adding the Temple of Merneptah and its fascinating museum and the Temple of Seti I; horse riding through the fields from Gezira to the desert at sunset.
- Four days or more: take things at a leisurely pace; add the tombs at Deir al-Medina, and some other Tombs of the Nobles; revisit the Valley of the Kings. Definitely take a sunset horse or camel ride. Drink tea and chat with villagers.

## What to Bring

Above all bring plenty of water, though it is available at many of the sites, and a sun hat. Small change for baksheesh is much needed too, as guardians rely on tips to augment their pathetic salaries – a few Egyptian pounds should be enough for them to either leave you in peace, or to open a door or reflect light on a particularly beautiful painting. A torch (flashlight) can come in handy.

## Tickets

Part of the new plan is that every site will have its own ticket office, but at the time of writing the **Antiquities Inspectorate ticket office** (Map p255; main road, 3km inland from ferry landing; ☎ 6am–4pm, to 5pm Jun–Sep) near Medinat Habu, still provided all tickets except for the Temple at Deir al-Bahri, the Assasif tombs, the Valley of the Kings and

the Valley of the Queens. Check here first to see which tickets are available, and which tombs are open. All sites are officially open from 7am to 5pm October to May and from 6am to 7pm June to September. Photography is not permitted in any tombs and guards may confiscate film or memory cards.

Tickets are valid only for the day of purchase and no refunds are given. Prices (adult/student):

**Assasif Tombs** (Kheruef & Ankhor) EE25/15

**Assasif Tombs** (Pabasa) EE25/15

**Dra Abu'l Naga** (Roy & Shuroy) EE25/15

**Deir al-Medina Temple & Tombs** (except Peshedu) EE25/15

**Medinat Habu** (Temple of Ramses III) EE25/15

**Ramesseum** EE25/15

**Temple of Merneptah** EE25/15

**Temple of Seti I** EE25/15



**Tomb of Ay** (Western Valley) E£20/10

**Tomb of Peshehu** (Deir al-Medina) E£10/5

**Tombs of the Nobles** E£10/5 to E£25/15 per group of tombs

## Colossi of Memnon

The two faceless Colossi of Memnon (Map p255) that rise majestically about 18m from the plain are the first monuments tourists see when they visit the West Bank. The enthroned figures have kept a lonely vigil on the changing landscape, and few visitors have any idea that these giants were only a tiny element of the largest temple ever built in Egypt, Amenhotep III's memorial temple, believed to have covered an area larger than Karnak.

The pharaoh's memorial temple has now all but disappeared. It was built largely of mud brick on the flood plain of the Nile, where it was flooded every year. The walls simply dissolved after it was abandoned and no longer maintained, and later pharaohs used the stones for their monuments. Some tiny parts of the temple remain and more is being uncovered by excavation; the colossi are the only large-scale elements to have survived.

The magnificent colossi, each cut from a single block of stone and weighing 1000 tons, were already a great tourist attraction during Graeco-Roman times, when the statues were attributed to Memnon, the legendary African king who was slain by Achilles during the Trojan War. The Greeks and Romans considered it good luck to hear the whistling sound emitted by the northern statue at sunrise, which they believed to be the cry of Memnon greeting his mother Eos, the goddess of dawn. She in turn would weep tears of dew for his untimely death. All this was probably due to a crack in the colossus' upper body, which appeared after the 27 BC earthquake. As the heat of the morning sun baked the dew-soaked stone, sand particles would break off and resonate inside the cracks in the structure. After Septimus Severus (193–211 AD) repaired the statue in the 3rd century AD, Memnon's plaintive greeting was heard no more.

The temple was filled with thousands of statues (including the huge dyad of Amenhotep III and Tiye that now dominates the central court of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo), most of which were later dragged off by other pharaohs. A stele, also now in the Egyptian Museum, describes the temple as

being built from 'white sandstone, with gold throughout, a floor covered with silver, and doors covered with electrum'. Other statues and fragments of wall reliefs can be seen at the nearby Temple of Merneptah.

The colossi are just off the road, before you reach the Antiquities Inspectorate ticket office, and are usually being snapped and filmed by an army of tourists. A new archaeological project is salvaging what remains of the temple.

## Temple of Merneptah

Almost directly behind Amenhotep's temple, lie the remains of the **Temple of Merneptah** (Map p255; adult/student E£25/15), who succeeded his father Ramses II in 1213 BC and ruled for 10 years. In the 19th century, the 'Israel Stele', now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, was found here, which was the only Egyptian text to mention 'Israel' (which Merneptah claimed to have defeated).

The Swiss Institute in Egypt has done considerable work here, uncovering the temple's original plan and a large number of statues and reliefs. At the small **museum** near the entrance, the history of the temple is illustrated with text, plans and finds from excavations, a great help to understand the little that remains of the building. In a covered storage area east of the sacred lake are the statues found on the site, including 12 jackal-headed sphinxes, some of which retain their original colours. Merneptah pilfered these, and many other statues and large stone blocks, from Amenhotep III's Temple nearby, often scratching out the latter's cartouche and replacing it with his own. Two display rooms in the centre of the temple house the reliefs of Merneptah with various gods that once stood atop the temple pylons (ask the caretaker to unlock them).

## Temple of Seti I

At the northern end of the Theban necropolis lies the **Temple of Seti I** (Map p255). Seti I, who also built the superbly decorated temple at Abydos (see p233) and Karnak's magnificent hypostyle hall, died before this memorial temple was finished, so it was completed by his son Ramses II. The temple sees few visitors, despite its picturesque location near a palm grove and recent restoration, after it was severely damaged by torrential rain and floods in 1994.

The entrance is through a small door in the northeast corner of the reconstructed fortresslike enclosure wall. The first and second pylons and the court are in ruins, but recent excavations have revealed the foundations of the pharaoh's palace, just south of the court. The earliest found example of a palace within a memorial temple, its plan is similar to the better-preserved palace at the memorial temple of Ramses III at Medinat Habu. The walls of the columned portico at the west façade of the temple, and those of the hypostyle court beyond it, contain some superbly executed reliefs. Off the hypostyle are six shrines and to the south is a small chapel dedicated to Seti's father, Ramses I, who died before he could build his own mortuary temple.

### Carter's House

Surrounded by a lush garden on what is otherwise a barren hill, where the road from Deir al-Bahri to the Valley of the Kings meets the road from Seti I's temple, stands the domed house where Howard Carter lived during his search for Tutankhamun's tomb. There are discussions about turning it into a West Bank conservation centre. In the meantime it languishes.

### Valley of the Kings

Once called the Great Necropolis of Millions of Years of Pharaoh, or the Place of Truth, the **Valley of the Kings** (Wadi Biban al-Muluk; Map p259; adult/student for 3 tombs excluding Ay & Tutankhamun ££70/35) has 63 magnificent royal tombs from the New Kingdom period (1550–1069 BC), all very different from each other. The West Bank had been the site of royal burials from the First Intermediate Period (2181–2055 BC) onwards. At least three 11th-dynasty rulers built their tombs near the modern village of Taref, northeast of the Valley of the Kings. The 18th-dynasty pharaohs, however, chose the isolated valley dominated by the pyramid-shaped mountain peak of al-Qurn (The Horn). The secluded site enclosed by steep cliffs was easy to guard and, when seen from the Theban plain, appears to be the site of the setting sun, associated with the afterlife by ancient Egyptians.

The tombs have suffered great damage from treasure hunters, floods and, in recent years, from mass tourism: carbon dioxide, friction and humidity produced by the average of 2.8g of sweat left by each visitor have affected the

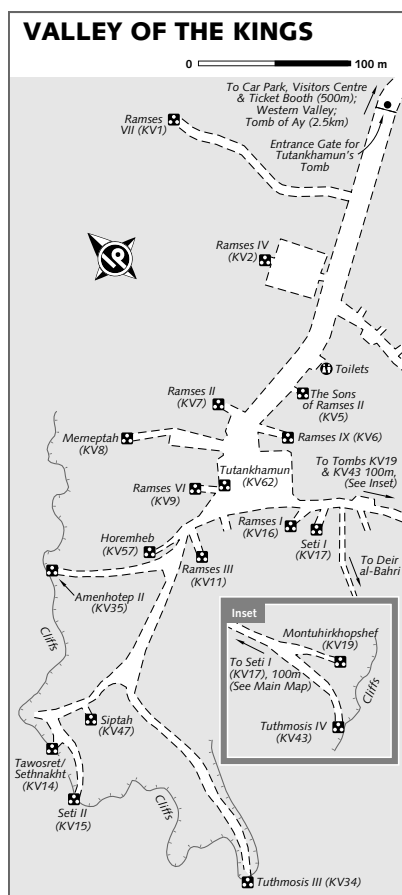
reliefs and the pigments of the wall paintings. The Department of Antiquities has since installed dehumidifiers and glass screens in the worst affected tombs, and introduced a rotation system for opening some tombs to the public while restoring others. Each tomb has a number that represents the order in which it was discovered. KV (short for Kings Valley) 1 belongs to Ramses VII; it has been open since Greek and Roman times, and was mentioned in the *Description de l'Égypte*, dating from the late 18th century. KV 62 – Tutankhamun's famous tomb, which was discovered by Howard Carter in 1922 – was until recently the last one to be discovered, but in 2006 KV 63 was discovered, with a few empty sarcophagus, so it is not clear if this was a royal tomb or a chamber for the mummification process.

The large car park leads to a new **visitors centre** (Map p259; ☎ 6am–4pm winter, 6am–5pm summer) where guides explain the history of the site and show a silicon model of the Valley to their groups in an air-conditioned room, and where individual visitors can get information on a set of computers. A movie about Carter's discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamun is also shown. Newly erected signs and maps make navigating the site far easier than before. Tomb plans and histories have also been upgraded to help visitors better understand what they're seeing. This is all part of the site-management plan Dr Kent Weeks and his Theban Mapping Project are developing to improve the experience of visitors and ensure protection of the tombs. It's worth having a torch to illuminate badly lit areas.

The road into the Valley of the Kings is a gradual, dry, hot climb, so be prepared if you are riding a bicycle. A rest house is being built near the visitors centre, but mineral water, soft drinks, ice creams and snacks are available from the stalls at the tourist bazaar near the entrance. A *tuf-tuf* – a little electrical train – ferries visitors between the visitors centre and the tombs (it can be hot during summer). The ride costs ££4.

Most of the tombs described here are usually open to visitors and are listed in the order that they are found when entering the site. If you want to avoid the inevitable crowds that tour buses bring to the tombs, head for those outside the entrance area.

The Tomb of Tutankhamun (KV 62), somehow the least impressive of all the royal tombs but famous for its treasury now mostly in



Cairo Museum, has been deemed worth a ticket on its own (adult/student E£80/40) and this can be bought at a second ticket office where the *tuf-tuf* arrives. The tomb of Ay (KV 23) also has its own ticket (E£20/10), available from the main ticket office.

### TOMB OF RAMSES VII (KV 1)

Up a small wadi near the main entrance is the small, unfinished tomb of Ramses VII (1136–1129 BC; Map p259). Only 44.3m long, short for a royal tomb because of Ramses' sudden death, it consists of a corridor, a burial chamber and an unfinished third chamber. His architects hastily widened what was to have been the tomb's second corridor, making it a burial chamber, and the pharaoh was laid to rest in a

pit covered with a sarcophagus lid. Niches for Canopic jars are carved into the pit's sides, a feature unique to this tomb. Walls on the corridor leading to the chamber are decorated with fairly well preserved excerpts from the Book of the Caverns and the Opening of the Mouth ritual, while the burial chamber is decorated with passages from the Book of the Earth. Although it has only recently reopened to the public, the Greek, demotic, Coptic and 19th-century graffiti show that it has been open since antiquity – at one stage it was even inhabited by Coptic hermits.

### TOMB OF RAMSES IV (KV 2)

This is the second tomb (Map p259) on the right as you enter the Valley of the Kings. Its whereabouts were already known by Ptolemaic times, as is evident from the graffiti on the walls dating back to 278 BC. Ramses IV (1153–1147 BC) died before the tomb was completed and its pillared hall had to be hastily turned into a burial chamber. The paintings in the burial chamber have deteriorated, but there is a wonderful image of the goddess Nut, stretched across the blue ceiling, and it is the only tomb in the valley to contain the text of the Book of Nut, with a description of the daily path taken by the sun every day. The red granite sarcophagus, though empty, is one of the largest in the valley. The discovery of an ancient plan of the tomb on papyrus (now in the Turin Museum) shows the sarcophagus was originally enclosed by four large shrines similar to those in Tutankhamun's tomb (p261). Following the robbery of the tomb in antiquity, the mummy of Ramses IV was one of those reburied in the Tomb of Amenhotep II (KV 35), and is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

### TOMB OF RAMSES IX (KV 6)

Opposite Ramses II is the most visited tomb in the valley, the Tomb of Ramses IX (1126–1108 BC; Map p259), with a wide entrance, a long sloping corridor, a large antechamber decorated with the animals, serpents and demons from the Book of the Dead – then a pillared hall and short hallway before the burial chamber. Here as well graffiti indicates that the tomb has been open since antiquity. In the chamber just before the staircase to the burial chamber are the cartouches symbols of Ramses IX. On either side of the gate on the rear wall are two figures of Iunmutef priests,

**TOMB BUILDING** *Dr Joann Fletcher*

Tombs were initially created to differentiate the burials of the elite from the majority of people whose bodies continued to be placed directly into the desert. By about 3100 BC the mound of sand heaped over these elite graves was replaced by a more permanent structure of mud brick, whose characteristic bench shape is known as a 'mastaba' after the Arabic word for bench.

As stone replaced mud-brick, the addition of further levels to increase height gave birth to the pyramid, whose first incarnation at Saqqara is also the world's oldest monumental structure. Its stepped sides soon evolved into the more familiar smooth-sided structure, of which the Pyramids of Giza are the most famous examples.

It was only when the power of the monarchy broke down at the end of the Old Kingdom that the afterlife became increasingly accessible to those outside the royal family, and as officials became increasingly independent they began to opt for burial in their home towns. Yet the narrow stretches of fertile land that make up much of the Nile Valley generally left little room for grand superstructures, so an alternative type of tomb developed, cut tunnel-fashion into the cliffs that border the valley and which also proved more resilient against robbery. Most were built on the west side of the river, the traditional place of burial where the sun was seen to sink down into the underworld each evening.

These simple rock-cut tombs consisting of a single chamber gradually developed into more elaborate structures complete with an open courtyard, offering chapel and entrance façade carved out of the rock with a shaft leading down into an undecorated burial chamber. The most impressive rock-cut tombs were those built for the pharaohs of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC), who relocated the royal burial ground south to the remote valley now known as the Valley of the Kings. New evidence suggests that the first tomb in the valley may have been built for Amenhotep I (1525–1504 BC; KV 39). The tomb intended for his successor, Tuthmosis I (KV 20), demonstrated a radical departure from tradition: the offering chapel that was once part of the tomb's layout was built as a separate structure some distance away in an attempt to preserve the tomb's secret location. The tombs themselves were designed to resemble the underworld, with a long, inclined rock-hewn corridor descending into either an antechamber or a series of sometimes pillared halls, and ending in the burial chamber.

The tomb builders lived in their own village of Deir al-Medina and worked in relays. The duration of the ancient week was 10 days (eight days on, two days off) and the men tended to spend the nights of their working week at a small camp located on the pass leading from Deir al-Medina to the eastern part of the Valley of the Kings. Then they spent their two days off at home with their families.

Once the tomb walls were created, decoration could then be added; this dealt almost exclusively with the afterlife and the pharaoh's existence in it. Many of the colourful paintings and reliefs were extracts taken from ancient theological compositions, now known as 'books', and were incorporated in the tomb to assist the deceased into the next life. Texts were taken from the Book of the Dead, the collective modern name for a range of works, all of which deal with the sun god's nightly journey through the darkness of the underworld, the realm of Osiris and home of the dead.

The Egyptians believed that the underworld was traversed each night by Ra, and it was the aim of the dead to secure passage on his sacred barque to travel with him for eternity. Since knowledge was power in the Egyptian afterlife, the texts give 'Knowledge of the power of those in the underworld and knowledge of their actions, knowing the sacred rituals of Ra, knowing the hours and the gods and the gates and paths where the great god passes'.

both dressed in priestly panther-skin robes and sporting a ceremonial side lock. The walls of the burial chamber feature the Book of Amduat, the Book of Caverns and the Book of the Earth; the Book of the Heavens is represented on the ceiling. Although unfinished it

was the last tomb in the valley to have so much of its decoration completed, and the paintings are relatively well preserved. A number of wooden statues of the pharaoh and the gods were salvaged and taken to the British Museum in the 19th century, although the

pharaoh's mummy had already been removed in antiquity and reburied as part of the Deir al-Bahri cache.

### **TOMB OF RAMSES II (KV 7)**

As befits the burial place of one of Egypt's longest-reigning pharaohs (67 years, from 1279 to 1213 BC), KV 7 (Map p259) is one of the biggest tombs in the valley. However, the location of its entrance at a low point in the valley left it vulnerable to flash floods – archaeologists estimate that it has flooded at least seven times since it was built. This has destroyed much of what must have been spectacular decoration, and left the rooms full of debris, so it is unlikely to open anytime soon. Based on the decorative scheme in his father Seti I's superb tomb, the walls of Ramses II's tomb would once have been just as brightly coloured, the wall scenes featuring the Litany of Ra, Book of Gates, the Book of the Dead and other sacred texts. In one of the side chambers off the burial chamber is a statue of Osiris similar to one found by Dr Kent Weeks in KV 5 (see the boxed text, p263), giving him yet more evidence for his theory that KV5 belongs to the many sons of Ramses.

Excavations have shown that Ramses II, following his father Seti I, had his sarcophagus made from alabaster, although his mummy was eventually buried in a wooden coffin in the Deir al-Bahri tomb cache; it's now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

### **TOMB OF MERNEPTAH (KV 8)**

Ramses II lived for so long that 12 of his sons died before he did, so it was finally his 13th son Merneptah (1213–1203 BC) who succeeded him in his 60s. The second-largest tomb in the valley, Merneptah's tomb (Map p259) has been open since antiquity and has its share of Greek and Coptic graffiti. Floods have damaged the lower part of the walls of the long tunnel-like tomb, but the upper parts have well-preserved reliefs. As you enter the first long corridor, on the left is a striking relief of Merneptah with the god Ra-Horakhty followed by the Litany of Ra. Further down, the corridors are decorated with the Book of the Dead, the Book of Gates and the Book of Amduat. Beyond a shaft is a false burial chamber with two pillars decorated with the Book of Gates. Although much of the decoration in the burial chamber has

faded, it remains an impressive room, with a sunken floor and brick niches on the front and rear walls.

The pharaoh was originally buried inside four stone sarcophagi, three of granite (the lid of the second still *in situ*, with an effigy of Merneptah on top) and the fourth, innermost, sarcophagus of alabaster. In a rare mistake by ancient Egyptian engineers, the outer sarcophagus did not fit through the tomb entrance and its gates had to be hacked away. Merneptah's mummy was removed in antiquity and was found in Amenhotep II's tomb (KV 35); it's now displayed in the Egyptian Museum.

### **TOMB OF TUTANKHAMUN (KV 62)**

The story of the celebrated discovery of the famous tomb and all the fabulous treasures it contained far outshines its actual appearance. Tutankhamun's tomb (Map p259) is small and bears all the signs of a rather hasty completion and inglorious burial. The son of Akhenaten by a minor wife, he ruled briefly (1336–1327 BC) and died young, with no great battles or buildings to his credit, so there was little time to build a tomb.

The Egyptologist Howard Carter slaved away for six seasons in the valley, excavating thousands of tonnes of sand and rubble from possible sites, believing that he would find the tomb of Tutankhamun intact with all its treasures. Even his benefactor Lord Carnarvon lost hope, and with his funding about to be cut off Carter made one last attempt at the only unexplored area that was left, which was covered by workers' huts just under the already excavated Tomb of Ramses VI.

The first step was found on 4 November 1922, and on 5 November the rest of the steps and a sealed doorway came to light. Carter wired Lord Carnarvon to join him in Egypt immediately for the opening of what he believed was the completely intact Tomb of Tutankhamun.

The tomb's priceless cache of treasures, although it had been partially robbed twice in antiquity, vindicated Carter's dream beyond even his wildest imaginings. Four chambers were found crammed with jewellery, furniture, statues, chariots, musical instruments, weapons, boxes, jars and food – even the later discovery that many had been stuffed haphazardly into the wrong boxes by necropolis officials 'tidying up' after the ancient robberies does

not detract from their dazzling wealth. Most are now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (a few items remain in Luxor Museum).

Seeing all the treasure contained in this small tomb, people wonder how rich the larger tombs must have been, but some archaeologists believe that Tutankhamun was perhaps buried with all the regalia of the unpopular Amarna royal line, as some of it is inscribed with the names of his father Akhenaten and the mysterious Smenkhkare (1388–1336 BC), who some Egyptologists believe was Nefertiti ruling as pharaoh.

Most of the treasure is in the Cairo Museum, but what is special here is that Tutankhamun's mummy still lies inside its gilded wooden coffin, the outermost of the three wooden coffins, which in turn rests within a carved, red quartzite sarcophagus. The burial chamber walls are decorated by chubby figures of Tutankhamun before the gods, painted against a yellow-gold background. The wall at the foot end of the sarcophagus shows scenes of the pharaoh's funeral; the 12 squatting apes from the Book of Amduat, representing the 12 hours of the night, are featured on the opposite wall.

### TOMB OF RAMSES VI (KV 9)

The intactness of Tutankhamun's tomb is largely thanks to the existence of the tomb of Ramses VI (Map p259). Tons of rock chippings thrown outside during its construction completely covered the tomb of Tutankhamun. The tomb was actually begun for the ephemeral Ramses V (1147–1143 BC) and continued by Ramses VI (1143–1136 BC), with both pharaohs apparently buried here; the names and titles of Ramses V still appear in the first half of the tomb. Following the tomb's ransacking a mere 20 years after burial, the mummies of both Ramses V and Ramses VI were moved to Amenhotep II's tomb where they were found in 1898 and taken to Cairo.

Although the tomb's plastering was not finished, its fine decoration is well preserved, with an emphasis on astronomical scenes and texts. Extracts from the Book of Gates and the Book of Caverns cover the entrance corridor. These continue into the midsection of the tomb and well room, with the addition of the Book of the Heavens. Nearer the burial chamber the walls are decorated with extracts from the Book of Amduat. The burial chamber is beautifully decorated, with a superb double

image of Nut framing the books of the day and of the night on the ceiling. This nocturnal landscape in black and gold shows the sky goddess swallowing the sun each evening to give birth to it each morning in an endless cycle of new life designed to revive the souls of the dead pharaohs. The walls of the chamber are filled with fine images of Ramses VI with various deities, as well as scenes from the Book of the Earth, with scenes that show the sun god's progress through the night, the gods who help him and the forces of darkness trying to stop him reaching the dawn; look out for the decapitated, kneeling figures of the sun god's enemies around the base of the chamber walls and the black-coloured executioners who turn the decapitated bodies upside down to render them as helpless as possible. On the beautifully decorated right wall of the burial chamber also try to pick out the ithyphallic figure (the one with a noticeable erection); the lines and symbols surrounding him represent a water clock. Plenty of Greek graffiti, from around AD 150, can be seen on the upper portions of the chamber.

### TOMB OF RAMSES III (KV 11)

Ramses III (1184–1153 BC), the last of Egypt's warrior pharaohs, built one of the longest tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The tomb (Map p259) started but abandoned by Sethnakht (1186–1184 BC), is 125m long, much of it still beautifully decorated with colourful painted sunken reliefs featuring the traditional ritual texts (Litany of Ra, Book of Gates etc) and Ramses before the gods. Unusually here are the secular scenes, in the small side rooms of the entrance corridor, showing foreign tribute such as highly detailed pottery imported from the Aegean, the royal armoury, boats and, in the last of these side chambers, the blind harpists that gave the tomb one of its alternative names: 'Tomb of the Harpers'.

In the chamber beyond is an aborted tunnel where ancient builders ran into the neighbouring tomb. They shifted the axis of the tomb to the west and built a corridor leading to a pillared hall, with walls decorated with scenes from the Book of Gates. There is also ancient graffiti on the rear right pillar describing the reburial of the pharaoh during the 21st dynasty (1069–945 BC). The remainder of the tomb is only partially excavated and structurally weak.



## THE GREATEST FIND SINCE TUTANKHAMUN

In May 1995, American archaeologist Dr Kent Weeks announced to the world his discovery of the largest tomb ever to be unearthed in Egypt, believed to be the burial place of the many sons of Ramses II. It was immediately hailed as the greatest find since that of Tutankhamun, or, as one London newspaper put it: 'The Mummy of all Tombs'.

In 1987 Weeks decided to excavate a hill where Howard Carter had uncovered an entrance to a tomb and partly cleared it in his search for Tutankhamun's tomb. Robbed in antiquity then filled with debris from flash floods, the tomb, KV5, appeared to have been destroyed and Carter soon dismissed it and filled it back in. Weeks located the entrance and his team then set about clearing the entrance chambers, finding pottery, fragments of sarcophagi and, more importantly, wall decorations which led him to believe it was the Tomb of the Sons of Ramses II.

However, it wasn't until 1995 that Weeks unearthed a doorway leading to an incredible 121 chambers and corridors, making the tomb many times larger and more complex than any other found in Egypt. Clearing the debris from this unique and enormous tomb is a painstaking and dangerous task. Not only does every bucketful have to be sifted for fragments of pottery, bones and reliefs, but major engineering work has to be done to shore up the tomb's structure. Despite the slow progress, Weeks has found the remains of six males that he contends are the sons of Ramses II. So far representations of 20 others have been found in the fragmentary reliefs, indicating that they too are likely to have been buried here.

Much of the tomb still lies tantalisingly off limits to investigation thanks to the tonnes of debris jammed inside its rooms and corridors. Weeks speculates that it has as many as 150 chambers: so far he has found 125 but exploration remains painfully slow. It might take another decade to study the tomb, during which it remains closed, but you can follow the progress on the excellent website at [www.thebanmappingproject.com](http://www.thebanmappingproject.com), or read Weeks' fascinating account in his book *The Lost Tomb*.

Ramses III's sarcophagus is in the Louvre in Paris, its detailed lid is in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and his mummy – found in the Deir al-Bahri cache – was the model for Boris Karloff's character in the 1930s film *The Mummy*. The mummy is now in Cairo's Egyptian Museum.

### TOMB OF HOREMHEB (KV 57)

This tomb (Map p259) was discovered filled with ransacked pieces of the royal funerary equipment, including a number of wooden figurines that were taken to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Horemheb (1323–1295 BC), a general and military strongman under Tutankhamun, brought stability after the turmoil of Akhenaten's reign. He had already built a lavish tomb in Saqqara, but abandoned it for this tomb. The various stages of decoration in the burial chamber give a fascinating glimpse into the process of tomb decoration.

From the entrance, a steep flight of steps and an equally steep passage leads to a well shaft decorated with superb figures of Horemheb before the gods. Notice Hathor's blue-and-black striped wig and the lotus

crown of the young god Nefertum, all executed against a grey-blue background. This leads to an undecorated pillared hall, and an antechamber. The six-pillared burial chamber decorated with part of the Book of Gates remains partially unfinished, showing how the decoration was applied by following a grid system in red ink over which the figures were drawn in black prior to their carving and painting. The pharaoh's empty red granite sarcophagus carved with protective figures of goddesses with outstretched wings remains in the tomb; his mummy is missing.

### TOMB OF AMENHOTEP II (KV 35)

One of the deepest structures in the valley, this tomb (Map p259) has more than 90 steps down to a modern gangway, built over a deep pit designed to protect the inner, lower chambers from both thieves (which it failed to do) and the water from flash floods.

Stars cover the entire ceiling in the huge burial chamber and the walls feature, as if on a giant painted scroll, text from the Book of Amduat. While most figures are of the same sticklike proportions as in the tomb of Amenhotep's father and predecessor

Tuthmosis III, this is the first royal tomb in the valley to also show figures of more rounded proportions, as on the pillars in the burial chamber showing the pharaoh before Osiris, Hathor and Anubis. The burial chamber is also unique for its double level; the top level was filled with pillars, the bottom contained the sarcophagus.

Although thieves breached the tomb in antiquity, Amenhotep's (1427–1400 BC) mummy was restored by the priests, put back in his sarcophagus with a garland of flowers around his neck, and buried with 13 other royal mummies in the two side rooms, including Tuthmosis IV (1400–1390 BC), Amenhotep III, Merneptah, Ramses IV, V and VI and Seti II (1200–1194 BC), most of which are now at the Egyptian Museum.

### **TOMB OF TUTHMOSIS III (KV 34)**

Hidden in the hills between high limestone cliffs and reached only via a steep staircase that crosses an even steeper ravine, this tomb (Map p259) demonstrates the lengths to which the ancient pharaohs went to thwart the cunning of the ancient thieves.

Tuthmosis III (1479–1425 BC), an innovator in many fields whose military exploits and stature has earned him the name 'the Napoleon of ancient Egypt', was one of the first to build his tomb in the Valley of the Kings. As secrecy was his utmost concern, he chose the most inaccessible spot and designed his burial place with a series of passages at haphazard angles and fake doors to mislead or catch potential robbers.

The shaft, now traversed by a narrow gangway, leads to an antechamber supported by two pillars, the walls of which are adorned with a list of more than 700 gods and demigods. As the earliest tomb in the valley to be painted, the walls appear to be simply giant versions of funerary papyri, with scenes populated by stick men. The burial chamber has curved walls and is oval in shape; it contains the pharaoh's quartzite sarcophagus that is carved in the shape of a cartouche.

Tuthmosis III's mummy, which shows he was a short man of around 1.5m, was one of those found in the Deir al-Bahri cache and is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

### **TOMB OF SIPTAH (KV 47)**

Discovered in 1905, Siptah's (1194–1188 BC) tomb (Map p259) was never completed but

the upper corridors are nonetheless covered in fine paintings. Like the builders of Ramses III's tomb, workmen struck an adjacent tomb when digging out the rock, but fortunately they were already in the burial chamber, and blocked up their mistake with stone blocks.

The tomb's entrance is decorated with the sun disc, and figures of Maat, the goddess of truth, kneel on each side of the doorway. The corridor beyond features colourful scenes from the Litany of Ra with an elaborately dressed Siptah before various gods, including Ra-Horakhty (an aspect of the sun god Ra combined with Horakhty, a form of Horus the sky god). There are further scenes from the Book of Amduat, and figures of Anubis, after which the tomb remains undecorated. The tomb was reused in the Third Intermediate Period. But Siptah's mummy was moved for safety to the well-hidden tomb of Amenhotep II by 10th-century priests. There he lay with many other royal mummies, Seti II, Amenhotep III and Ramses IV, V and VI among them.

### **TOMB OF TAWOSRET/SETHNAKHT (KV 14)**

Tawosret was wife of Seti II and after his successor Siptah died she took power herself (1188–1186 BC). Egyptologists think she began the tomb (Map p259) for herself and Seti II but their burials were removed by her successor, the equally short-lived Sethnakht, who completed the tomb by adding, unusually for the Valley of the Kings, a second burial-chamber where he himself was buried. The change of ownership can be seen in the tomb's decoration; the upper corridors show the queen, accompanied by her stepson Siptah, in the presence of the gods. Siptah's cartouche was later replaced by Seti II's. However, in the lower corridors and burial chambers images of Tawosret have been plastered over by images or cartouches of Sethnakht.

The tomb has been open since antiquity and although the decoration has worn off in some parts, the colour and state of the burial chambers remains good, with astronomical ceiling decorations and images of Tawosret and Sethnakht with the gods. The final scene from the Book of Caverns adorning Tawosret's burial chamber is particularly impressive, showing the sun god as a ram-headed figure stretching out his wings to emerge from the darkness of the underworld. The two anonymous mummies found in the

Amenhotep II cache may belong to Tawosret and Sethnakht.

### **TOMB OF SETI II (KV 15)**

Adjacent to Tawosret's/Sethnakht's tomb is a smaller tomb (Map p259) where it seems Sethnakht buried Seti II (1200–1194 BC) after turfing him out of KV 14. Open since ancient times judging by the many examples of classical graffiti, the tomb's entrance area has some finely carved relief scenes, although the rest was quickly finished off in paint alone. The walls have extracts from the Litany of Ra, the Book of Gates and the Book of Amduat and, unusually, on the walls of the well room, images of the type of funerary objects used in pharaohs' tombs, such as golden statuettes of the pharaoh within a shrine (just like the actual examples found in Tutankhamun's tomb, which are now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo). The sky goddess Nut stretches out across the ceiling of the burial chamber. Seti II's mummy was found in the Amenhotep II tomb cache. During the 1920s, Seti II's tomb was used by Carter and his team as a conservation laboratory and photographic studio during their clearance of Tutankhamun's tomb.

### **TOMB OF RAMSES I (KV 16)**

Ramses I (1295–1294 BC) only ruled for a year, so his tomb (Map p259) is a very simple affair. Originally called Paramessu, he was a military officer and vizier under Horemheb, later chosen as Horemheb's successor. His tomb has the shortest entrance corridor leading to a single, almost square, burial chamber, containing the pharaoh's open pink granite sarcophagus. Only the chamber is superbly decorated, very similar to Horemheb's tomb (KV 57), with extracts from the Book of Gates, as well as scenes of the pharaoh in the presence of the gods, eg the pharaoh kneeling between the jackal-headed 'Soul of Nekhen' and the falcon-headed 'Soul of Pe', symbolising Upper and Lower Egypt. For information on the long journey of the mummy some think is Ramses I from here to North America and back again, see the boxed text, p266.

### **TOMB OF SETI I (KV 17)**

As befits such an important pharaoh, Seti I (1294–1279 BC), son and heir of Ramses I, has one of the longest (137m) and most beautiful tombs (Map p259) in the valley. Its

discovery by Giovanni Belzoni in 1817 generated almost the same interest as the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb a century later. As the first royal tomb to be decorated throughout, its raised, painted relief scenes are similar to those found in the pharaoh's beautifully decorated temple at Abydos (p233) and the quality of the work is superb. Two of its painted reliefs showing Seti with Hathor are now in the Louvre in Paris and Florence's Archaeological Museum, while Seti's alabaster sarcophagus was bought by Sir John Soane, and it can still be seen in the basement of his London house-turned-museum. Seti's mummy was found in the Deir al-Bahri mummy cache, and is now in the Egyptian Museum.

The first part of the pharaoh's burial chamber is decorated with texts from the Litany of Ra, and the Book of Amduat, with the Book of Gates featured in the first pillared hall. The walls of the burial chamber are adorned with the Book of Gates, the Book of Amduat and the Book of the Divine Cow, while the ceiling depicts vivid astronomical scenes featuring the various constellations.

The tomb is indefinitely closed for restoration (ongoing since 1991).

### **TOMB OF MONTUHIRKOPSHEF (KV 19)**

The tomb (Map p259) of Ramses IX's son (c 1000 BC), whose name translates as 'The Arm of Montu is Strong', is located high up in the valley's eastern wall and seems to have been constructed for an earlier prince. It is small and unfinished but has fine paintings and few visitors. Its entrance corridor is adorned with life-size reliefs of various gods, including Osiris, Ptah, Thoth and Khonsu, receiving offerings from the young prince, who is shown in all his finery, wearing exquisitely pleated fine linen robes and a blue-and-gold 'sidelock of youth' attached to his black wig – not to mention his gorgeous make-up (as worn by both men and women in ancient Egypt).

### **TOMB OF TUTHMOSIS IV (KV 43)**

The tomb (Map p259) of Tuthmosis IV (1400–1390 BC) is one of the largest and deepest tombs constructed during the 18th dynasty. It is also the first in which paint was applied over a yellow background, beginning a tradition that was continued in many tombs. Discovered in 1903 by Howard

Carter (who less than 20 years later would find the tomb of Tuthmosis IV's great-grandson Tutankhamun), it is accessed by two long flights of steps lead down and around to the burial chamber where there's an enormous sarcophagus covered in hieroglyphs. The walls of the well shaft and antechamber are decorated with painted scenes of Tuthmosis before the gods, and the figures of the goddess Hathor are particularly fetching in a range of beautiful dresses decorated with beaded designs.

On the left (south) wall of the antechamber there is a patch of ancient Egyptian graffiti dating back to 1315 BC, written by government official Maya and his assistant Djehutymose and referring to their inspection and restoration of Tuthmosis IV's burial on the orders of Horemheb following the first wave of robbery in the eighth year of Horemheb's reign, some 67 years after Tuthmosis IV died.

After the tomb was ransacked a second time it was decided it would be safer to re-bury Tuthmosis' mummy in the tomb of his father Amenhotep II (KV 35). Tuthmosis' mummy with pierced ears, is now displayed in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

### TOMB OF AY (KV 23)

Although he succeeded Tutankhamun, Ay's brief reign from 1327 to 1323 BC tends to be associated with the earlier Amarna period and Akhenaten (some Egyptologists have suggested he could have been the father of Akhenaten's wife Nefertiti). Ay abandoned a grandiose tomb in Amarna (see p227) and took over another in the West Valley here. The West Valley played an important part in the Amarna story, as it was chosen as a new burial ground by Amenhotep III for his own enormous tomb (KV 22, part way up the valley), and his son and successor Akhenaten also began a tomb here, before he relocated the capital at Amarna, where he was eventually buried. It seems Tutankhamun too planned to be buried in the West Valley, until his early death saw his successor Ay 'switch' tombs. Tutankhamun was buried in a tomb (KV 62) in the traditional section of the Valley of the Kings, while Ay himself took over the tomb Tutankhamun had begun at the head of the West Valley. The tomb (Map p255) is accessed by a dirt road leading off from the car park at the Valley of the Kings that winds for almost 2km up a desolate valley past sheer rock cliffs. Recapturing the atmosphere (and silence)

### THE RETURN OF THE MUMMY

In 1881 the Egypt's antiquities authority made the greatest mummy find in history: the mummies of 40 pharaohs, queens and nobles, just south of Deir al-Bahri in tomb No 320. It seems that 21st-dynasty priests had them moved as a protection against tomb robbers to this communal grave, after 934 BC. The mummies included those of Amenhotep I, Tuthmosis I, II and III, Seti I and Ramses II and III, many of which are now on display at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Their removal from the tomb and procession down to the Nile, from where they were taken by barge to Cairo, was accompanied by the eerie sound of black-clad village women ululating to give a royal send-off to the remains. The episode makes for one of the most stunning scenes in Shadi Abdel Salam's 1975 epic *The Mummy (Al-Mumia)*, one of the most beautiful films made in Egypt.

However the cache had already been found a decade earlier by the Abdel Rassoul family from Gurna, who were making a tidy sum by selling contents from it. Mummies, coffins, sumptuous jewellery and other artefacts made their way to Europe and North America, and many ended up in museums. One of the mummies ended up in a small museum in Niagara Falls, Canada until the late 1990s, when the crossed arms and excellent state of the body were recognised by an Egyptologist as signs of possible royalty. When the museum closed in 1999, the mummy was acquired by the Michael Carlos Museum in Atlanta. CT scans, X-rays, radiocarbon dating and computer imaging attempted to identify the mummy, and although they could only suggest that it was from later than the Ramesside period, an uncanny resemblance to the mummified faces of Seti I and Ramses II was seized upon by some Egyptologists as proof that this was the missing mummy of Ramses I.

As a gesture of goodwill, the museum returned the mummy to Egypt in 2003, where he was welcomed home, at the Egyptian Museum, with songs and ceremonies. Later he was taken to Luxor where, as befitting a pharaoh in his afterlife, he made the final stage of his journey under sail.

## TOMB PLANNING

Each of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings is unique, but most follow a basic plan that developed over time. In the 18th dynasty (1550–1295 BC) the typical tomb had four passages, each symbolising a stage on the journey to the afterlife. The passages led into a small chamber with a well or pit, called the 'Hall of Waiting', which led into a pillared hall called the 'Chariot Hall'. From here another passage, at right angles to the first four, led into the oval burial chamber. This change in axis may have had a symbolic meaning, possibly reflecting winding waterways in the afterlife, or may have been simply a function of the topography.

During the 19th dynasty (1295–1186 BC) the bent axis eventually switched to an east–west orientation with the sarcophagus set at right angles. The descent of the passages became less steep and as time passed an antechamber, which may have been a false burial chamber, was added to the first pillared hall. Wooden doors were added to close off passages and rooms (previously mortar had been used to seal off sections of tombs).

By the 20th dynasty (1186–1069 BC) the tomb axis had straightened and the tombs became shorter, but were higher and wider. The sarcophagus was on the same east–west axis as the tomb, so that the pharaoh could eternally face the rising sun.

The tombs were decorated with texts from the Book of the Dead and with colourful scenes to help guide the pharaoh on his or her journey through the afterlife. In the 18th dynasty only the burial chamber was decorated but by the 19th dynasty the entire tomb became a riot of colour.

once found in the neighbouring Valley of the Kings makes it worth the visit.

Although only the burial chamber is decorated, it is noted for its scenes of Ay hippopotamus hunting and fishing in the marshes (scenes usually found in the tombs of nobles not royalty) and for a wall featuring 12 baboons, representing the 12 hours of the night, after which the West Valley or Wadi al-Gurud (Valley of the Monkeys) is named. This is so similar to the decoration in Tutankhamun's tomb that archaeologists suspect that the same artists worked on both tombs. Although Ay's mummy has never been identified, his smashed up sarcophagus has been restored for tourists.

## Walk to Deir al-Bahri

The steep walk out of the Valley of the Kings and over the surrounding mountains down to Hatshepsut's mortuary temple at Deir al-Bahri, guarantees great views over the ancient sites, fertile green fields, the Nile and across to the town of Luxor. The path starts beside KV 17, the tomb of Seti I, where the path is marked. The first few hundred metres are very steep, but then the path levels out. Ascending the path, souvenir hawkers and would-be guides will offer their services, but the route is pretty obvious. Walk along the ridge, taking a left where the path forks. After passing the police post on the left, you can

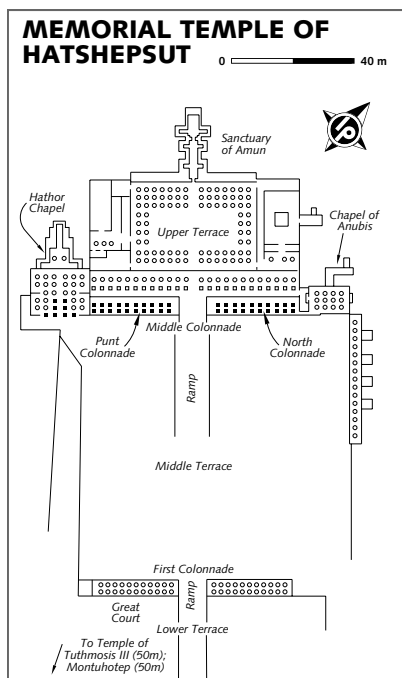
see Deir al-Bahri down the sheer cliff to your right. Stick to the path that follows the ridge, ignoring the steep trail that plunges down the cliff face. Once you've almost completed a full circle you will find yourself at the ticket office to the temple.

The walk takes about 50 minutes, allowing time to enjoy the views and the amazing lunarlike landscape. Ideally the walk should be done in winter. In summer start very early as it gets incredibly hot up there. At all times take a hat, sun cream, lots of water and some decent walking shoes. If you tire on the ascent there are sometimes donkeys available to carry you to the top.

## Deir al-Bahri

The eyes first focus on the dramatic rugged limestone cliffs that rise nearly 300m above the desert plain, a monument made by Nature, only to realize that at the foot of all this immense beauty, lies a man-made monument even more extraordinary, the dazzling **Temple of Hatshepsut** (Map p268; adult/student £25/15; ☎ 6am–4.30pm Oct–Apr, to 5pm May–Sep). The almost-modern-looking temple blends in beautifully with the cliffs from which it is partly cut, it is a marriage made in heaven.

Continuous excavation and restoration since 1891 have revealed one of ancient Egypt's finest monuments, but it must have been even more stunning in the days of



Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BC), when it was approached by a grand sphinx-lined causeway instead of today's noisy tourist bazaar, and when the court was a garden planted with a variety of exotic trees and perfumed plants – the ancient Egyptians called it *Djeser-djeseru*, 'Most Holy of Holies'. If the design seems unusual, it featured in fact all the things a memorial temple usually had, including the rising central axis and a three-part plan, but had to be adapted to the chosen site almost exactly on the same line with the Temple of Amun at Karnak, and near an older shrine to the goddess Hathor.

The temple was vandalised over the centuries: Tuthmosis III removed his stepmother's name whenever he could (see the boxed text, p270), Akhenaten removed all references to Amun, and the early Christians turned it into a monastery, Deir al-Bahri ('Monastery of the North'), and defaced the pagan reliefs.

Deir al-Bahri has been appointed as one of the hottest places on earth, so an early morning visit is advisable, also because the reliefs are best seen in the low sunlight. The complex is entered via the **great court**, where

original ancient tree roots are still visible. The colonnades on the **lower terrace** were closed for restoration at the time of writing. The delicate relief work on the south colonnade, left of the ramp, has reliefs of the transportation of a pair of obelisks commissioned by Hatshepsut from the Aswan quarries to Thebes, and the north one features scenes of birds being caught.

A large ramp leads to the two upper terraces. The best-preserved reliefs are on the **middle terrace**. The reliefs in the northern colonnade record Hatshepsut's divine birth and at the end of it is the **Chapel of Anubis**, with well-preserved colourful reliefs of a disfigured Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III in the presence of Anubis, Ra-Horakhty and Hathor. The wonderfully detailed reliefs in the **Punt Colonnade** to the left of the entrance, tell the story of the expedition to the Land of Punt to collect myrrh trees needed for the incense used in temple ceremonies. There are depictions of the strange animals and exotic plants they saw there, the foreign architecture and strange landscapes as well as the different-looking people. At the end of this colonnade is the **Hathor Chapel**, with two chambers both with Hathor-headed columns. Reliefs on the west wall show, if you have a torch, Hathor as a cow licking Hatshepsut's hand, and the queen drinking from Hathor's udder. On the north wall is a faded relief of Hatshepsut's soldiers in naval dress in the goddess' honour. Beyond the pillared halls is a three-roomed chapel cut into the rock, now closed to the public, with reliefs of the queen in front of the deities, and with a small figure behind the door of Senenmut, the temple's architect and some believe Hatshepsut's lover.

The **upper terrace**, restored by a Polish-Egyptian team over the last 25 years, had 24 colossal Osirid statues, some of which are left. The central pink granite doorway leading into the Sanctuary of Amun, which is hewn out of the cliff.

On the south side of Hatshepsut's temple lie the remains of the **Temple of Montuhotep**, built for the founder of the 11th dynasty and one of the oldest temples so far discovered in Thebes, and the **Temple of Tuthmosis III**, Hatshepsut's successor. Both are in ruins.

## Assasif Tombs

This group of tombs, located near Deir al-Bahri, belong to 18th-dynasty nobles, and 25th and 26th-dynasty nobles under the



Nubian pharaohs. The area is under excavation by archaeologists, but of the many tombs here, only some may be open to the public including the **Tombs of Kheruef** and of **Pabasa** (Map p255; adult/student ££12/8; ☞ 6am–4.30pm Oct–Apr, to 5pm May–Sep); tickets are available at the Antiquities Inspectorate ticket office near the Memnon Colossi. The tomb of Kheruef is the largest 18th-dynasty noble's tomb here in Thebes, and it has some of the finest examples of New Kingdom relief, but unfortunately the tomb is in poor condition. The tomb of Pabasa, a 26th-dynasty priest, has scenes of agriculture, hunting and fishing.

### Dra Abu'l Naga

Hidden in the desert cliffs north of Deir al-Bahri lies yet another necropolis, **Dra Abu'l Naga** (Map p255), with 114 tombs of rulers and officials, most dating from the 17th dynasty to the late period (about 1550–500 BC). The area has been extensively plundered but two tombs escaped with their paintings more or less intact.

The **Tomb of Roy** (No 234; Map p255), a royal scribe and steward of Horemheb, is small with scenes of funerary offerings and agriculture, and a beautifully painted ceiling. A few metres away, the T-shaped **Tomb of Shuroy** (No 13; Map p255) contains some finely executed, but in places heavily damaged, paintings of Shuroy and his wife making offerings to the gods and a funeral procession led by a child mourner.

### Tombs of the Nobles

The **tombs** (Map p255; adult/student ££25/15 per group of tombs; ☞ 6am–4.30pm Oct–Apr, to 5pm May–Sep) in this area are some of the best, but least visited, attractions on the West Bank. Nestled in the foothills opposite the Ramesseum, there are more than 400 tombs, belonging to nobles from the 6th dynasty to the Graeco-Roman period. Where the pharaohs decorated their tombs with cryptic passages from the Book of the Dead to guide them through the afterlife, the nobles, intent on letting the good life continue after their death, decorated their tombs with wonderfully detailed scenes of their daily lives.

Only 15 or so tombs are open to the public – they are divided into five groups and each requires a separate ticket from the Antiquities Inspectorate ticket office near Memnon Colossi.

### TOMBS OF KHONSU, USERHET & BENIA (NOS 31, 51 & 343)

Khonsu was First Prophet in the memorial temple of Tuthmosis III (1479–1425 BC). Inside the first chamber of **Khonsu's tomb** (Map p255) are scenes of the Montu festival at Armant, about 20km south of Luxor, the festival of the god of war over which he presided. The sacred barque with the shrine of Montu is towed by two smaller boats. The gods Osiris and Anubis are also honoured, and in many scenes Khonsu is seen making offerings to them. The ceiling is adorned with images of ducks flying around and nests with eggs.

The **Tomb of Benia**, just behind that of Khonsu, is even more colourful. Benia was boarder in the Royal Nursery and chief treasurer also during the reign of Tuthmosis III. There are many scenes of offering tables piled high with food and drinks overlooked by Benia, and sometimes by his parents. In a niche cut out at the end of the tomb is a statue of Benia flanked by his parents, all three with destroyed faces.

The **Tomb of Userhet** (not to be confused with Userhet No 56) was closed at the time of writing.

### TOMBS OF MENNA & NAKHT (NOS 52 & 69)

The beautiful and highly colourful wall paintings in the **Tomb of Menna** and the **Tomb of Nakht** (Map p255) emphasise rural life in 18th-dynasty Egypt. Menna was an estate inspector and Nakht was an astronomer of Amun. Their finely detailed tombs show scenes of farming, hunting, fishing and feasting. The Tomb of Nakht has a small museum area in its first chamber. Although this tomb is so small that only a handful of visitors can squeeze in at a time, the walls have some of the best-known examples of Egyptian tomb paintings, including some familiar scenes such as that of the three musicians, which shows up on a million souvenir T-shirts, posters, postcards and papyrus paintings.

### TOMBS OF RAMOSE, USERHET & KHAEMHET (NOS 55, 56 & 57)

The **Tomb of Ramose** (Map p255), a governor of Thebes under Amenhotep III and Akhenaten, is fascinating because it one of the few monuments dating from that time, a period of transition between two different forms of

## FEMALE PHARAOHS

Pharaoh was an exclusively male title and in early Egyptian history there was no word for a Queen regent, but records show there actually were a few female pharaohs. From early Dynastic times it seemed common practice that on the death of the pharaoh, if his heir was too young to rule or there was no heir, his wife, often also his stepsister or sister, would be appointed regent. It's not clear if this role was limited to a regency, or if they were created pharaoh, but what is sure is that they were often buried with all the honours reserved for a pharaoh.

The first queen to have ruled independently is thought to have been Merneith, who was the wife of the 1st-dynasty Pharaoh Djer (c 3000 BC), and mother of Den who ruled after her. Her name was recently found on a clay seal impression with all the names of the early kings. She was buried with full royal honours at Abydos. Almost every dynasty had a woman who ruled for a short while under the title of 'King's Mother'. The 12th-dynasty Sobeknofru, daughter of Amenemhat III and wife and half-sister of Amenhotep IV, is thought to have ruled Egypt from 1785 to 1782 BC after the early death of her husband. Her titles included Female Horus, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, and Daughter of Ra. The 12th dynasty ended with her rule, as she had no son.

Hatshepsut is the most famous of Egypt's female pharaohs. She was married to her half-brother Tuthmosis II, whose son by a minor wife was to be his successor. When Tuthmosis II died in 1479 BC, Hatshepsut became regent and ruled together with the child Tuthmosis III. Then, with the political support of the Amun priesthood, she declared herself pharaoh. Her 15-year rule (1473–1458 BC) marked a period of peace and internal growth for Egypt. She is sometimes shown in the regalia of the male pharaoh, including the false beard, while in other scenes she is clearly female. When Tuthmosis III finally took control in 1458 BC, he ordered all reference to her be wiped from Egyptian history. Hatshepsut's mummy has never been found, and her name and images were almost all erased.

Other female rulers include Nefertiti, wife of the rebel pharaoh Akhenaten who was clearly involved in her husband's policies and is often depicted wearing kingly regalia. Some believe that she was in fact the mysterious Smenkhare, known to have ruled for a few years after Akhenaten's death in 1336 BC. Tawosret, the wife of Seti II, was buried in the Valley of the Kings (see p264). After her husband died, she became co-regent with her stepson Siptah, and after his death she proclaimed herself pharaoh from 1188 to 1186 BC).

About a thousand years later Cleopatra came to the throne at the age of 17, in 51 BC. It's thought that she first ruled jointly with her father Ptolemy XII and, after his death, with her younger brother Ptolemy XIII. To keep Egypt independent, she allied herself with the Roman Julius Caesar, whom she married and whose son she bore. After Caesar's death, she famously married another powerful Roman, Marc Anthony, and fell with him to the might of Augustus Caesar.

religious worship. The exquisite paintings and low reliefs show scenes in two different styles from the reigns of both pharaohs, depicting Ramose's funeral and his relationship with Akhenaten. The tomb was never actually finished, perhaps because Ramose died prematurely.

Next door is the **Tomb of Userhet** (Map p255), one of Amenhotep II's royal scribes, with fine wall paintings depicting daily life. Userhet is shown presenting gifts to Amenhotep II; there's a barber cutting hair on another wall; other scenes include men making wine and people hunting gazelles from a chariot.

The **Tomb of Khaemhet** (Map p255), Amenhotep III's royal inspector of the gra-

naries and court scribe, has scenes on the walls showing Khaemhet making offerings; the pharaoh depicted as a sphinx; the funeral ritual of Osiris; and images of daily country life as well as official business.

## TOMBS OF SENNOFER & REKHMIRE (NOS 96 & 100)

The most interesting parts of the **Tomb of Sennofer** (Map p255), overseer of the Garden of Amun under Amenhotep II, are deep underground in the main chamber. The ceiling there is covered with clear paintings of grapes and vines, while most of the vivid scenes on the surrounding walls and columns depict Sennofer and the different women in his

## OLD GURNA

Until early 2007 the entrances to the Tombs of the Nobles were hidden among the mud-brick houses of the village of Sheikh Abd al-Gurna. The houses often had painted façades, and were a picturesque sight against the backdrop of the Theban Hills. Now almost all residents have been relocated to a new village a few kilometres north of the Valley of the Kings, and their houses have been demolished.

The UK-based Friends of Qurna Discovery, with the agreement of the Supreme Council for Antiquities, have launched a project to preserve and restore four properties. These will be devoted to explaining the history of life on this hillside in the last millennia. A *zawia* (tomb complex of a saint) will house a permanent exhibition of drawings of Qurna by early-19th-century British artist Robert Hay. His finely detailed works depict ancient mud-brick structures that are now lost and, of course, the famous tomb houses, all showing a life that has all but disappeared in the past 50 years. The adjoining Daramalli house will be used to exhibit household objects and agricultural implements to show how Gurnawi families lived and worked. The *bab al-haggar* (tomb house), with its amazing collection of mud structures, and the ruined house of Giovanni D'Athenasi, the early-19th-century dragoman, will both be restored. Donations are welcome to restore these four houses and to provide for the guardians. More details from [www.qurna.org](http://www.qurna.org).

life he was close to, including his wife and daughters and his wet nurse. The guard usually has a kerosene lamp, but bring a torch just in case.

The **Tomb of Rekhmire**, governor under Tuthmosis III and Amenhotep II, is one of the best preserved in the area. In the first chamber, to the extreme left, are scenes of Rekhmire receiving gifts from foreign lands. The panther and giraffe are gifts from Nubia; the elephant, horses and chariot from Syria; and the expensive vases from Crete and the Aegean Islands. Beyond this is the unusual chapel. The west wall shows Rekhmire inspecting the production of metals, bricks, jewellery, leather, furniture and statuary, while the east wall shows banquet scenes, complete with lyrics (the female harpist sings 'Put perfume on the hair of the goddess Maat').

## TOMBS OF NEFERRONPET, DHUTMOSI & NEFERSEKHERU (NOS 178, 295 & 296)

Discovered in 1915, the highlight of the brightly painted **Tomb of Neferronpet** (also known as Kenro; Map p255), the scribe of the treasury under Ramses II, is the scene showing Kenro overseeing the weighing of gold at the treasury. Next door, the **Tomb of Nefersekeru**, an officer of the treasury during the same period, is similar in style and content to his neighbours. The ceiling is decorated with a huge variety of elaborate geometric patterns. From this long tomb, a small passage leads into the **Tomb of Dhutmisi**, which is in poor condition.

## The Ramesseum

Ramses II called his massive **memorial temple** (Map p272; adult/student ££25/15; ☺ 6am-4.30pm Oct-Apr, to 5pm May-Sep) 'the Temple of Millions of Years of User-Maat-Ra'; classical visitors called it the Tomb of Ozymandias; and Jean-François Champollion, who deciphered hieroglyphics, called it the Ramesseum. Like other memorial temples it was part of Ramses II's funerary complex. His tomb was built deep in the hills, but his memorial temple was on the edge of the cultivation on a canal that connected with the Nile and with other memorial temples.

Unlike the well-preserved structures that Ramses II built at Karnak and Abu Simbel, his memorial temple has not survived the times very well. It is mostly in ruins, despite extensive restoration – a fact that would no doubt disappoint Ramses II. The Ramesseum is famous for the scattered remains of fallen statue that inspired the English poet Shelley's poem 'Ozymandias', using the undeniable fact of Ramses' mortality to ridicule his aspirations to immortality.

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs  
of stone  
Stand in the desert....Near them, on  
the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies,  
whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold  
command,

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these life-less things,

The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:

And on the pedestal these words appear:

'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

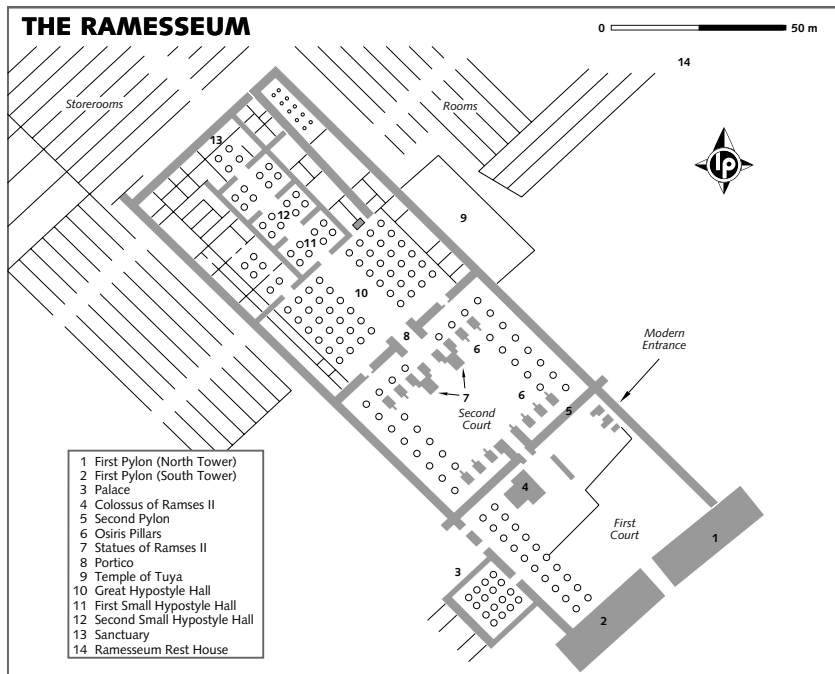
Although it is more elaborate than other temples, the fairly orthodox layout of the Ramesseum, consisting of two courts, hypostyle hall, sanctuary, accompanying chambers and storerooms, is uncommon in that the usual rectangular floor plan was altered to incorporate an older, smaller temple – that

of Ramses II's mother, Tuya – off to one side.

The entrance is through a doorway in the northeast corner of the enclosure wall which leads into the second court, where one should turn left to the **first pylon**. The **first and second pylons** measure more than 60m across and feature reliefs of Ramses' military exploits, particularly his battles against the Hittites. Through the first pylon are the ruins of the huge **first court**, including the double colonnade that fronted the royal **palace**.

Near the western stairs is part of the **Colossus of Ramses II**, the Ozymandias of Shelley's poem, lying somewhat forlornly on the ground, where it once stood 17.5m tall. The head of another granite **statue of Ramses II**, one of a pair, lies in the **second court**. Twenty-nine of the original 48 columns of the **great hypostyle hall** are still standing. In the smaller hall behind it, the roof, which features astronomical hieroglyphs, is still in place.

There is a rest house–restaurant next to the temple that is called, not surprisingly, **Ramesseum Rest House**. It is a great place to relax and have a cool drink or something to



eat. You can leave your bike here while exploring the surroundings.

### Deir al-Medina

About 1km off the road to the Valley of the Queens and up a short, steep paved road is **Deir al-Medina** (Monastery of the Town; Map p255; adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 6am–4.30pm Oct–Apr, to 5pm May–Sep), named after a temple that was occupied by early Christian monks. Near the temple is the ruined settlement, the Workmen's Village. Many of the workers and artists who created the royal tombs lived and were buried here. Some of the small tombs here have exquisite reliefs, making it worth a visit.

### TEMPLE

The small Ptolemaic-era temple of Deir al-Medina is set just north of the Workmen's Village, along a rocky track. Measuring only 10m x 15m, it was built between 221 and 116 BC, the last of a series of earlier temples built on the same site. It was dedicated to Hathor, the goddess of pleasure and love, and to Maat, the goddess of truth and personification of cosmic order.

### WORKMEN'S VILLAGE

Archaeologists have uncovered more than 70 houses in this village and many tombs, the most beautiful of which are now open to the public.

The beautifully adorned **Tomb of Inherka** (No 359) belonged to a 19th-dynasty servant who worked in the Place of Truth, the Valley of the Kings. The one-room tomb has magnificent wall paintings, including the famous scene of a cat (representing the sun god Ra) killing a snake (representing the evil serpent Apophis) under a sacred tree, on the left wall. There are also beautiful domestic scenes of Inherka with his wife and children. Right next to it is the **Tomb of Sennedjem** (No 1), a stunningly decorated 19th-dynasty tomb that contains two small chambers and some equally exquisite paintings. Sennedjem was an artist who lived during the reigns of Seti I and Ramses II and it seems he ensured his own tomb was as finely decorated as those of his masters. Due to the popularity and small size of both these tombs, only 10 people at a time are allowed inside; it's likely you'll find yourself in a queue.

While you wait, take a look at the 19th-dynasty **Tomb of Pashedu** (No 3) just up the slope from the other two tombs. Pashedu was another servant in the Place of Truth and can

be seen in the burial chamber praying under a palm tree beside a lake. Close by is the **Tomb of Ipy** (No 217), a sculptor during the reign of Ramses II. Here scenes of everyday life eclipse the usual emphasis on ritual, with scenes of farming and hunting, and a depiction of Ipy's house in its flower- and fruit-filled garden (see the boxed text, p253).

### Valley of the Queens

There are at least 75 tombs in the **Valley of the Queens** (Biban al-Harim; Map p255; adult/student ££30/15). They belonged to queens of the 19th and 20th dynasties and other members of the royal families, including princesses and the Ramesside princes. Only two were open at the time of writing, as the Tomb of Nefertari was again closed.

### TOMB OF NEFERTARI (NO 66)

Hailed as the finest tomb in the Theban necropolis – and in all of Egypt for that matter – the **Tomb of Nefertari** (Map p255; ☎ closed at the time of writing) was completely restored and reopened in 1995, but it was solidly booked and closed again until further notice in 2003.

Nefertari was one of the five wives of Ramses II, the New Kingdom pharaoh known for his colossal monuments, but the tomb he built for his favourite queen is a shrine to her beauty and, without doubt, an exquisite labour of love. Every centimetre of the walls in the tomb's three chambers and connecting corridors is adorned with colourful scenes of Nefertari in the company of the gods and with associated text from the Book of the Dead nearby. Invariably, the 'Most Beautiful of Them', as Nefertari was known, is depicted wearing a divinely transparent white gown and a golden headdress featuring two long feathers extending from the back of a vulture. The ceiling of the tomb is festooned with golden stars.

Like most of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, this one had been plundered by the time it was discovered by archaeologists. Only a few fragments of the queen's pink granite sarcophagus remained. Of her mummified body, only traces of her knees were left.

### TOMB OF AMUNHERKHEPSHEF (NO 55)

Until the reopening of Nefertari's tomb, the **Tomb of Amunherkhepshef** (Map p255) is the valley's showpiece, with beautiful, well-preserved reliefs. Amunherkhepshef, the son of Ramses

III was still in his teens when he died. On the walls of the tomb's vestibule, Ramses holds his son's hand to introduce him to the gods that will help him on his journey to the afterlife. Amunherkhepshef can be seen wearing a kilt and sandals, with the sidelock of hair typical of young boys.

The mummified five-month-old foetus on display in a glass case in the tomb is the subject of many an inventive story, among them the suggestion that the foetus was aborted by Amunherkhepshef's mother when she heard of his death. It was actually found by Italian excavators in a valley to the south of the Valley of the Queens.

### TOMB OF KHAEMWASET (NO 44)

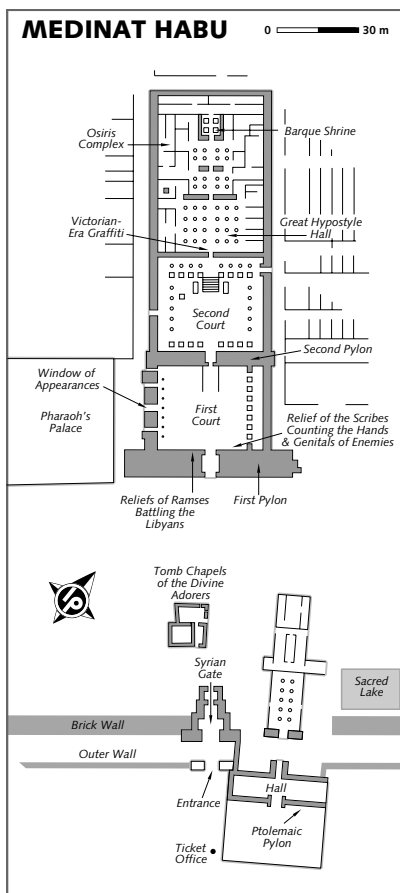
Another of Ramses III's sons, Khaemwaset died young, although Egyptologists have little information about his age or cause of death. His tomb (Map p255) is filled with well-preserved, brightly coloured reliefs. Like that of his brother Amunherkhepshef, Khaemwaset's tomb follows a linear plan, and is decorated with scenes of the pharaoh introducing this deceased son to the various gods and scenes from the Book of the Dead. The vestibule has an astronomical ceiling, showing Ramses III in full ceremonial dress, followed by his son wearing a tunic and the sidelock of hair signifying his youth.

### TOMB OF TITI (NO 52)

Egyptologists are not sure which Ramesside pharaoh Titi was married to, however, in her tomb, she is referred to as the royal wife, royal mother and royal daughter. Some archaeologists believe she was the wife of Ramses III, and her tomb is in many ways similar to Khaemwaset and Amunherkhepshef's, who were perhaps her sons. The **tomb** (Map p255) consists of a corridor leading to a square chapel, off which is the burial chamber and two other small rooms. The paintings are faded but you can still make out a winged Maat kneeling on the left-hand side of the corridor, and the queen before Toth, Ptah and the four sons of Horus opposite. Inside the burial chamber are a series of animal guardians: a jackal and lion, two monkeys and a monkey with a bow.

### MEDINAT HABU

Ramses III's magnificent memorial temple of **Medinat Habu** (Map p274) is perhaps one of



the most underrated sites on the West Bank. With the Theban mountains as a backdrop and the sleepy village of Kom Lolah in front, it is a wonderful place to spend a few hours late afternoon.

The site was one of the first places in Thebes to be closely associated with the local god Amun. Although the complex is most famous for the funerary temple built by Ramses III, Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III also constructed buildings here. They were later added to and altered by a succession of rulers through to the Ptolemies. At Medinat Habu's height there were temples, storage rooms, workshops, administrative buildings and accommodation for priests and officials. It was the centre of the economic life of Thebes for



centuries and was still inhabited as late as the 9th century AD, when a plague was thought to have decimated the town. You can still see the mud-brick remains of the medieval town that gave the site its name (medina means 'town' or 'city') on top of the enclosure walls.

The original **Temple of Amun**, which was built by Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III, was later completely overshadowed by the enormous **Funerary Temple of Ramses III**, the dominant feature of Medinat Habu.

Ramses III was inspired in the construction of his shrine by the Ramesseum of his illustrious forebear, Ramses II. His own temple and the smaller one dedicated to Amun are both enclosed within the massive outer walls of the complex.

Also just inside, to the left of the gate, are the **Tomb Chapels of the Divine Adorers**, which were built for the principal priestesses of Amun. Outside the eastern gate, one of only two entrances, was a landing quay for a canal that once connected Medinat Habu with the Nile.

You enter the site through the unique **Syrian Gate**, a large two-storey building modelled after an Asiatic fortress. If you follow the wall to the left you will find a staircase leading to the upper floors. There is not much to see in the rooms but you'll get some great views out across the village in front of the temple and over the fields to the south.

The well-preserved **first pylon** marks the front of the temple proper. Ramses III is portrayed in its reliefs as the victor in several wars. Most famous are the fine **reliefs** of his victory over the Libyans (who you can recognise by their long robes, sidelocks and beards). There is also a gruesome scene of scribes tallying the number of enemies killed by counting severed hands and genitals.

To the left of the **first court** are the remains of the **Pharaoh's Palace**; the three rooms at the rear were for the royal harem. There is a window between the first court and the Pharaoh's Palace known as the **Window of Appearances**, which allowed the pharaoh to show himself to his subjects.

The reliefs of the **second pylon** feature Ramses III presenting prisoners of war to Amun and his vulture-goddess wife, Mut. Colonnades and reliefs surround the **second court**, depicting various religious ceremonies.

If you have time to wander about the extensive ruins around the funerary temple you

will see the remains of an **early Christian basilica** as well as a small **sacred lake**.

## New Gurna

Hassan Fathy's mud-brick village of **New Gurna** lies just past the railway track on the main road from the ferry to the ticket office. It was built to rehouse the inhabitants of Old Gurna (see boxed text, p271), who lived on and around the Tombs of the Nobles, and whom the authorities have been trying to remove from their hillside since the 1930s. Hardly any Gurnawis moved in, and Fathy himself admitted that his vision was a failure as a social engineering experiment. He blamed the authorities' disdain for the Gurnawis rather than any flaw in his own vision.

The buildings were stunning, with his signature domes and vaults, thick mud-brick walls and natural ventilation, but Hassan Fathy would probably cry if he went back today. The houses are now lived in by people who came from villages outside Luxor, many of the domed mud-brick houses have been replaced with crude concrete boxes which need less maintenance and can easily be extended. However, the beautiful mud-brick mosque and theatre still survive, as well as the architect's own house.

## Getting There & Around

Most tourists cross to the West Bank by bus or taxi via the bridge, about 7km south of town. But the river remains the quickest way to go. The *baladi* (municipal) ferry costs ££1 for foreigners (10pt for locals) and leaves from a dock in front of Luxor Temple. Alternatively, small motor launches (locally called *lunches*) leave from wherever they can find customers and will take you across for ££5 to ££10 for a small group.

On the West Bank, the taxi lot is up the hill from the ferry landing. Voices call out the destinations of pick-up truck taxis (*kabout*). If you listen out for Qurna you'll be on the right road to the ticket office (25pt). Pick-ups run back and forth between the villages, so you can always flag one down and find your way to one of the sites, although you might have to walk from the main road to the entrance. If you want to have an entire pick-up for yourself, it'll cost ££5. The driver will likely stick to his normal route.

To hire a private taxi for the day, expect to pay between ££150 and ££200 per day,

depending on the season, the state of tourism and your bargaining skills.

Past the taxi lot are bicycles for rent for ££15 per day. One of the best selections is at Ahmed's, just up the hill from the taxi park at the first track forking left off the main road.

Donkeys and camels with guides can also be rented; see right.

To give you an idea of the distances involved, from the local ferry landing it is 3km straight ahead to the ticket office, past the Colossi of Memnon; 4km to the Valley of the Queens; and 8km to the Valley of the Kings.

## ACTIVITIES

### Felucca Rides

As elsewhere in Egypt, the nicest place to be late afternoon, is on the Nile. Take a felucca from either bank, and sail for a few hours, catching the soft afternoon light and the sunset, cooling in the afternoon breeze and calming down after sightseeing. Felucca prices range from ££30 to ££50 per boat per hour, depending on your bargaining skills.

A popular felucca trip is upriver to Banana Island, a tiny isle dotted with palms about 5km from Luxor. The trip takes two to three hours. Plan it in such a way that you're on your way back in time to watch a brilliant Nile sunset from the boat. Some travellers have complained that the felucca captain has added money for 'admission' to the island; make sure you are clear about what is included in the price you agree.

### Ballooning

**Hod Hod Suleiman** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 0116; Sharia Televizyon), **Sky Cruise of Egypt** (Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid; ☎ 237 6515) and **Magic Horizons** (Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid; ☎ 012 226 1697; [www.magic-horizon.com](http://www.magic-horizon.com)) offer early morning balloon flights over Luxor's West Bank. When the air is clear, the view over the monuments and the mountains is truly amazing. Changing winds mean that the trips are subject to cancellation at the last minute. The prices are not fixed, varying from US\$70 to US\$120 per person, and it definitely pays to bargain, particularly out of season.

### Bowling

For something entirely different, a bowling alley has just opened in the shopping arcade below the Corniche opposite the Winter Palace. **Metropolitan Bowling** (Map pp244-5; Corniche an-Nil; 20 shots per person ££50; ☎ 9am-noon) has two bowling

lanes and rents out shoes. Food is available, as are drinks, including cool beers (££15).

### Donkey, Horse & Camel Rides

Almost all the smaller hotels organise donkey treks around the West Bank. These trips, which start at around 7am (sometimes 5am) and finish near lunchtime, cost a minimum of about ££35 per person.

If you want to see the Nile from the back of a camel, the boys at the local ferry dock on the West Bank ask ££30 to ££40 for an hour. Some hotels offer camel trips, which include visits to nearby villages for a cup of tea.

Riding a horse through the fields and seeing the sunset behind the Theban hills is a wonderful thing to do. The best horses, and the only stable that provides riding hats, English saddles and insurance is **Nobi's Arabian Horse Stables** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 0024, 010 504 8558; ££25 per hour; ☎ 7am-sunset). Nobi also has 25 camels at the same price. Call ahead to book, and he can arrange a hassle-free transfer to make sure you arrive at the right place, as often taxi drivers will try and take you to a friend's stable instead. Another stable is **Pharaoh's Stables** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 0015; ☎ 7am-sunset) who have horses, camels (both ££25 per hour) and donkeys (££15 per hour).

### Seaplane

**Legend of the Nile** (Sharia al-Marwa; ☎ 238 6646, 010 070 7429; [www.lont-travel.com](http://www.lont-travel.com)) have just started doing tours by seaplane, flying over the temples in Luxor & Upper Egypt (from US\$85 for a 25 min tour over Luxor).

### Swimming

After a hot morning of tombs and temples, a dip in a pool can seem like heaven. Most of the bigger hotels and some of the budget places have swimming pools. The St Joseph, Karnak, Windsor, New Emilio and Arabesque Hotels have small rooftop pools that you can use for ££20. The pool of the Mercure Inn can be used for ££30. Rezeiky Camp's slightly larger pool is ££10. The Sheraton pool sits on a secluded Nile-side spot and charges ££80 for day use.

### TOURS

The ever-increasing travel restrictions for foreigners and the constant bargaining and hassle involved in even a simple transaction can make independent travel challenging, so

you may want to visit sites on a day tour. American Express and Thomas Cook (see p242) offer an array of tours. Prices range from around US\$30 to US\$60 per person for a half-day.

**Al-Nada Travel Service** (NTS; Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 2163; [www.alnadaegypttravel.com](http://www.alnadaegypttravel.com); Petra Travel Agency Bldg, Sharia Ahmed Oraby; ☎ 8am-11pm) Near the Luxor Temple. Deals with lots of young travellers and is where you go to organise ISIC student cards. It's more geared to long-range travel than day trips around Luxor.

**Jolleys Travel & Tours** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2262; [www.jolleys.com](http://www.jolleys.com); ☎ 9am-10pm) This reputable company, located next to the Old Winter Palace, also runs day trips to the main sites.

**Nawas Tourist Company** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 0701; [magednawas@yahoo.com](mailto:magednawas@yahoo.com); ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-9pm) Located behind the tourist office, this company also has a good reputation. As well as organising day trips, it sells ferry tickets from Hurghada to Sharm el-Sheikh and day cruises to Dendara.

**QEA Travel Agency** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 1667; [www.questfortheegyptianadventure.com](http://www.questfortheegyptianadventure.com); Al-Gezira) British-run agency that runs tailor-made tours in and around Luxor, as well as further afield on the Red Sea or in the Western Desert. A percentage of its profits go towards charitable projects in Egypt.

**Sherif Tours** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 010-280 9988; Sharia at-Taieb, off Sharia Televizyon; [www.elsheriftours.com](http://www.elsheriftours.com)) Has a good reputation for organising tours in Luxor, Nile cruises and trips into the desert.

Most of the small budget hotels aggressively promote their own tours. Some of these are better than others and there have been complaints by a number of travellers that they ended up seeing little more than papyrus shops and alabaster factories from a sweaty car with no air-con. If you do decide to take one of these tours, expect to pay about ££50 to ££75 per person.

The Iberotel Luxor Hotel (right) organises day cruises on the *Lotus Boat* to Dendara for ££350 per adult and ££150 per child, including lunch, guide and admission fees. Trips to Abydos are less frequent but go for about ££400 per person. The **Nefertiti Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 010 601 6132; [www.nefertitihotel.com/tours](http://www.nefertitihotel.com/tours); Sharia Sahbi) also organises day cruises to Dendara.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The town's biggest traditional festival is the **Moulid of Abu al-Haggag**. One of Egypt's largest *moulsids* (saints' festivals), it is held in honour of Luxor's patron sheikh, Youssef Abu al-Haggag, a 12th-century Iraqi who settled

in Luxor. The *moulid* takes place around the Mosque of Abu al-Haggag, the town's oldest mosque, which is built on top of the north-eastern corner of Luxor Temple. It's a raucous five-day carnival that takes place in the third week before Ramadan. See the boxed text, p252, for details of other *moulsids*.

In February each year a **marathon** (☎ 02-260 6930, 012 214 8839; [www.egyptianmarathon.com](http://www.egyptianmarathon.com)) is held on the West Bank. It begins at Deir al-Bahri and loops around the main antiquities sites before ending back where it began.

## SLEEPING

Luxor has a wide range of hotels for all budgets. Most of the package-tour hotels are on the East Bank, and so are the shops, restaurants and the hectic town life. The West Bank is coming on fast, and is no longer as rural as it once was, but it is still a tranquil place, where the pace is much slower and where the evenings are more often than not blissfully quiet.

## Budget

Luxor has a good selection of budget places. Many boast both roof gardens and washing machines. The budget hotels on the West Bank are particularly good value, much quieter and often offering a more authentic meeting with locals.

Avoid the hotel touts who pounce on you as you get off the train or bus – they get a 25% to 40% commission for bringing you in, which is added to your bill.

## EAST BANK

**Oasis Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 496 1848 , 010 380 5882; [www.luxoroasis.com](http://www.luxoroasis.com); Sharia Mohammed Farid; dm ££12; s/d without bathroom ££15/25, d/tr/q ££35/50/65; ☎ ) Delightful budget hotel all painted in shades of bright blue, with clean rooms, most with air-con and very clean private bathroom, and all with fans. Internet and afternoon tea is included in the price. The blue rooftop terrace is a lovely spot to hang out or to have breakfast. The owner Hassan often picks up clients from the train station, and the staff is incredibly helpful and friendly. There are many reports that touts working for the much lesser-quality Nubian Oasis Hotel in the same street, claim that the Oasis is now the Nubian Oasis, but beware: this isn't true. They are two different hotels.

**Fontana Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0663; off Sharia Televizyon; s/d without bathroom ££20/30, s/d ££30/45; ☎ )

An old stalwart of the budget hotel scene, this 25-room hotel has clean rooms, a washing machine for guest use, a rooftop terrace and a kitchen. All bathrooms are large and really clean, and toilet paper and towels are provided. The owner Magdi Soliman is always ready to help, and readers have written in to tell us how friendly and helpful his staff was.

**Anglo Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 1679; fax 238 1679; Midan al-Mahatta; s/d/tr ££40/50/75; ☺) Right next to the train station, so a bit noisy at times, but the spacious rooms are excellent value, very clean and well maintained, with air-con, satellite TV, private bathroom and telephone. The bar in the basement is popular with locals.

**Venus Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2625, 012 171 3599; Sharia Yousef Hassan; s/d with fan ££25/4, with air-con ££35/50; ☺) The 25 rooms at the Venus are quite noisy and shabby, but there is a fun atmosphere in the hotel, that is still popular with budget tours. All rooms have clean private bathrooms, and most have air-con. There is a great rooftop terrace and a lively bar (Stella beer ££10).

**St Mina Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 5409; fax 237 6568; off Sharia Ramses; s/d without bathroom ££30/35, s/d ££35/50; ☺) A friendly, family-run hotel, the St Mina doesn't have the aura of hustle that plagues so many of Luxor's budget hotels. Its 20 rooms are clean, with air-con or fans. Prices drop considerably in summer.

**Horus Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2165; fax 238 0965; Sharia al-Karnak; s/d/tr ££40/60/80; ☺) A recently refurbished old-timer, the Horus has clean and spacious rooms, simple but comfortable, with clean private bathrooms. All rooms have views over Luxor Temple as the hotel is situated right behind there. Good central location.

**Happy Land Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 1828; www.luxorhappyland.com; Sharia Qamr; s/d without bathroom ££30/45, s/d/tr with bathroom, fridge & air-con ££55/70/90; ☺) The Happy Land, another backpackers' favourite, offers clean rooms and spotless bathrooms, as well as very friendly service, a copious breakfast with fruit and corn flakes and a rooftop terrace. Competition among Luxor's budget hotels is fierce, and the Happy Land comes out on top almost every time, it doesn't need to send touts to the station! Bikes can be rented for ££12 per day and laundry facilities are free. Mr Ibrahim tries his utmost to make everyone appreciate his town. It sells ISIC cards.

**Nefertiti Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2386; www.nefertitihotel.com; Sharia as-Sahbi, btwn Sharia al-Karnak & Sharia as-Souq; s/d/tr US\$9/13/16; ☺) The energetic Aladin as-Sahbi runs the hotel, which has been in his family for a few generations, and the attached Aladin Tours travel agency, to perfection, offering midrange facilities at budget prices. No wonder this hotel is popular with our readers: the rooms are simple but cosy, the small private bathrooms are spotless, the breakfast is good and the staff is super friendly. You can sunbathe on the rooftop and take a shower, or have a drink with views of the West Bank and Luxor Temple. The top-floor lounge has satellite TV, a pool table and a small gym.

**Merryland Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 1746; s/d ££50/80; ☺) Large but quiet three-star hotel near the Luxor Museum, off Sharia Labib Habashi, which offers good-value rooms – albeit quite dark and small – all with satellite TV, private bathrooms and small balconies. The roof terrace has a bar, breakfast area and great views over to the West Bank.

**Mina Palace Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2074; Corniche an-Nil; s/d ££80/100; ☺) Right on the Corniche in front of the Mummification Museum the Mina Palace offers five-star views at bargain-basement prices. The two corner rooms have unparalleled views of both the West Bank and the avenue of sphinxes at Luxor Temple. All rooms could use a coat of paint but have lots of atmosphere, satellite TV, comfortable beds and very clean bathrooms. There is a roof terrace where you can kick back and enjoy a cold beer while watching the sun setting over the Nile.

**Rezeiky Camp** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 1334; www.rezeikycamp.com; Sharia al-Karnak; camp site per person ££20, vehicle ££15, s/d with fan ££11/14, s/d with air-con ££12/16; ☺) Rezeiky Camp is the only place to pitch a tent in town, but it is pleasant enough with a pool on your doorstep. There is a large garden with a restaurant and bar, and internet access. The motel-style rooms are not nice enough to make up for the inconvenient location, but the place is popular with overland groups, so call ahead to make sure there is space.

## WEST BANK

**Habu Hotel** (Map p255; ☎ 237 2477; Kom Lolah; s/d ££25/40) If you like character in a hotel, the Habu is for you. It's a mud-brick warren of small, vaulted rooms and has stunning views

over the entrance to Medinat Habu temple complex and the mountains beyond. Go for one of the three domed 1st-floor terrace rooms, which are practically in the forecourt of Medinat Habu and have a large terrace with palm-reed furniture. The downstairs restaurant has dusty ceiling fans and great old tourist posters. The downside? The less welcome saggy beds, mosquitos, somnolent staff and waterlogged bathrooms.

**Al-Gezira Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 0034; [www.el-gezira.com](http://www.el-gezira.com); Gezira al-Bayrat; s/d ££70/100; 🍷) Different in style, as it is in a modern building overlooking the lush and fertile agricultural land in the village of Gezira al-Bayrat, this hotel is very much a home away from home. It is actually home to quite a few archaeologists during the winter season, and the charming owners really make everyone feel welcome, so much so that the hotel is often full. The 11 cosy and homey rooms are pristine, all with private bathrooms, overlooking the lake or a branch of the Nile. Management and staff are friendly and efficient, and the upstairs rooftop restaurant, where breakfast is served, has great Nile views as well as cold beer (££10) and good traditional Egyptian food.

**Senmut Bed & Breakfast** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 3077/012 736 9159; [www.senmut-luxor.com](http://www.senmut-luxor.com); Ar-Ramlah, south of the ferry-landing; s/d without bathroom ££60/90, s/d ££70/110) In the home of a Dutch-Egyptian couple are nine comfortable double rooms, six with a clean private bathroom, all with fan and some with air-con, and a communal kitchen where guests can cook or order dinner in advance, a shaded garden and a roof terrace with great views on the Nile and Luxor Temple. The owners are very happy to have a cup of tea and help you organise your stay on the West Bank. The whole 1st floor can be rented as a large apartment for a family, with five double bedrooms.

**Marsam Hotel** (Map p255; ☎ 237 2403, 231 1603; [www.luxor-westbank.com/marsam\\_e\\_az.htm](http://www.luxor-westbank.com/marsam_e_az.htm); Gurna; s/d without bathroom ££40/80, s/d ££60/120) Built for American archaeologists in the 1920s, the Marsam, formerly the Sheikh Ali Hotel, is the oldest on the West Bank. The hotel is charming with 30 simple rooms set around a lovely courtyard, with ceiling fans and traditional palm-reed beds. A delicious breakfast with home-baked bread is served in the garden. Atmospheric and quiet, and close to almost all the West Bank sights, it is still popular with archaeologists, so you need to book ahead, particularly

during the dig season, roughly from October to March. The hotel has a good restaurant too (see p284).

## Midrange

Luxor has an ever-growing selection of mid-range hotels on both banks. If you are looking for a hotel with character, then check out the small mud-brick, traditional-style hotels around Medinat Habu on the West Bank. Many new hotels on the West Bank cater to families and often offer flats with two double rooms and a kitchen and living area. The hotels in Luxor are often slick and modern places, popular with budget and adventure tour groups. There are also some excellent bargains in this category, with good facilities at rock-bottom rates.

## EAST BANK

**Little Garden Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 227 4936; [www.littlegardenhotel.com](http://www.littlegardenhotel.com); Sharia Radwan; s/d US\$18/24; 🍷) Don't let the location put you off, there is a free transfer from the airport and the train station! This small hotel is very well managed, with friendly but very efficient staff, 24-hour room service, good cotton mattresses, air-con, satellite TV and sparkingly clean private bathrooms. There is also a small garden courtyard and a rooftop restaurant serving Asian foods and *sheesha* (water pipe) but no alcohol. Students can get a 10% discount.

**New Pola Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 236 5081; [www.polahotel.com](http://www.polahotel.com); Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid; s/d/tr US\$18/25/45; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Great views and a small rooftop pool make the recently opened New Pola an excellent bargain. The décor is kitsch but the 81 air-con rooms are spotless and come with minibars, satellite TV and private bathrooms. Half also have Nile views. Very good value for money.

**Philippe Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0050; Sharia Labib Habashi; s/d US\$18/25; 🍷 🍷) Near the Corniche, the Philippe is immensely popular with budget tours, offering comfortable and clean rooms with satellite TV, private bathrooms and air-con. The style is rather impersonal, but it is good value, there is also a roof terrace which has a small pool. Front rooms are the best: most have small balconies and get plenty of light.

**St Joseph Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 1707; [sjhiey2002@hotmail.com](mailto:sjhiey2002@hotmail.com); Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; s/d US\$25/30; 🍷 🍷) This popular and well-run three-star hotel has been a favourite with small



groups for years thanks to its comfortable rooms with satellite TV, air-con and private bathrooms. There is also a (heated) rooftop pool and basement bar. Ask for a Nile view.

**Luxor (Wena) Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0018; Sharia al-Karnak; s/d/tr US\$25/30/45; ☞ ☞ ☞) This very faded grand old hotel, recently used as the set for a BBC film about Howard Carter, boasts a great location near Luxor Temple, in a 2-hectare garden. The Arabesque-Moorish lobby is wonderful, but the rooms are quite shabby and the staff is beyond sleepy.

**Flobater Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 4223; fax 370 618; off Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; s/d US\$25/35; ☞ ☞) Next to the St Joseph, this modern family-run hotel has 40 comfortable rooms with fridges, satellite TV, air-con and private bathrooms. There is also a pleasant roof terrace with a pool. Try to get a room with a balcony.

**Tutotel Partner Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 7990; tutotel@partner-hotels.com; Sharia Salah ad-Din; s/d US\$34/42; ☞ ☞ ☞) A three-star hotel with four-star facilities conveniently located between the Corniche and Sharia Televizyon. The 79 rooms, most with Nile views, have comfy beds, satellite TV, air-con and minibars. There is also a rooftop pool with a Jacuzzi, three restaurants and one of Luxor's few discos.

**New Emilio Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 3570; emilio\_hotel@hotmail.com; Sharia Yousef Hassan; s/d US\$25/47; ☞ ☞ ☞) A good midrange hotel, the New Emilio has 101 spacious rooms, all fully equipped with minifridge, satellite TV, private bathroom, air-con and 24-hour room service. Other extras include an AstroTurfed roof terrace with plenty of shade and a large pool, a sauna and a business centre.

**Morris Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 235 9832; www.hotelmorrisluxor.com; Sharia al-Hurriya, off Sharia ibn al-Walid; s/d/tr US\$50/80/105; ☞ ☞ ☞) New four-star hotel that came recommended by some of our readers for its spacious rooms with classical décor with fridge, satellite TV and safe. The views over the Nile and the West Bank from the West Bank terrace, where breakfast is served upon request, are delightful. The hotel has several international restaurants, a swimming pool and a piano bar, and a discotheque is planned. Lunch buffet costs US\$12, dinner buffet is US\$18.

**Mercurie Inn** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0721; www.accor-hotels.com; off Sharia al-Karnak; s/d/tr US\$65/85/95; ☞ ☞ ☞) The Mercurie Inn has very comfortable rooms with a fridge and satellite TV, and offers four-star amenities, which include

room service, baby-sitting, three restaurants, a bar and a decent-sized swimming pool in large grounds, for less than most of the other top-end hotels.

**Sheraton Luxor Resort** (☎ 237 4544; www.starwoodhotels.com/sheraton; Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; s/d from US\$70/90; ☞ ☞ ☞) The long-standing Sheraton is a secluded three-storey building set amid lush gardens at the far southern end of Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid – close enough to walk to some restaurants but far enough away to avoid any street noise. Rooms are well appointed and those overlooking the Nile have great views. The rooms in the main building are far nicer than the garden bungalows, which should be avoided. The hotel has a shopping arcade and Italian restaurant (see p283). Prices do not include breakfast and rates are considerably lower if booked through the internet.

## WEST BANK

**Al-Fayrouz Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 2709, 012 277 0565; www.elfayrouz.com; Al-Gezira; s EE80-120, d EE120-150, tr EE140-170, q EE160; ☞ ☞ ☞) This tranquil hotel with 17 brightly painted rooms, overlooking fields of sugarcane and clover, is a great base for exploring the monuments of the West Bank. Under Egyptian-German management, the simple, nicely decorated rooms are spotless and have private bathrooms; some also come with air-conditioning and a balcony with a view. The more expensive rooms are larger with a sitting area, and have more atmosphere. Meals can be had on the comfortable roof terrace or in the popular garden restaurant.

**Amenophis Hotel** (Map p255; ☎/fax 231 1228; www.luxor-westbank.com/ameophis\_e.htm; Kom Lolah; s/d EE75/130, s&d half board EE100-170, flat EE250; ☞ ☞) This quiet hotel, in a large building near the Medinat Habu temple complex, is a good midrange choice, with spotless, comfortable rooms, all with air-con, satellite TV and private bathrooms, as well as flats with two double rooms, a kitchen and living area. The rooftop restaurant has stunning views over the temple, the mountains beyond and the fields.

**Nour al-Gurna** (Map p255; ☎ 231 1430, 010 129 5812; Gurna; s EE100, d EE150-200, ste EE250) A unique little hotel in a mud-brick house nestled in a palm grove opposite the Antiquities Inspectorate ticket office, Nour al-Gurna has large rooms, each slightly different, with fans, small stereos, locally made furniture and tiled bathrooms.



All beds have mosquito nets, which are both practical and decorative. The only complaint is that the traditional cotton mattresses are quite hard. Romantic and original, with friendly management and a convenient location, this is a lovely centrally located hotel for visiting West Bank sites.

**Amon Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 0912; fax 231 1353; Al-Gezira; s/d/tr ££120/160/230; ☼) Utterly charming, family-run hotel in a modern building with spotless rooms, a lush exotic garden where it's pleasant to have breakfast or have a drink, extremely helpful staff and delicious home-cooked meals. In the new wing the rooms are large with private bathrooms, ceiling fans, air-con and balconies overlooking the courtyard. In the old wing, some of the small rooms have private bathrooms, and all are air-conditioned. On the top floor are three triple rooms with an adjoining terrace and stunning views over the Theban Hills and the East Bank. This hotel is also popular with archaeologists so book ahead if you can.

**Nile Valley Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 1477, 012 796 4473; [www.nilevalley.nl](http://www.nilevalley.nl); Al-Gezira; s/d without bath-room ££15/24, s/d ££18/27; ☼) Pleasant Dutch-Egyptian-run hotel in a modern block right near the ferry landing. The immaculate and comfortable rooms almost all have ultra clean private bathrooms and air-con – the rooms that don't share one bathroom between two rooms intended for one family. Some rooms have Nile views but those overlooking the rear garden are quieter and slightly bigger. Upstairs is a good rooftop bar-restaurant with fantastic views of the Nile and Luxor Temple, and there is a pool and children's pool in the garden. This hotel is particularly family friendly, and has families staying here for a week or more. They organise good-value donkey tours (££35 per person from 7.30am to 2pm) and other trips upon request, and have bike rental (££12 a day).

**Nour al-Balad** (Map p255; ☎ 242 6111; Ezbet Bisily; s/d/ste ££150/200/250; ☼) Equally beautiful but even quieter sister hotel to Nour al-Gurna, Nour al-Balad takes the same traditional-with-a-twist style to the edge of the desert. Upper rooms in the large mud-brick house range from two large suites with a stunning view over the desert and the fields, to simple singles with woven mats, brass beds and arabesque tiles in bathrooms. Downstairs rooms are small and dark but cosy in winter. All have ceiling fans and are highly recommended. To

get there, follow the track behind Medinat Habu for 500m.

**Al-Nakhil Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 3922, 012 382 1007; [www.el-nakhil.com](http://www.el-nakhil.com); Al-Gezira; s/d US\$25/35; ☼) A more recent arrival on the hotel scene, the Nakhil or 'Palm Tree' is nestled in a palm grove at the edge of Al-Gezira. The resort-style hotel has spotless, well-finished domed rooms, all with private bathrooms and air-con, or flats (US\$55) with two double bedrooms, a kitchen, living room and a terrace. Like so many of these new hotels on the West Bank, it is very family-friendly, with cots available for babies. It also has a room that can cater for disabled guests. With views over the fields and a small restaurant, this hotel is an excellent addition to the hotel scene, and it offers really good value.

**Al-Gezira Gardens** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 2505; [www.el-gezira.com](http://www.el-gezira.com); Al-Gezira; s/d US\$25/35, s/d half board US\$30/45 2-bed apt incl breakfast \$55; ☼) A large resort-style complex with 14 double rooms and eight flats with two double rooms, a kitchen and a living room, popular with Germans. All rooms have a balcony – some overlook the garden, and others have great views over the Nile and the surrounding fields. The décor is not entirely tasteful but the beds are comfortable and everything is spotless. The hotel boasts a bar, restaurant and a great rooftop terrace, a good-size swimming pool in the garden, and a little super market. A free hourly shuttle boat takes residents back and forth to Luxor and the East Bank.

**our pick Beit Sabée** (Map p255; ☎ 010 632 4926; [info@nourelnil.com](mailto:info@nourelnil.com); Kom Lolah; d ££250-400; ☼) This latest addition to Luxor's mushrooming West Bank hotel scene was having the finishing touches put to it at the time of writing, but it already looked very attractive. Set in a traditional-style two-storey mud-brick house, across the fields from Medinet Habu temple, the eight bedrooms, all painted in different warm colours with private bathroom, are effortlessly stylish, decorated with local furniture and textiles. This small hotel, very much like a real Egyptian home, is definitely set to become one of the nicest hotels in the area, a good place to spend awhile.

## Top End EAST BANK

Luxor has many four- and five-star hotels, all with one notable exception, run by international hotel chains.

**Iberotel Luxor Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0925; [www.iberotel-eg.com/luxor](http://www.iberotel-eg.com/luxor); Corniche an-Nil; s/d with Nile view US\$90/110, with city view US\$80/105; ☒ ☑ ☐) Formerly the Novotel (and still called that locally), this squat high-rise at the southern tip of the Corniche has an indoor atrium, great Nile views and a floating swimming pool. Rooms are comfortable, if smallish, and the building interior has the look of a cheap package-holiday hotel, but its location on the Nile just a short distance from Luxor Temple, is unbeatable.

**Sofitel Karnak** (Map p241; ☎ 237 8020; [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com); Sharia az-Zinia Gebly; r US\$110-250; ☒ ☑ ☐) Quiet and secluded, the enormous Sofitel Karnak, with 351 rooms, is nestled in lush gardens beside the Nile 3km north of the Temples of Karnak. Its Nubian-influenced architecture works well with the palms and bougainvilleas, and it is a tranquil haven after the din of the town. As well as comfortable bungalow-style rooms there is a very pleasant (heated) Nileside pool, tennis and squash courts and a fitness centre, sauna, and Jacuzzi. It is also near an 18-hole golf course. Buses are on hand to shuttle guests into the centre of town.

**Our pick Old Winter Palace Hotel and New Winter**

**Palace Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0422; [h1661@accor-hotels.com](mailto:h1661@accor-hotels.com); Corniche an-Nil; old wing r €200-350, ste €445-890; new wing s/d €75-106; pavillion r €108-120, ste €325; ☒ ☑ ☐) These hotels stand side by side on the Corniche. Ignore the modernist new section (rumour has it that the governor wants the building removed as it is an eyesore so close to Luxor Temple) and head to the old. The Old Winter Palace was built to attract the aristocracy of Europe and is one of Egypt's most famous historic hotels. A wonderfully atmospheric Victorian pile, it has high ceilings, lots of gorgeous textiles, fabulous views over the Nile, an enormous garden with exotic trees and shrubs, a huge great swimming pool, table-tennis tables and a tennis court. The rooms vary in size and decor, but are very comfortable. After many years of incredibly sleepy service and mediocre food, we are pleased to see that the service and food are finally back up to standard with the beautiful surroundings. A buffet breakfast costs ££95 in the old wing, ££81 in the pavillion. The Winter Palace is a great place to spend a week in Luxor. At the back of the New Wing is a low-rise, more classical building of the Pavillion Wing, which shares the garden and the pool, as does the New Wing.

**Mövenpick Jolie Ville** (☎ 237 4855; [www.moevenpick-hotels.com](http://www.moevenpick-hotels.com); Crocodile Island; s US\$110-130, d US\$160-170, ste US\$300-400; ☒ ☑ ☐) Set amid lush gardens on Crocodile Island, 4km south of town, this is a great family hotel with a minizoo and playground in addition to the swimming pool, tennis courts and feluccas. There are 320 comfortable, if architecturally unremarkable, bungalow-style rooms, and a hotel motorboat shuttles guests to and from the centre of town. At the end of 2008 the name of the hotel will change to Meretem Jolie Ville, but at the time of writing there was not yet a new website.

**Sonesta St George Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 2575; [www.sonesta.com/egypt\\_luxor](http://www.sonesta.com/egypt_luxor); Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; s/d with Nile view US\$120/180, with city view US\$108/195; ☒ ☑ ☐) This 224-room marble-filled hotel has a kitsch value that should not be overlooked, with lots of marble, faux Pharaonic columns and a flamelike fence around the roof, but it is a good lively place to stay. The hotel is well managed, has friendly staff, recently refurbished and comfortable rooms with great views, a heated swimming pool, a business centre and a good selection of restaurants.

**WEST BANK**

**Al-Moudira** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 012 325 1307; [moudira.hotel@yahoo.com](mailto:moudira.hotel@yahoo.com); Daba'iyya; r €170, ste €220-290; ☒ ☑ ☐) Al-Moudira is a true luxury hotel, with an individuality that is missing from so many other hotels in Luxor. A Moorish fantasy of soaring vaults, pointed arches and enormous domes, surrounded by lush green and birdsong, the hotel has 54 rooms grouped together around small courtyards. Each room is different in shape, size (all are very large though) and colour, each with its own hand-painted trompe l'oeil theme and with antiques found throughout Egypt. Cushioned benches and comfortable antique chairs invite pashalike lounging and the enormous vaulted bathrooms have the feel of a private *hammam* (bathhouse). The public spaces are even more spectacular with traditional *mashrabiyya* (wooden lattice) work combined with work by contemporary 'orientalists'. Set on the edge of the cultivated land and the desert, the hotel is truly spectacular, the only let downs are the sometimes surly staff, and it's a long way from anywhere.

**Flat Rental**

Families or those planning a prolonged stay in Luxor might consider a self-catering option. Flat rental is mushrooming on the West

Bank, particularly as so many foreigners are getting involved in the business. The street along the Nile south of the ferry landing on the West Bank, is locally called 'European Street', because so many Europeans have built houses and flats here. The downside of the self-catering is apparently sex tourism, as there is no control as to who you take to your room. Several companies can arrange flat rental, including **Flats in Luxor** (Map p255; ☎ 010 356 4540; [www.flatsinluxor.com](http://www.flatsinluxor.com); per week from £150; ☹ ☹ ☹) run by a British-Egyptian couple who started renting out their own flats but now also manage others. The website [www.luxor-westbank.com](http://www.luxor-westbank.com) also has a wide selection of flats available, as does [www.egyptwithmara.com/flats\\_in\\_luxor.htm](http://www.egyptwithmara.com/flats_in_luxor.htm).

## EATING

Most people come to Luxor for monuments and not for its fine cuisine – a good thing as most restos are pretty mediocre. However there is good news as a few newcomers are upping the standards by doing what Egyptians do best: cook honest traditional Egyptian food. Outside the hotels few serve alcohol or accept credit-card payment; exceptions are noted in the reviews. Unless otherwise noted, restaurants tend to open from about 10am until midnight.

## Restaurants

### EAST BANK

**Mish Mish** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 1756; Sharia Televizyon; meals £7-18) A long-standing budget-traveller haunt, Mish Mish is showing its age these days but still popular. Its prices have jumped too. It's a basic café-restaurant with reasonably priced pizza (££10 to ££18), salads (££3 to ££5) and piping hot *tagens* (££15). There is also fresh fruit juice for ££8.

**Kings Head Pub** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 1249; Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; dishes ££10-30; ☹ 10am-2am; ☹) The king here is Akhenaten in a Tudor hat, and the temperature inside is closer to the cool of an English summer day. This increasingly popular pub provides everything a homesick Brit could possibly need: a teakwood counter, darts, pool table, Sky sports, curries (about ££20), chips, and on Sunday you can even get roast beef and Yorkshire pud (££30). Beer is reasonably priced (££12 for a Stella) and there's an array of cocktails and spirits.

**our pick** **Sofra** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 235 9752; [www.sofra.co.eg](http://www.sofra.co.eg); 90 Sharia Mohamed Farid, off Sharia al-Manshiya; mains

££12-35; ☹ 11am-midnight) Sofra is the restaurant Luxor has been waiting for. Located in an old 1930s house, away from all the tourist tat, it is as Egyptian as can be, both in menu and décor – and even in price. The ground floor has three private dining rooms, as if you were in someone's home and a salon, and there is a wonderful terrace on the rooftop, which is also a café, where you can come for a drink. The house is filled with antique oriental furniture, chandeliers and traditional decorations, all simple but cosy and very tasteful. The menu is large, featuring all the traditional Egyptian dishes, such as stuffed pigeon and excellent duck, as well as a large selection of salads, dips (££4) and mezze. Alcohol is not available, but there are delicious fresh juices on offer, and *sheesha* afterwards. A real treat, with very friendly staff, which was also recommended by many readers.

**Oasis Café** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 012 336 7121; Sharia Dr Labib Habash; mains ££15-60; ☹ 10am-10pm; ☹) Set in a renovated 1930s building right in the centre of town, the Oasis is a good place to recover from the bustle of Luxor town, from the heat or from sightseeing. The dining rooms are cool with fans, high ceilings and old tiled floors, painted in soft colours with local artwork on the walls, and furnished with traditional-style furniture. With jazz softly playing, smoking and nonsmoking rooms, the *New Yorker* to read and friendly staff, this is the perfect place for lunch, to linger over a good morning latte or to spend the afternoon reading. The place is very Western, but in a nice way, like your favourite café back home, not like some of the brash tourist restaurants elsewhere in town. The food is good too, with an extensive brunch menu and a regular menu of international dishes, including pastas (££15 to ££25), grilled meats (££40 to ££60), filling sandwiches (££12 to ££18) and a wide selection of pastries.

**La Mama** (off Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 4544; Sheraton Luxor Resort, Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; dishes ££18-60; ☹ 10.30am-11pm) The Italian restaurant on the terrace overlooking a little pond with wading birds, at the entrance to the Sheraton, is a good bet, particularly if you've got kids in tow. This is an Italian restaurant in 1970s style with red-and-white napkins, live Neapolitan music and a good selection of pizzas, pastas and mains, all served in clean five-star surroundings.

**Dawar al-Umda Restaurant** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 3321; Sharia al-Karnak; mains ££20-40; ☹ 7-11pm) Set in the garden of the Mercure Inn, this pleasant, cheap and cheerful outdoor restaurant serves

Egyptian specialities, with a good selection of meze (££2 to ££6), in addition to the usual kebab and *kofta* (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer). The Egyptian experience is completed by an Oriental buffet, that comes with a belly dancer, on Thursday evenings (6.30pm to 10.30pm; ££65), call for reservations.

**Kebabgy** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 6521; Nile Shopping Centre, Corniche an-Nil, opposite Old Winter Palace Hotel; dishes ££20-45; ☎ 9am-1am; ☎) Good solid Egyptian fare including kebab, *kofta* and *tagens* and the usual selection of salads and dips, served on a delightful terrace right on the Nile, with simple wooden tables and a mist machine to cool down on a hot day.

**Snobs** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 236 0356; off Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid, just past the Sonesta Hotel; dishes ££20-50; ☎ 10am-12am; ☎) Popular and well-managed Western-style restaurant that has gained an excellent reputation for its great salads, pastas, pizzas and steaks, cooked by a young and talented chef. There is no alcohol but you are welcome to bring your own discreetly.

**Bombay Restaurant** (off Map pp244-5; ☎ 010 665 9505; Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; dishes ££24-45; ☎ noon-11.30pm; ☎) Good Indian restaurant, always filled with Brits, outside the Sheraton Hotel. At ££80, the lunchtime set menu for two is good value, offering a good choice of basic curry dishes, along with side dishes such as dhal and samosas. Good selection for vegetarians.

**Jamboree Restaurant** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 235 5827, 012 781 3149; Sharia al-Montazah; dishes ££35-80; ☎ 10.30am-11pm; ☎) A small British-run restaurant, Jamboree serves international fare in its rather undistinct dining room or much better, upstairs on a pleasant roof terrace. Lunchtime dishes are limited to good homemade sandwiches and snacks. The menu includes filled jacket potatoes, pastas and the traditional, perhaps not so authentic, Egyptian dishes.

**1886 Restaurant** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0422; Old Winter Palace Hotel, Corniche an-Nil; starters ££35-122, mains ££60-190; ☎ dinner only; ☎) The 1886 is once again the gourmet restaurant in town serving inventive Mediterranean-French food, and a few Egyptian dishes with a twist, in a grand old-style dining room with very formal waiters. Guests are expected to dress up for the occasion – men wear a tie and/or jacket – and are eyed up by the waiters just a tad too much, but the food is superb and light. Delicacies include risotto of crayfish, truffle and chanterelles, sea scallops in artichoke broth and potato and celery ravioli. A grand evening out!

**Miyako Restaurant** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 2575; Sonesta St George Hotel, Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; teppanyaki menu ££125-180, sushi ££25-40, sashimi ££40-100; ☎) Luxor's only Japanese restaurant serves rather mediocre Japanese food, but it is still a welcome change from kebabs and stews. You can either sit in the cool and peaceful *tatami* (straw matting) room or watch the chef's stunts, including the throwing of knives, while preparing the *teppanyaki* at your table.

## WEST BANK

**Restaurant Mohammed** (Map p255; ☎ 231 1014; Gurna; dishes ££12-30) With an outdoor terrace and laid-back atmosphere, Mohammed's is the perfect place to recharge batteries in the middle of a day exploring temples and tombs, or to linger in the evening. This is a family affair, the restaurant is attached to the owner's mud-brick house; the charming Mohammed Abdel Lahi serves with his son, while his wife and mother cook together. The menu is small but includes meat grills, delicious chicken and duck as well as stuffed pigeon, served with fries and excellent simple salads. Stella beer is available (££10).

**Al-Gezira Hotel** (Map p255; ☎ 231 0034; Al-Gezira; dishes ££15-45) This comfortable rooftop restaurant serves Egyptian specialities such as the infamous *molokhiyya* (stewed leaf soup) and *mahshi kurumb* (stuffed cabbage leaves), but food needs to be ordered in advance. The menu of the day costs ££25. There are great views over the Nile and the bright lights of Luxor beyond. Beer and wine are available.

**Nour el-Gurna** (Map p255; ☎ 231 1430; Gurna; meals ££15-50) Stuffed pigeon, duck and other hearty local dishes are served under a palm-reed shade on long benches in the garden or in a cool room, depending on the season. Near the Antiquities Inspectorate ticket office, this is a friendly and pleasant place to eat. Alcohol is not available, but there excellent fresh juices.

**Memnon** (Map p255; ☎ 012 327 8747; opposite Colossi of Memnon; dishes ££19-30; ☎ 6.30-10.30pm, later in summer) Excellent, laid-back restaurant with simple but very well prepared Egyptian fare, and if you want a change from that, there are some equally good Indian & Chinese dishes on the menu. Afterwards hang out and stare eternity in the face looking at the Colossi, while smoking a *sheesha*. Leave some space for the homemade mango sorbet, it's worth it.

**Africa Restaurant** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 012 365 8722; Al-Gezira; meals ££25) On the right just up the hill from the ferry landing, the popular Africa

Restaurant, with a large outdoor terrace, serves simple but good Egyptian food – grilled meat, poultry or fish, accompanied by rice, vegetables and salad. A Stella can usually be conjured up for ££10.

**Nile Valley Hotel** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 1477; Al-Gezira; meals ££25-45) A popular rooftop restaurant with a bird's-eye view of the action along the West Bank's waterfront, the Nile Valley has a wide-ranging menu of Egyptian and international specialties, but is also a good place to relax with a cold drink and a *sheesha*. On Sunday nights a buffet (££55) is accompanied by Sufi dancing and local music.

**Tutankhamun Restaurant** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 231 0918, 010 566 8614; Al-Gezira; mains ££30-40) This top-floor restaurant was the first one here on the riverside just south of the local ferry dock and it's still going strong. Amm Mahmoud (Uncle Mahmoud), a former cook at one of the French archaeological missions in Luxor, is still cooking his excellent *tagens*, *duck à l'orange*, chicken with rosemary and other good dishes. The food is served on the great rooftop terrace with wonderful views of the Nile.

**Al-Moudira** (Map p255; ☎ 012 325 1307; Daba'iyya; dishes ££35-180) In keeping with its décor, Al-Moudira has the most sophisticated food, and the most expensive, on the West Bank, with great salads and grills at lunchtime and a more elaborate menu for dinner with Mediterranean-Lebanese cuisine. Call ahead for reservations.

## Quick Eats

### EAST BANK

**Abu Ashraf** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 5936 209; Sharia al-Mahatta; dishes ££2-9) This large, popular restaurant and takeaway is just down from the train station. It serves roasted chicken (££12), pizzas (££12 to ££20), good *kushari* (££4 to ££10) and kebabs (££15).

**Sayyida Zeinab** (Map pp244-5; Sharia Televizyon; dishes ££2.50-5.50) This tiny but spotless place is one of Luxor's best *kushari* joints. Takeaway only.

**Koshari Elzaeem** (Map pp244-5; Midan Hussein; dishes ££4-11; ☎ 24hr) Popular *kushari* restaurant that also serves an Egyptian version of spaghetti (££8 to ££15). There are a few tables but they fill up fast.

**Salt & Bread Cafeteria** (Map pp244-5; Midan al-Mahatta; dishes ££6-20) Quick, cheap meals, including kebab, chicken and omelettes are served here, on a terrace and restaurant opposite the train station.

## Self-Catering

Luxor has a number of good bakeries. Try the ones on Sharia Ahmed Orabi, at the beginning of Sharia al-Karnak and on Sharia Gedda (all Map pp244-5). On the West Bank try the food and fruit shops on the main street in Al-Gezira, or head for the wonderful weekly market Souq at Talaat on Tuesday mornings opposite the Temple of Seti I.

**Fruit & Vegetable Souq** (Map pp244-5; Sharia as-Souq) This is the best place for fruit and veg, although the good stuff sells out early in the morning. On either side of the main street are little shops selling produce and groceries throughout the day.

**Bakri Supermarket** (Map pp244-5; cnr Sharias Medina & Televizyon) A bustling, well-stocked, Western-style store with a good selection of imported products as well as yogurts and cheeses kept in clean, functioning fridges.

**Omar** (Map pp244-5; Sharia Medina al-Manawwara) A large Western-style minimarket, which has a range of imported goodies.

**Al-Ahram Beverages** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2445; Sharia Ramses) Al-Ahram Beverages is the Luxor outlet for Egypt's monopoly beer and wine producer.

## DRINKING

### East Bank

**Metropolitan Café & Restaurant** (Map pp244-5; lower level, Corniche an-Nil) A pleasant, popular outdoor café, right on the Nile, in front of the Winter Palace Hotel. Beers (Stella ££10) and a wide selection of cocktails are available, served on a terrace with rattan furniture with jungle-print fabric and mist machines. Salads (££13 to ££17) are available as well as snacks and sandwiches (££10 to ££35), ice cream and *sheesha*. The perfect place to enjoy a sundowner.

**New Oum Kouloum Coffee Shop** (Map pp244-5; Sharia as-Souq; ☎ 24hr) New and very pleasant *ahwa* (coffeehouse) right at the heart of the souq, on a large terrace with welcome mist machines, where you can recover from shopping and haggling in the souq and watch the crowds without any hassle. On the menu are fresh juices (££10), hot and cold drinks and a good *sheesha* (££5) as well as 'professional Nespresso' coffee (££10).

**Kings Head Pub** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 1249; Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; ☎) A relaxed and perennially popular place to have a drink and shoot pool, the Kings Head tries to capture the atmosphere of an English pub without being twee. The



laid-back atmosphere also means that women can come here without being harassed.

**Nile Terrace Café & Bar** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0422; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-7pm) The terrace in front of the Old Winter Palace Hotel is the most elegant place in Luxor to watch the sun slowly set over the Theban hills. Starched collars and gin and tonics are the rule here, but there is also ice-cold beer (££23); or you can order afternoon tea if you prefer.

**Sindbad Café** (Map pp244-5; off Sharia Al-Karnak; ☎ 7.30am-1am) A large pleasant terrace in the grounds of the Wena Hotel, overlooking the back of Luxor Temple, with old rattan chairs. This is a laid-back friendly place serving some of the cheapest cold Stella beer (££8) in town, tea and *sheesha* and simple Egyptian fare including grills and salads (main dishes cost ££12 to ££22, salads ££6).

**Murphy's Irish Pub** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 8101; Sharia al-Gawazat; ☎ ) With polished wood and a family atmosphere, this pub is a nice place to escape to for a quick, cooling Stella beer or a long evening with friends.

## West Bank

There are no real bars on the West Bank; drinking is done at restaurants or not at all.

**Maratonga Cafeteria** (Map p255; Kom Lolah; ☎ 6am-11pm) This friendly outdoor café, in front of Medinat Habu, is the best place to sip a cold drink under a big tree after wandering through Ramses III's magnificent temple. The view is superlative and the atmosphere is relaxing.

**Ramesseum Rest House** (Map p255; beside the Ramesseum, Gurna) A friendly, laid-back place to relax after temple-viewing. In addition to the usual mineral water and soft drinks, Stella is sometimes available.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### East Bank

With tourism booming in Luxor, the town is busy at night. The Temple of Luxor is open until 10pm and night seeing at night, the souq is open late as well and more lively at night than in the day, and in summer lots of locals stroll along the Corniche. This is not the place to go clubbing though, even if you're into dancing to outmoded disco music, but there are some bars with a decent atmosphere. Most of the larger hotels put on a folkloric show several times each week, depending on the season and number of tour groups around.

**Dawar al-Umda** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 3321; Mercure Inn, Sharia al-Karnak) This venue has a popular folkloric show that includes a belly dancer, *rababa* music (named after the instrument that resembles a single-stringed violin) and occasionally a snake charmer. The show is usually on Thursday night and comes with an Oriental buffet (££65).

If you'd rather move about on the dance floor yourself, the disco at **Tutotot** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 7990) is one of the more popular options, while at **Hotel Mercure** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0944; nonquest minimum ££40) the extra charge covers you for watching the belly-dancing show at 11.30pm too.

## West Bank

If you want to avoid the bright lights of the town, the West Bank is the place to be. Pharaoh's or Nobi's Arabian Horse Stables (p276) and QEA (p276) arrange evening desert barbecues for groups of 10 or more and sometimes put on a horse-dancing show.

On Sunday (and occasionally on other days according to demand) you can watch and dance to local musicians on the rooftop terrace of the **Nile Valley Hotel** (Map p255; ☎ 231 1477; Al-Gezira).

## SHOPPING

The whole range of Egyptian souvenirs is available in Luxor town, but for alabaster it is best to head for the West Bank. The alabaster is mined about 80km northwest of the Valley of the Kings, and although the alabaster factories near the Ramesseum and Deir al-Bahri sell cheap handmade cups, vases and lights in the shape of Nefertiti's head, it is possible to find higher-quality bowls and vases, often unpolished, which are great buys. Take care when buying, sometimes what passes for stone is actually wax with stone chips.

The *tagen* (clay pots) that are used in local cooking make a more unusual buy. Very practical, they can be used to cook on top of the stove or in the oven and they look good on the table too. Prices start at ££5 for a very small pot and go up to about ££30. They're on sale on the street just beside the police station in Luxor.

**Habiba** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 010 124 2026; www.habiba-gallery.com; Sharia Sidi Mahmoud, off Sharia as-Souq; ☎ 10am-10pm) Newly opened and run by an Australian woman who loves to travel in Egypt and who wants to promote the best of Egyptian crafts, this tiny shop sells an ever expanding selection of Bedouin embroidery, jewellery, leather work, wonderful Siwan scarves, the



best Egyptian cotton towels usually only for export, mirrors and brass lights all at fair-trade fixed prices. A world away from what is available in the nearby souq. Recommended.

**Fair Trade Centre Luxor Outlet** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 236 0870, 012 356 3445; www.egyptfairtrade.org; Sharia al-Karnak; ☎ 9am-10.30pm) A nonprofit shop that markets handicrafts from NGO projects throughout Egypt, with a good selection of well-priced hand-carved wood and pottery from the nearby villages of Hejaza and Garagos, aromatic oils from Quz, bead work from Sinai and hand-blown glass, recycled glass and recycled paper from Cairo.

**Winter Akhmeem Gallery** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0422; Corniche an-Nil) A small shop, beside the staircase to the Old Winter Palace, stuffed with beautiful hand-woven cotton, linen and silk from Akhmim. Prices are steep, averaging ££120 to ££180 per metre, but this is still cheaper than you'd pay for something comparable in most other countries. *Galabiyyas* (men's full length robes) and shirts can be made to measure.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

**EgyptAir** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 238 0581; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-8pm) operates several daily flights between Cairo, Luxor and Aswan. A one-way ticket to Cairo costs ££198 to ££574. Tickets to Aswan cost ££127 one-way. There are three flights per week to Sharm el-Sheikh (££328 one-way). Flights to Abu Simbel only operate in high season but have such long waits in Aswan that you're better off arranging a trip from there.

### Bus

The bus station is out of town, located approximately 1km from the airport, but tickets for the

**Upper Egypt Bus Co** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 232 2218; ticket office, Midan al-Mahatta) buses can be bought at their office in town, south of the train station. Minibuses (££5) go from town to the bus station, and a taxi will cost around ££25 to ££30.

Buses heading to Cairo leave at 7am (££91, 10 to 11 hours), but booking ahead is essential as the bus fills up quickly. Six daily buses head to Hurghada (££25 to ££32, five hours) from 6.30am to 8pm. All stop in Qena (££5, one to two hours) and Safaga (££20 to ££27, 3½ to four hours) and go on to Suez (££60, 10 hours). For Quseir and Marsa Alam, change at Safaga. A bus to Sharm el-Sheikh (££110, 12 hours) and Dahab (££120, 14 to 16 hours) leaves at 5pm. It is often full so try to reserve in advance. There are frequent buses to Qena (££3 to ££5) between 6.30am and 8pm, and a daily bus to Port Said at 8pm (££70, 12 hours) via Ismailiya (££65). There are buses to Al-Kharga (££50, four hours).

To go to the Western Desert oases take a bus or train to Asyut from where there are daily buses. At the time of writing there were no buses between Luxor and Aswan.

### Cruise Ship or Dahabiyya

For information on the many cruise boats and increasing number of *dahabiyyas* (houseboats) that ply the Nile between Luxor and Aswan see p89 and p87.

### Felucca

You can't take a felucca from Luxor to Aswan, most feluccas leave from Esna because of the Esna Lock, but unless you have a strong wind, it can take days to go more than a few kilometres in this direction. For more information, see p85.

## POLICE CONVOYS

Getting out of Luxor by road usually involves going in police convoy (see p314). Current convoy times to Hurghada are 8am, 2pm and 6pm. Day trips to Dendara and Abydos leave with the 8am convoy and branch off at Qena with their own escort. There is also a 2pm trip to Dendara. Both return at around 5.30pm.

To Aswan the convoys leave at 7am (stopping at Esna, Kom Ombo and Edfu), 11am (direct) and 3pm (direct). Check these times with the tourist office before travelling.

Vehicles congregate on Sharia Serb (see Map pp244-5) about 30 minutes before the convoy time.

If you are heading further afield by car, you will not fit into the convoy schedule but will still be given a police escort. There are police checkpoints at most municipal boundaries so chances of eluding them are slim. Irritatingly, at each checkpoint your police escort will probably change, involving a delay of a few minutes each time. If possible take the train.

## Service Taxi

Foreigners are forbidden from taking service taxis at present. Instead you have to rent the entire vehicle and go in a convoy. The drivers are always ready to bargain for special trips up the Nile to Aswan, stopping at the sights on the way; expect to pay about ££250 to ££300. To Hurghada, the going rate is about ££400. Make sure you are at the taxi stand 30 minutes before the convoy leaves.

Travellers planning a trip from Luxor to Al-Kharga have to push the police hard if they don't want to go on a long detour to Asyut. Taxis are reluctant to undertake the trip and their current asking price is ££900 for the car (maximum seven people).

## Train

**Luxor Station** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 2018; Midan al-Mahatta) has left-luggage facilities, plenty of cardphones and a post office.

The **Abela Egypt Sleeping Train** (☎ 237 2015; www.sleepingtrains.com) goes daily to Cairo at 8.30pm and 9.30pm (single/double including dinner and breakfast US\$80/120, child four to 10 years US\$45, nine hours). No student discounts; tickets must be paid for in US dollars or euros.

Other trains to Cairo permitted for foreigners are the 981 at 9.15am (adult 1st/2nd class ££73/35, student 1st/2nd class ££40/27, 10 hours), which stops in Balyana (££19/14, three hours) for those who wish to visit Abydos; the 1903 at 9.15pm (adult 1st/2nd class ££78/40, student 1st/2nd class ££45/32, 10 hours); and the 980 at 11.10pm (adult 1st/2nd class ££78/40, nine hours). All trains stop in the Nile Valley towns of Qena (1st/2nd class ££18/13), Sohag (££26/16), Asyut (££36/22), Minya (££54/35) and Beni Suef (££62/40). Student discounts are available on all trains.

To Aswan (three hours) there are three trains: the 996 at 7am (1st/2nd class ££35/21); the 1902 at 9.30am (1st/2nd class ££30/21); and the 980 at 5pm (1st/2nd class ££26/18). All stop at Esna (1st/2nd class ££14/12), Edfu (££19/15) and Kom Ombo (££25/18). Student discounts are available.

There is also a train to Al-Kharga every Thursday at 6am or 7am, depending on the time of year (adult/student ££11/6 in 3rd class only; eight to 10 hours).

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Luxor airport is 7km east of town. A taxi costs at least ££30 to ££40 from the centre of town. To get to or from the West Bank costs about ££70 to ££100. There is no bus between the airport and the town.

## Bicycle

A compact town, Luxor lends itself to cycling, and distances on the generally flat West Bank are just far enough to give some exercise but not far enough to exhaust (except when the weather is too hot). Cycling at night is inadvisable given the local habit of leaving headlights off.

Many hotels rent out bikes. Expect to pay from ££10 to ££15 per day and choose carefully – there's nothing worse than getting stuck with a broken chain halfway to the Valley of the Kings. You can take bikes across to the West Bank on the *baladi* ferry (see p275). If you're based on the West Bank, see p276.

## Felucca

There is a multitude of feluccas to take you on short trips around Luxor, leaving from various points all along the river. How much you pay depends on your bargaining skills, but you're looking at about ££20 for an hour of sailing.

## Hantour

Also called a *calèche*, horse and carriages cost about ££20 to ££50 per hour depending on your haggling skills (this is where you really need them). Expect to pay about ££15 to ££20 to get to Karnak.

## Pick-up Taxis

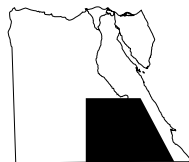
*Kabout* and minibuses are often the quickest and easiest way to get about. To get to the Temples of Karnak, take a microbus from Luxor station or from behind Luxor Temple for 50pt. Other routes run inside the town. For information about West Bank pick-ups, see p275.

## Taxi

There are plenty of taxis in Luxor but passengers still have to bargain hard for trips. A short trip around town is likely to cost at least ££10. Taxis can also be hired for day trips around the West Bank; expect to pay ££100 to ££200, depending on the length of the excursion and your bargaining skills.

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# Nile Valley: Esna to Abu Simbel



One after another the great temples next come into view: Kom Ombo dominating a bend in the river, Edfu still intact on the western bank... There is a monumental stillness in the warm air, an intimation of past existence endlessly preserved...

*Alan Moorhead, The Blue Nile (HarperCollins, 1962)*

Where northern Upper Egypt is dominated by fast-growing cities and political problems, the country south of Luxor is both harder and calmer. The Nile is increasingly hemmed in by the desert, its banks lined with well-preserved Graeco-Roman temples at Esna, Edfu and Kom Ombo, its lush fields punctuated by palm-backed villages – it's the perfect place to glide through on a Nile sailing boat. Al-Kab provides the perfect contrast to the grandeur of the temples, for this once-great city has almost completely disappeared. Beyond Edfu the ribbon of cultivation on the Nile's east bank gives way to the Eastern (Arabian) Desert, while at Gebel Silsila, 145km south of Luxor, the river passes through a gorge, once thought to mark a cataract.

Aswan may be the regional capital and administrative centre, but this ancient ivory-trading post has a laid-back atmosphere that sets it apart from other tourist centres in Egypt. With the Nubia Museum, ancient remains, a vibrant souq, beautiful gardens and a unique Nubian-influenced local culture, it is a fascinating and relaxing place to spend time.

South of Aswan, the land is dominated by the High Dam and its offspring, Lake Nasser, the world's largest artificial lake. Remarkable monuments that would have been lost to the lake's waters now stand grouped on its shores and can be visited by boat. Most southerly and spectacular of all is the Great Temple of Ramses II at Abu Simbel, one of ancient Egypt's most awesome structures and a highlight of any visit to Egypt.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at the most completely preserved Egyptian temple and get lost in its inner chambers all perfectly carved with sacred formulae, at the **Temple of Horus** (p294) at Edfu
- See where the pharaohs found their building blocks and get a sense of the connection between Egyptian religion and the Nile at the quarries and shrines of **Gebel Silsila** (p296)
- Wander around the rarely visited but fascinating ruins of the ancient settlement of **Abu** (p305) on Elephantine Island
- Sense Pharaoh Ramses II's vanity in the grandest temple he ever built, the awe-inspiring **Great Temple** (p324) at Abu Simbel
- Enjoy the peace of **Lake Nasser** (p321) and the rescued temples, and get an idea of the Nubian history and culture that were submerged by it at the **Nubia Museum** (p302) in Aswan



## History

The Nile valley south of Luxor was the homeland of the vulture and crocodile gods, a place of harsh nature and grand landscapes. Its cult places, centres such as Al-Kab and Kom al-Ahmar, date back to the earliest periods of Egyptian history – it was here that the Narmer Palette was found, the object around which the origins of the 1st dynasty have been constructed, here that one of the earliest-known Egyptian temples, made of wood not stone, has been found and here that recently found Lascaux-type rock carvings have opened a window into Egypt's remotest past.

Yet most of what one can see between Luxor and Aswan dates from the last period of ancient Egyptian history, when the country was ruled by the descendants of Alexander the Great's Macedonian general, Ptolemy. They ruled for some 300 years, respecting the country's ancient traditions and religion and setting an example to the Romans who succeeded them.

Although they were based in Alexandria and looked out to the Mediterranean, the Ptolemies pushed their way south into Nubia, the land that straddled what is now the border between Egypt and Sudan. They ensured peaceful rule in Upper Egypt by erecting temples in honour of the local gods, building in grand Pharaonic style to appease the priesthood and earn the trust of the people. The riverside temples at Esna, Edfu, Kom Ombo and Philae are as notable for their strategic locations, on ancient trade routes or key commercial centres, as for their artistic or architectural merit.

Aswan's history was always going to be different. However much the rulers in the north, whether Theban or Macedonian, may have wanted to ignore the south, they dared not neglect their southern border. Settlement on Elephantine Island, located in the middle of the Nile at Aswan, dates back at least to 3000 BC. Named Abu (Ivory) after the trade that flourished here, it was a natural fortress positioned just north of the First Nile Cataract, one of six sets of rapids that blocked the river between Aswan and Khartoum. At the beginning of Egypt's dynastic history, in the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 BC), Abu became capital of the first Upper Egyptian nome (province) and developed into a thriving economic and religious centre, its strategic importance underlined by the title

accorded to its rulers, Keepers of the Gate of the South. By the end of ancient history, with Egypt part of a larger Roman Empire, the southern frontier town was seen as a place of exile for anyone from the north who stepped out of line.

## Climate

Heading south from Luxor, the fertile green Nile Valley narrows considerably and becomes more and more enclosed by the desert, which in some places edges dramatically close to the river banks. The climate also changes and becomes increasingly desertlike, with mostly warm and dry days in winter – there's an average temperature of about 26°C during the day – but often surprisingly cold at night. Summer days are dry but often very hot, with temperatures hovering between 38°C and 45°C, making it difficult to visit sites outdoors. At the height of summer, temperatures hardly seem to drop during the night.

## Getting There & Away

Constant police checkpoints and an insistence that foreigners travel in convoys make independent road travel in southern Upper Egypt almost, but not entirely, impossible (see the boxed text, opposite). The police in Aswan often don't allow foreigners to travel on any public bus north of Aswan, and certainly don't allow travel by service taxi. Travelling by train is recommended as it allows a little more freedom. Officially foreigners are only allowed to travel on three particular trains a day, but usually you can get on any other train, although it might be wise to buy your ticket on board. It is possible to hire a private taxi from Aswan to Luxor, although you will have to be part of the morning convoy that stops at the Temple of Kom Ombo for about half an hour, and at the Temple of Horus at Edfu for one hour.

Travel to Abu Simbel has become much easier again. Foreigners can take buses (officially only four foreigners are allowed on each bus), minibuses and private taxis, all still in a police convoy. The plane remains the fastest, if most expensive, option.

## Getting Around

Foreigners are restricted from travelling between towns in the far south of Egypt, but the rules within municipal boundaries keep

### TRAVELLING IN THE SOUTH

In the aftermath of the 1990s deadly terrorist attacks on tourists, police introduced security measures designed to protect tourists in the heavily travelled area between Luxor and Aswan. This means that all sites have armed police protection and, more importantly, that foreigners can only travel between towns in police convoy. Independent travellers are prevented from taking buses or service taxis, can only spend the same amount of time at sites as hundreds of other people as they have to join the convoy, and are forbidden from wandering about in villages or back lanes.

There have been no violent incidents in the south since 1997, but the threat remains proven by a series of attacks on tourists in Cairo in early 2005, so the security forces are unlikely to lighten their heavy-handed tactics any time soon. Some people feel more secure under police protection, but most don't: high speeds and dangerous driving in the convoy seem to pose a greater risk to travellers than terrorism. But this is Egypt and the rules are often bent: depending on the tension in the area or town, on how foreign you look or on the mood of the official in charge, you may be left alone to walk around and see whatever you want, or you maybe escorted to the station and put on the first train out.

on changing, and differ from place to place, from police officer to police officer. In some places foreigners are pretty much left alone and can use communal taxis (usually pickup trucks) outside Aswan (fares are 25pt to 50pt). But in some towns, security people will be waiting to grab foreigners from the train and will insist on escorting them to their hotel and everywhere else they want to go. Security tightens considerably if there has been any kind of incident in the town, not necessarily related to tourists or terrorism.

## SOUTHERN UPPER EGYPT

### ESNA

☎ 095 / pop 71,588

Most visitors come to Esna, 54km south of Luxor on the west bank of the Nile, for the Temple of Khnum, but the busy little farming town itself is quite charming. Beyond the small bazaar selling mainly tourist souvenirs are several examples of 19th-century provincial architecture with elaborate *mashrabiyya* (ornate carved wooden screens) and a beautiful caravanserai southwest of the temple. An old oil mill, in the covered souq east of the temple, presses lettuce seed into oil, a powerful aphrodisiac since ancient times. Esna was until the early 20th century an important stop on the camel caravan route between Sudan and Cairo, and between the Western Desert oases and the Nile Valley. The town could be a pleasant

morning excursion from Luxor, but with current security restrictions, you will be lucky if the convoy stops here en route to Edfu and Aswan. You can currently visit Esna as part of a cruise itinerary down the Nile (see p83).

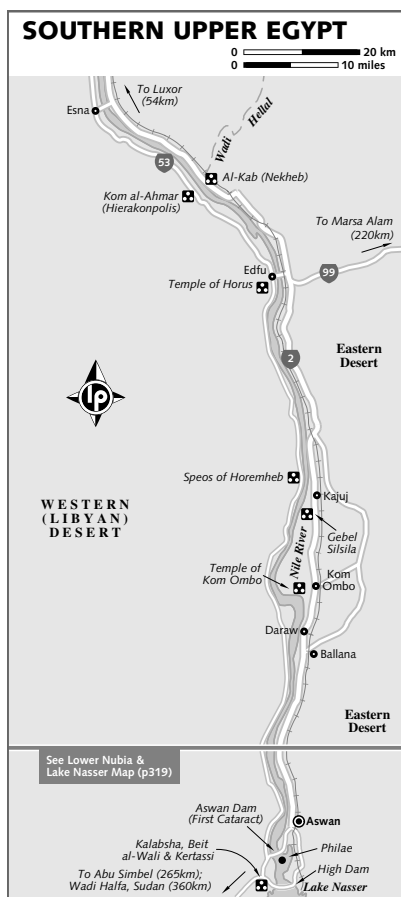
The post office and a branch of the Bank of Alexandria are on the street leading from the canal to the Nile. The **tourist police office** (☎ 240 0686) is in the bazaar near the temple.

### Temple of Khnum

The Ptolemaic-Roman **Temple of Khnum** (adult/student ££15/10; ☎ 6am-4pm Oct-May, to 5pm Jun-Sep) is situated about 200m from the boat landing, at the end of the tourist souq. The temple today sits in a 9m-deep pit, which represents 15 centuries of desert sand and debris, accumulated since it was abandoned during the Roman period. Most of the temple, which was similar in size to the temples of Edfu (see p293) and Dendara (see p235), is still covered. All that was excavated in the 1840s, all you can see now, is the Roman hypostyle hall.

Khnum was the ram-headed creator god who fashioned humankind on his potter's wheel using Nile clay. Construction of the temple dedicated to him was started, on the site of an earlier temple, by Ptolemy VI Philometor (180–145 BC). The Romans added the hypostyle hall that can be visited today, with well-preserved carvings from as late as the 3rd century AD. A quay connecting the temple to the Nile was built by Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180).





The central doorway leads into the dark atmospheric vestibule, where the roof is supported by 18 columns with wonderfully varied floral capitals in the form of palm leaves, lotus buds and papyrus fans; some also have bunches of grapes, a distinctive Roman touch. The roof is decorated with astronomical scenes, while the pillars are covered with hieroglyphic accounts of temple rituals. Inside the front corners, beside the smaller doorways, are two hymns to Khnum. The first is a morning hymn to awaken Khnum in his shrine, and the second is a wonderful 'hymn of creation' that acknowledges him as creator of all, even foreigners: 'all are formed on his potter's wheel, their speech different in

every region but the lord of the wheel is their father too'.

On the walls Roman emperors dressed as pharaohs make offerings to the local gods of Esna. The northern (right) wall has colourful scenes of the ruler catching fish in a papyrus thicket with the god Khnum, and next to this the emperor presents the temple to Khnum.

The back wall, to the northeast, the only remaining part of the original Ptolemaic temple, features reliefs of two Ptolemaic pharaohs, Ptolemy VI Philometor and Ptolemy VIII Euergetes (170–116 BC). A number of Roman emperors, including Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta, added their names near the hall's rear gateway.

## Eating & Drinking

Few people linger in Esna as it is so close to Luxor and the police hurry visitors back into the convoy. There are a few food stands with snacks and *ahwas* (coffeehouses) in the souq leading to the temple.

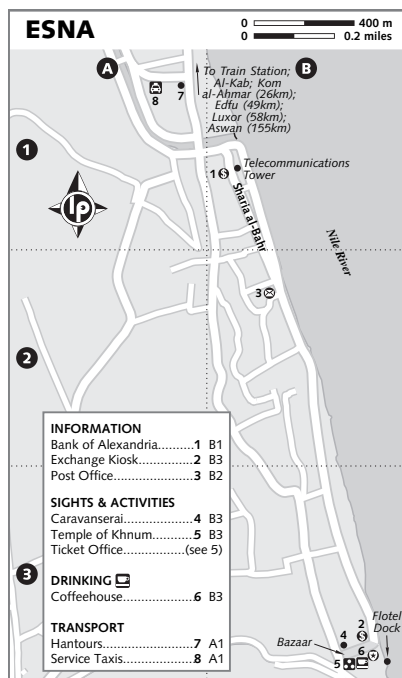
## Getting There & Away

Trains are a pain because the train station is on the opposite (east) bank of the Nile, away from the town centre. Buses to Luxor (££7, 8.30am, 5.30pm and 8pm) and Aswan (££18, 8am and 10am) run on the main east-bank Luxor–Aswan road, stopping only briefly to pick up passengers, if you are allowed to get on at all. Esna's service-taxi station is next to the canal, although arrivals are generally dropped off on the main thoroughfare into town along which *hantour* (horse-drawn carriage) drivers congregate in the hope of picking up a fare. They ask ££8 each way for the five- to 10-minute ride to the temple.

## AL-KAB & KOM AL-AHMAR

Between Esna and Edfu are the ruins of two settlements, both dating back more than 3000 years, with traces of even earlier habitation.

The little-visited site of **Al-Kab** (adult/student ££25/15), ancient Nekheh, is one of the most important sites of ancient Egypt. It was the home of Nekheh, the vulture goddess of Upper Egypt, one of two goddesses who protected the pharaoh right back to the Old Kingdom. There isn't much to see, but the remains of the 12m-thick mud-brick walls that surrounded the town are impressive and date back to the Late Period (747–332 BC).



The oldest of the sandstone temples within the walls dedicated to the god Thoth was built by Ramses II (1279–1213 BC) and the adjoining Temple of Nekhbet was built during the Late Period, both reusing blocks from much earlier temples from the Early Dynastic Period (c 3100 BC) and the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BC).

To the northwest of the walls is an Old Kingdom cemetery. Across the road, cut into the hill at the edge of the valley, are tombs of New Kingdom local governors. The most important is the **Tomb of Ahmose**, son of Ebana (tomb No 2), the 'Captain-General of Sailors', who fought under Ahmose I against the Hyksos. The old soldier left a long, detailed biographical inscription describing his bravery. Further east were several temples dedicated to Nubian gods. A Ptolemaic temple has a staircase going up to two columned vestibules before a chapel carved into the rock. South of there is a small chapel, locally known as Al-Hammam, (the 'Bath' or 'Toilet') built by Setau, Viceroy of Nubia under Ramses II. At the centre of the wadi, 'Vulture Rock' takes its name from a large

vulture-shaped crag covered in inscriptions from predynastic times to the Old Kingdom. Some 3.5km further east into the desert is the small chapel of Nekhbet, built by Amenhotep III (1390–1352 BC) as a way station for the vulture goddess' cult statue when she passed through 'The Valley'. Her protective influence was no doubt appreciated, as this was one of the supply routes to the gold mines that gave Egypt much of its wealth.

Across the river lies **Kom al-Ahmar**, ancient Nekhen or Hierakonpolis, home of the falcon god Nekheny, an early form of Horus. Although little remains of what was one of Egypt's most important cities in predynastic times, recent excavations have revealed a large settlement (with Egypt's earliest brewery!), a predynastic cemetery dating from around 3400 BC with elephant and cattle burials, together with the site of Egypt's earliest known temple, a large timber-framed structure fronted by 12m-high imported wood pillars. A century ago, within this sacred enclosure, archaeologists discovered a range of ritual artefacts, among them two items of huge historical significance, the Narmer Palette and a superb gold falcon head of the god Horus, both now in Cairo's Egyptian Museum.

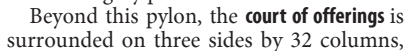
Close by is Egypt's oldest standing brick building, an enigmatic mud-brick enclosure known as 'the Fort', built by Khasekhemuy (c 2686 BC). The impressive rock-cut tombs on the west bank were built by New Kingdom dignitaries.

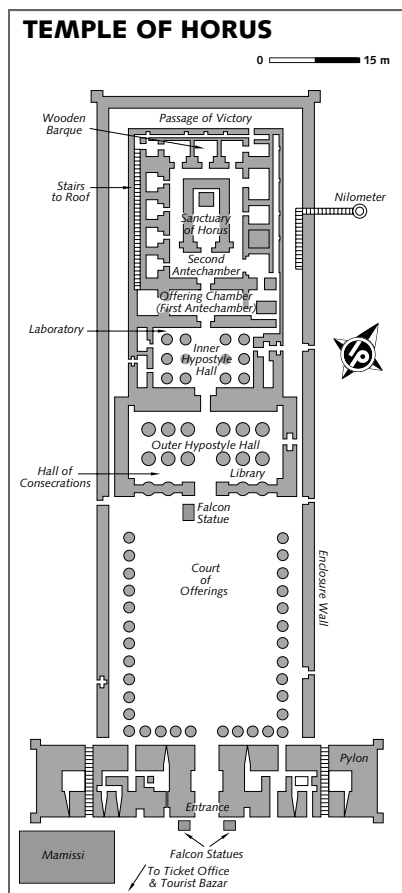
Al-Kab and Kom al-Ahmar are 26km south of Esna. The best option to see these sites is to take a dahabiyah (houseboat) or felucca (traditional canvas-sailed boat) from Aswan to Esna, or the other way around. See p83 for more information. Convoys do not stop here. Other than jumping, undetected, off a bus and taking a chance on finding a ride out when you've finished, there's little chance of seeing these monuments by land.

## EDFU

☎ 097 / pop 72,979

Built on a rise above the broad river valley, the Temple of Horus at Edfu, having escaped destruction from Nile floods, is the most completely preserved Egyptian temple. One of the last ancient attempts at building on a grand scale, the temple dominates this west-bank town, 53km south of Esna. The





each with different floral capitals. The walls are decorated with reliefs, including the 'Feast of the Beautiful Meeting' just inside the entrance, the meeting being that of Horus of Edfu and Hathor of Dendara, who visited each other's temples each year and, after two weeks of great fertility celebrations, were magically united.

A second set of Horus falcon statues in black granite once flanked the entrance to the temple's first or **outer hypostyle hall**, but today only one remains. Inside the entrance of the outer hypostyle hall, to the left and right, are two small chambers: the one on the right was the temple **library** where the ritual texts were stored; and the chamber on the left the **hall of consecrations**, a vestry where freshly laundered

robes and ritual vases were kept. The hall itself has 12 columns, and the walls are decorated with reliefs of the temple's founding.

The **inner hypostyle hall** also has 12 columns, and in the top left part of the hall is perhaps this temple's most interesting room: the temple **laboratory**. Here, all the necessary perfumes and incense recipes were carefully brewed up and stored, their ingredients listed on the walls.

On either side of the hall, doorways lead into the narrow **passage of victory**, which runs between the temple and its massive protective enclosure walls. This narrow ambulatory is decorated with scenes that are of tremendous value to Egyptologists in trying to understand the nature of the ancient temple rituals. Reliefs here show the dramatic reenactment of the battle between Horus and Seth at the annual Festival of Victory. Throughout the conflict, Seth is shown in the form of a hippopotamus, his tiny size rendering him less threatening. At the culmination of the drama, priests are shown cutting up a hippo-shaped cake and eating it to destroy Seth completely.

Back in the inner hypostyle hall, exit through the large central doorway to enter the **offering chamber**, or first antechamber, which has an altar where daily offerings of fruit, flowers, wine, milk and other foods were left. On the west side, 242 steps lead up to the rooftop and a fantastic view of the Nile and the surrounding fields. You may have to pay the guard a bit of baksheesh if you want to go up here.

The second antechamber gives access to the **sanctuary of Horus**, which still contains the polished-granite shrine that once housed the gold cult statue of Horus. Created during the reign of Nectanebo II (360–343 BC), this statue was reused by the Ptolemies in their newer temple. All around Horus' sanctuary are smaller shrines of other gods, including Hathor, Ra and Osiris, and, at the very back, a modern reproduction of the wooden barque in which Horus' statue would be taken out of the temple in procession during festive occasions.

On the eastern enclosure wall look for the remains of the Nilometer, which measured the level of the river and helped predict the coming harvest. For more on Nilometers and their importance in ancient Egypt, see the boxed text, p318.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Al-Medina Hotel** (☎ 471 1326; off Sharia Gumhuriyya; s/d with bathroom & fan ££40/50) This option is very basic, with threadbare furniture and an erratic hot-water system.

**Our pick! Horus Hotel** (☎ 471 5284/86; Sharia al-Gumhuriyya; s/d/tr ££72/132/195) This new hotel, opposite Omar Effendi department store, is the best option in town. It's on the upper floors of the building, with cheerful brightly coloured rooms, with fans or with air-con, and very clean shared bathrooms. The staff is friendly and helpful, and the restaurant (mains ££40 to ££44) is one up on other eateries in town.

There are a few kebab places on the main square, and several cafeterias on the waterfront, Sharia an-Nil, including internet café **Koko** (☎ 010 440 1196). At all of these places you should ask how much dishes cost before you order. There is a daily food and vegetable souq just off the main square.

Next door to Koko you will find the pleasant Habiba café for tea and snacks and there are a few cafés, mostly men only, around the main square.

## Getting There & Away

Edfu train station is on the east bank of the Nile, about 4km from town. There are frequent trains heading to Luxor and Aswan throughout the day, although most are 2nd and 3rd class only. To get to the town, you must first take a covered pick-up truck from the train station to the bridge, then another into town. Each costs 50pt. Alternatively, hire an entire pick-up to take you to the main square for about ££8.

**Upper Egypt Bus Co** (off Sharia Gumhuriyya) operates frequent buses to Luxor (££15, two hours) and Aswan (££12, 1½ hours). Marsa Alam micro-buses (££20, three to four hours) originate in Aswan and pick up passengers at the café by the entrance to the desert road on the east bank at about 7.30am and 8.30am.

The easiest option to visit Edfu is to take a day tour or travel in a private taxi (££180 to ££250 return) in the 7am convoy from Luxor.

## GEBEL SILSILA

At Gebel Silsila, about 42km south of Edfu, the Nile narrows considerably to pass between steep sandstone cliffs that are cluttered with ancient rock stelae and graffiti. Known in Pharaonic times as Khenu (Place of Rowing),

it was an important centre for the cult of the Nile: every year at the beginning of the inundation season, sacrifices were made here to insure the fertility of the land. The Nile at its height flowing through the narrow gorge must have been a particularly impressive sight, which no doubt explains why the location was chosen as a cult centre. The gorge also marks the change from limestone to sandstone in the bedrock of Egypt. The sandstone quarries here were worked by thousands of men and, judging by the names of pharaohs inscribed in the caves, it seems they were worked from the 18th dynasty or earlier through to the Roman period. The quarries were for centuries the main source in Egypt of sandstone for temple building.

The most attractive monuments are on the west bank, where the rocks are carved with inscriptions and tiny shrines from all periods, as well as adorned with larger chapels. The southern side of the site is marked by a massive pillar of rock, known as the 'Capstan', so called because locals believe there was once a chain, *silsila* in Arabic, from which the place takes its name, that ran from the east to the west bank. Nearby are the three shrines built by Merneptah, Ramses II and Seti I during the New Kingdom. Further north, the main quarry has clear masons' marks and a group of elaborate private memorial chapels. Several stelae, including a large **Stelae of Shoshenq I**, mark the northern limit of the quarry and lead to the **Speos of Horemheb** (adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 7am-5pm), a rock-hewn chapel started by Horemheb (1323-1295 BC) and finished by the officials of the later Ramesside kings.

The more impressive quarries are to be found on the east bank of the river, with several stelae in memory of pharaohs from different periods and *ex votos*. Here one gets a real sense of the grandeur and the enormity of what the pharaohs undertook, by just looking at the cubist landscape of the gigantic shelves adorned with quarry marks and drawings, left by the removal of the sandstone blocks for the temples.

At present you can only get to Gebel Silsila by felucca or dahabiyya from Aswan to Esna, or the other way around. See p83 for more information. Should the security situation change, you may be able to hire a taxi from Edfu to take you to the village of Kajuj, 41km south of Edfu, then take the track to the quarries on the east bank of the Nile, or negoti-

ate with a boatman to take you across to the west bank.

## KOM OMBO

☎ 097 / pop 80,991

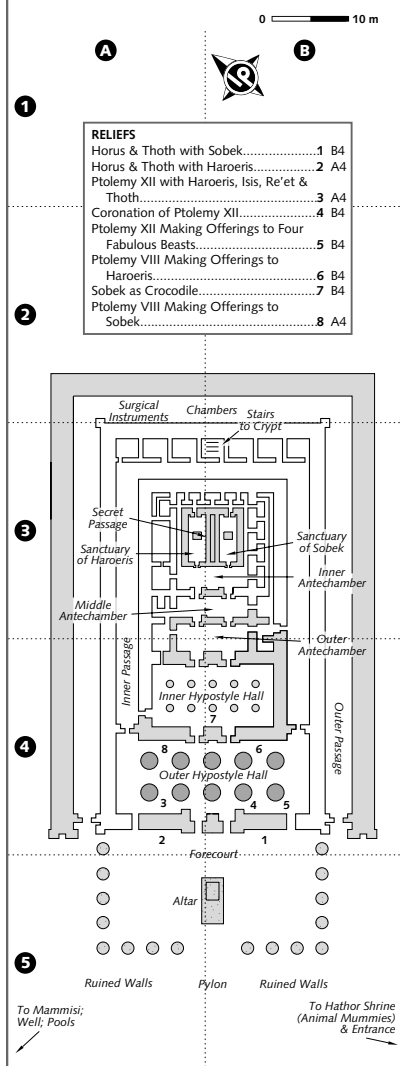
The fertile, irrigated sugarcane and cornfields around Kom Ombo, 65km south of Edfu, support not only the original community of fellaheen (peasant farmers), but also a large population of Nubians displaced from their own lands by the creation of Lake Nasser (see p320). It's a pleasant little place, easily accessible en route between Aswan and Luxor. A huge cattle market is held on the outskirts of town, near the railway line, on Thursday. The main attraction these days, however, is the unique riverside Temple of Horus the Elder (Haroeris) and Sobek, about 4km from the town's centre, which stands gloriously on a promontory overlooking the Nile. If you're not stopping here on a felucca trip or Nile cruise, it's best visited on a day trip from Aswan (40km to the south) taking the morning police convoy, or on the morning convoy from Aswan to Luxor, which stops at the temple for just 30 to 35 minutes.

In ancient times Kom Ombo was known as Pa-Sebek (Land of Sobek), after the crocodile god of the region. It became important during the Ptolemaic period, when its name was changed to Ombos and it became the capital of the first Upper Egyptian nome during the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor. Kom Ombo was an important military base and a trading centre between Egypt and Nubia. Gold was traded here, but more importantly it was a market for African elephants brought from Ethiopia, which the Ptolemies needed to fight the Indian elephants of their long-term rivals the Seleucids, who ruled the largest chunk of Alexander's former empire to the east of Egypt.

## Temple of Kom Ombo

Standing on a promontory at a bend in the Nile, where in ancient times sacred crocodiles basked in the sun on the riverbank, is the **Temple of Kom Ombo** (adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 6am-4pm Oct-May, to 5pm Jun-Sep). Unique in Egypt it has a dual dedication to the local crocodile god Sobek and Haroeris, from *har-wer*, meaning Horus the Elder. This is reflected in the temple's plan: perfectly symmetrical along the main axis of the temple, there are twin entrances, two shared hypostyle halls with

## TEMPLE OF KOM OMBO



carvings of the two gods on either side and twin sanctuaries. It is assumed that there were also two priesthoods. The left (western) side of the temple was dedicated to Haroeris, the right (eastern) half to Sobek.

Reused blocks suggest an earlier temple from the Middle Kingdom period, and there are remains of 18th-dynasty structures, but the



## LASCAUX ON THE NILE

Belgian archaeologists recently discovered the oldest drawings in Egypt at a site near Kom Ombo. Palaeolithic animal illustrations, similar to those found in the Lascaux caves in France, have been discovered on huge Nubian sandstone rocks in the village of Qurta, on the northern edge of Kom Ombo. Most of these fine paintings are of bovines in different positions. There are also gazelles, birds, hippos and fish in a naturalistic style, and a few stylised human figures with pronounced buttocks but no other particular features.

These discoveries represent some of the largest and finest examples of rock art ever found. Many of the paintings were first carved in the rock surface, almost like a bas-relief, and then painted. It is thought they were produced by the Ballanan-Silsilian culture, dated to about 16,000 to 15,000 years ago, which corresponds climatologically with the end of a hyperarid period, before the return of the rains and the 'Wild Nile' stage of about 14,000 to 13,000 years ago. The artists appear to have been hunters and fishermen.

As the art is very fragile, the site is still closed to the public.

main temple dates from Ptolemaic times; built by Ptolemy VI Philometor, though most of its decoration was completed by Cleopatra VII's father, Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos. The temple's spectacular riverside setting has resulted in the erosion of part of its partly Roman forecourt and outer sections, but much of the complex has survived and is very similar in layout to the other Ptolemaic temples of Edfu and Dendara, albeit smaller.

The temple is entered through the Ptolemaic gateway on the southeast corner. Nearby, to the right of the temple wall, is a small **shrine to Hathor**, now a storage for the **mummified crocodiles** and their clay coffins that were dug up from a nearby sacred-animal cemetery; four from the collection are on display. On the opposite side of the compound, to the left (southwest) corner of the temple are the remains of a small **mammisi**, decorated with reliefs, including one that depicts Ptolemy VIII Euergetes in a boat in a reed thicket before the god Min. Beyond this to the north you will find the deep well that supplied the temple with water, and close by is a small pool in which crocodiles, Sobek's sacred animal, were raised.

Passing into the temple's **forecourt**, where the reliefs are divided between the two gods, there is a double altar in the centre of the court for both gods. Beyond are the shared **inner and outer hypostyle halls**, each with 10 columns. Inside the **outer hypostyle hall**, to the left, is a finely executed relief showing Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos being presented to Haroeris by Isis and the lion-headed goddess Raetawy, with Thoth looking on. The walls to the right show the crowning of Ptolemy XII by Nekhbet

(the vulture goddess worshipped at the Upper Egyptian town of Al-Kab) and Wadjet (the snake goddess based at Buto in Lower Egypt), with the dual crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, symbolising the unification of Egypt.

Reliefs on the north wall of the **inner hypostyle hall** show Haroeris presenting Ptolemy VIII Euergetes with a curved weapon, representing the sword of victory. Behind Ptolemy is his sister-wife and coruler Cleopatra II.

From here, three **antechambers**, each with double entrances, lead to the **sanctuaries of Sobek and Haroeris**. The now-ruined chambers on either side would have been used to store priests' vestments and liturgical papyri. The sanctuaries themselves are no longer completely intact, allowing you to see the secret passage between them that enabled the priests to give the gods a 'voice' to answer the petitions of pilgrims.

The outer corridor, which runs around the temple walls, is unusual. Here, on the left-hand (northern) corner of the temple's back wall, is a puzzling scene, which is often described as a collection of 'surgical instruments'. It seems more probable that these were implements used during the temple's daily rituals.

## Sleeping & Eating

At the time of writing, foreigners were not allowed to stay in Kom Ombo, so press on to Luxor or Aswan.

**Al-Noba Restaurant** (main rd; meals E£8-15) A little way north of the service-taxi station, Al-Noba is the only sit-down eatery in this part of town and it serves chicken, rice and vegetable dishes.

Otherwise, the choice is between *ta'amiyya* and kebab stands. Snacks and drinks can be bought at the series of cafeterias and tourist bazaars, called Rural Home, in the shade of the trees between the temple and the Nile. Cafeteria Venus on the north side of the temple has cold beers in a pleasant garden setting, but foreigners are often not allowed to leave the temple compound to reach it.

## Getting There & Away

The easiest way to visit the temple is to come on a tour or via a private taxi, travelling with the convoy. A private taxi from Luxor taking in both Edfu and Kom Ombo and returning in the evening can cost from about ££255 to ££300.

The Luxor-Aswan buses also frequently stop in the town. As you approach Kom Ombo from Aswan, you can ask the driver to drop you off at the road leading to the temple; look for the sign. From here it's about a 2km walk. Should you want to head to the Red Sea from here, the daily bus from Aswan to Marsa Alam (££20, four to five hours) calls in at around 7.30am.

Trains are another option, but the train station is some way from the temple.

To get to the temple from the town centre, take a covered pick-up (25pt to 40pt) to the boat landing on the Nile about 800m north of the temple, then walk the remainder of the way. Pick-ups to the boat landing leave from the service-taxi station. A private taxi between the town and temple should cost about ££10 return.

## DARAW

Daraw, 8km south of Kom Ombo, appears to be like any other village in this part of Egypt, except for its remarkable **camel market** (*souq al-gimaal*). Most of the camels are brought up in caravans from Sudan to just north of Abu Simbel (see the boxed text, p300), from where they're trucked to Daraw. The rest walk to the market in smaller groups, entering Egypt at Wadi al-Alagi and making their way through the Eastern Desert.

Camels are sold here each day of the week, but the main caravan of camels from Abu Simbel, sometimes as many as 2000 of them, is brought to market on Sunday.

Also worth seeing is the Nubian house called **Hosh al-Kenzi**. Built in 1912 by the father of the current resident, Haj Mohammed Eid Mohammed Hassanein, it is constructed in

traditional Nubian style and decorated with Nubian artefacts. To get there, ask for the Dar Rasoul Mosque on Sharia al-Kunuz. The house is clearly visible next door.

## Getting There & Away

Trains between Aswan and Luxor usually stop at Daraw. By road you are likely to be forced to go by convoy to Daraw, which is usually arranged via the tourist office in Aswan (p301). Should all this change, service taxis and minibuses running between Aswan and Kom Ombo stop in Daraw (if passengers indicate that they want to get off). The ££5 fare is the same as for the whole stretch. The camel market is on a large lot 2km from the Luxor-Aswan highway. Turn off at the main road into the town and ask for 'souq al-gimaal'.

# ASWAN

☎ 097 / pop 1.18 million

On the northern end of the First Cataract and marking the country's ancient southern frontier, Aswan has always been of great strategic importance. In ancient times it was a garrison town for the military campaigns against Nubia, its quarries provided the valuable granite used for so many sculptures and obelisks, and it was a prosperous marketplace at the crossroads of the ancient caravan routes. The first document mentioning Aswan, rather than the older island settlement of Abu, date to the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC) and use the ancient Egyptian word *swenet*, meaning 'trade', a name that later became the Arabic As-Suan, meaning markets.

Today, slower than most places in Egypt, laid-back and pleasant, it is the perfect place to linger for a few days, rest the eyes and the mind, and recover from the rigours of travelling along the Nile. The river is wide, languorous and stunningly beautiful here, flowing gently down from Lake Nasser, around dramatic black-granite boulders and palm-studded islands. Colourful Nubian villages run down to the water and stand out against the backdrop of the desert on the west bank.

With so long a history, there is plenty to see in Aswan, but somehow the sight-seeing seems less urgent and certainly less overwhelming than, say, Luxor, allowing more time to take in the magic of the Nile at sunset, to stroll in the exotic souq, one of the best outside Cairo, or to appreciate

## THE FORTY DAYS ROAD

Large caravans of camels are brought through the desert from Sudan's Darfur and Kordofan provinces to Daraw, along the Forty Days Rd (Darb al-Arba'een), allegedly named for the number of days it took to walk.

At first, after the Persians introduced camels into the region (around the 6th century BC), the animals carried slaves, ostrich feathers, precious stones, animal skins and other goods from Africa, much appreciated by the pharaohs and their officials, or later, distributed to the great empires in Greece, Persia and Rome.

Trading caravans were replaced by the faster railway at the end of the 19th century, but the camels still come, except now they are the cargo. Once in Daraw, they spend two days in quarantine, where they are inoculated against a number of diseases. After they have been sold by the Sudanese owners, most go on to the camel market in Birqash, about 35km northwest of Cairo (see p212), and from there they are sold again. Some are sold to Egyptian farmers, others are exported to other Middle Eastern countries, but many are slaughtered to provide meat for poor Egyptians (yes, that cheap kebab does taste a bit mature).

the gentleness of the Nubians. Most tour groups head straight for the Temple of Isis at Philae, taking in the Unfinished Obelisk and the dams on the way, but the rarely visited ruins of ancient Abu and the small Aswan Museum on Elephantine Island are fascinating, as are the exquisite botanical gardens and the Nubia Museum.

But Aswan is more than just a tourist town; a governorate capital, it has a large population of educated bureaucrats and a good university. Some days, when all the cruise boats seem to unload their tour groups at the same time, it is no longer as relaxed as it was a few years ago. But much of the time the heat, the sweet smells of spices and the slow pace take hold of the visitor. Few things are more calming than to glide on a felucca between the islands and the rocks at sunset, or failing that to sit on the banks and watch the Nile go by.

The best time to visit Aswan is in winter, when the days are warm and dry. In summer the temperature hovers between 38°C and 45°C; it's too hot by day to do anything but sit by a fan and swat flies, or flop into a swimming pool.

## ORIENTATION

Most of the city of interest to visitors is along the Nile or parallel to it. The train station is at the northern end of town, only 100m from the river and the Corniche an-Nil.

The street running north-south in front of the train station is Sharia as-Souq (also occasionally signposted as Sharia Saad Zaghloul). This is Aswan's market street, where the

souq overflows with colourful, tempting and aromatic wares. Running parallel to it is Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir, where you'll find the youth hostel and a few budget and mid-range hotels. Most of Aswan's government buildings, banks, travel agencies, restaurants and top-end hotels are on Corniche an-Nil. From the Corniche, ferries and feluccas sail to the rock tombs on the west bank or to Elephantine Island.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

The New Cataract Hotel (Map p302) has a small bookshop with a good selection of foreign-language books about Aswan, Egypt and Egyptian history. Stalls in the tourist bazaar at the exit of the Unfinished Obelisk (see p303) also have some good books on Egypt and Nubia. If you're after international newspapers and magazines, try the newsstand near the Philae Hotel on the Corniche.

### Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 123)

**Police** (Map p304; ☎ 230 2043; Corniche an-Nil) Near Thomas Cook.

**Tourist police** (Map p304; ☎ 230 3436, 231 4393; Corniche an-Nil) Contact the tourist office (opposite) first to help with translation.

### Internet Access

Internet prices cost E£6 to E£15 per hour.

**Aswan Internet Café** (Map p304; ☎ 231 4472; Rowing Club, Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-midnight Sun-Fri)

**Aswanet Internet Café** (Map p304; ☎ 231 7332; Keylany Hotel, 25 Sharia Keylany; ☎ 9am-11pm) A local

internet service provider, the excellent Aswanet has the fastest lines in town.

**Nubani Café Net** (Map p304; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; ☎ 24hr)

**Tarek for Computer Services** (Map p304; ☎ 012 381 7534; Sharia Ahmed Maher; ☎ 9am-11pm)

## Medical Services

**German Hospital** (Map p302; ☎ 231 7176; Corniche an-Nil)

**Mubarak Military Hospital** (Map p302; ☎ 231 7985, 231 4739; Tariq Sadat) The top hospital in town.

**Ta'mim (Insurance) Hospital** (Map p302; ☎ 231 5112, 231 6510; Tariq Sadat) Newest hospital in town with a good reputation.

## Money

Unless otherwise noted, banking hours are 8.30am to 2pm and 5pm to 8pm Sunday to Thursday. There are ATMs all along the Corniche and around Sharia as-Souq, as well as at the train station.

**American Express** (Map p302; ☎ 230 6983; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu, to 2pm Fri & Sat)

**Bank of Alexandria** (Map p304; Corniche an-Nil) Accepts Eurocheques.

**Banque du Caire** (Map p304; Corniche an-Nil) Has an ATM and will issue cash advances on both Visa and MasterCard.

**Banque Misr** (Map p304; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-3pm & 5-8pm) ATM and foreign-exchange booth next to main building.

**Thomas Cook** (Map p304; ☎ 230 4011; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-2pm & 5-9pm)

## Post

**Branch post office** (Map p304; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Opposite the Victoria Hotel.

**Main post office** (Map p304; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

## Telephone

There are card phones along the Corniche and at the train station.

**Telephone centrale** (Map p302; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 24hr)

## Tourist Information

**Tourist office** (Map p304; ☎ 231 2811, 010 576 7594; Midan al-Mahatta; ☎ 8am-3pm & 7-9pm Sat-Thu, 9am-3pm & 6-8pm Fri) For many years this office next to the train station was one of the most efficient tourist offices in Egypt. Hakeem Hussein is now in charge and, although he is knowledgeable and still helpful, there have been complaints from readers about the fact that there are no longer fixed prices for felucca trips.

**Travco** (Map p304; ☎ 231 6393, fax 231 5960; www.travco.com; 83 Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-5pm, Mon-Sat)

## Visa Extensions

**Passport office** (Map p304; ☎ 231 2238; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 8.30am-1pm Sat-Thu) For visa extensions go to this office, at the southern end of the Corniche.

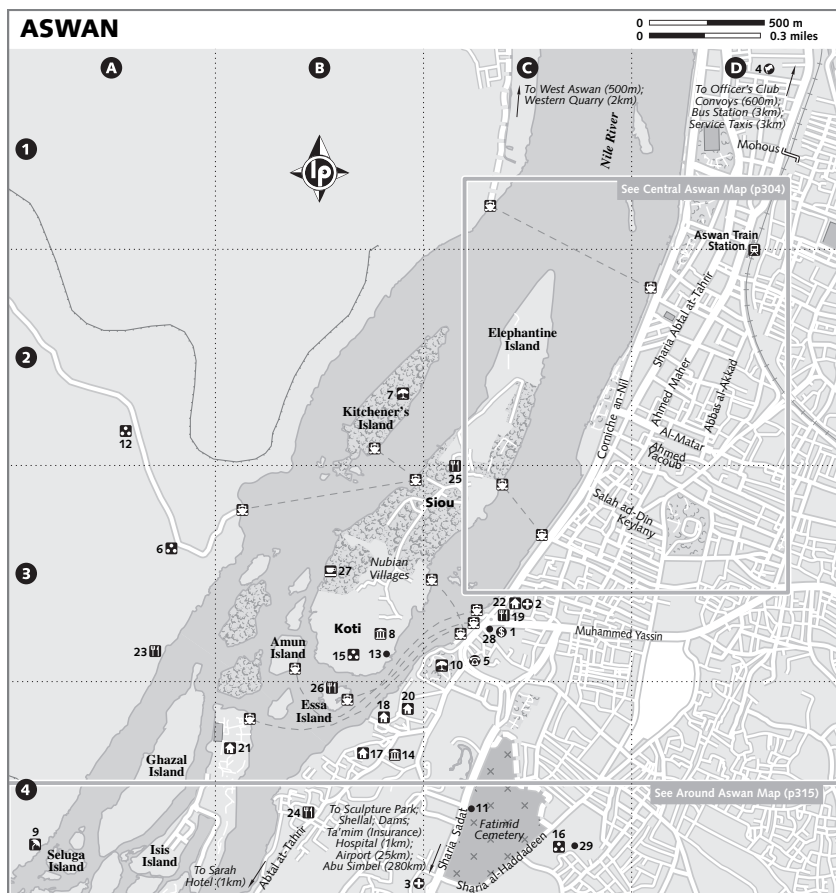
## SIGHTS

Aswan's sights are spread out, mostly to the south and west of the town. The souq cuts right through the centre of town, parallel to the Nile. The Nubia Museum is within walking distance, just, but all other sites require transport. The sites on the islands and on the west bank involve a short boat trip.

## The Town & East Bank

Starting from the southern end, **Sharia as-Souq** appears very much like the tourist bazaars all over Egypt, with persistent traders trying to lure passers-by into their shops to buy T-shirts, perfume, spices, beaded *galabiyas* (men's full-length robes) and roughly carved copies of Pharaonic statues. But a closer look down side alleys and walking further north reveals more exotic elements, hinting at the markets south in Sudan and Africa. Here traders sell Nubian talisman for good luck, colourful Nubian baskets and scull caps, Sudanese swords, African masques, and enormous stuffed crocodiles and desert creatures. This is also very much a living market, where Nubians from Elephantine Island and around Aswan shop for food and live produce, including fruit, vegetables, chickens and pigeons. Aswan is famous for the quality of its peanuts (*fuul sudan*), henna powder (sold in different qualities) and dried hibiscus flowers, used to make the much-loved local drink *karkadai*. The pace is slow, particularly in the late afternoon, the air has a slight whiff of sandalwood and, as in ancient times, you may feel that Aswan is the gateway to Africa.

Walking along the Corniche and watching the sunset over the islands and the desert on the other side of the Nile is a favourite pastime in Aswan. The view from riverside café-terraces may be blocked by cruise boats, but plans are underway to relocate them all to a dock that is under construction on the northern end of town; for now the best place to watch the sunset is from the Old Cataract Hotel (Map p302; for nonresidents the minimum charge per person is E£85, which can be



spent anywhere except on the main terrace of the hotel, see p311) or next door at the peaceful **Ferial Gardens** (Map p302; admission EE5).

### NUBIA MUSEUM

The **Nubia Museum** (Map p302; ☎ 231 9111; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; adult/student EE40/20; 🕒 9am-1pm & 5-9pm) is a showcase of the history, art and culture of Nubia and is a real treat. Established in 1997, in cooperation with Unesco, the museum is a reminder of the history and culture of the Nubians, much of which was lost when Lake Nasser flooded their land after the building of the dams (see p320). Exhibits are beautifully displayed in huge halls, where clearly written explanations take you from 4500 BC through to the present

day. As it is not on the tour-group circuit, the museum is little visited.

At the entrance to the main exhibition hall is a model of the Nile Valley and the main temple sites. The exhibits start with prehistoric artefacts and objects from the Kingdom of Kush and Meroe. Coptic and Islamic art displays lead to a description of the massive Unesco project to move Nubia's most important historic monuments away from the rising waters of Lake Nasser, following the building of the Aswan High Dam. Among museum highlights are 6000-year-old painted pottery bowls and an impressive quartzite statue of a 25th-dynasty priest of Amun in Thebes with distinct Kushite (Upper Nubian) features. The stunning horse

<b>INFORMATION</b>		Monastery of St Simeon.....	12 A2	<b>EATING</b> ⓘ	1902 Restaurant.....	(see 20)
American Express.....	1 C3	Nilometer.....	13 B3	Egypt Free Shop.....	22 C3	
German Hospital.....	2 C3	Nubia Museum.....	14 B4	Nubian Beach.....	23 A3	
Mubarak Military Hospital.....	3 B4	Temple of Khnum & Ruins of Abu.....	15 B3	Nubian House.....	24 B4	
Sudanese Consulate.....	4 D1	Unfinished Obelisk.....	16 C4	Nubian House.....	25 C3	
Telephone Centrale.....	5 C3			Nubian Restaurant.....	26 B4	
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>		<b>SLEEPING</b> ⓘ		<b>DRINKING</b> ☑		
Aga Khan Mausoleum.....	6 A3	Basma Hotel.....	17 B4	Nubian Café.....	27 B3	
Aswan Botanical Gardens.....	7 B2	New Cataract Hotel.....	18 B4			
Aswan Museum.....	8 B3	Nile Hotel.....	19 C3	<b>TRANSPORT</b>		
Beach for Swimming.....	9 A4	Old Cataract Hotel.....	20 B4	Egypt Air.....	28 C3	
Ferial Gardens.....	10 C3	Pyramisa Isis Island Resort & Spa.....	21 B4	Gathering Point for Police		
Main Entrance to the Fatimid Cemetery.....	11 C4			Convoy.....	29 C4	

armour found in tombs from the Ballana Period (5th to 7th century BC) shows the sophistication of artisanship during this brief ascendancy. A fascinating display traces the development of irrigation along the Nile River, from the earliest attempts to control the flow of the river, right up to the building of the old Aswan Dam. A model of a Nubian house, complete with old furniture and mannequins wearing traditional silver jewellery, attempts to portray the folk culture of modern Nubia.

All this is housed in a well-designed modern building, loosely based on traditional Nubian architecture. In the museum garden there is a reconstructed Nubian house (which you can't enter, unfortunately) and a small 'cave' with prehistoric petroglyphs, which show giraffes and other wild animals once indigenous to the region. The site also incorporates an 11th-century Fatimid tomb, as well as a number of other tombs of sheikhs.

The museum entrance is about a five-minute walk from the EgyptAir office on Corniche an-Nil.

### FATIMID CEMETERY

Behind the Nubia Museum is this vast **cemetery** (Map p302), a collection of low mud-brick buildings with domed roofs. Although most tombs are modern, some of the mausolea clustered towards the back of the cemetery go back to the Tulunid period (9th century). The old tombs are in bad shape and when the original marble inscriptions fell off after a freak late-19th-century rainstorm, they were taken to Cairo without anyone recording which tomb they had come from. As a result, the dates and names of tomb owners have been lost forever. The tombs are covered with domes that are built on a drum with corners sticking out like horns,

a feature unique to southern Egypt. Some domes near the outer edges of the cemetery are decorated with flags and are in much better condition than the other ones. These belong to local saints and you may see Aswanis circumambulating a tomb, praying for the saint's intercession.

The municipality of Aswan has fenced off the Fatimid Cemetery. Enter from the main gate, a 10-minute walk from the Corniche along the road to the airport, and walk right through the cemetery to join the road to the Unfinished Obelisk; just aim for the four-storey building facing the back of the cemetery. The site's caretaker will often accompany you and show you the best-preserved tombs, for which he should be given a baksheesh of a few pounds.

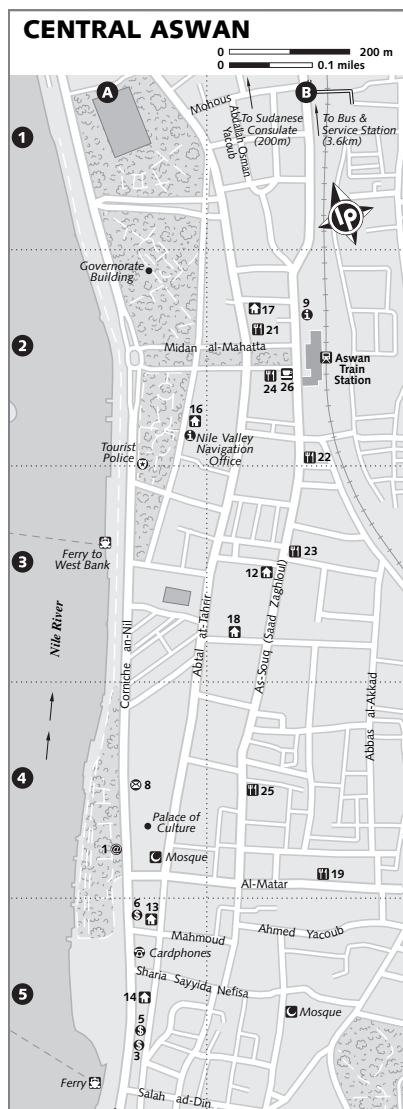
### UNFINISHED OBELISK

Aswan was the source of Egypt's finest granite, the hard stone ancient Egyptians used for statues and to embellish temples and pyramids.

In the **Northern Quarries** (Map p315; adult/student E£25/15; ☎ 7am-4pm Oct-May, 8am-6pm Jun-Sep), about 1.5km from town opposite the Fatimid Cemetery, is a huge discarded **obelisk**. Three sides of the shaft, which is nearly 42m long, were completed except for the inscriptions. At 1168 tonnes, the completed obelisk would have been the single heaviest piece of stone the Egyptians ever fashioned. However, a flaw appeared in the rock at a late stage in the process. So it lies where the disappointed stonemasons abandoned it, still partly attached to the parent rock, with no indication of what it was intended for.

Upon entering the quarry, steps lead down from the surrounding ramp into the pit of the obelisk where there are ancient pictographs of dolphins and ostriches or flamingos,





thought to have been painted by workers at the quarry.

No service taxis run past the site, but you can get one to the junction on Sharia al-Haddadeen and then walk (about 10 minutes). Private taxis will charge about E£12. You can also walk through Fatimid Cemetery to get to it.

### SCULPTURE PARK

The **Sculpture Park** (Map p315) near the Southern Quarries houses the sculptures made by artists from around the world, during the International Sculpture Symposium, held each spring at the Basma Hotel.

Sculpture aficionados can get here, taking the road to Shellal, and instead of turning

right towards the ferry to Philae, taking the road up the hill. Continue until you reach the top; on the left is the quarry, on the right the sculptures. No service taxis come to the Sculpture Park, so you will have to organise a private taxi. You should expect to pay about ££20.

## The River

### ELEPHANTINE ISLAND

Aswan's earliest settlement lies opposite the town centre, just north of the First Cataract.

**Elephantine Island** (Map p302) is the site of ancient **Abu** (meaning both elephant and ivory in ancient Egyptian), both names a reminder of the important role the island once played in the ivory trade. At the beginning of the 1st dynasty (about 3000 BC) a fortress was built on the island to establish Egypt's southern frontier. Abu soon became an important customs point and trading centre. It remained strategically significant throughout the Pharaonic period as a departure point for the military and commercial expeditions into Nubia and the south. During the 6th dynasty (2345–2181 BC) Abu gained its strength as a political and economics centre and, despite occasional ups and downs, the island retained its importance until the Graeco-Roman period.

As well as being a thriving settlement, Elephantine was the main cult centre of the ram-headed god Khnum (at first the god of the inundation, and from the 18th dynasty worshipped as the creator of humankind on his potter's wheel), Satet (Khnum's wife, and guardian of the southern frontier) and their daughter Anket. Each year the rushing of the waters of the flood were first heard here on Elephantine. Over time religious complexes took over more and more of the island, so residential areas moved either further north on the island or to the east bank. The temple town of Abu received its *coup de grâce* in the 4th century AD, when Christianity was established as the imperial Roman religion. From then on, worship of the ancient gods was gradually abandoned and defensive fortifications were moved to the east bank, today's city of Aswan.

The extensive ruins of Abu take up the southern end of the island. The northern tip is dominated by the deluxe and architecturally insensitive Mövenpick Resort Aswan; rumour has it that the ugly tower, intended

to hold a panoramic restaurant, may soon be demolished.

## Nubian Villages

Sandwiched between the ruins of Abu and the Mövenpick are two colourful Nubian villages, **Siou** and **Koti**. Strolling through their shady alleys and gardens is a wonderful way to experience life on modern Elephantine. A north–south path across the middle of the island links the two villages and about halfway along is the Nubian Café, with a shady garden beside a traditional Nubian house. The wonderful Hamdi, who often hangs out here, loves to tell people about his culture. Beware that several readers have warned about locals pretending to be Hamdi and trying to sell excursions or souvenirs. Some of these people have turned aggressive when visitors declined their services.

Close to the wall separating the Mövenpick from Siou village is Nubian House, where the owner serves tea, sells Nubian handicrafts, and can arrange live music and dancing or henna 'tattoos' (see boxed text, p306) with local women. Western women should be respectful of local tradition and wear modest clothes.

## Aswan Museum & the Ruins of Abu

The ruins of the original town of Abu and the fascinating **Aswan Museum** (Map p302; adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 8am–5pm Oct–Apr, 8.30am–6pm May–Sep) lie at the southern end of Elephantine. The older part of the museum is housed in the villa of Sir William Willcocks, architect of the old Aswan Dam. Built in 1898, it became a museum in 1912. The newer extension was added in 1998.

The main part of the museum houses a dusty collection of antiquities discovered in Aswan and Nubia, but most of the Nubian artefacts rescued from the temples flooded by Lake Nasser were moved to the Nubia Museum. The modern annexe, however, makes up with a delightful collection of objects, from weapons, pottery and utensils to statues, encased mummies and sarcophagi from predynastic to late Roman times, found in the excavations on Elephantine. The well-displayed objects, with excellent labels in English and Arabic, are organised in separate glass cases, each explaining a particular facet of life on the island in ancient times: death, trade, religion, weaving, hunting, farming, cooking and so on. At the right of the main

## HENNA TATTOOS

Henna is the natural dye derived from the leaves of the *Lawsonia inermis* shrub, grown in southern Egypt and Nubia for millennia – traces of it have even been found on the nails of mummified pharaohs.

Like their ancestors, Nubian women use henna powder for their hair and also to decorate hands and feet prior to getting married. The intricate red-brown designs adorn the skin for a fortnight or so before fading away.

Women visitors will be offered henna ‘tattoos’ on their hands (or feet or stomachs) at some of the Nubian villages around Aswan or in the souq of Aswan – it looks great and you get to spend time with Nubian women. The Nubian villages on Elephantine Island or in West Aswan, just north of the Tombs of the Nobles, are also good places to try. Check first who will apply them. This is women’s work, but would-be lotharios see this as a great opportunity to get close to a bit of foreign flesh.

Tattoos are traditionally red-brown but many foreigners like black henna, which in effect is natural henna darkened with chemicals, among them the very toxic hair-dye PPD, which is banned in Europe. Avoid black henna at all cost, and visit [www.hennapage.com](http://www.hennapage.com) to see the damage the dye can cause, from a light allergic reaction to chemical burns and sometimes even death.

At all these places you’re looking at anywhere between ££20 and ££70 per tattoo, depending on the size and intricacy of the design.

entrance, in a room by itself, lies the sarcophagus and mummy of a sacred ram, the animal associated with Khnum.

A path through the garden behind the museum leads to the evocative **ruins of ancient Abu**. Swiss and German teams, excavating here since the early 20th century, have made the site into an outdoor museum. Numbered plaques and reconstructed buildings mark the island’s long history from around 3000 BC to the 14th century AD. The largest structure in the site is the partially reconstructed **Temple of Khnum** (plaque Nos 6, 12 and 13). Built in honour of the God of Inundation during the Old Kingdom, it was added to and used for more than 1500 years before being extensively rebuilt in Ptolemaic times. Other highlights include a small 4th-dynasty **step pyramid**, thought to have been built by Sneferu (2613–2589 BC; father of Khufu of Great Pyramid fame); a tiny **Ptolemaic chapel** (No 15), reconstructed from the Temple of Kalabsha (which is now just south of the High Dam); a reconstructed 18th-dynasty **temple** (No 2), built by Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BC) and dedicated to the goddess Satet; a **cemetery for sacred rams** (No 11), thought to have been the living embodiment of the god Khnum; and the ruins of an **Aramaic Jewish colony** dating from the 5th century BC.

Heavenly portents and priestly prophecies aside, in ancient times only the Nilometer could give a real indication of the likelihood

of a bountiful harvest. When the Nilometer here in the southern frontier town recorded a high water level of the river, it meant a good harvest, which in turn meant more taxes. The **Nilometer of the Temple of Khnum** (No 7) is below the southern balustrade of the Khnum temple. Built in the 26th dynasty, its stone stairs lead down to a small basin for measuring the Nile’s maximum level. Another stairway, with a scale etched into its wall, leads to the water from the basin’s northern end. Descending to the river’s edge from beneath a sycamore tree near the museum is the **Nilometer of the Satet Temple** (No 10). Built in late Ptolemaic or early Roman times and restored in the 19th century, its staircase is roofed over and niches in the walls would have had oil lamps to provide light. If you look hard as you descend to the river, you can see the names of Roman prefects carved into the left-hand wall.

An excellent guide, *Elephantine: The Ancient Town*, produced by the German archaeological mission on Elephantine, explains the long history of Abu and describes in detail the monuments according to their numbered plaques. It is available in English and German at the museum or, when it is open, at the German excavation house, adjacent to the site.

## Getting There & Away

For information on ferries to Elephantine Island, see p308.

### ASWAN BOTANICAL GARDENS

To the west of Elephantine is the **Aswan Botanical Gardens** (Map p302; admission ££10; ☎ 8am–5pm Oct–Apr, to 6pm May–Sep), still often referred to by its old name, Kitchener's Island. The island was given to Lord Horatio Kitchener in the 1890s when he was commander of the Egyptian army. Indulging his passion for beautiful palms and plants, Kitchener turned the entire island into a stunning botanical garden, importing plants from the Far East, India and parts of Africa. Covering 6.8 hectares, it is filled with birds as well as hundreds of species of flora. The garden may have lost some of its former glory, but its majestic palm trees are still a stunning sight, particularly just before sunset when the light is softer and the scent of sandalwood floats on the breeze. Avoid Friday when the place is invaded by picnicking extended families with stereos.

The island is most easily seen as part of a felucca tour. Alternatively take the northernmost ferry to Elephantine and walk across the village to the other side of the island, where a few little feluccas wait on the island's western edge, to take visitors across. Expect to pay at least ££10 for a one-way trip.

### The West Bank

As with the Botanical Gardens, it is easiest to visit the west bank as part of a felucca tour. The longer way is to take a ferry from Elephantine Island across to the landing for the Monastery of St Simeon. To get to the Tombs of the Nobles, there is a public ferry that leaves from a landing north of the Abu Simbel Hotel on the east bank. See p308 for more details.

### AGA KHAN MAUSOLEUM

High up on the west bank stands the elegant **Tomb of Mohammed Shah Aga Khan** (closed to the public), the 48th imam (leader) of the Ismaili sect, who died in 1957, and of his wife the Begum, who died in 2000. Aswan was their favourite wintering place, and the family's white villa is in the garden beneath the tomb.

### MONASTERY OF ST SIMEON

The fortresslike 7th-century **Monastery of St Simeon** (Map p302; Deir Amba Samaan; adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 8am–4pm Oct–May, 7am–5pm Jun–Sep) was first dedicated to the 4th-century local saint, Anba Hadra, who renounced the world on his wedding day. It was rebuilt in the 10th cen-

tury and dedicated to St Simeon. From here the monks travelled into Nubia, in the hope of converting the Nubians to Christianity, until Salah ad-Din destroyed the monastery in 1173.

Surrounded by desert sands, the monastery was built on two levels – the lower level of stone and the upper level of mud brick – surrounded by 10m-high walls. The basilica has traces of frescoes, and nearby is the chamber where St Simeon prayed with his beard tied to the ceiling in case he fell asleep. The cells with their mastaba beds, once provided accommodation for about 300 resident monks and some 100 pilgrims. The last room on the right still has graffiti from Muslim pilgrims who stayed here en route to Mecca.

To get to the monastery from the boat landing, negotiate with the camel drivers (expect to pay about ££30 per hour; agree in advance how much time you want to spend) or scramble up the desert track (about 25 minutes). Alternatively, you can take the ferry to the Tombs of the Nobles and ride a camel or donkey from there (same price; see p308), but remember to bring water.

### TOMBS OF THE NOBLES

The high cliffs opposite Aswan, just north of Kitchener's Island, are honeycombed with the tombs of the governors, the keepers of the Gate of the South, and other dignitaries of ancient Elephantine. Known as the **Tombs of the Nobles** (Map p304; adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 8am–4pm Oct–May, to 5pm Jun–Sep), six are open to the public. The tombs date from the Old and Middle Kingdoms and most follow a simple plan, with an entrance hall, a pillared room and a corridor leading to the burial chamber. A set of stairs cutting diagonally across the hill takes you up to the tombs from the ferry landing.

### Tombs of Mekhu & Sabni (Nos 25 & 26)

The adjoining tombs of father and son Mekhu (Tomb No 25) and Sabni (Tomb No 26), both governors, date from the long reign of 6th-dynasty Pharaoh Pepi II (2278–2184 BC). The reliefs in Sabni's tomb record how he led his army into Nubia, to punish the tribe responsible for killing his father during a previous military campaign, and to recover his father's body. Upon his return, Pepi II sent him his own royal embalmers and professional mourners, to show the importance accorded to the keepers of the

southern frontier. Several reliefs in Sabni's tomb retain their original colours, and there are some lovely hunting and fishing scenes depicting him with his daughters in the pillared hall.

### **Tomb of Sarenput II (No 31)**

Sarenput was the local governor and overseer of the priesthood of Satet and Khnum under 12th-dynasty Pharaoh Amenemhat II (1922–1878 BC). One of the most beautiful and best-preserved tombs, its colours are still vivid. A six-pillared entrance chamber leads into a corridor with six niches holding statues of Sarenput. The burial chamber has four columns and a niche with wall paintings showing Sarenput with his wife (on the right) and his mother (on the left), as well as hunting and fishing scenes.

### **Tomb of Harkhuf (No 34)**

The tomb of Harkhuf, governor of the south during the reign of Pharaoh Pepi II, is hardly decorated, except for remarkable hieroglyphic texts about his three trading expeditions into central Africa, right of the entrance. Included here is Pepi II, then only a boy of eight, advising Harkhuf to take extra care of the 'dancing pygmy' he had obtained on his travels, as the pharaoh was very keen to see him in Memphis. 'My majesty desires to see this pygmy more than the gifts of Sinai or of Punt,' Harkhuf writes. Look carefully to see the tiny hieroglyph figure of the pygmy several times in the text.

### **Tomb of Hekaib (Pepinakht; No 35)**

Hekaib, also known as Pepinakht, was overseer of foreign soldiers during the reign of Pharaoh Pepi II. He was sent to quell rebellions in both Nubia and Palestine, and was even deified after his death as is revealed by the small shrine of Hekaib built on Elephantine Island during the Middle Kingdom (c 1900 BC). There are fine reliefs showing fighting bulls and hunting scenes.

### **Tomb of Sarenput I (No 36)**

The court of the tomb of Sarenput I, grandfather of Sarenput II and governor during the 12th-dynasty reign of Pharaoh Sesostri I (1965–1920 BC), has the remains of six pillars, decorated with reliefs. On either side

of the entrance Sarenput is shown being followed by his dogs and sandal-bearer, his flower-bearing harem, his wife and his three sons.

### **KUBBET AL-HAWA**

On the hilltop above the Tombs of the Nobles lies this small **tomb** (Map p304), constructed for a local sheikh. The steep climb up is rewarded with stunning views of the Nile and the surrounding area.

### **WESTERN QUARRY**

Isolated in the desert to the west of the Tomb of the Nobles is the ancient **Western Quarry** (Gebel Simaan), where stone for many ancient monuments – possibly including the Colossi of Memnon (see p257) – was quarried. The large **unfinished obelisk**, made for Pharaoh Seti I (1294–1279 BC), was decorated on three sides of its apex before it was abandoned. Nearby the ancient quarry face and marks are clearly visible, along with the tracks on which the huge blocks were dragged down to the Nile.

Guides to the quarry can be found at the ferry landing, opposite the Tombs of the Nobles. Expect to pay at least E£50 to E£80, after bargaining, for the camel ride, half an hour each way. Take plenty of water, and keep an eye out for snakes.

## **ACTIVITIES**

### **Feluccas & Ferries**

The Nile looks fabulous and magical at Aswan, and few things are more relaxing than hiring a felucca (traditional canvas-sailed boat) before sunset and sailing between the islands, the desert and the huge black boulders, listening to the flapping of the sail and to Nubian boys singing from their tiny dugouts. On days when cruise boats dock together in town, hundreds of feluccas circle the islands, a good time to take a felucca a bit further out towards Seheyl Island (p315). The trustworthy **Gelal** (☎ 012 415 4902), who hangs out near Panorama Restaurant near the ferry landing, offers hassle-free tours on his family's feluccas at good-value fixed prices. He is from Seheyl Island and can also arrange a visit of the island and lunch (E£25) in his house, as well as a swim on a safe beach (see opposite).

When walking along the Nile, it's hard to avoid felucca touts any time of the day. According to the tourist office the going rate for hiring a felucca for up to eight people is

around ££30 per hour for the boat. But if business is good, prices go up. A three- or four-hour tour costs at least ££75 to ££90. A two- to three-hour trip down to Seheyl Island costs about ££75.

The public ferry (££1) runs to Elephantine Island, departing from either the landing opposite the telephone centrale (Map p302) or the one across from Thomas Cook (Map p304). Another ferry (££1) leaves from a landing (Map p304) north of the Abu Simbel Hotel to the landing for Tombs of the Nobles on the west bank. When the river is low the ferry leaves from just north of the tourist-police station (Map p304).

For details on taking an overnight felucca trip down the Nile, see the boxed text, p85.

## Swimming

Aswan is a hot place, and often the only way to cool down, apart from hiding in your air-conditioned room, is to swim. Joining the local kids splashing about in the Nile is not a good idea (see Schistosomiasis, p538). Schistosomiasis can only be caught in stagnant water; boatmen know where the current is strong enough (but not too strong), for it to be safe, among them a beach on the west bank opposite Seluga Island (Map p302). To get there rent a motor boat (per person about ££40 and ££20 extra for lunch if you want to spend the day). Some hotels have swimming pools open to the public, generally from 9am to sunset. The cheapest by far is the Cleopatra Hotel (p310), which costs ££10, but the pool is small and overlooked by other buildings. The Basma Hotel (p311) has a large pool that non-guests can use for ££30, while the Mövenpick (p311) and Isis Hotel (p310) charge ££60.

## TOURS

Small hotels and travel agencies arrange day tours of the area's major sights. Half-day guided tours usually include the Temple of Isis at Philae, the Unfinished Obelisk and the High Dam, and start at ££275 (per person with three to five people) with Amex or Thomas Cook, including admission to all sites. Some budget hotels offer cheaper tours but are not licensed to guide groups. Travel agencies will also arrange felucca trips to Elephantine and Kitchener's Islands for about ££65 to ££100 per person, based on a group of three to five people, but it is cheaper to deal directly with the boatmen.

All travel agencies and most hotels in Aswan offer trips to Abu Simbel, but watch out for huge price differences. Some cheaper tours may not include admission fees, and buses may not have air-con, so it pays to ask a few questions before setting off through the desert, particularly in summer. Most larger travel agencies in Aswan use air-con coaches and minibuses to Abu Simbel. Try Thomas Cook, Amex, Travco or one of the other reputable agencies in town. Their bus trips will be a lot more expensive, but definitely more comfortable. Thomas Cook charges about US\$115 per person, including a seat in an air-con minibus, admission fees and guide, and US\$260 by air, including transfers, fees and guide. By contrast, budget hotels offer tours for about ££120 to ££150, often stopping off at the Unfinished Obelisk and Temple of Isis on the return trip. Again, you get no extras and have no protection in case of problems. For more information about getting to Abu Simbel, see p326.

## SLEEPING

Most visitors to Aswan stay on their cruise boats, so the hotel scene has changed little in the last few years. There are few good mid-range options and many of the longstanding places are only slowly making well overdue improvements to décor and service. Prices vary greatly depending on the season. The high season officially extends from October through to April, but it peaks in December and January. In the low season, and even until early November, you'll have no trouble finding a room. We have tried to list high-season rates here. All prices include breakfast and taxes unless otherwise noted.

## Budget

### HOSTELS

**International Youth Hostel** (Map p304; ☎/fax 230 2313; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; dm members/nonmembers ££8.55/10.25, r ££15) Don't be confused with the governorate-run hostel next door, for Egyptians only. The International Youth Hostel has seen much better days and the (clean) shared bathrooms show signs of age, but it's a good deal if you're on a tight budget.

### HOTELS

Hotel touts at the train station try to convince tired travellers that the hotel they have booked is now closed so that they can take them to



another hotel and collect their commission. Ignoring them is the thing to do, otherwise it usually ends up costing you more.

**Noorhan Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 6069; off Sharia as-Souq; s/d E£20/25; ☑) A perennial travellers' haunt, the Noorhan has OK rooms with private bathrooms, and some have air-con. Internet access (per hour E£10) is available, and Stellas are served (E£9). Readers have complained about aggressive staff tactics for promoting tours.

**Yassin Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 7109; off Sharia as-Souq; s/d E£20/25; ☑) Same story as the neighbouring Noorhan Hotel, with staff trying to push tours at all costs, but the rooms are clean and some have private bathrooms. It's a good deal if other cheap options are full.

**Nubian Oasis Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 2126; Nubian Oasis\_Hotel\_Aswan@hotmail.com; 234 Sharia as-Souq; s/d E£25/30; ☑ ☑) Popular with backpackers. The rooms are clean enough, with private bathrooms, and the hotel has a large lounge area and a pleasant roof garden where cool Stellas (E£9) are served. The staff is renowned to be pushy, as they make their money from selling tours.

**Abu-Schleeb Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 230 3051; off Sharia Abbas Farid; s/d/tr E£35/40/45; ☑) These small but clean rooms, in a modern, characterless building, offer good value, all with private bathrooms and hot water. Corner rooms have balconies, and there is a dusty restaurant on the ground floor with very sleepy staff.

**Hathor Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 4580; fax 303 462; Corniche an-Nil; s/d E£40/60; ☑) The 36 spotless rooms vary in size and some are gloomy, but all have private bathrooms and most have air-con (which is controlled at reception), all in all offering good value for money. The rooftop terrace has a small swimming pool with a few poolside chairs and spectacular Nile views.

**Memnon Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ /fax 230 0483; Corniche an-Nil; s/d E£45/65; ☑ ☑) The Memnon has been around for a few years and it shows, but the clean, good-sized rooms have great Nile views. The rooftop has a small not very attractive pool and no shade. The shabby hotel entrance is easily missed, on a dusty street off the Corniche, south of the Aswan Moon restaurant.

**Nuba Nile Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 3267; nubanil\_hotel@hotmail.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d E£60/75; ☑) If the Keylany is full, this friendly family-run hotel is the next best budget option, with clean, comfortable rooms, conveniently located just

north of the square in front of the train station and beside a popular *ahwa* and internet café. Check the room before you agree, as they vary considerably: some are tiny, others have no windows, but all have private bathrooms, and most have air-con.

**Philaé Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 2090; fax 232 4089; Corniche an-Nil; s/d Nile view E£70/90, rear view E£60/75; ☑) Rooms at this well-established hotel have recently been renovated, with freshly painted walls, tiled floors and proper bathrooms; however, the rooms on the lower floors are very noisy.

**our pick Keylany Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 7332; www.keylanyhotel.com; 25 Sharia Keylany; s/d/tr E£60/75/90; ☑ ☑) Aswan's best budget hotel has simple but comfortable rooms, furnished with pine furniture and with spotless bathrooms with proper showers and hot water. The management and staff are friendly and endlessly helpful. The roof terrace has no Nile view but there is a burlap sunshade and furniture made from palm fronds, and it is a great place to hang out. Good internet place downstairs.

**Happi Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 4115; fax 230 7572; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d E£65/90; ☑ ☑) Turn a blind eye to the gloomy décor and threadbare carpets, and the Happi is not a bad place to stay. The staff can be unresponsive, but the rooms are clean and have decent-sized private bathrooms. Some have Nile views, too. The owner also runs the Cleopatra Hotel (below), so guests can use the Cleopatra's pool at a discounted price.

**Ramsis Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 230 4000; fax 231 5701; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d E£65/100; ☑) A pleasant, conveniently located high-rise hotel, with little character but comfortable rooms with a shower, toilet, TV and minifridge, and some have Nile views. Service is quite slow, but it's good value for the price.

**Orchida St George** (Map p304; ☎ 231 5997; orchida\_hotel@hotmail.com; Sharia Muhammed Khalid; s/d E£80/100; ☑ ☑) Friendly three-star hotel with clean rooms, all equipped with comfortable beds, spotless bathrooms, fridge and satellite TV. The décor is tacky, and the room sizes differ considerably, so check before you commit.

## Midrange

Aswan has only a small selection of midrange hotels. There's not much to distinguish those at the bottom end of the scale from the better budget places, so if money's tight look carefully before making a choice.

**Al-Amir Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 4732; fax 230 4411; Sharia Abbas Farid; s/d ££90/120; 🍷 🍷) A street back from the Corniche, this three-star hotel claims to have Nile views (apparent only if you strain your neck). The kitsch décor sets the tone and betrays a connection with the Gulf (Saudi emblems emblazon the stationery and brochures). The 28 rooms, all with private bathrooms and satellite TV, are showing their age. Consider only if others are full.

**Nile Hotel** (Map p302; ☎ 231 4222; www.nilehotel-aswan.com; Corniche an-Nil; s/d/tr ££127/158/190; 🍷 🍷) A very welcome new hotel in this price range offering 30 well-appointed rooms with spotless private bathrooms, satellite TV and minibar, all with a window or balcony overlooking the Nile. The staff speak English and are very friendly and helpful. There is a restaurant, a small library with foreign novels and books about Egypt, and a business centre. Recommended.

**Sarah Hotel** (Map p315; ☎ 232 7234; www.sarahhotel-aswan.com; s/d US\$35/55; 🍷 🍷) Built on a clifftop overlooking the Nile about 2km beyond the Nubia Museum, the Sarah is isolated but has fantastic views over the First Cataract and the Western Desert. It's worth putting up with the kitsch pastel décor for the spotlessly clean rooms, with satellite TV, friendly staff and a good-sized pool overlooking the Nile. Corner rooms have huge balconies. The cafeteria is hugely popular with Aswanis. A shuttle bus runs into town hourly. If you want to stay in Aswan for a few days of peace and quiet, the Sarah is a good choice.

**Marhaba Palace Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 233 0102; marhabaaswan@yahoo.com; Corniche an-Nil; s/d US\$50/60; 🍷 🍷) The Marhaba has small but cosy tastefully decorated rooms, with comfortable beds, sumptuous bathrooms for this price range and satellite TV. Bright and welcoming, it overlooks a park on the Corniche and has two restaurants, friendly staff and a roof terrace with excellent Nile views.

**Cleopatra Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 231 4003; fax 231 4002; Sharia as-Souq; s/d US\$48/62; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Away from the bright lobby, the Cleopatra is dark and gloomy, with 109 rooms filled with battered old furniture, ancient air-con units and unfriendly staff. Somehow it remains full of groups on cut-price package tours, possibly because of its convenient location in the centre of town and a reasonably sized (but overlooked) rooftop pool. It could be much

better; perhaps the opening of the Marhaba Palace will force the management to clean up its act.

**Isis Hotel** (Map p304; ☎ 232 4744; www.pyramisaegypt.com; Corniche an-Nil; s/d US\$62/74; 🍷 🍷) Built right on the riverbank, the Isis Hotel has a prime location in the centre of town. The chalet-style rooms in the garden are clean and comfortable, popular with budget tour groups. The hotel has a reasonably good Italian restaurant and a figure-8-shaped pool beside the Nile.

## Top End

**Pyramisa Isis Island Resort & Spa** (Map p302; ☎ 231 7400; www.pyramisaegypt.com; r garden/Nile view £79/89; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Imposing four-star resort hotel on its own island (there are regular free shuttle boats to town), with big well-appointed rooms overlooking the Nile or the garden. Popular with tour groups, it has two huge swimming pools and several restaurants, usually with long queues at the enormous buffets. Very friendly staff.

**New Cataract Hotel** (Map p302; ☎ 231 6002; www.softel.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d city view US\$98/138, Nile view US\$108/160; 🍷 🍷 🍷) If your budget doesn't stretch to the Old Cataract, consider staying at the high-rise modern annexe next door. The rooms could do with an update, but the 1960s décor of the lobby and restaurants is just becoming attractive again, and the Nile-side rooms have stunning views (try to get one on the upper floors). You also get access to the Old Cataract's swimming pool and restaurants.

**Basma Hotel** (Map p302; ☎ 231 0901; basma@rocketmail.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d £110/165; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Located on the Nile near the Nubia Museum, the Basma has friendly staff, and a large pool and terrace with fantastic Nile views at sunset. The whole place is quite sleepy and would definitely benefit from some updating, but rooms are spacious and comfortable, equipped with fridge and satellite TV. There is an Asian and European restaurant, but the food is mediocre.

**our pick Old Cataract Hotel** (Map p302; ☎ 231 6000; www.softel.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; s/d garden view US\$175/190, r Nile view US\$168-1500; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The *grande dame* of hotels on the Nile, the Old Cataract brings you back to the days of Agatha Christie, who is said to have written part of her novel *Death on the Nile* here (the hotel featured in the movie). The splendid building, surrounded by well-tended exotic gardens on

a rock above the river, commands fantastic views of the Nile and several islands, the ruins of Abu and the desert behind. The service and food don't live up to the grand architecture and can be disappointing, but the atmosphere and views make a stay unique and worthwhile. Deluxe Nile-view rooms are worth the extra cost, but ask to see several if possible as they vary in size and style. The hotel is worth visiting just to enjoy a cool cocktail or afternoon tea: the old-fashioned veranda is often reserved for guests, but the lower terrace commands the same views. Expect to be charged ££85 (to be offset against your bar tab) for the privilege.

**Mövenpick Resort Aswan** (Map p304; ☎ 230 3455; www.moenvick-aswan.com; Elephantine Island; 🍷 🍷 ) Hidden in a large garden, and characterised by an ugly tower, rumoured to be ripe for demolition, the Mövenpick dominates the northern end of Elephantine Island. At the time of writing the hotel was being totally refurbished and, with the Mövenpick's reputation in Egypt, will probably be the best resort-style hotel in town. Guests are transported to and from the town centre by a free ferry. Prices were not available at the time of writing but will be announced when it opens (by the time this book is published).

## EATING

Aswan is a sleepy place, and as most tourists eat on board of the cruise boats, the restaurant scene is as stagnant as the hotel scene. Few new ones open and old stalwarts don't close, even if they seem to have few customers. Outside the hotels, few serve alcohol and none accept credit cards.

## Restaurants

**Emy** (Map p304; ☎ 230 4349; Corniche an-Nil; dishes ££8-20) On a double-decked boat moored on the Nile next to the Aswan Moon, this is where the Nubian felucca captains hang out, as it is the only place where cool beers (Sakkara ££9, Stella ££8) are served. The menu includes a selection of salads (££2.50), Egyptian and international dishes (££13 to ££18) and excellent fresh juices (££4.50).

**Panorama** (Map p304; ☎ 231 6169; Corniche an-Nil; dishes ££8-20) With its quiet waterside location and pleasant terrace, this is a great place to chill out and watch the Nile flow by, while sipping a herbal tea or fresh juice. It also serves simple Egyptian stews cooked in clay pots,

with salad, mezze and rice or chips, or an all-day breakfast.

**Al-Masry Restaurant** (Map p304; ☎ 230 2576; Sharia al-Matar; meals ££8-30) Popular with meat-eating local families, Al-Masry is famous for its excellent fresh kebabs and *kofa* (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer), as well as pigeon and chicken, all served with bread, salad and tahini.

**Biti Pizza** (Map p304; Midan al-Mahatta; dishes ££12-22; 🍷 ) Convenient to the train station, Biti (bey-ti) is a popular air-conditioned restaurant and takeaway that serves adequate Western-style pizzas, but more recommended are the delicious sweet and savoury *fiteer* (flaky Egyptian pizza), including the excellent tuna *fiteer* (££20) or the fruit-and-nut dessert version (££18).

**Aswan Moon Restaurant** (Map p304; ☎ 231 6108; Corniche an-Nil; meals ££12-30) The once-popular hang-out no longer serves alcohol, but it remains a pleasant place for dinner. The menu ranges from basic Egyptian and international dishes, including mezze (££4 to ££9); pizzas (££19 to ££25); kebabs (££25); and our favourite *daoud basha* (meatballs in tomato sauce; ££13), served piping hot in an earthenware dish.

**Madena Restaurant** (Map p304; Sharia as-Souq; meals ££15-20) Small and unpretentious, this no-frills eatery close to the Cleopatra Hotel serves good, basic Egyptian meals at reasonable prices. A decent *kofa* meal, accompanied by bread, rice, salad and tahini, costs ££22. Vegetarian meals cost ££15.

**Nubian House** (Map p302; ☎ 232 6226; just off Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir on the Nile; mains ££15-22; 🍷 2pm or 3pm-late) This laid-back Nubian café and restaurant is the place to be at sunset, with spectacular views over the First Cataract. Sit on traditional wooden benches on the huge shady terrace for a mint tea and *sheesha* (water pipe). To get here, follow the road past the Nubia Museum for about 1km (15 minutes' walk) and take a right just past a development of upmarket housing (many still under construction). Or take a taxi after dark.

**Chef Khalil** (Map p304; ☎ 231 0142; Sharia as-Souq; meals ££25-60) Popular fish restaurant, just along from the train station, serving very fresh fish by the weight, from Lake Nasser and the Red Sea, grilled, baked or fried to your choice and served with salad and rice or French fries. It's a small place, but worth the wait if it's full.

**Our pick Nubian Beach** (Map p302; West Bank, past the Aga Khan Mausoleum; set menu per person ££45) Wonderful Nubian café-restaurant set in a quiet garden on the west bank of the Nile, against the back drop of a towering sand dune. During the heat of the day or on cold winter nights there is a beautifully painted room indoors. The food is simple but good, and alcohol is served – sometimes with live Nubian music.

**Nubian Restaurant** (Map p302; ☎ 230 2465; Essa Island; meals ££45-70) Sitting on a tiny island south of Elephantine Island, the Nubian Restaurant has quite mediocre Nubian food, but does an after-dinner folkloric show, popular with tour groups. A free boat departs opposite EgyptAir.

**1902 Restaurant** (Map p302; ☎ 231 6000; Old Cataract Hotel, Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; set menu per person ££350) Considered Aswan's finest restaurant, and certainly its most formal, this beautifully restored Moorish-style hall is definitely a treat. Dinner is a set four-course French-influenced menu, with a performance by local musicians. Unfortunately here, too, the food doesn't live up to the grandeur of the surroundings at all. Book ahead to reserve a table.

## Quick Eats

Along Sharia as-Souq there are plenty of small restaurants and cafés, good for taking in the lively atmosphere of the souq.

**Koshary Aly Baba Restaurant** (Map p304; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; dishes ££1-15) A clean and popular takeaway-restaurant with good *kushari*, as well as *shwarma* and *kofta*.

**Haramain Foul & Ta'amiyya** (Map p304; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir; dishes ££2-6) A tiny takeaway hidden among the low-rise apartment blocks, this is where Aswanis go when they want good *fuul* (fava bean stew) and *ta'amiyya* (fava bean dumplings).

**El-Tahrir Pizza** (Map p304; Midan al-Mahatta; dishes ££8-18) A popular café that serves pizza and *fitea* at rock-bottom prices. Tea and *sheesha* (££5) are also served.

## Self-Catering

The souq is the best place to buy your own food. On Sharia as-Souq, as well as some of the small alleyways, small grocery shops stock canned goods, cheese and UHT milk. Fruit and vegetables are abundant when in season and are best bought in the morning, at their freshest.

**Egypt Free Shop** (Map p302; ☎ 231 4939; Corniche an-Nil; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-10pm) The only place to buy liquor, local beer and wine, but you need to show a passport.

## ENTERTAINMENT

**Palace of Culture** (Map p304; ☎ 231 3390; Corniche an-Nil) Between October and February/March, Aswan's folkloric dance troupe sporadically performs Nubian *tahtib* (stick dancing) and songs depicting village life. If tour groups book performances and the troupe is not travelling, it begins its performances at around 9pm Saturday to Thursday. The show lasts about two hours and admission is ££15.

Nubian music is sometimes played at the **Nubian House** (Map p302; ☎ 232 6226; just off Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir on the Nile; ☎ 2pm or 3pm-late) restaurant, although when we visited there was no performance schedules. Call for details. Nubian shows are also performed for tourists at the **Mövenpick Resort Aswan** (Map p304; ☎ 230 3455; www.moevenpick-aswan.com; Elephantine Island) and the **New Cataract Hotel** (Map p302; ☎ 231 6002; www.sofitel.com; Sharia Abtal at-Tahrir).

If you're lucky, you may be invited to a Nubian wedding on a weekend night. Foreign guests are deemed auspicious additions to the ceremony, but don't be surprised if you're asked to pay a ££20 to ££40 'fee' to help defray the huge costs of the band and the food.

Otherwise, strolling along the Corniche, watching the moon rise as you sit at a rooftop terrace or having a cool drink at one of the floating restaurants is about all that most travellers get up to in Aswan at night. The top-end hotels all have discos and nightclubs, but they're fairly empty.

## SHOPPING

Aswan's famous souq may be more touristy than it used to be but it's still a good place to pick up souvenirs and crafts. Handmade Nubian skullcaps (about ££10), colourful scarves (££20 to ££30), and traditional baskets and trays (££15 to ££70) in varying sizes are popular. The spices and indigo powder prominently displayed are also good buys, and most of the spice shops sell the dried hibiscus used to make the refreshing drink *karkadai*. However, beware of the safflower that is sold as saffron. Aswan is also famous for the quality of its henna powder and its delicious roasted peanuts. The higher grade of the latter go for ££15 per kilogram.

**Hanafi Bazaar** (Map p302; ☎ 231 4083; Corniche an-Nil; ☞ 8am–8pm) In a mock Pharaonic temple, this is the oldest, no doubt also the most dusty, and best bazaar in town, with genuine Nubian swords, baskets, amulets, silk kaftans and beads from all over Africa, run by the totally laid-back Hanafi brothers.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Daily flights are available with **EgyptAir** (Map p302; ☎ 231 5000; Corniche an-Nil; ☞ 8am–8pm) from Cairo to Aswan (one-way ££218 to ££681, 1¼ hours). The one-way trip to Luxor is ££127 and takes 30 minutes. There are two flights a day to Abu Simbel, leaving at 6.15am and 9.15am, an hour later in summer. The round-trip ticket costs ££466, including bus transfers between the airport and the temple site.

### Boat

For details about the five-star cruise boats and fishing safaris operating on Lake Nasser, see p92. For details on boat transport to Sudan, see p526.

### Bus

The bus station is 3.5km north of the train station. It costs about ££10 to get there by taxi, or 50pt by service taxi. Only four foreigners are allowed per bus, and seats cannot be booked in advance, so get to the bus station early to be sure of getting a seat. Take your passport, as there are two checkpoints along the way. The tourist office advises against travelling by bus as it is too much of a hassle.

Upper Egypt Bus Co has three daily buses to Abu Simbel (££20, four hours, departing 8am, 11.30am and 5pm). Buses to Luxor (££20, four to five hours) leave at 6am, 8am, 12.30pm, 2pm, 3.30pm and 5pm, stopping at Kom Ombo (££5, one hour), Edfu (££10, two hours) and Esna (££15, three hours). A direct bus to Cairo (££91, 14 hours) leaves at 3.30pm daily. There are four buses going to Hurghada (££55, eight hours, 6am, 8am, 3.30pm and 5pm), stopping on the way in Luxor, Qena and Safage. Buses for Marsa Alam (££30, six hours) leave at 6.30am.

### Service Taxi

Foreigners are forbidden from taking service taxis and public minibuses. If things change

(check with the tourist office), service taxis leave from the bus station, 3.5km north of the train station.

### Train

From the **Aswan Train Station** (Map p304; ☎ 231 4754) a number of daily trains run north to Cairo, but officially foreigners can only buy tickets in the station for three of them (1st/2nd class ££95/48, student 1st/2nd class ££65/38, 14 hours, 6am, 6pm, 8pm). No-one will stop you boarding the two other trains (8am, 4pm), but you have to buy the ticket on the train. All trains heading north stop at Daraw (1st/2nd class ££16/11, 45 minutes), Kom Ombo (££17/13, one hour), Edfu (££22/14, two hours), Esna (££29/17, 2½ hours) and Luxor (££35/21, three hours). Student discounts are available on all of these trains.

**Abela Egypt Sleeping Train** (☎ 230 2124; [www.sleepingtrains.com](http://www.sleepingtrains.com)) has two daily services to Cairo at 5pm and 6.30pm (single/double cabin per person US\$60/80, children aged four to nine years US\$45 including dinner and breakfast, 14 hours). Note that there is no student discount, and tickets must be paid for in US dollars.

## GETTING AROUND

### To/From the Airport

The airport is located 25km southwest of town. A taxi to/from the airport costs about ££30 to ££35.

### Bicycle

Aswan is not a great town for cycling. However, there are a few places at the train-station end of Sharia as-Souq where you can hire bicycles for about ££12 a day.

### POLICE CONVOYS

Driving north or south means going in a police convoy. Convoys congregate in the parking lot opposite the Unfinished Obelisk. Be there at least 15 minutes in advance. Two convoys head north to Luxor at 8am, one direct and one travelling via Kom Ombo, Edfu and Esna. Another one leaves at 2pm, direct to Luxor. Two convoys travel to Abu Simbel (4am and 11am). The trip to Luxor takes approximately three hours, and it's 3½ hours to Abu Simbel.



## Taxi

A taxi tour that includes Philae, the High Dam and the Unfinished Obelisk near the Fatimid Cemetery costs around ££80 to ££100 for five to six people. Taxis can also take you on day trips to Daraw and/or Kom Ombo for about ££150. Remember that you have to join the convoy to do this. A taxi anywhere within the town costs ££5 to ££10.

Service taxis (50pt) run along the major roads in Aswan.

# AROUND ASWAN

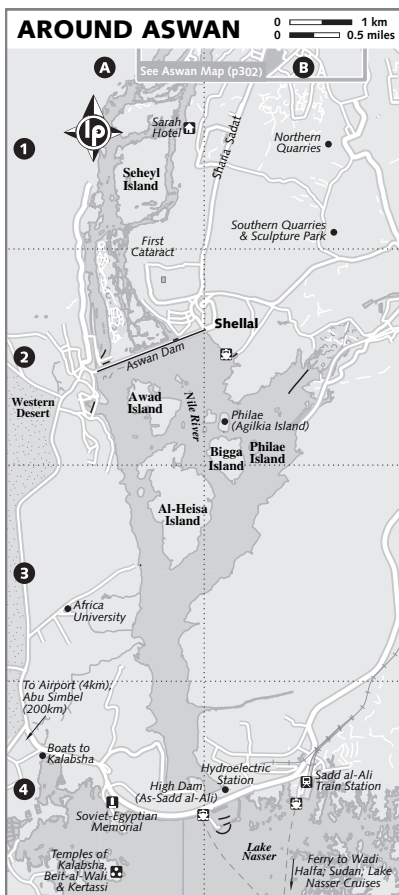
## ASWAN DAM

At the end of the 19th century Egypt's fast-growing population made it imperative to cultivate more agricultural land, which would only be possible by regulating the flow of the Nile. The British engineer Sir William Willcocks started construction of the old Aswan Dam in 1898 above the First Cataract. When completed in 1902, it was the largest dam in the world, measuring 2441m across, 50m tall and 30m wide, and was made almost entirely of Aswan granite.

It was raised twice to meet the demand not only to increase the area of cultivable land but also to provide hydroelectric power. With the opening of the High Dam, it now only generates hydroelectricity for a nearby factory producing fertilisers, and otherwise serves as a tourist attraction on the way to the High Dam, 6km upstream. The road to the airport and all trips to Abu Simbel by road include a drive across the Aswan Dam.

## SEHEYI ISLAND

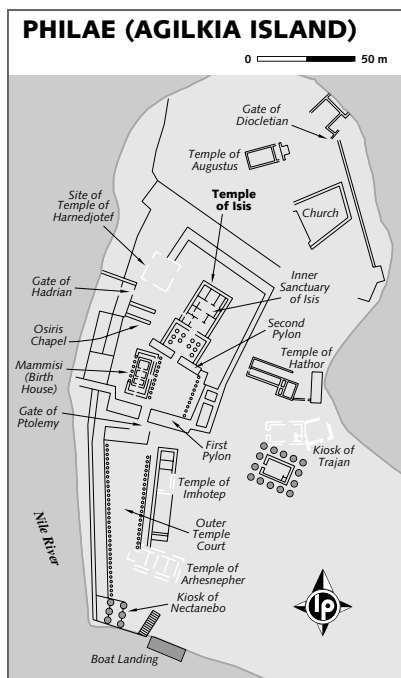
The large island situated just north of the old Aswan Dam, **Seheyl** (adult/child ££65/35; ☎ 7am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 5pm May-Sep) was sacred to the goddess Anukis. Prior to the dam's construction, the Nile would rush noisily through the granite boulders that emerged from the riverbed just south of here, forming the First Cataract, called Shellal by the Egyptians. Herodotus reported that an Egyptian official had told him that this was the source of the Nile, which flowed north and south from there. Now the waters flow slowly and Seheyl makes an ideal destination for a slightly longer felucca trip. On the island's southern tip is



a cliff with more than **200 inscriptions**, most dating to the 18th and 19th dynasties, of princes, generals and other officials who passed by on their journey to Nubia. The most famous is the so-called 'famine stele' from the 3rd dynasty that recounts a terrible seven-year famine during the reign of Zoser (2667–2648 BC), which the pharaoh tried to end by making offerings to the Temple of Khnum at Elephantine.

Next to the inscriptions is a friendly Nubian village with brightly coloured houses. Several houses now welcome visitors, including **Kanzian House** (☎ 012 415 4902; set meal with tea ££30), serving tea and good Nubian lunches as well as selling local crafts. It's a pleasant place to stroll around.





## PHILAE (AGILKIA ISLAND)

The romantic aura and the grandeur of the **Temple of Isis** (adult/child EE40/20; ☞ 7am–4pm Oct–May, to 5pm Jun–Sep) on the island of Philae (fee-leh) lured pilgrims for thousands of years, and during the 19th century the ruins became one of Egypt's most legendary tourist attractions. After the building of the old Aswan Dam, Philae was swamped for six months of every year by the high waters, allowing travellers to take rowing boats and glide among the partially submerged columns to peer down through the translucent green at the wondrous sanctuaries of the mighty gods below.

After the completion of the High Dam, the temple would have entirely disappeared had Unesco not intervened. Between 1972 and 1980, the massive temple complex was disassembled stone by stone and reconstructed 20m higher on nearby Agilkia Island. Agilkia was then landscaped to resemble the sacred isle of Isis.

Although the cult of Isis at Philae goes back at least to the 7th century BC, the earliest remains on the island date from the reign

of the last native king of Egypt, Nectanebo I (380–362 BC). The most important ruins were begun by Ptolemy II Philadelphus and added to for the next 500 years until the reign of Diocletian (AD 284–305). By Roman times Isis had become the greatest of all the Egyptian gods, worshipped right across the Roman Empire even as far as Britain. Indeed, as late as AD 550, well after Rome and its empire embraced Christianity, Isis was still being worshipped at Philae. Early Christians eventually transformed the main temple's hypostyle hall into a chapel and defaced the pagan reliefs, their inscriptions later vandalised by early Muslims.

## Touring the Temple

The boat across to the temple leaves you at the base of the **Kiosk of Nectanebo**, the oldest part of the Philae complex. Heading north, you walk down the **outer temple court**, which has colonnades running along both sides, the western one is the most complete, with windows that originally overlooked the island of Biga. At the end is the entrance of the Temple of Isis, marked by the 18m-high towers of the **first pylon** with reliefs of Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos smiting enemies.

In the central court of the **Temple of Isis**, the *mammisi* is dedicated to Horus, son of Isis and Osiris. Successive pharaohs reinstated their legitimacy as the mortal descendants of Horus by taking part in rituals celebrating the Isis legend (see the boxed text, p235) and the birth of her son Horus in the marshes.

The **second pylon** leads to a hypostyle hall, with superb column capitals, and beyond lie three vestibules, leading into the **Inner Sanctuary of Isis**. Two granite shrines stood here, one containing a gold statue of Isis and another containing the barque in which the statue travelled, but those were long ago moved to Florence and Paris, and only the stone pedestal for the barque remains, inscribed with the names of Ptolemy III (246–221 BC) and his wife Berenice. A staircase, on the western side, leads up to the **Osiris Chapel**, closed at the time of writing, decorated with scenes of the gods bemoaning the dead Osiris, as well as clear images of the Isis Legend and the creation of Horus.

On the northern tip of the island you'll find the **Temple of Augustus** and the **Gate of Diocletian**; east of the second pylon is the de-

lightful **Temple of Hathor** decorated with reliefs of musicians (including an ape playing the lute) and Bes, the god of childbirth. South of this is the elegant, unfinished pavilion by the water's edge, known as the **Kiosk of Trajan** (or 'Pharaoh's Bed'), perhaps the most famous of Philae's monuments and frequently painted by Victorian artists.

## Sound-&Light Show

Each evening a **sound-and-light show** ([www.sound-light.egypt.com](http://www.sound-light.egypt.com); adult/child ££60/44) is shown at Philae (6.30pm, 7.45pm and 9pm October to May, 8pm, 9.15pm and 10.30pm May to September, and 7.30pm, 8.45pm and 10pm Ramadan). The commentary is cheesy, but wandering through the temple at night is quite delightful. Double-check the schedule at the tourist office.

Day	Show 1	Show 2	Show 3
Monday	English	French	-
Tuesday	French	English	French
Wednesday	French	English	French
Thursday	French	Spanish	Italian
Friday	English	French	-
Saturday	English	Arabic	-
Sunday	German	French	-

## Getting There & Away

The boat landing for the Philae complex is at Shellal, south of the old Aswan Dam. The only easy way to get there is by taxi or organised trip (which can be arranged by most travel agencies and major hotels in Aswan). The return taxi fare costs about ££40 without bargaining. Tickets for the return trip are sold at the booth on the landing (££10 per person, small extra baksheesh for the boatman particularly if you want to stay a little longer).

### HIGH DAM FACTS

- Length: 3600m
- Width at base: 980m
- Height at highest point: 111m
- Number of workers involved in construction: 35,000
- Number of workers who died during construction: 451

## HIGH DAM

Egypt's modern example of construction on a monumental scale, the controversial **Aswan High Dam** (As-Sadd al-Ali) contains 18 times the amount of material used in the Great Pyramid of Khufu and created Lake Nasser, the world's largest artificial lake.

From the 1940s, it was clear that the old Aswan Dam, which only regulated the flow of water, was not big enough to counter the unpredictable annual flooding of the Nile. In 1952, when Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power, plans were drawn up for a new dam, 6km south of the old one, but from the start there were political and engineering difficulties. In 1956, after the World Bank refused the promised loan for the project, Nasser ordered the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, which sparked the Suez Crisis in which France, the UK and Israel invaded the canal region. But Nasser got his way and also won additional funding and expertise from the Soviet Union. Work started in 1960 and was finally completed in 1971.

The dam has brought great benefits to Egypt's farmers, increasing cultivable land by at least 30%. At the same time, the country's power supply has doubled. But there are downsides. The dam has stopped the flow of silt essential to the fertility of the land, and the much higher use of artificial fertilisers has led to increasing salinity of the agricultural areas. The ground water tables have risen, too, and are damaging many monuments close to the Nile. The now perennially full irrigation canals have led to endemic infection with the bilharzia parasite, until recently a huge public health problem.

Most people visit the High Dam, 13km south of Aswan, as part of an organised trip to sights south of Aswan. There is a small pavilion with displays detailing the dimensions and the construction of the dam, and on the western side is a monument honouring Soviet-Egyptian friendship and co-operation. Video cameras and zoom lenses cannot be used, although nobody seems to police this.

## Getting There & Away

The quickest way to get to the High Dam is to take a taxi from Aswan (about ££20). Usually it is combined with a trip to the Temple of Kalabsha, which is about 3km from the western end of the dam and is visible from the dam on the western side of Lake Nasser.

### FEAST, FAMINE OR WAR

Egypt's fate has always been closely intertwined with the amount of water in the Nile, and although the river flows through many countries, it is Egypt that has gained the most from its beneficence. Ancient Egyptians called their country Kemet (Black Land), after the fertile silt that the Nile's receding waters left in their wake. This annual dumping of a thick layer of dark, wet topsoil allowed ancient Egypt's agricultural system to develop and thrive, leading in turn to an accumulation of wealth and the flourishing of a sophisticated society and culture. When the floods failed and hunger turned to famine, the entire system broke down: consecutive years of inadequate flooding often coincided with the collapse of central authority or invasion by a foreign power.

Because of this dependence on the Nile, the Egyptians developed a highly organised irrigation system to help them deal with its unpredictability. Nilometers, a series of steps against which the rising water would be gauged, were used to measure the level of the flood, which was crucial for predicting soil fertility and crop yields. The Nilometer at Elephantine (see p306), on Egypt's southern frontier, was one of the first to show evidence of rising water in early June. Authorities also used the level of the flood to predict the size of the harvest and therefore to fix the level of taxes farmers should pay.

From the earliest times canals helped extend the reach of the flood plain, and devices were developed to help move water. These began as simple pots. Later, the *shadouf*, a long pole with a 'bucket' at one end and counterbalancing weight at the other, and the *saqia*, an animal-powered water wheel, helped farmers to move greater amounts of water and extend the area of cultivable land.

Since the building of the High Dam, Egypt has been freed from the uncertainties of the Nile's annual flood, but the supply of water is still not entirely within its control. At present Egypt's use of Nile water is governed by a 1959 treaty with Sudan that essentially divides the flow of the river between the two countries. The eight other countries around the Nile basin claim – not without reason – that this is unfair and are clamouring for a more equitable division of this precious resource. An international initiative to help resolve the issue has been underway since 1999 but Egypt, the largest and most powerful – and also the most Nile dependent – of the riparian states has so far blocked any changes to the 1959 treaty and has even threatened war if any country violates its terms.

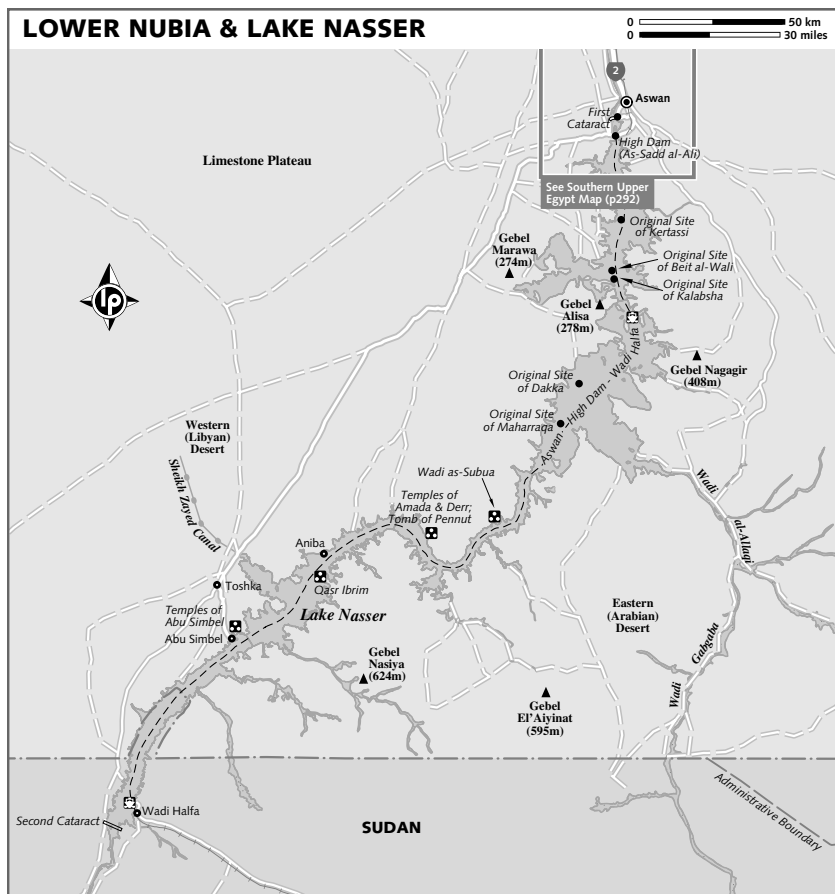
## LOWER NUBIA & LAKE NASSER

For thousands of years, the First Cataract marked the border between Egypt and Nubia, the land that stretched from Aswan to Khartoum. The Nile Valley on the Egyptian side was fertile and continuously cultivated, while the banks further south in Nubia were more rugged, with rocky desert cliffs and sand separating small pockets of agricultural land.

The building of the Aswan and High Dams irrevocably changed all that, and much of Nubia disappeared under the waters of Lake Nasser. The landscape now is dominated by the contrast of smooth desert and the calm green-brown water of the lake. Apart from the beauty and the peace of the lake itself, the main attraction

of this region is the temples that were so painstakingly moved above the floodwaters in the 1960s. See the boxed text (p324) for more about this mammoth cultural rescue mission. The area between the First and the Second Cataract is generally known as Lower Nubia (ancient Egyptian Wawat), and further south between the Second and Sixth Cataracts is Upper Nubia (Kush).

To ancient Egyptians, Nubia was Ta-Sety, the Land of Bowmen, after the weapon for which the Nubians were famous. It was a crucial route for the trade with sub-Saharan Africa, and the source of much-needed raw materials, such as copper, ivory, ebony and gold. The modern name is thought to come from the ancient Egyptian word *nbw*, meaning 'gold'. Egypt was always interested in Nubia and its riches, and the two people's history was always connected: when Egypt was strong it dominated Nubia and aggres-



sively exploited its natural resources; when Egypt was weak, the Nubians enjoyed periods of growth and development.

Evidence of 10,000-year-old settlements has been found in northern Nubia. At Nabta Playa, located some 100km west of Abu Simbel, archaeologists have recently discovered the remains of houses, sculpted monoliths and the world's oldest calendar made of small standing stones, dating from around 6000 BC. Until 3500 BC Nubia and Egypt both developed in roughly the same way, domesticating animals, growing crops and gradually adopting permanent settlements. Both people were ethnically linked, but the darker-skinned Nubians had more African features and spoke a Nilo-Saharan

language, while the ancient Egyptian language is Afro-Asiatic.

With the unification of the land north of Aswan around 3100 BC, Egypt started to impose its authority on Nubia. From the beginning of the Old Kingdom, for nearly 5000 years, expeditions were sent to extract the region's considerable mineral wealth. During the First Intermediate Period (2181–2055 BC), central authority in Egypt collapsed, while Nubia became stronger, and Nubian soldiers played an important role in Egypt's civil war. The reunification of Egypt, at the start of the Middle Kingdom, saw Lower Nubia once again annexed and a chain of mud-brick fortresses built at strategic points along the Nile to safeguard trade.

During the New Kingdom, instead of fortresses, the Egyptians built temples in Nubia, dividing the whole of the region into five nomes, ruled on the pharaoh's behalf by his viceroy, who took the title King's Son of Kush. Taking advantage of Egypt's political disunity during the Third Intermediate Period (1069–747 BC), the tables were turned and Nubians extended their authority far to the north, ruling Egypt for a century as the 25th Kushite dynasty (747–656 BC). The 25th dynasty ended with the Assyrian invasion of Egypt, after which Nubian action was guided by its own best interests, sometimes siding with foreign invaders, sometimes with their Egyptian neighbours.

Christianity gradually spread to Nubia after the 5th century AD and lasted long after Islam had spread along the Egyptian Nile. In AD 652 Egypt's new Muslim authorities made a peace treaty with the Christian king of Nubia. That treaty lasted more or less until the 13th century, when Egyptians moved south again: the last Christian king of Nubia was replaced by a Muslim in 1305 and most of the population converted to Islam. In the 19th century Nubia was again important to Egyptian ambitions as the route for its supply of slaves. The rise of the Mahdist state in Sudan at the end of the 19th century led to Nubia being divided for the last time: with the defeat of the Mahdi and his successor, and the establishment of the Anglo-Egyptian government in Sudan in 1899, a border between Egypt and Sudan was established 40km north of Wadi Halfa.

## Modern Nubia

Following the completion of the old Aswan Dam in 1902, and again after its height was raised in 1912 and 1934, the water level of the Nile in Lower Nubia gradually rose from 87m to 121m, partially submerging many of the monuments in the area and, by the 1930s, totally flooding a large number of Nubian villages. With their homes flooded, some Nubians moved north where, with government help, they bought land and built villages based on their traditional architecture. Most of the Nubian villages close to Aswan, such as Elephantine, West Aswan and Seheyl, are made up of people who moved at this time. Those who decided to stay in their homeland, built houses on higher land, assuming they would be safe, but they saw their

date plantations, central to their economy, destroyed. This meant that many Nubian men were forced to search for work further north, leaving the women behind to run the communities.

Less than 30 years later, the building of the High Dam forced those who had stayed to move again. In the 1960s, 50,000 Egyptian Nubians were relocated to government-built villages around Kom Ombo, 50km north of Aswan.

## Nubian Culture

The Nubians have paid the highest price for Egypt's greater good. They have lost their homes and their homeland, and with a new generation growing up far from the homeland, as Egyptians, or even Europeans and Americans, they are now also gradually losing their distinctive identity and traditions.

What is left of Nubian culture then seems all the more vibrant. Nubian music, famous for its unique sound (see the boxed text, opposite), was popularised in the West by musicians such as Hamza ad-Din, whose oud (lute) melodies are ethereally beautiful. As well as the oud, two basic instruments give the music its distinctive rhythm and harmony: the *douff*, a wide, shallow drum or tabla that musicians hold in their hands; and the *kisir*, a type of stringed instrument.

Less known abroad is Nubia's distinctive architecture, which was the main influence on Egyptian mud-brick architect Hassan Fathy. Traditional Lower Nubian houses are made with mud bricks, but unlike the Upper-Egyptian houses, they often have domed or vaulted ceilings, and further south the houses usually have a flat split-palm roof. They are plastered or whitewashed and covered with decorations, including ceramic plates. The basic forms of these houses can be seen in the Nubian villages around Aswan and in Ballana, near Kom Ombo.

Nubians also have their own marriage customs. Traditionally wedding festivities lasted for up to 15 days, although nowadays they are a three-day affair. On the first night of the festivities, the bride and groom celebrate separately with their respective friends and families. On the second night, the bride takes her party to the groom's home and both groups dance to traditional music until the wee hours. Then the bride returns home and her hands and feet are painted with beauti-

## NUBIAN MUSIC

It's one of those strange quirks, but it's almost easier to hear and buy Nubian music in the West than it is in Egypt, apart from in Aswan. Nubian music is very different to the more popular Egyptian music, is rarely heard on national TV and radio, and hard to find in music stores in Cairo. But Nubian artists sell CDs by the rackload in Europe and play to sell-out audiences.

The biggest name is Ali Hassan Kuban. A former tillerman from a small village near Aswan, Kuban grew up playing at weddings and parties and made the leap to a global audience after being invited to perform at a Berlin festival in 1989. Until his death in 2001, he toured all over Europe, as well as in Japan, Canada and the USA. He released several CDs on the German record label **Piranha** ([www.piranha.de](http://www.piranha.de)), including *From Nubia to Cairo* and *Walk Like a Nubian*.

The Nubian sound, unlike Arabic music with its jarring use of quarter tones, is easily accessible, particularly to a Western audience familiar with African music. It is rhythmic, warm and exotic, mixing simple melodies and soulful vocals. This can be heard at its best on a series of CDs by a loose grouping of musicians and vocalists recording under the name Salamat. Look out especially for *Mambo al-Soudani* (again on the Piranha label).

A slightly different facet of Nubian music is represented by Hamza ad-Din, a Nubian composer born in Wadi Halfa in 1929 and widely respected in the West for his semiclassical compositions written for the oud (lute). Inspired by his Sufi beliefs, Ad-Din's work is extremely haunting, especially *Escalay* (The Waterwheel), which you can find in a recording by the composer himself, or there's an excellent version of it by the Kronos Quartet on their CD *Pieces of Africa*.

Other names to look out for are the now-retired Sayyed Gayer, who sings poems and love songs accompanied only by the *douff* (drum), and Ahmed Monieb and Mohammed Hamam.

The best places to pick up CDs of Nubian music are from the music stores in the Aswan souq, where the sales assistants are happy to let you listen to different musicians. To hear authentic live Nubian music, try to get yourself invited to a Nubian wedding in Aswan. You can also head to Eskaleh in Abu Simbel (p325), where musician Fikry Kacheh hosts performances by local musicians.

ful designs in henna. The groom will also have his hands and feet covered in henna but without any design. On the third day, the groom and his party walk slowly to the bride's house in a *zaffer* (procession), singing and dancing the whole way. Traditionally the groom will stay at the bride's house for three days before seeing his family. The couple will then set up home.

## Getting There & Away

Although all the sites except Qasr Ibrim have roads leading to them, the only sites foreigners are currently allowed to drive to are Kalabsha, Beit al-Wali and Kertassi. The road to Abu Simbel is open, but foreigners are only allowed to travel in buses or micro-buses in a police convoy. Abu Simbel can be reached by plane from Aswan, Luxor or Cairo. For more details on travelling to Abu Simbel, see p326.

For the moment, the rest of the sites can only be reached by boat, which is in any case the best way to see Lake Nasser's dramatic monuments. See p92 for details.

## LAKE NASSER

Looking out over Lake Nasser's vast expanse of deep green-blue water, it's hard to believe that it is human-made. As the world's largest artificial lake, its statistics are staggering: with an area of 5250 sq km, it is 510km long and between 5km and 35km wide. On average it contains some 135 billion cubic metres of water, of which an estimated six billion are lost each year to evaporation. Its maximum capacity is 157 billion cubic metres of water, which was reached in 1996 after heavy rains in Ethiopia, forcing the opening of a special spillway at Toshka, about 30km north of Abu Simbel, the first time it had been opened since the dam was built. The Egyptian government has since embarked on a controversial project to build a new canal and irrigate thousands of acres in what is now the Nubian Desert between Toshka and the New Valley, a project President Mubarak has likened to the Suez Canal and Aswan High Dam in its enormity.

Numbers aside, the contrast between this enormous body of water and the remote desert stretching away on all sides makes Lake



Nasser a place of austere beauty. Because the level of the lake fluctuates it has been difficult to build settlements around its edges. Instead the lake has become a place for migrating birds to rest on their long journeys north and south. Gazelles, foxes and several types of snake (including the deadly horned viper) live on its shores. Many species of fish live in its waters, including the enormous Nile perch. Crocodiles – some reportedly up to 5m long – and monitor lizards also live in the lake's shallows. The main human presence here, apart from the fast-growing population of Abu Simbel town and the few tourists who visit, is limited to the 5000 or so fishermen who spend up to six months at a time in small rowing boats, together catching about 50,000 tonnes of small fish each year.

## KALABSHA, BEIT AL-WALI & KERTASSI

As a result of a massive Unesco effort, the temples of **Kalabsha, Beit al-Wali** and **Kertassi** (adult/student £25/15; ☎ 8am–4pm) were transplanted from a now-submerged site about 50km south of Aswan. The new site is on the west bank of Lake Nasser just south of the High Dam.

The **Temple of Kalabsha**, started in the late Ptolemaic period and completed during the reign of Emperor Augustus (30 BC–AD 14), was dedicated to the Nubian solar god Merwel, known to the Greeks as Mandulis. Later it was used as a church.

In the 1960s and '70s the West German government financed the transfer and reconstruction of the 13,000 blocks of the temple. In thanks, it was presented with the temple's west pylon, now in the Berlin Museum. During the rescue operation, evidence was found of older structures dating from the times of Amenhotep II (1427–1400 BC) and Ptolemy IX.

An impressive stone causeway leads from the lake to the first pylon of the temple, beyond which are the colonnaded court and the eight-columned hypostyle hall. Inscriptions on the walls show various emperors or pharaohs in the presence of gods and goddesses. Just beyond the hall is the sanctuary consisting of three chambers, with stairs leading from one up to the roof, where there are superb views of Lake Nasser and the High Dam, across the capitals of the hall and court. An inner passage, between the temple and the encircling wall, leads to a well-preserved Nilometer.

The **Temple of Beit al-Wali** was rebuilt with assistance from the US government and was placed just northwest of the Temple of Kalabsha. The temple, mostly built by Ramses II, was cut into the rock and fronted by a brick pylon. On the walls of the forecourt, several fine reliefs detail the pharaoh's victory over the Nubians (on the south wall) and wars against the Libyans and Syrians (on the north wall). Ramses is gripping the hair of his enemies prior to smashing their brains while women plead for mercy. The finest scenes are those of Ramses on his throne, receiving the tribute paid by the defeated Nubians, including leopard skins, gold rings, elephant tusks, feathers and exotic animals.

Just north of the Temple of Kalabsha are the scant but picturesque remains of the **Temple of Kertassi**, with two Hathor columns, a massive architrave and four fine papyrus columns.

When the water level is low you can sometimes walk across to the site, otherwise you can find a motorboat on the western side of the High Dam (around ££30 for the return trip and an hour to visit).

## WADI AS-SUBUA

The **temples of Wadi as-Subua** (adult/student ££35/20) were moved to this site, about 4km west of the original now-submerged Wadi as-Subua between 1961 and 1965.

Wadi as-Subua means 'Valley of Lions' in Arabic and refers to the avenue of sphinxes that leads to the **Temple of Ramses II**. Yet another monument built during the reign of the energetic pharaoh, the interior of the temple was hewn from the rock and fronted by a stone pylon and colossal statues. Behind the pylon is a court featuring 10 more statues of the pharaoh, beyond which lies a 12-pillared hall and the sanctuary. The central niche was once carved with relief scenes of Ramses making offerings to Amun-Ra and Ra-Horakhty. In Christian times this part was converted into a church, the pagan reliefs plastered over and painted with saints, so that now, with part of the plaster fallen away, Ramses II appears to be adoring St Peter!

About 1km to the north are the remains of the **Temple of Dakka**, begun by the Upper Nubian Pharaoh Arkamani (218–200 BC) using materials from much earlier structures and adapted by the Ptolemies and the Roman Emperor Augustus. Originally situated 40km north of here, it is dedicated to the god of wis-

dom, Thoth, and is notable for its 12m-high pylon, which you can climb for great views of the lake and the surrounding temples.

The **Temple of Maharraqa**, the smallest of the three at this site, originally stood 50km north at the ancient site of Ofendina. Dedicated to Isis and Serapis, the Alexandrian god, its decorations were never finished and all that remains is a small hypostyle hall, where in the northeast corner an usual spiral staircase of masonry leads up to the roof.

## AMADA

Situated around 180km south of the High Dam there are two temples and a tomb at **Amada** (adult/student ££35/20).

The **Temple of Amada**, moved about 2.6km from its original location, is the oldest surviving monument on Lake Nasser. It was built jointly by 18th-dynasty pharaohs Tuthmosis III and his son Amenhotep II, with a hypostyle hall added by his successor, Tuthmosis IV (1400–1390 BC). Dedicated, like many temples in Nubia, to the gods Amun-Ra and Ra-Horakhty, it has some of the finest and best-preserved reliefs of any Nubian monument and contains two important historical inscriptions. The first, on a stele at the left (north) side of the entrance, describes the unsuccessful Libyan invasion of Egypt (1209 BC) during Pharaoh Merneptah's reign, and a second stele on the back wall of the sanctuary, describing Amenhotep II's military campaign (1424 BC) in Palestine, both no doubt designed to impress upon the Nubians that political opposition to the powerful Egyptians was useless.

The rock-cut **Temple of Derr**, built by Ramses II, stood on a curve of the Nile. The pylon and court have disappeared, but there are some well-preserved reliefs in the ruined pillared hall, illustrating the Nubian campaign of Ramses II, with the usual killing of his enemies, accompanied by his famous pet lion. Following cleaning, many of the scenes are once again brightly coloured.

Five minutes' walk away is the small rock-cut **Tomb of Pennut**, viceroy of Nubia under Ramses VI (1143–1136 BC), which was originally situated at Aniba, 40km southwest of Amada. This well-preserved Nubian tomb consists of a small offering chapel and a niche at the rear, with reliefs depicting events and personalities from Pennut's life, including him being presented with a gift by Ramses VI.

## QASR IBRIM

The only Nubian monument visible on its original site, **Qasr Ibrim** once sat on top of a 70m-high cliff, about 60km north of Abu Simbel, but now has water lapping at its edges.

There is evidence that Ibrim was a garrison town from 1000 BC onwards, and that around 680 BC the 25th-dynasty Pharaoh Taharka (690–664 BC), a Nubian by birth, built a mud-brick temple dedicated to Isis. During Roman times the town was one of the last bastions of paganism, its six temples converting to Christianity two centuries later than the rest of Egypt. It then became one of the main Christian centres in Lower Nubia and held out against the Muslims until the 16th century, when a group of Bosnian mercenaries, part of the Ottoman army, occupied the site. They stayed on and married into the local Nubian community, using part of the cathedral as a mosque.

Among the structural remains, the most impressive is an 8th-century sandstone cathedral built over Taharka's temple. The site is closed to visitors because of ongoing archaeological work.

## ABU SIMBEL

☎ 097

The village of Abu Simbel lies 280km south of Aswan and only 40km north of the Sudanese border. The small settlement is laid-back and quiet. So far few tourists linger more than the few hours needed to visit the colossal temples for which it is famous, but things might be about to change. Those interested in the peace and tranquillity of the lake, in seeing the temples without the crowds, in wandering around a small nontouristy Egyptian town without police escort, or in listening to Nubian music might choose to hang around for a few days.

### Information

**Abu Simbel Hospital** (☎ 499 237; main rd)

**Ahly Bank** (main rd; ☎ 8.30am–2pm & 6–8pm Sun–Thu) Has an ATM.

**Banque du Caire** (main rd; ☎ 8.30am–2pm & 6–8pm Sun–Thu) Has an ATM.

**Banque Misr** (main rd; ☎ 8.30am–2pm & 6–8pm Sun–Thu) Has an ATM.

**Main post office** (☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Sat–Mon) On the road to the temples.

**Telephone centrale** (☎ 24hr) Off the main road.

**Tourist police** (☎ 400 277/8) On the road to the temples.

## Sights & Activities

Overlooking Lake Nasser, the two **temples of Abu Simbel** (adult/student ££80/40; ☎ 6am–5pm Oct–Apr, to 6pm May–Sep) are reached by road or, if you are on a cruise boat, from one of the jetties leading directly into the fenced temple compound.

### GREAT TEMPLE OF RAMSES II

Carved out of the mountain on the west bank of the Nile between 1274 and 1244 BC, Ramses II's imposing temple was as much dedicated to the deified pharaoh himself as to Ra-Horakhty, Amun and Ptah. The four pharaoh's colossal statues fronting the temple are like gigantic sentinels watching over the incoming traffic from the south, undoubtedly designed as a warning of the strength of the pharaoh.

Over the centuries both the Nile and the desert sands imperceptibly shifted, and this temple was lost to the world until 1813, when it was rediscovered by chance by the Swiss explorer Jean Louis Burckhardt. Only one of the heads was completely showing above the sand, the next head was broken off and, of the remaining two, only the crowns could be seen. Enough sand was cleared away in 1817 by Giovanni Belzoni for the temple to be entered.

From the temple's forecourt, a short flight of steps leads up to the terrace in front of the massive rock-cut façade, which is about 30m high and 35m wide. Guarding the entrance, three of the four famous colossal Ramses II statues sit majestically, staring out across the water into eternity – the inner left statue collapsed in antiquity and its upper body still lies on the ground. The statues, more than 20m high, are accompanied by smaller statues of the pharaoh's mother Queen Tuya, his wife Nefertari and some of his favourite children.

Above the entrance, between the central throned colossi, is the figure of the falcon-headed sun god Ra-Horakhty. Unfortunately, the sun god has been subjected to the trials of time and he now lacks part of his leg and foot.

The roof of the large hall is decorated with vultures, which are protective figures symbolising the goddess Nekhbet, and is supported by eight columns, each fronted by an Osiride statue of Ramses II. Reliefs on the walls depict the pharaoh's prowess in battle, trampling over his enemies and slaughtering them in front of the gods. On the north wall is a depiction of the famous Battle of Kadesh (c 1274 BC), now in Syria,

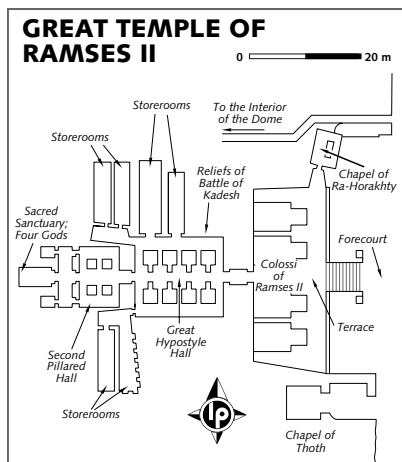
## SAVING NUBIA'S MONUMENTS

As the plans for the High Dam were drawn up, worldwide attention focused on the many valuable and irreplaceable ancient monuments doomed by the waters of Lake Nasser. Between 1960 and 1980 the Unesco-sponsored Nubian Rescue Campaign gathered expertise and financing from more than 50 countries, and sent Egyptian and foreign archaeological teams to Nubia. Necropolises were excavated, all portable artefacts and relics were removed to museums and, while some temples disappeared beneath the lake, 14 were salvaged.

Ten of them, including the temple complexes of Philae, Kalabsha and Abu Simbel, were dismantled stone by stone and painstakingly rebuilt on higher ground. Four others were donated to the countries that contributed to the rescue effort, including the splendid Temple of Dendur, now reconstructed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of all was the preservation of the temples at Abu Simbel. Ancient magnificence and skill met with the equally impressive modern technology as, at a cost of about US\$40 million, Egyptian, Italian, Swedish, German and French archaeological teams cut the temples up into more than 2000 huge blocks, weighing from 10 to 40 tonnes each, and reconstructed them inside an artificially built mountain, 210m away from the water and 65m higher than the original site. The temples were carefully oriented to face the original direction, and the landscape of their original environment was re-created on and around the concrete, dome-shaped mountain.

The project took just over four years. The temples of Abu Simbel were officially reopened in 1968 while the sacred site they had occupied for more than 3000 years disappeared beneath Lake Nasser. A plaque to the right of the temple entrance eloquently describes this achievement: 'Through this restoration of the past, we have indeed helped to build the future of mankind'.



where Ramses inspired his demoralised army by his own courage, so that they won the war against the Hittites. The scene is dominated by a famous relief of Ramses in his chariot, shooting arrows at his fleeing enemies. Also visible is the Egyptian camp, walled off by its soldiers' round-topped shields, and the fortified Hittite town, surrounded by the Orontes River.

The next hall, the four-columned vestibule where Ramses and Nefertari are shown in front of the gods and the solar barques, leads to the sacred sanctuary, where Ramses and the triad of gods of the Great Temple sit on their thrones.

The temple is aligned in such a way that on 22 February and 22 October every year, the first rays of the rising sun reach across the Nile, penetrate the temple and move along the hypostyle hall, through the vestibule and into the sanctuary, where they illuminate the somewhat mutilated figures of Ra-Horakhty, Ramses II and Amun. Ptah, to the left, is never illuminated. (Until the temples were moved, this phenomenon happened one day earlier.)

### TEMPLE OF HATHOR

Next to the great temple is the much smaller **Temple of Hathor**, with a rock-cut façade fronted by six 10m-high standing statues of Ramses and Nefertari, with some of their many children by their side. Nefertari here wears the costume of the goddess Hathor, and is, unusually, portrayed as the same

height as her husband (instead of coming only up to his knees as most consorts were depicted).

Inside, the six pillars of the hypostyle hall are crowned with capitals in the bovine shape of Hathor. On the walls the queen appears in front of the gods very much equal to Ramses II, and she is seen honouring her husband. The vestibule and adjoining chambers, which have colourful scenes of the goddess and her sacred barque, lead to the sanctuary with a weathered statue of Hathor as a cow emerging from the rock.

### SOUND-&-LIGHT SHOW

A **sound-and-light show** ([www.sound-light.egypt.com](http://www.sound-light.egypt.com); adult/child ££80/43.50) is performed nightly at 7pm and 8pm in winter (October to May) and 8pm and 9pm in summer (May to September). Headphones are provided allowing visitors to listen to the commentary in various languages. While the text is flowery and forgettable, the laser show projected onto the temples is stunning and well worth the detour.

### Sleeping & Eating

Few people stay the night in Abu Simbel, but a few hotels allow those looking for ultimate peace and quiet to enjoy their stay.

**Abu Simbel Village** (☎ 400 092; s/d ££80/110; 🏠) Abu Simbel's cheapest option, the faded Abu Simbel Village has basic vaulted rooms based around a concrete courtyard.

**ourpick Eskaleh** (Beit an-Nubi; ☎ 012 368 0521; d £40-60; 🏠 🍷) Part Nubian cultural centre with a library dedicated to Nubian history and culture, part small hotel in a traditional Nubian mud-brick house, Eskaleh is definitely the place to stay in town and something of a destination in its own right. The friendly owner Fikry Kachif, a Nubian musician who lived in Abu Simbel before the dam was built, worked for years as a guide on the *Eugénie* (p92), but got tired of travelling and decided to set up shop beside the lake. Comfortable rooms are simply furnished with local furniture, and have fans, air-con and good private bathrooms. Nubian women prepare delicious home-cooked meals (three-course lunch or dinner ££50) with organic produce from Fikry's garden. At night the quiet is absolute, a rare thing on the tourist trail along the Nile. Sometimes Fikry plays with his friends, or he hosts performances of Nubian music and dance.

**Seti Abu Simbel** (☎ 400 720; [www.setifirst.com](http://www.setifirst.com); s/d US\$130/180; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Abu Simbel's only five-star hotel has chalet-style rooms overlooking Lake Nasser, all pleasant enough but a bit empty and not worth the prices being charged. The hotel is best booked through the Cairo-based travel agency **Seti First** (☎ 02-736 9820). Its restaurant offers buffet breakfast (E£55), lunch (E£90) and dinner (E£120).

**Toya** (☎ 012 357 7539; Tariq al-Mabad; breakfast E£8, mains E£15) New place in town serving breakfast for the early arrivals, or simple local cuisine in a lovely garden or madly painted rooms inside. A good place to stop for a drink or to smoke a *sheesha*.

Along Abu Simbel's main road is a line-up of cheap cafés, with the Nubian Oasis and Wadi el-Nil among the most popular.

## Getting There & Away

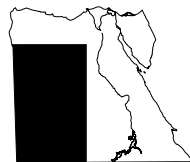
Foreigners travelling from Aswan to Abu Simbel by road must travel in police convoy. The police have deemed taxis off limits to foreigners, so luxury coach or minibus is your only option. Most people opt for a tour and get the admission and guide included.

You can avoid the convoy by taking a bus. Buses from Abu Simbel to Aswan leave at 6am, 9.30am, 1pm and 4pm from the Wadi el-Nil Restaurant on the main road. There is no advanced booking and tickets (E£21) are purchased on board. Note that the official limit is four foreign passengers per bus, although they will generally turn a blind eye to one or two extra.

EgyptAir has flights to Abu Simbel from Aswan; see p314 for flight details.

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# Western Desert



Cairo can keep its pyramids, and Luxor can have its temples – this is the desert of deserts, an unfathomable natural wonder unlike any other. Egypt's Western Desert stretches from the Nile and the Mediterranean to the Sudanese and Libyan borders, rolling far into Africa oblivious to any lines drawn on the map. The Great Sand Sea starts here, a formidable khaki ocean undulating with some of the largest sand dunes on earth.

This desolate region is punctuated with five major oases boasting freshwater sources and supporting islands of verdant greenery. The valley floors lie speckled with crumbling Roman forts, once towering protectively over ancient caravan routes as they wound their way across North Africa. Flourishing palm plantations engulf medieval towns, and it's here out west that you will find the eerie rock formations of the White Desert, a dreamscape of eroded, snow-white pinnacles. Nearby, you can explore the charred mountains of the Black Desert, and bathe in innumerable crystal-clear springs as they gush from the valley floor. Away from the popular desert circuit road lies happily isolated Siwa, a tranquil paradise of springs and ancient ruins thickly carpeted with date palms.

Not many travellers peel themselves away from the popular Nile Valley routes to make the dusty trip out west. It's a shame. Paved roads now connect the oases, and while travel in this region takes time, the Western Desert offers some of the most jaw-dropping scenery and photogenic journeys in all Egypt.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Sleep under the blazing desert stars amid the unreal chalk-rock formations of the **White Desert** (p347)
- Soak in the tranquil, old-world ambience and unique culture of breathtaking **Siwa Oasis** (p355)
- Dip into one of the numerous cool and hot **natural springs** (see boxed text, p341) that lie peppered around the oases
- Wonder at the crumbling ruins of the medieval mud-brick fortified towns that protected oasis dwellers from marauding desert tribes in **Al-Qasr** (p342)
- Scramble over the ruins of Roman forts and the oldest Christian cemetery in the world around **Al-Kharga Oasis** (p331)
- Take the ultimate desert adventure, a multiday safari into the foreboding **Great Sand Sea** (p367) and beyond

★ Siwa Oasis

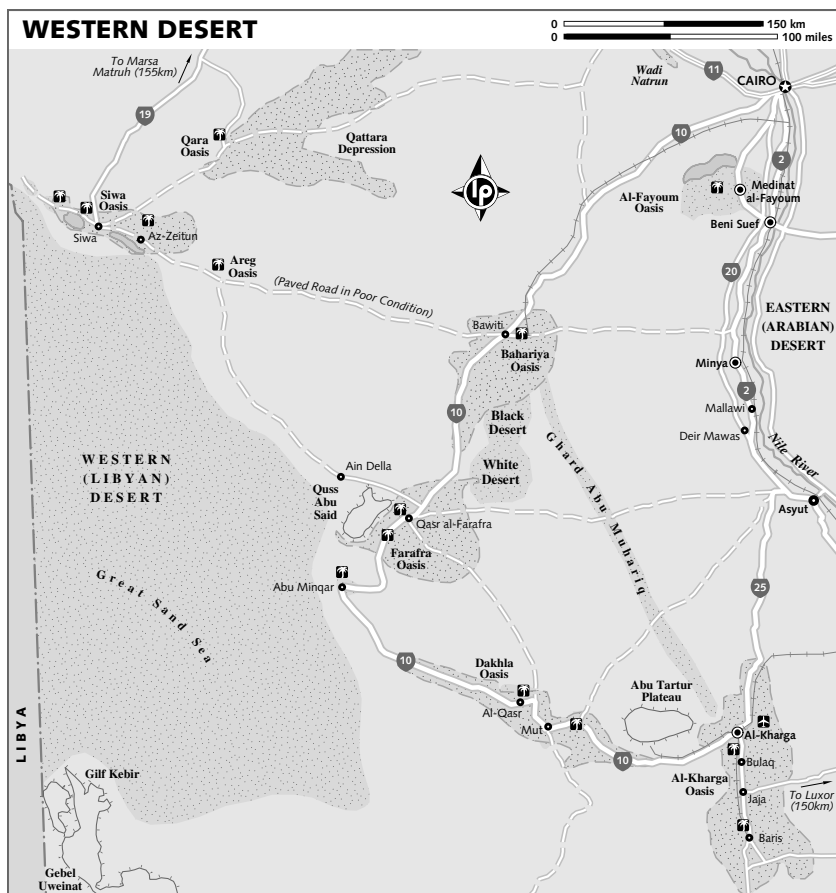
★ Great Sand Sea

★ White Desert

★ Al-Qasr

Al-Kharga Oasis ★





## History

As with the Sahara and other deserts that stretch across northern Africa, the Western Desert was once a savannah that supported all manner of wildlife. Giraffes, lions and elephants roamed here in Palaeolithic times, when the landscape is thought to have looked much like the African Sahel. All that you see in the desert – the huge tracts of sand, the vast gravel plains, the fossil beds and limestone rocks – were once the happy hunting grounds that supported nomadic tribes. Gradual climate change led to desertification and turned this vast area into the arid expanse seen today. Only depressions in the desert floor have enough water to support wildlife, agriculture and human settlement.

The ancient Egyptians understood the nature of the desert, which they saw as being synonymous with death and exile. Seth, the god of chaos who killed his brother Osiris, was said to rule here. Despite their fears, it is believed the ancient Egyptians did maintain links with the oases throughout the Pharaonic era although so far, with the exception of Dakhla Oasis, there is scant evidence of this before the Third Intermediate Period. But with the accession of a Libyan dynasty (22nd dynasty, 945–715 BC), focus moved to the west and the oases, with caravan routes to the Nile Valley. Many monuments in Al-Kharga and Bahariya date from this period.

The oases enjoyed a period of great prosperity during Roman times, when new wells

and improved irrigation led to a vast increase in the production of wheat and grapes for export to Rome. Prosperity was also encouraged by provincial army units, usually consisting of non-Romans serving under Roman officers, which protected the oases and trade routes. Garrisoned fortresses can still be seen in the desert around Al-Kharga and Bahariya, and Roman-era temples and tombs lie scattered across all the oases.

When the Romans withdrew from Egypt, the trade routes became unsafe and were a target for attacking nomadic tribes. Trade suffered, the oases went into gradual decline, and the population of settlements shrank. By medieval times, raids by nomads were severe enough to bring Mamluk garrisons to the oases. The fortified villages built to defend the population can still be seen in Dakhla (Al-Qasr, Balat) and Siwa (Shali).

But even the gradual cessation of attacks and the growing power of the pashas in Cairo during the 19th century could not revive the prosperity of ancient times. Although the oases remained important bulwarks against any threat to Egypt's western flank, the difficulty of travel through the desert meant they remained isolated agricultural communities until the arrival of motor vehicles and paved roads.

The biggest change to the oases after the departure of the Romans occurred in 1958, when President Nasser created the New Valley to relieve population pressure along the Nile. Roads were laid between the previously isolated oases and an administration was established. The New Valley Governorate is the largest in Egypt and one of the least densely populated: although conditions were right for people to migrate to the New Valley, there has never been enough work to attract significant numbers.

## Climate

The ideal time to visit the Western Desert is in late autumn or early spring. During the summer season, temperatures can soar as high as 52°C and although there is little humidity, the heat can be withering. Winter is very pleasant with average daytime highs of 20°C to 25°C, although it can get very cold (down to 0°C at times) at night. Winds, particularly the hot, dry wind of April known as the khamsin, can present great problems for desert travellers.

## Long-Range Desert Safaris

Going on safari in the Western Desert can be one of the most rewarding experiences Egypt has to offer. It can also be one of the most frustrating. Each area has its local guides and experts, though many of them operate on a shoestring and have neither the expertise nor the equipment to pull off a long-range safari. This won't stop guides from trying to persuade you they can do it. Journeys to the remote Gifl Kebir (in Egypt's southwest corner) and the Great Sand Sea need organisation, reliable equipment and plenty of experience. There are risks, and people do die in the desert each year. Military permits, which are available locally for short desert treks, must be procured in Cairo for longer trips.

The following safari operators have solid international reputations, are among the more reliable in Egypt, and will treat the desert with the respect it deserves. Expect prices to be considerably higher than those of the many smaller, local outfits.

**Al-Badawiya** (☎ 02-575 8076; [www.badawiya.com](http://www.badawiya.com))

The three Ali brothers are Bedouin from Farafra, who have built up a significant business operating out of their Al-Badawiya Hotel and an office in downtown Cairo. With considerable experience in the Western Desert, they can mount tailored camel or jeep safaris from three to 28 days. They have tents, cooking equipment and bedding.

**Dabuka Expeditions** (6085 987 9896; [www.dabuka.de](http://www.dabuka.de)) Dabuka is a German-based company that specialises in North African desert travel, not only through Egypt but also through Libya, Sudan, Tunisia and Jordan. In Egypt it arranges multiday safaris into the Great Sand Sea, Gebel Oweinat and Gifl Kebir, as well as organising camel expeditions and running off-road driving courses.

**Egypt Off Road** (☎ 010 147 5462; [www.egyptoffroad.com](http://www.egyptoffroad.com)) Egypt Off Road is one of the most highly recommended desert tour operators in Egypt. Many expat desert rats swear by owner, Peter Gaballa, who taught them how to drive in the desert. Peter is an excellent car mechanic and speaks Arabic, French, English and German fluently. He organises driving lessons in the desert and trips to the Western Desert oases, as well as more serious two-week expeditions to the Gifl Kebir and the Great Sand Sea.

**Hisham Nessim** (☎ 012 780 7999; [www.raid4x4egypt.com](http://www.raid4x4egypt.com)) Rally driver and owner of the Aquasun hotels in Farafra and Sinai, Hisham Nessim has been driving in the desert for many years. With satellite phones, GPS and six 4WDs specially rigged for long-range desert travel, he is prepared to go to all corners of Egypt. He offers five programmes (including self-drive) of seven to 14 days, or will tailor-make tours.

### OASES FOR BEGINNERS

So what exactly is an oasis? An isolated pocket of fertile tract surrounded by arid desert and supported by a natural water source – that's what. Water is available in these strips of vegetation since the oasis surface lies closer to the water table here than in surrounding areas, allowing natural springs to form. Each of the oases found in the Western Desert lies in a depression, the deepest of which is the Qattara depression at 134m below sea level.

Oases were vital to the old trade routes, as cross-desert caravans needed to stop to replenish valuable food and water supplies. Political control of an oasis often led to great prosperity from the lucrative commerce that passed through these well-trodden paths.

**Khalifa Expedition** (☎ 012 321 5445; [www.khalifaexp.com](http://www.khalifaexp.com)) Khaled and Rose-Maria Khalifa have been running camel and jeep tours throughout the Western Desert from their base in Bahariya Oasis for well over a decade. Rose-Maria is a qualified speech therapist and foot masseuse, which perhaps explains why they also offer meditation tours for people more interested in communing with nature than looking at antiquities.

**Pan Arab Tours** (☎ 02-418 4409/419; [www.panarab tours.com](http://www.panarab tours.com)) With more than 30 years' experience, Pan Arab Tours has developed expertise in taking visitors into Egypt's deserts. Used by archaeologists as well as tourists, the company has a number of specially equipped vehicles and offers six itineraries throughout the country, from two to eight days.

**Zarzora Expedition** (☎ 02-761 8105; [www.zarzora.com](http://www.zarzora.com)) Captained by the very experienced Ahmed Al-Mestekawi, a retired colonel who used to conduct military desert patrols, Zarzora does expeditions to Siwa, Gilf Kebir and the Great Sand Sea. Ahmed has in-depth knowledge of the area and moonlights as a lecturer on the desert's environment and history.

### AL-KHARGA OASIS

☎ 092 / pop 74,940

As the closest of the oases to the Nile Valley, Al-Kharga used to have the unenviable role as a place of banishment for mischievous Nile Valley citizens. Its remote location, punishing summer heat and destructive winds mean the oasis was synonymous with misery and exile. It may seem strange then that its chief town, Al-Kharga, was chosen as the capital of the New Valley Governorate in the 1950s. Life in

the oasis has improved somewhat since then, and with a smattering of fascinating ancient sites it's a worthwhile stopover.

Lying in a 220km-long and 40km-wide depression, Al-Kharga Oasis was at the crossroads of vital desert trade routes, including the famous Darb al-Arba'een (Forty Days Rd; see boxed text, p333). Al-Kharga's influential location brought it great prosperity, and the arrival of the Romans improved things as wells were dug, crops cultivated and fortresses built to protect caravan routes from attacking desert nomads. Even as late as the 1890s British forces were using lookout towers here to safeguard the 'back door' into Egypt. Today, attempts at modernising Wadi el-Gedid (the New Valley) with environmentally questionable land-reclamation efforts and intensive agriculture pose a bigger threat to the area than pillaging clans ever did.

### Al-Kharga

The busy city of Al-Kharga is the largest town in the Western Desert and also the poster-child of the government's efforts to modernise the oases. Unfortunately, visitors are unlikely to see the town's drab housing blocks and wide, bare highways as much of an improvement.

Still, the town makes a good base to explore some of the remarkable, gently crumbling sights found around this oasis valley floor. There's a fine museum to check out, and a walk through the scruffy streets of the old *souq* (market) is a worthwhile distraction. To visit most of the Graeco-Roman sights, however, you'll need to arrange your own transport (see p333).

Although there is no record of trouble in the oasis, at the time of our visit foreigners were encouraged to take police escorts around town and to nearby sights.

### ORIENTATION

Al-Kharga is fairly spread out, with the bus station in the southeast near the *souq* and crumbling old centre, and most of the hotels a fair hike away. If you're coming from Dakhla, you may want to be let off early at Sharia al-Adel.

### INFORMATION

#### Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 123)

**Tourist police** (Map p332; ☎ 792 1367; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser)

**Internet Access****Governorate Information Support Centre**

(Map p332; ☎ 792 6973; Governorate Bldg, Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; ☎ 8am-3pm & 6pm-midnight Sat-Thu)

**Internet café** (Map p332; ☎ 793 0722; off Midan Sho'ala; per hr E£10; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-11pm)

**Medical Services**

**General hospital** (Map p332; ☎ 792 0777; Sharia Basateen)

**Money**

**Pioneers Hotel** (p334) has an ATM.

**Banque du Caire** (Map p332; off Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser) Very slow service, but there is an ATM.

**Banque Misr** (Map p332; Dakhla rd)

**Post & Telephone**

Private telephone shops are sprinkled all over Al-Kharga.

**Main post office** (Map p332; Sharia Abdel Moniem Riad; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

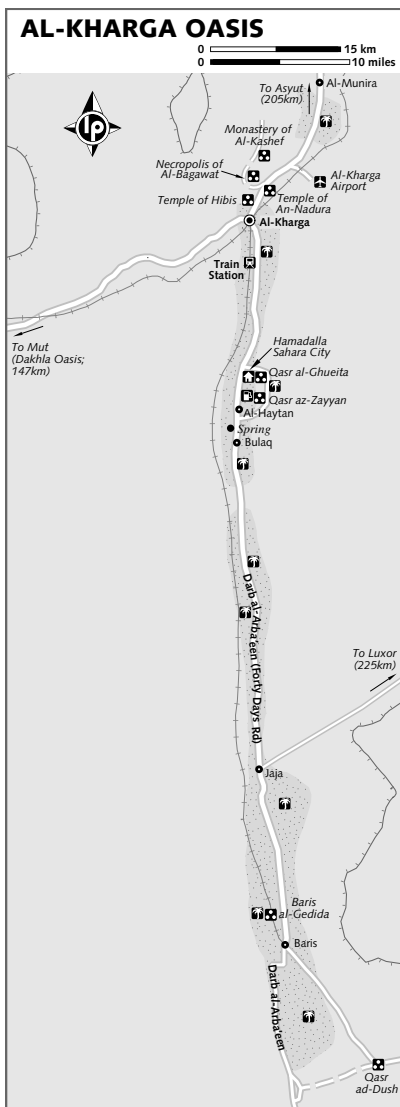
**Telephone centrale** (Map p332; Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 24hr)

**Tourist Information**

**New Valley Tourist Office** (Map p332; ☎ 792 1206; syaha2007@yahoo.com; Midan Nasser; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu) Tourism Manager Ibrahim Hassan and his crew are very helpful. Several members of staff help arrange private transport to local sights.

**SIGHTS****Al-Kharga Museum of Antiquities**

This two-storey **museum** (Map p332; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; adult/student E£25/15; ☎ 8am-5pm) is housed in a cavernous, well-lit building made from local bricks and designed to resemble the architecture of nearby Bagawat. Inside is a small but interesting selection of archaeological finds from around Al-Kharga and Dakhla Oases. There's a particularly good selection of prehistoric objects, flints, ostrich eggs and tools tracing the prehistory of the oases in both English and Arabic. There's also a smattering of objects from Pharaonic, Greek and Roman antiquities. One fascinating find is a collection of wooden Roman panels (early versions of post-it notes) detailing farmer's accounts, marriages and contracts of the time. Also look for the exquisite false-door stele of 6th-dynasty governor Khent-ka (c 2700 BC) with the earliest known reference to Dakhla Oasis.



The upper floor contains objects from the Coptic, Islamic and Ottoman eras, with some fascinating jewellery, books, coins and textiles.

**Temple of Hibis**

The town of Hebet ('the Plough', now corrupted into Hibis) was the capital of the oasis

in antiquity, but all that remains today is the well-preserved limestone **Temple of Hibis** (Map p331; adult/student E£25/15; ☞ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep). Once sitting on the edge of a sacred lake, the temple was dedicated to the Theban god triad of Amun-Re, Mut and Khons. Construction of the temple began during the 25th dynasty, though the decorations and a **colonnade** were added over the next 300 years.

An **avenue of sphinxes** leads to a series of gateways, the colonnade of Nectanebo and then to a **court**, a **hypostyle hall** and an **inner sanctuary**. One of the reliefs in the hypostyle hall shows the god Seth battling with the evil serpent Apophis – an archetype of the St George and the dragon motif. Among the graffiti left by 19th-century European travellers is a lengthy inscription from 1818 by Frederic Cailliaud, who claimed to have been the first European to see the temple.

The temple is in the process of been renovated and restored to its original location after a bungled attempt to move it elsewhere to protect it from rising groundwater. It's 2km north of town just to the left of the main road;

pick-ups (50pt) heading to Al-Munira pass this way.

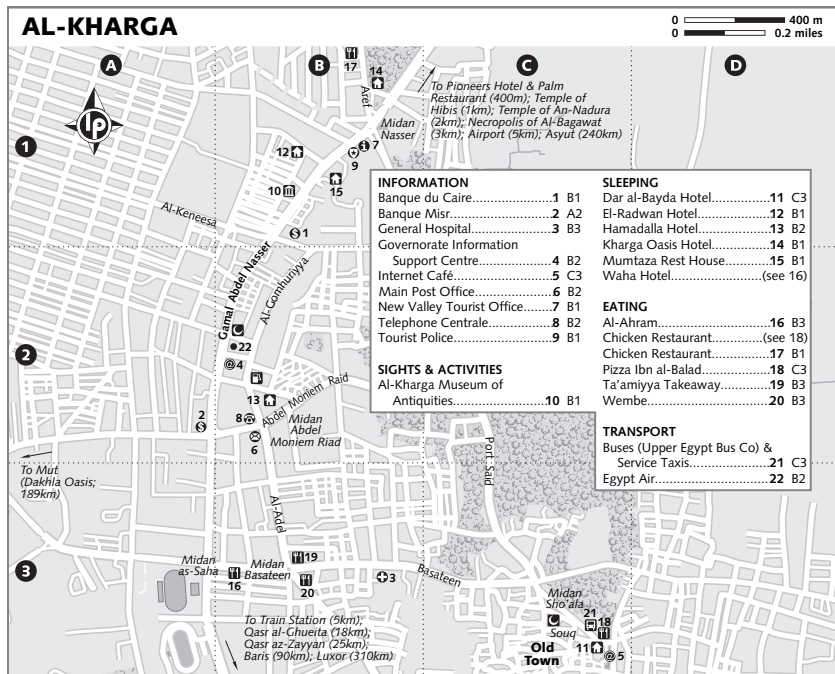
### Temple of An-Nadura

Located on a hill off the main road at the north end of town, the **Temple of An-Nadura** (Map p331; admission free) has strategic views of the area and once doubled as a fortified lookout. It was built during the reign of Roman emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161) to protect the oasis, and inside you will find the remains of a sandstone temple with hieroglyphic inscriptions. It later housed a Coptic church and was used as a fortress by the Ottomans.

The site is badly ruined, but the superb vistas are ideal for sunset adulation. The ruins lie perched on a rise off to the right of the main road before the Temple of Hibis.

### Necropolis of Al-Bagawat

It may not look like much from afar, but this **Necropolis** (Map p331; adult/student E£25/15; ☞ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep) is one of the earliest surviving and best-preserved Christian cemeteries in the world. About 1km north



## THE WAY OF DUSTY DEATH

Al-Kharga Oasis sits atop what was once the only major African north-south trade route through Egypt's Western Desert: the notorious Darb al-Arba'een, or Forty Days Rd. A 1721km track linking Fasher in Sudan's Darfur Province with Asyut in the Nile Valley, this was one of Africa's great caravan trails, bringing the riches of Sudan – gold, ivory, skins, ostrich feathers and especially slaves – north to the Nile Valley and beyond to the Mediterranean. It's thought to date back to the Old Kingdom, and the richness of the merchandise transported along this bleak track was such that protecting it was a priority. The Romans invested heavily here, building a series of fortresses – such as Qasr ad-Dush (p336), the Monastery of Al-Kashef (below) and Qasr al-Ghuita (p335) – to tax the caravans and try to foil the frequent raids by desert tribesmen and, on occasion, Nubians.

Despite the dangers, Darb al-Arba'een flourished until well into the Islamic era, by which time it was Egypt's main source of slaves. Untold numbers of tragic human cargo died of starvation and thirst on the journey north. According to 19th-century European travellers, slavers travelled in the intense summer heat, preferring to expose their merchandise to dehydration on what British geographer GW Murray (author of the 1967 *Dare Me to the Desert*) called 'the way of dusty death', rather than risk the possibility of bronchitis and pneumonia from the cold desert winter.

Despite repeated attempts by the British to suppress the trade, slaves were brought north until Darfur became part of Sudan at the beginning of the 20th century. The Darb al-Arba'een withered and today its route has been all but lost.

of the Temple of Hibis, it's built on the site of an earlier Egyptian necropolis, with most of the 263 mud-brick tombs appearing to date from the 4th to the 6th centuries AD. While many of the domed Coptic tombs are fairly plain, a few have vivid murals of biblical scenes inside and some have ornate façades. The **Chapel of Peace** has figures of the Apostles on the squinches of the domes, just visible through Greek graffiti. The **Chapel of the Exodus**, one of the oldest tombs, has the best-preserved paintings, including the Old Testament story of Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, which is visible through some 9th-century graffiti. Another large family tomb (No 25) has a mural of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, and the smaller **Chapel of the Grapes** (Anaeed al-Ainab) is named after the images of grapevines that cover the walls. A guardian will be anxious to guide you to some of the more colourful tombs, he should be tipped (around £E5).

### Monastery of Al-Kashef

Dominating the cliffs to the north of Al-Bagawat is the ruined Monastery of Al-Kashef (Deir al-Kashef; Map p331), named after Mustafa al-Kashef, a tax collector, and strategically placed to overlook what was one of the most important crossroads of the Western Desert – the point where the Darb al-Ghabari from Dakhla crossed the Darb

al-Arba'een. The magnificent mud-brick remains date back to the early Christian era, although the site was occupied as early as the Middle Kingdom. Once five storeys high, much of it has collapsed but you can see the tops of the arched corridors that crisscrossed the building. To get here, walk or drive on the left-hand track from the Necropolis of Al-Bagawat for about 1km.

### TOURS

Al-Kharga has few outfits offering desert trips, although there has been continual talk of agencies setting up shop in the near future (*inshallah*). Some of the staff at the tourist office moonlight as impromptu guides and can help organise transport for the day, but unfortunately there is a dearth of overnight trips on offer. For more information on longer desert trips, see p329.

### SLEEPING Hotels

You'd better recalibrate your hotel expectations for Al-Kharga before you arrive as, with a couple of exceptions, the choices are a little sad. On the up-side, many places are nearly empty year-round, so getting a room is never a problem!

**Waha Hotel** (Map p332; ☎ 792 0393; Sharia an-Nabawi; s/d without bathroom ££12/14, s/d ££20/30) This is the cheapest digs in a town low on options. This



four-storey hotel has basic, dingy rooms and whiffy shared toilets – splurge on a private bathroom. Bonus: you can clamber up on the roof for sweeping views of the surrounding valley.

**Mumtaza Rest House** (Map p332; ☎ 792 1206; fax 792 1205; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; dm ££20; ☺) Fresh from a round of renovations, the carpeted chalets of this government rest house are a pretty good deal by Al-Kharga standards. It's often being used by government officials, so it's best to call ahead to check availability (reservations are made through the tourist office, p331).

**Hamadalla Hotel** (Map p332; ☎ 792 0638; fax 792 5017; off Sharia Abdel Moniem Riad; s/d ££40/55, with air-con ££65/85; ☺) A hotel popular with overland tour groups, Hamadalla has rooms that are clean but dark, gloomy and garnished with ruffled furniture. There are a number of different room configurations, so ask to see a few. It sometimes sells Stella beer.

**Dar al-Bayda Hotel** (Map p332; ☎ 792 9393; Midan Sho'ala; s/d without bathroom ££40/60, s/d ££60/90, with bathroom & air-con ££75/120; ☺) A shabby place just to the left off Midan Sho'ala, where the buses and service taxis are based, so it's handy for late arrivals or if you're toting a lot of luggage. Most rooms have fans but can be noisy and, frankly, are overpriced.

**El-Radwan Hotel** (Map p332; ☎ 792 1716, 012 747 2087; off Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; s/d ££50/80; ☺) There's a good welcome (though not in English) at the Radwan, which is beside the Town Hall and well located for the Museum of Antiquities and the tourist office. The rooms are dark and worn, but reasonably kept and off the main road.

**Pioneers Hotel** (off Map p332; ☎ 792 9751-3; [www.solyamar.com](http://www.solyamar.com); Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; s/d half board from ££66/84; ☺ ☎ ☎) An apt name: these guys pioneered the concept of luxury resorts in the Western Desert, though few hotels have followed their lead. While the salmon-pink, low-rise construction is reminiscent of a hollowed-out sponge cake, the hotel does offer a level of comfort that was until recently unimaginable in the oases: a swimming pool, fitness area, outdoor Bedouin-style café, ATM, billiards and a children's playground all connected by ridiculously lush grass. It is the only place in Al-Kharga where you can count on getting alcohol.

**Kharga Oasis Hotel** (Map p332; ☎ 792 4940; Midan Nasser; s/d ££70/95; ☺) Another modern homage to concrete, the 1960s Kharga Oasis nonetheless

proffers the best-value nap in town. A favourite stopping-off point for desert adventurers, it sports generous and comfortable midpriced rooms, friendly, courteous staff and has a lush, palm-filled garden and terrace. By the time you read this, construction of some lovely traditional mud-brick bungalows in the palm groves should have been completed – these will definitely be worth a look.

**Hamadalla Sahara City** (Map p331; ☎ 762 0240; Kharga–Dush rd; s/d ££85/110; ☺) Hamadalla Sahara City shimmers like a gussied-up, garish pink-and-yellow mirage in the open desert, 15km south of Al-Kharga. Set around an urban-like hotel complex, it has domed bungalows clustered in small groups, each sporting neat, agreeable rooms with private bathrooms. It's a pain to get to without your own wheels, but the views of the desert rising over nearby Qasr al-Ghueita are damned impressive.

## Camping

**Kharga Oasis Hotel** (Map p332; ☎ 792 4940; Midan Nasser; per person ££13) The palm grove out the back of this hotel is your best bet in town for sleeping under your own canvas. You can use the hotel's toilet and shower facilities, but be warned that the garden breeds aberrantly large swarms of mosquitoes at night.

## EATING

If your palate needs a break from the staple Egyptian trinity of chicken, *fuul* (fava bean paste) and *ta'amiyya* (mashed, deep-fried fava beans), you'd be best to head for one of the better hotels. Otherwise, there's a smattering of basic eateries around Midan Sho'ala, Sharia al-Adel and near Midan Basateen. There's a cheap chicken restaurant a few doors down from the bus station, and another at the northern end of town.

**Pizza Ibn al-Balad** (Map p332; Midan Sho'ala; pizzas ££6-20) Strike us down if this place doesn't serve some of the best darned *fiteer* (Egyptian pizza/pancake) in the oases. Deservedly, it's one of the most popular places to eat. Choose from cheese, veggie and tuna or beef toppings.

**Al-Ahram** (Map p332; Waha Hotel, Sharia an-Nabawi; meals ££8-20) A small, friendly place serving roast chicken and *kofta* (spiced minced meat grilled on a skewer) accompanied by modest salads and vegetable dishes.

**Wembe** (Map p332; Midan Basateen; meals ££8-24) This busy local eatery gets the thumbs up from people who are qualified to give such ratings,

and serves the usual Egyptian comestibles: grilled meats, salads, rice and vegetables.

**Palm Restaurant** (off Map p332; ☎ 792 9751-3; fax 792 7983; Pioneers Hotel, Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser; buffet dinner €10) If there is a group staying here, dinner tends to be a buffet; otherwise the restaurant offers an à la carte selection of Continental dishes. None of the cooking here is particularly inspiring, but this is one of the best dining experiences to be had in Al-Kharga.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

The airport is 5km north of town. While **EgyptAir** (Map p332; ☎ 790 1334; Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser) has been talking for years of restarting flights to Al-Kharga, the Petroleum Surface Company has beaten it to it. The latter has tentatively scheduled Sunday flights on a 15-seat plane, leaving Cairo at 8am and returning from Al-Kharga at 4pm (€50 one-way, 1½ hours). Contact the tourist office (p331) for schedules and bookings.

### Bus

**Upper Egypt Bus Co** (Map p332; ☎ 792 0838; Midan Sho'ala) operates buses to Cairo (E£51, eight to 10 hours) at 7am, 9.30pm and 11pm. The 7am bus goes via Asyut and takes the Nile Valley agricultural road, lengthening the trip but allowing stops in Minya or Beni Suef.

There are several buses bound for Asyut (E£9 to E£10, three to four hours) leaving at 6am, 7am, 11am, 2pm and 9pm. There are 8.30am and 11.30am services that originate in Dakhla.

Local buses to Baris (E£3, one hour) leave at 7am and 2pm.

At the time of writing, regular bus services to Luxor were suspended due to lack of demand. To get to Luxor you could either catch a bus to Asyut and change there, or hire a private taxi (see below).

### Service Taxi

The **service taxi station** (Map p332; Midan Sho'ala) is next to the bus station. Most of the vehicles are minibuses but there are also a few Peugeot station wagons. Destinations include Asyut (E£10, three to four hours) and Dakhla (E£10, three hours).

### Taxi

Thanks to the new road, special taxis can get you to Luxor (via Jaja) in three hours, but will

set you back E£350. Cairo (six to seven hours) costs E£600 for the car (maximum seven people), but expect a long, hot, cramped ride.

### Train

Al-Kharga's train station (Map p331), on the road south to Baris, reflects government ambitions for the place, with impressive Islamic architecture featuring a domed ceiling and marble interior. Alas the service doesn't live up to the dream: there is one weekly departure, on Friday at 7.30am (E£11/10.25 for 2nd/3rd class), sometimes. The ticket office reckons on eight to 10 hours to cover the 477km. Be prepared for at least 12 hours. To get to the station, take any micro or bus heading for Baris or a taxi (E£5).

## GETTING AROUND

Microbuses (50pt) run along the main streets of Al-Kharga, especially Sharia Gamal Abdel Nasser. Outside the town, covered pick-up trucks go to the villages along the road south to Baris. Expect to pay around E£1.50 to E£2.

### South to Baris

A good asphalt road heads south of Al-Kharga to Baris, the southernmost town in the Western Desert. As you follow the road there are a number of easily accessible sights, all of which are shown on the Al-Kharga Oasis map (p331).

### QASR AL-GHUEITA & QASR AZ-ZAYYAN

It is easy to see why the Romans chose this site, some 18km south of Al-Kharga, for **Qasr al-Ghueita** (adult/student E£20/10; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep). The imposing Roman mud-brick fortress has survived millennia and still dominates the road to Baris. The massive outer walls enclose a 25th-dynasty sandstone temple, dedicated to the Theban triad Amun, Mut and Khons. In later centuries, the fortress served as the perimeter for a village, with some houses surviving along the outer wall. Within the hypostyle hall, a series of reliefs show Hapy, the potbellied Nile god, holding symbols of the nomes (provinces) of Upper Egypt.

The fortress' name translates as Fortress of the Small Garden, which seems an unlikely name for a place surrounded by desert. But in antiquity, Qasr al-Ghueita was the centre of a fertile agricultural community renowned for its grapes: tomb inscriptions in Thebes

mention the quality of the Ghueita grapes. An asphalt road leads 2km to the temple from the main road.

About 7km further south are the remains of **Qasr az-Zayyan** (adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep), another fortress enclosing a temple. Unlike many of the sights in this oasis, the fort is still situated beside a small but thriving village.

If you don't have a vehicle you can get to the temples by taking a bus heading for Baris (see p335) or a covered pick-up going to Bulaq (££1). There is an asphalt road linking the two temples, but 7km is a long hike if you're on foot – be sure to take plenty of water.

## BARIS

Baris, 90km south of Al-Kharga, was once one of the most important trading centres along the Darb al-Arba'een, but there is little left to remind you of that. Other than a few kiosks selling *fuul* and *ta'amiyya*, there is little of note apart from the mud-brick houses of **Baris al-Gedida**, about 2km north of the original town. Hassan Fathy, Egypt's most influential modern architect, designed the houses using traditional methods and materials and intended Baris al-Gedida to be a model for other new settlements. Work stopped at the outbreak of the Six Day War of 1967 and only two houses and some public spaces have ever been completed.

About 13km to the southeast of Baris is **Qasr ad-Dush** (adult/student ££20/10; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-6pm May-Sep), an imposing Roman temple-fortress completed around AD 177 on the site of the ancient town of Kysis. Dush was a border town strategically placed at the intersection of five desert tracks and one of the southern gateways to Egypt. It may also have been used to guard the Darb al-Dush, an east-west track to the Esna and Edfu temples in the Nile Valley. As a result it was solidly built and heavily garrisoned, with four or five more storeys lying underground. A 1st-century sandstone temple abutting the fortress was dedicated to Isis and Serapis. The gold decorations that once covered parts of the temple and earned it renown have long gone, but there is still some decoration on the inner stone walls.

Baris is not an ideal place to stay the night and you're better off staying at or near Al-Kharga.

## Getting There & Away

There are buses between Al-Kharga and Baris (££3, two daily), leaving from Al-Kharga at 7am and 2pm, and from Baris at 6am and noon. The frequent minibuses and pick-up trucks are a more convenient option between Al-Kharga and Baris, and cost about ££3. To cover the 15km between Qasr ad-Dush and Baris, negotiate a special ride with a covered pick-up, usually available for ££20 to ££30, depending on the waiting time.

## DAKHLA OASIS

☎ 092 / pop 79,810

With more than a dozen fertile hamlets sprinkled along the Western Desert circuit road, Dakhla lives up to most visitors' romantic expectations of oasis life. Lush palm groves and orchards support traditional villages, where imposing, ancient mud-brick forts still stand guard over the townships and allude to their less tranquil past.

The region has been inhabited since pre-historic times, with fossilised bones hinting at human habitation dating back 150,000 years. In Neolithic times, Dakhla was the site of a vast lake and rock paintings show that elephants, zebra and ostriches wandered its shores. As the area dried up, inhabitants migrated east to become the earliest settlers of the Nile Valley. In Pharaonic times, Dakhla retained several settlements and was a fertile land producing wine, fruit and grains. The Romans, and later Christians, left their mark by building over older settlements, and today's remaining medieval-era fortified towns attest to the more violent times of Bedouin and Arab raids.

## Mut

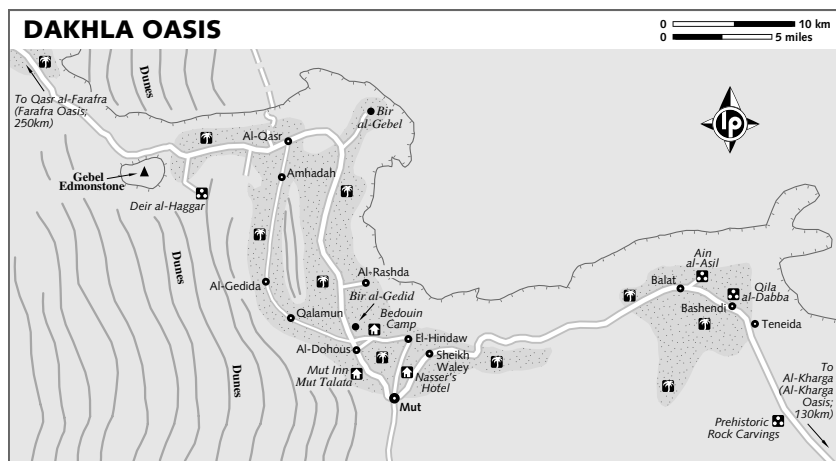
At the centre of the oasis lies the town of Mut, settled since Pharaonic times (Mut was the god Amun's consort). Although now a modern Egyptian town, it has the most facilities in the area and makes the most convenient base for travellers. Mut's wide boulevards and the proximity of the palm groves all help to give it some charm, while the remains of the ruined old town show how it must have once looked.

## INFORMATION

### Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 123)

**Tourist police** (off Map p338; ☎ 782 1687; Sharia 10th of Ramadan)



## Internet Access

Internet connections in Mut have been known to approach courier-pigeon speed. Abu Mohamed Restaurant (p339) and El-Forsan and Mebarez Hotels (see p338) all have an internet terminal or two, though prices are much higher (££10 to ££15) than at the internet cafés.

**Abo Ali Internet** (Map p338; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; per hr ££1; ☎ 8am-late)

**Mido Net** (Map p338; Sharia Basateen; per hr ££1; ☎ 8am-late)

## Medical Services

**General hospital** (Map p338; ☎ 782 1555; off Sharia 10th of Ramadan)

## Money

**Banque Misr** (Map p338; Sharia al-Wadi; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu) Exchanges cash and does cash advances on Visa and MasterCard, but does not change travellers cheques.

## Post & Telephone

**Branch post office** (Map p338; Sharia as-Salam; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

**Main post office** (Map p338; Midan al-Gamaa; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

**Telephone centrale** (Map p338; Sharia as-Salam; ☎ 24hr)

## Tourist Information

**Tourist office** (Map p338; ☎ 782 1685 6; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; ☎ 8am-3pm & some evenings) Friendly tourist-office director Omar Ahmad is a mine of knowledge

about the oases. For urgent issues he can be contacted at home on ☎ 782 0782.

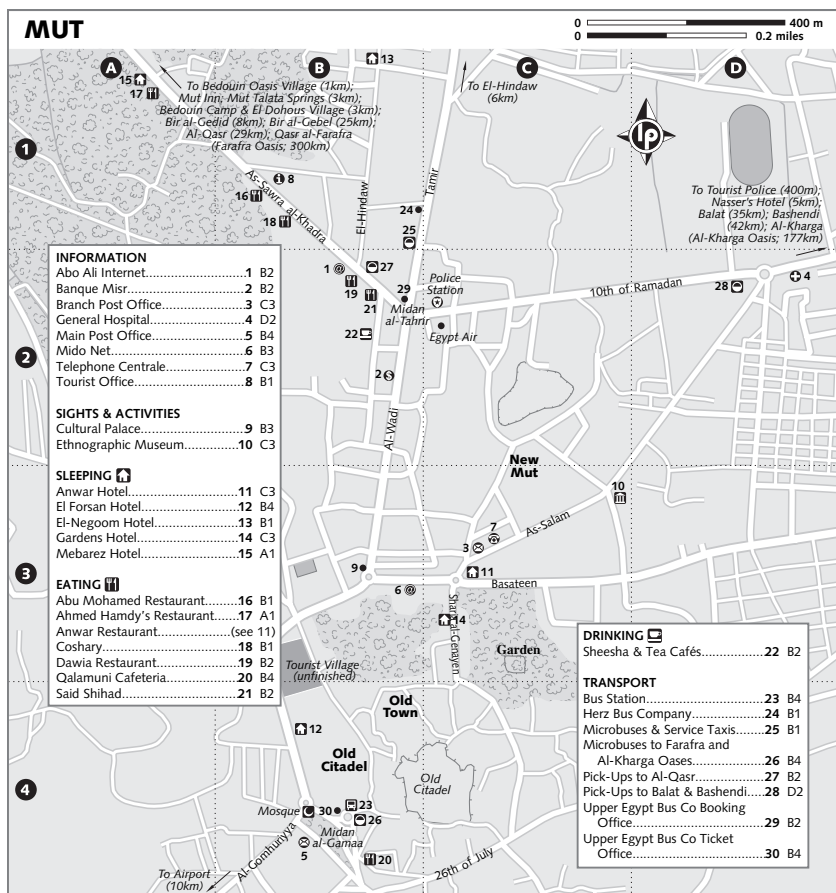
## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Ethnographic Museum

Dakhla's wonderful **museum** (Map p338; Sharia as-Salam; admission ££3; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu), attached to Dar al-Wafdeen Government Hotel, is only opened on request: ask at the tourist office or at the **Cultural Palace** (Map p338; ☎ 782 1311; Sharia al-Wadi), where the museum's manager, Ibrahim Kamel, can be found. The museum is laid out as a traditional home, with different areas for men, women and visitors. Displays of clothing, baskets, jewellery and other domestic items give an insight into oasis life.

### Old Town of Mut

For much of its existence, the villagers of old Mut lived with the threat of raiding Bedouin. Most houses here have no outside windows, thus protecting against intruders and keeping out the heat and wind of the desert. Often ignored by passing travellers, the labyrinth of mud-brick houses and lanes that wind up the slopes of the hill is definitely worth exploring. Today, you'll still see a few outlying houses being inhabited or used to store livestock, and there are plenty of low-slung, shaded corridors through which to meander. From the top of the hill, at the **citadel** (the original town centre; Map p338), there are great views of the new town and the desert cliffs and dunes that surround it.



## TOURS

Dakhla has its share of keen, would-be desert guides (although they are not as aggressive as in Bahariya). Most hotels and restaurants will also offer to take you on a trek around the area. A typical day trip includes visits to Qalamun (p342) and Baris al-Gedida (p336), a drive through the dunes, visits to a spring and a tour of Al-Qasr (p342), for up to £100 per person. Alternatively, aspiring taxi drivers can drive you to outlying sights for around £150 to £200 per day.

An overnight trip around the same area, with Bedouin music, will cost about £400 per person, including food. The owners of the Bedouin Camp (right) are camel experts and can arrange long and short trips into

the desert around Dakhla. You're looking at about £60 for a two-hour ride or £150 to £200 per person per (bumpy) day. If you want to go further afield, check with the tourist office to confirm whether the person taking you has the necessary permits – Dakhla is one of the closest oases to the Gilf Kebir, but permits to go there are only issued from Cairo. For more information about desert safaris, see p329.

## SLEEPING

### Hotels

Mut has a decent selection of hotels, although most crowd the budget end of the spectrum. Recently, there's been a refreshing trend for hotels designed with Bedouin-influenced



flair, using natural materials, mud bricks and palm logs.

**El-Forsan Hotel** (Map p338; ☎ 782 1343; zakelmasy@yahoo.com; Sharia al-Wadi; s/d without bathroom £16.50/25, s/d £25/45, s/d bungalow £35/60; ☎) While the main building is a typically stuffy concrete confabulation, the newer, domed mud-brick bungalows out back are a much more interesting option. With attached rooms surrounding a small, lush garden, there's also a covered rotunda restaurant (meals £15 to £20) boasting top views. The friendly staff is keen to arrange local tours, and breakfast is available (£5 to £8).

**Gardens Hotel** (Map p338; ☎ 782 1577; Sharia al-Genayen; s/d £19/24, with shower £18/23) Low prices and a good location help keep the rooms occupied at this ramshackle but popular budget hotel. There's a great bamboo café on the roof here, though the shared bathrooms can be pretty dire and single women may feel uncomfortable with the stares from resident Egyptian men. Breakfast is extra and the hotel rents bicycles for £10 per hour.

**Bedouin Camp & El-Dohous Village** (Map p337; ☎ 785 0480; [www.dakhlabledouins.com](http://www.dakhlabledouins.com); Al-Dohous; huts s/d £30/50, village s/d £80/120) Al-Hag Abdel Hameed comes from a family of Bedouins who settled in the area a generation ago. While some of the original reed huts remain in Bedouin Camp, nearby El-Dohous Village has grown into a Disneyland of structures made from gently curving mud-brick and natural materials. There's a huge variety of rooms, from bell-shaped cave rooms to regular two-storey abodes, all carefully decorated with crafted pillows and local crafts. The hilltop restaurant has outstanding views (meals £25) and there are plenty of cushioned chill-out areas strewn about the place. The nearby spring looks tempting but may stain clothes.

**Anwar Hotel** (Map p338; ☎ 782 0070; Sharia Basateen; s/d/tr with fan £20/40/60, with air-con £30/60/80; ☎) The friendly and sociable Mr Anwar runs this family establishment with gusto and offers relatively clean rooms above the popular restaurant of the same name. Noise from the nearby mosque can be an issue.

**Nasser's Hotel** (Map p337; ☎ 782 2727, 010 682 6467; Sheikh Waley; s/d £30/50; ☎) While his brothers Abu Mohamed and Ahmed Hamdy run two of Dakhla's better restaurants, Nasser has given the hotel business a shot. His hotel has grown into a warren of gritty rooms with shared bathrooms, and although brand-new rooms were being built when we last visited, we're

sure a state of disrepair is their inevitable fate. A murky-looking pool has been added to the terrace.

**El-Negoom Hotel** (Map p338; ☎ 782 0014; fax 782 3084; north of Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; s/d £40/50, with air-con £45/75; ☎) On a quiet street behind the tourist office and near a selection of restaurants, this extra-friendly hotel has a span of trim little abodes with bathrooms, some even with air-con and TV. This is one of the most dependable options in town.

**Mut Inn** (Map p337; ☎ 792 7982/6; [www.solymar.com](http://www.solymar.com); Mut Talata Springs; s/d half board €45/70; ☎) This three-star inn out of town at Mut Talata Springs sports six chalets, six lodge rooms with fans, a five-room villa and a restaurant. The décor is kitsch and the rooms overpriced, but this is a comfortable hotel with a pleasant, deep pool fed by warm spring water.

**Mebarez Hotel** (Map p338; ☎ /fax 782 1524; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; s/d £65/105, with air-con £95/115; ☎) Safari groups and others doing an oases tour like to stay here, where the rooms offer a reasonable level of comfort and cleanliness, even though the staff can be surly. The top-floor rooms have great vistas over the oasis – ask for one facing away from the road.

**Bedouin Oasis Village** (off Map p338; ☎ 782 0070, 012 669 4893; s/d £70/150, full board £100/200) This relative newcomer, on a rise above the main street into town, has well-designed, traditional-style buildings replete with a deluge of domes, arches and vaults. Nice arty touches in the humble-but-cosy rooms and in the communal areas really spruce the place up, and the restaurant (dinner around £20) has splendid views. In the oases' race to 'Beduinify' everything (it's the flavour of the month), these guys have trumped the competition with the first 'Bedouin spa' (ie a natural spring pool).

## Camping

You should be able to camp near the dunes west of Mut or in Al-Qasr, on a star-lit plateau just north of town, but check first with the tourist office in Mut.

## EATING & DRINKING

There is no fancy dining in Mut, but there is some decent, fresh food (mostly of the chicken/kebab/rice variety) to be had. For an atmospheric tea or *sheesha* (water pipe), pop into one of the rowdy and popular outdoor *sheesha* and tea cafés near Midan al-Tahrir.



**Anwar Restaurant** (Map p338; ☎ 782 0070; Sharia Basateen; meals E£2-15) A café-restaurant that's popular with locals, below the hotel of the same name. Anwar serves up *ta'amiyya* and *fuul*, in addition to the more substantial chicken-and-rice combo.

**Ahmed Hamdy's Restaurant** (Map p338; ☎ 782 0767; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£2-15) On the main road into town is Ahmed Hamdy's popular place serving delicious chicken, kebabs, vegetables and a few other small dishes inside or on the terrace. The freshly squeezed lime juice is excellent and you can request beer (E£12) and *sheesha*.

**Abu Mohamed Restaurant** (Map p338; ☎ 782 1431; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£3-25; 🍷) Abu Mohamed, brother of Ahmed Hamdy, touts, cooks and serves in this simple roadside restaurant. His set meal includes good vegetables with kebab or pigeon (order ahead) and ends with homemade *basbousa* (a sticky dessert). Cold beer, internet and bike hire are available.

**Dawia Restaurant** (Map p338; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£5-12) The wall-to-wall, sparkling white tiles signal one of the cleanest places to eat in town. As well as the usual Egyptian victuals, Dawia throws caution to the wind: it fries up burgers and even experiments with several pasta dishes.

**Said Shihad** (Map p338; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£6-15) Owner Said is onto a good thing here: grilling up a meat-centric feast nightly to a dedicated following of hungry locals. The lamb shish kebab is the thing to go for – yum!

If you need to scratch a *ta'amiyya* or *fuul* itch, the following will oblige:

**Coshary** (Map p338; Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra; meals E£2)

**Qalamuni Cafeteria** (Map p338; Midan al-Gamaa; dishes E£2-10)

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Bus

**Upper Egypt Bus Co** (Map p338; ☎ 782 4366; Midan al-Gamaa) runs buses at 7pm and 8.30pm to Cairo (E£56, eight to 10 hours) via Al-Kharga Oasis (E£10, one to two hours) and Asyut (E£20, four to five hours). Other services to Asyut leave at 6am, 8.30am and 10pm. You can also go to Cairo (E£56) via Farafra Oasis (E£20, three to four hours) and Bahariya Oasis (E£35, seven hours) at 6am and 7pm. There's a convenient **booking office** (Map p338; Midan al-Tahrir), where the bus also stops to pick up passengers.

**Herz Bus Company** (Map p338; ☎ 782 4914) recently started running a daily bus to Cairo (through Asyut) at 8pm (E£45) from the microbus and service taxi station.

## Service Taxi & Microbus

Microbuses leave when full from the old part of Mut, near the mosque, and cost E£10 to Al-Kharga, E£20 to either Farafra or Asyut and around E£60 to Cairo.

## GETTING AROUND

Abu Mohamed Restaurant (p339) and Gardens Hotel (p338) rent out bicycles for E£10 per hour.

Most places in Dakhla are linked by crowded pick-ups, Peugeots or microbuses, but working out where they all go requires a degree in astrophysics. Those heading to Al-Qasr (E£1) depart from Sharia as-Sawra al-Khadra. You can take pick-ups to Balat and Bashendi from in front of the hospital for E£1. Most others depart from the service taxi station on Sharia Tamir.

It may prove easier on occasion to bargain for a 'special' pick-up.

## Around Mut

The following sights are all marked on the Dakhla Oasis map (p337).

## HOT SPRINGS

There are several hot sulphur pools around the town of Mut, but the easiest to reach is **Mut Talata** (Mut Three). It's at the site of a small hotel (p338), so unless you are staying there, you have to dip in the exposed 1.5m-deep pool outside the hotel's walls. The pool's funny-coloured water is both hot and actually relaxing, though it may stain clothes.

**Bir al-Gedid** (New Spring), a short distance from the Bedouin Camp (p338), is the latest artesian well to be dug and is also rust-coloured.

Set among breathtaking desert scenery, **Bir al-Gebel** (Mountain Spring; admission E£10) has been turned into a day-trip destination where blaring music and hundreds of school children easily overwhelm any ambience it might have had. Sitting on the edge of a small palm-shrouded oasis, surrounded by rolling dunes and towering desert cliffs, this still has to be one of the most beautiful dipping-spots in the oases. It's best to come in the

### THESE ARE A FEW OF OUR FAVOURITE SPRINGS...

There's nothing better after a hard day's rambling along the dusty roads of the desert than a soak or swim in one of the many springs that dot the Western Desert. The following are but a few of our best-loved water holes:

**Cleopatra's Bath** (p360) No, the queen in question probably did not bathe here, but since this is one of the most famous, stunning and clear bubbling springs in the Western Deserts, it's fine by us.

**Bir al-Wahed** (p360) This hot, Jacuzzi-like spring sits among the dunes on the edge of the Great Sand Sea. Amazing sunsets guaranteed.

**Ain Gomma** (p354) A small, gushing, clear and cool isolated spring in a minioasis 45km south of Bawiti, surrounded on all sides by the vast desert expanse.

**Bir al-Gebel** (opposite) Surrounded by breathtaking scenery, this spring can get packed with rowdy picnickers during the day. It's ideal in the evening when the crowds die down.

### Spring Etiquette

When bathing in the public springs of the oases, it's important to be mindful of generally accepted spring etiquette:

- If locals are bathing, wait until they are finished before entering the water.
- During the day, women should wear a long baggy T-shirt over their bathing suit, although in some places even this may not be appropriate.
- To locals, a woman bathing alone is about as provocative as running through a town's main drag in your panties. Don't do it.

evening when it's quieter and the stars blaze across the night sky. If you arrive during spring peak hour, there's a serene natural spring about 500m before Bir al-Gebel on the right, concealed behind a brick pump house. A sign marks the turn-off 20km north of Mut, from where it's about another 5km to the springs.

### SAND DUNES & CAMEL RIDES

A few kilometres out past the southern end of town you can have a roll around in sand dunes which, while not the most spectacular in the desert, are easy to reach for people without their own transport. Almost every hotel and restaurant in Mut offers day trips that include a sand dune stop. Sunset camel rides out to the dunes can also be arranged (see Tours, p338).

### ROCK CARVINGS

Dakhla's cultivated land ends at the feet of some strange rock formations 45km towards Al-Kharga. This was the crossroads of two important caravan routes, the Darb al-Ghabari between Dakhla and Al-Kharga and another, now lost, track that linked the nearby village of Teneida with the Darb al-Arba'een to the south. Carved into the soft rock are prehistoric rock carvings, showing

camels, giraffes and tribal markings. Long visited by desert travellers, some of whom left their names carved in the rock, it has recently suffered from the attentions of less scrupulous travellers who have all but ruined most of these curious images with their own graffiti.

### BALAT

For a captivating glance into life during medieval times, pay a visit to the Islamic village of Balat, 35km east of Mut. Built during the era of the Mamaluks and Turks on a site that dates back to the Old Kingdom, this is a living monument to the possibilities of Sudanic-style mud architecture. Here in the old town, charismatic, winding lanes weave through low-slung corridors past Gaudi-like moulded benches. Palm fronds are still used for shelter as smoothly rounded walls ease into each other. The tiny doors here were designed to keep houses cool and confuse potential invaders. A guide will happily take you onto the roof of one of the three-storey mud-brick houses for commanding views (a small tip is expected). To get to Balat, a pick-up from near the general hospital in Mut will cost ££1.

You will need your own vehicle to explore **Ain al-Asil**, or the Spring of the Origin, an

Old Kingdom settlement. The oasis expert Ahmed Fakry, who excavated here in the 1970s and found remains of a large fortress and possibly a canal, believed it was once the capital of the oasis. The site was abandoned in Ptolemaic times and there is little of interest here today unless you are archeologically inclined. Ain al-Asil is about 2km down a track leading north off the main road, 200m east of Balat.

About 1.5km past Ain al-Asil is **Qila al-Dabba** (adult/student ££20/10), Balat's ancient necropolis. The five mastabas (mud-brick structures above tombs that were the basis for later pyramids) here, the largest of which stands over 10m high, date back to the 6th dynasty. Four are ruined, but one has been restored and is now open to the public. Originally all five would have been clad in fine limestone, with three thought to have belonged to important Old Kingdom governors of the oasis. Opening hours are 8pm to 5pm October to April and 8am to 6pm May to September, but you may need to find a guardian in the nearby buildings.

#### BASHENDI

This small village to the north of the main Dakhla–Al-Kharga road takes its name from Pasha Hindi, the medieval sheikh buried nearby. The **Tomb of Pasha Hindi** is covered by an Islamic-era dome, which sits over a Roman structure, clearly visible from the inside of the building. Locals make pilgrimages to pray for the saint's intercession. Nearby is the sandstone **Tomb of Kitives** (both tombs adult/student ££20/10; ☑ 8am–5pm Oct–Apr, 8am–6pm May–Sep), which was occupied by Senussi soldiers during WWI and by a village family after that. Nevertheless, some funerary reliefs have survived and show the 2nd-century AD notable meeting the gods Min, Seth and Shu.

#### AL-QASR

One of the must-see sights in Dakhla Oasis is the extraordinary medieval/Ottoman town of Al-Qasr, which lies on the edge of lush vegetation at the foot of the pink limestone cliffs that mark the northern edge of the oasis. It's an extraordinary place that has been thoughtfully restored to provide a glimpse of how other oasis towns looked before the New Valley development projects had their way with them. Several hundred people still live in the town that not so long ago was home to several thousand.

#### Sights

The Supreme Council for Antiquities has taken responsibility for the town, but because people still live there, it is unable to enclose the site or charge an entrance fee. Visitors are expected to go with one of the Antiquities guards (who will expect a 'donation' of up to ££10).

The old town is built on the ancient foundations of a Roman city and is thought to be the one of the oldest inhabited areas of the oases. The gateway of a temple to Thoth is now the front of a private house, and inscribed blocks from the temple have been used in other local buildings. Most of what you can see today, however, dates to the Ottoman period (1516–1798). During its heyday, this was probably the capital of the oasis, easily protected by barring the fort's quartered streets. The size of the houses and the surviving fragments of decoration suggest a puzzling level of wealth and importance given to this town by the Ottomans.

The architecture of the narrow covered streets harks back to its ancient origins. The winding lanes manage to remain cool in the scalding summer and also serve to protect their inhabitants from desert sandstorms. Entrances to old houses can be clearly seen and some are marked by beautiful lintels – acacia beams situated above the door. Carved with the names of the carpenter and the owner of the house, the date and a verse from the Quran, these decorative touches are wonderfully preserved.

There are 37 lintels in the village, the earliest of which dates to the early 16th century. One of the finest is above the **Tomb of Sheikh Nasr ad-Din** inside the old mosque, which is marked by a restored 12th-century mud-brick minaret. Adjoining it is **Nasr ad-Din Mosque**, with a 21m-high minaret. Several buildings have been renovated, including one that appears to have been a **madrassa**, a school where Islamic law was taught and which doubled as a town hall and courthouse: prisoners were tied to a stake near the entrance.

Also of interest is the restored **House of Abu Nafir**. A dramatic pointed arch at the entrance frames a huge studded wooden door. Built of mud brick, and on a grander scale than the surrounding houses, it incorporates huge blocks from an earlier structure, possibly a Ptolemaic temple, decorated with hieroglyphic reliefs.

Other features of the town include the **pottery factory**, a **blacksmith's forge**, a **water-wheel**, an **olive press** and a huge old **corn mill** that has been fully restored to function with Flintstonelike efficiency when its shaft is rotated. Near the entrance is the **Ethnographic Museum** (admission ££3; ☎ 9am-sunset). Occupying Sherif Ahmed's house, which itself dates back to 1785, the museum's everyday objects try to give life to the empty buildings around them.

Heading back to Mut from Al-Qasr, take the secondary road for a change of scenery. You can visit several **tombs** (admission ££10) near the ruined village of Amhadah, dating from the 2nd century. About 15km further towards Mut is the Mamluk village of **Qalamun**, with both Ottoman and modern houses built of mud. There are good views of the countryside from the cemetery.

### Sleeping

**Al-Qasr Hotel** (☎ 787 6013; s/d/tr ££10/20/30) The sprightly and ever-helpful Mohamed captains this great little guesthouse, which sits above a café near the old town. The bucolically charming rooms have screens and balconies and some even boast views onto Al-Qasr. There's a breezy upstairs communal sitting area where you can play games or relax, and for ££2 you can sleep on a mattress on the roof. The ground-floor coffee-house and restaurant serves good basic fare (breakfast ££3 extra). Mohamed rents bikes for ££5 a day and arranges camel tours into the surrounding desert (££75 for the day, ££120 overnight).

**Beir Elgabal Camp** (☎ 772 6600; [elgabalcamp@hotmail.com](mailto:elgabalcamp@hotmail.com); s/d ££25/50; ☎) This place has clean, plain rooms next to Bir al-Gebel spring. It's in an idyllic position at the base of the soaring desert mountains, although fairly isolated from any amenities, 4km from the turn-off on the Mut road.

**Desert Lodge** (☎ 772 7061/2, in Cairo 02-690 5240; [www.desertlodge.net](http://www.desertlodge.net); s/d/tr half board US\$90/120/150; ☎ ☎) The best accommodation in Dakhla also has the best views of Al-Qasr. This thoughtfully designed, mud-brick fortress of a lodge crowns a hilltop overlooking the town and comprises 32 large rooms in traditionally styled clusters. The restaurant is adequate, and there is also a bar and many of the services you would expect for the exacting price.

### Getting There & Away

Pick-ups to Al-Qasr leave from opposite Said Shihad restaurant in Mut and cost ££1.

### DEIR AL-HAGGAR

This restored Roman **sandstone temple** (admission ££20; ☎ 8am-sunset) is one of the most complete Roman monuments in Dakhla. Dedicated to the Theban triad of Amun, Mut and Khons, as well as Horus (who can be seen with a falcon's head), it was built between the reigns of Nero (AD 54–68) and Domitian (AD 81–96). The cartouches of Nero, Vespasian and Titus can be seen in the hypostyle hall, which has also been inscribed by almost every 19th-century explorer who passed through the oasis. If you look carefully in the adjacent Porch of Titus you can see the names of the entire expedition of Gerhard Rohlfs, the 19th-century desert explorer. Also visible are the names of famous desert travellers Edmonstone, Drovetti and Houghton.

The temple has been enclosed by a wall to help prevent wind and sand erosion. Deir al-Haggar is signposted about 7km west of Al-Qasr; from the turn-off it's another 5km to the temple.

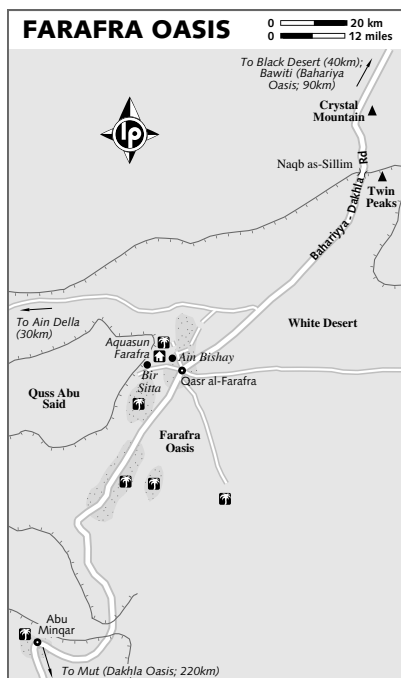
### FARAFRA OASIS

☎ 092 / pop 21,920

Blink and you might miss dusty Farafra, the least populated and most remote of the Western Desert's oases. Though little evidence has been found of Pharaonic occupation, Farafra does make a cameo appearance in the legend of King Cambyse's army (see boxed text, p346), which is purported to have disappeared in the 6th century BC on its way to Siwa.

Farafra's exposed location made it prone to frequent attacks by Libyans and Bedouin tribes, many of whom eventually settled in the oasis and now make up much of the population.

In recent years, the government has been increasing its efforts to revitalise this region, and the agriculture of olives, dates, apricots, guava, figs, oranges, apples and sunflowers is slowly developing. Though light on tourist infrastructure or any real attractions, Farafra's proximity to the White Desert (only 20km away) and its torpid pace of life and extensive palm gardens, manage to draw a small trickle of travellers each year.



## Qasr al-Farafra

The only real town in Farafra Oasis, Qasr al-Farafra remains an undeveloped speck on the western Egypt circuit that is only now beginning to discover the cheap thrills of concrete. The town's tumbledown Roman fortress was originally built to guard this part of the desert caravan route, though these days all it has to show for it is a mound of rubble.

Some small, mud-brick houses still stand here against all the odds, their doorways secured with medieval peg locks and their walls painted with verses of the Quran.

## INFORMATION

For tourist information, contact the tourist office in Mut (p337).

**Hospital** (Map p345; ☎ 751 0047; main Bahariya-Dakhla rd) For dire emergencies only.

**Post office** (Map p345; off main Bahariya-Dakhla rd; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm)

**Telephone centrale** (Map p345; off main Bahariya-Dakhla rd; ☎ 24hr)

**Tourist police** (Map p345; Sharia al-Mishtaqa Nakhoz) No telephone.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Badr's Museum

Badr Abdel Moghny is a self-taught artist whose gift to his town has become its only real sight, bless 'im. **Badr's Museum** (Map p345; ☎ 751 0091, 012 170 4710; donation E£5; ☎ 8.30am-sunset), surrounded by a desert garden, is worth seeing for the enthusiasm that Badr puts into his work, much of which records traditional oasis life. His distinctive style of painting and sculpture in mud, stone and sand has won him foreign admirers; he exhibited successfully in Europe in the early 1990s and later in Cairo.

### Springs

A popular stop is **Bir Sitta** (Well No Six; Map p344), a sulphurous hot spring 6km north-west of Qasr al-Farafra. Water gushes into a Jacuzzi-sized concrete pool and then spills out into a larger tank. This is a good place for a night-time soak under the stars.

The Roman spring of **Ain Bishay** (Map p344) bubbles forth from a hillock on the northwest edge of town. It has been developed into an irrigated grove of date palms together with citrus, olive, apricot and carob trees, and is a cool haven amid the arid landscape. Several families tend the crops here; you should seek someone out and ask permission before wandering around.

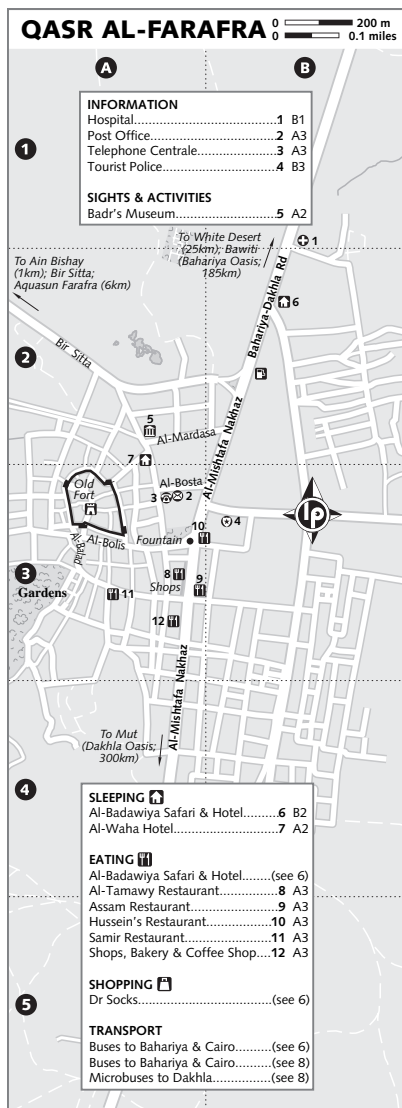
## TOURS

Farafra is nearer than Bahariya to the White Desert and yet there is a very limited choice of desert outfits. Al-Waha Hotel (below) offers perfunctory trips around Farafra and the White Desert for around E£425 per vehicle for an overnight stay. Both Al-Badawiya and Aqasun are more expensive (see Sleeping, below), but are well prepared for long-range desert travel as well as trips closer to home; see also p329.

## SLEEPING

At the time of our visit, the new Sahara Hotel was being completed 1km north of town, promising to bring more dome-roofed, mud-brick goodness to Farafra.

**Al-Waha Hotel** (Map p345; ☎ 016 209 3224, 012 720 0387; wahaafara@yahoo.com; d without bathroom E£35, s & d E£45) A small, primitive hotel opposite Badr's Museum, Al-Waha offers two- and three-bed rooms with orderly shared bathrooms, though frills are at a premium here.



Some rooms have balconies onto the unsealed streets of Farafra.

**Aquasun Farafra** (Map p344; ☎ 012 7807 999; [www.raid4x4egypt.com](http://www.raid4x4egypt.com); Bir Sitta; s/d half board €50/70; 🍷 🍷) Built beside Bir Sitta and nestled in its own idyllic oasis, Aquasun has 21 chalet-style rooms built around a peaceful garden. Each has its own porch, thatched with palm fronds,

and piping-hot water from Bir Sitta fills the hotel pool. Owner Hisham Nessim has had years of hotel-owning experience in Sinai and is also a longtime desert-safari operator (see also p329).

**Al-Badawiya Safari & Hotel** (Map p345; ☎ 751 0060, 012 214 8343; [www.badawiya.com](http://www.badawiya.com); s/d £140/200, villas with air-con £220/300; 🍷 🍷 🍷) We hear mixed opinions about Al-Badawiya on the Bahariya–Dakhla road, but there is no escaping the dynamism of the Ali brothers, who dominate Farafra tourism with their hotel and safari outfit. Al-Badawiya has a wide choice of stylishly designed and traditionally themed rooms and is dotted with cushioned sitting areas, has a refreshing pool, and boasts more than its fair share of arches and domes. Breakfast costs £20, reservations are recommended in winter. Saad Ali and Hamdy Ali lead camel and jeep trips into the Western Desert (see p329).

## EATING

As with most facilities, eating choices are limited in Farafra.

**Al-Tamawy Restaurant** (Map p345; dishes ££2-10) A cafeteria on the main road, Al-Tamawy has uncomplicated food on offer along with tea, coffee and, of course, *sheesha*.

**Samir Restaurant** (Map p345; dishes ££8-20) With outdoor tables off the main drag, this tourist-oriented place is spotless, with, wait for it, tablecloths! The spicy kebabs are delicious, though it's a shame it tends to hike the prices. Check the prices before you dine.

**Aquasun Farafra** (Map p344; ☎ 012 225 9660; meals ££20-45) Fresh organic ingredients are used in Aquasun's restaurant, and dishes are a choice of the usual Western and Egyptian staples. Has been known to serve beer and wine.

**Al-Badawiya Safari & Hotel** (Map p345; ☎ 751 0060, 012 214 8343; meals ££25-50) Al-Badawiya serves freshly made, if rather expensive, dishes including pasta and simple three-course meals, using organic vegetables from its own farm. Serves beer and wine on occasion.

You can also try **Hussein's Restaurant** (Map p345; dishes ££5-9) or **Assam Restaurant** (Map p345; dishes ££6-15) for simple outdoor seating and grilled meats to order.

## SHOPPING

It's a family affair. In the summer, Dr Socks takes wool from the neck and lower back of camels, spins it and knits. His sister makes



### THE LOST ARMY OF CAMBYSES

Persian king Cambyses invaded Egypt in 525 BC, overthrowing Egyptian pharaoh Psamtek III and signalling the beginning of Persian rule over the country that was to last 193 years. This success, however, was not necessarily representative of this 'tyrannical despot's' skills as a military strategist. In the years immediately following his conquest of Egypt, Cambyses mounted several disastrous offensives. In one such campaign, he sent a mercenary army down the Nile into Ethiopia that was so ill-prepared and undersupplied it had to turn to cannibalism to survive. The soldiers returned disgraced, having never even encountered the enemy on the battlefield.

Cambyses' most famous failure, however, remains his attempt to capture the Oracle of Amun in Siwa (see p359). As recounted by Greek writer Herodotus, Cambyses set out to destroy the famous oracle, which insolently predicted his tragic end, and legitimise his rule over Egypt. To this end, he dispatched an army of 50,000 men from Thebes, supported by a vast train of pack animals weighed down by supplies and weapons. The army is purported to have reached Al-Kharga and Farafra Oases before turning west to cover the 325km of open desert to Siwa – a 30-day march without any shade or sources of water. Legend has it that after struggling through the Great Sand Sea, the men were engulfed by a fierce sandstorm, which buried the entire army under the desert's shifting sands never to be heard from again.

There have been dozens of unsuccessful expeditions over the centuries determined to find a trace of the lost men of Cambyses. Only time will tell if the shifting sands that buried this ancient army will ever reveal their archaeological riches.

sweaters, his uncle blankets, while he and his mother get on with the socks and scarves. Dr Socks and his wares can be found at Al-Badawiya Safari & Hotel (p344) and beyond. Count on ££10 to ££30 for socks, and up to ££400 for a blanket.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are buses from Farafra to Cairo (££40, eight to 10 hours) via Bahariya (££20, two to three hours) at 10am and 10pm. Buses from Farafra to Dakhla (££20, four to five hours) originate in Cairo and leave around 1pm to 2pm and around 1am to 2am. Buses stop at Al-Tamawy Restaurant, the petrol station and at Al-Badawiya hotel. Tickets are bought from the conductor.

Microbuses to Dakhla (££20, three to four hours) also leave from in front of Al-Tamawy Restaurant when full (ie not often), so you're better off going early in the morning. The same goes for minibuses to Bahariya Oasis (££20, three hours). Rare service taxis to Dakhla cost ££20, to Al-Kharga ££30.

### FARAFRA TO BAHARIYA OASIS

The stupefying desert formations between the Farafra and Bahariya Oases are responsible for attracting more travellers to this far-flung corner of Egypt than any other sight. No surprises there: this unearthly terrain varies from the bizarre and impossibly

shaped rock formations of the White Desert to the eerie black-coned mountains of the nearby Black Desert, with a healthy dose of sand dunes interspersed for good measure. These regions are relatively easy to get to from either Farafra or Bahariya Oases and are immensely popular with one-day and overnight safari tours.

### Ain Della

Surrounded by cliffs on the north and east and dunes to the south and west, Ain Della (Spring of the Shade) lies about 120km from Farafra al-Qasr. The contrasting tawny hues of the surrounding landscape envelop this area in an alluring, almost soft glow. But Ain Della is more than a picturesque water hole. Lying within 200km of the three major oases of Siwa, Bahariya and Farafra, it has been a strategic and extremely important source of water for desert travellers since ancient times. Most famously, the army of the Persian conqueror Cambyses is thought by many to have disappeared in the dunes near here (see boxed text, p359). During WWII the British Army's Long Range Desert Group stored fuel and supplies here and used it as a jumping-off place for their raids behind German and Italian lines.

Ain Della's position is still considered vital to controlling vast swathes of the Western Desert: it is from here that Egyptian army patrols search the desert for drugs and arms

smugglers. Anyone coming here must have a guide and military permit (obtained through desert guides; see also boxed text, p352, or Tours, p361 and p344).

## White Desert

Upon first glimpse of the White Desert (Sahra al-Beida; Map p344) dreamscape, you'll feel like a modern Alice fallen through the desert looking-glass. Starting just 20km northeast of Farafra, the yellow desert sands east of the road start to become pierced by chalky rock formations, sprouting almost supernaturally from the ground. Blinding-white spires of rock reach for the sky, each frost-coloured lollipop licked into an ever odder shape by the dry desert winds. As you get further into the 300-sq-km White Desert Protectorate, you'll notice that the surreal shapes start to take on familiar forms; chickens, ostriches, camels, hawks and other uncanny shapes abound. They are best viewed at sunrise or sunset, when the sun turns them hues of pink and orange, Salvador Dali-like, or under a full moon which gives the landscape a ghostly, arctic, whipped-cream appearance. The sand around the outcroppings is littered with quartz and different varieties of deep-black iron pyrites, as well as small fossils.

On the west side of the road, away from the wind-eroded shapes, there are small canyons formed by white, clifflike chalk monoliths called inselbergs. Less dramatic than other areas, they are nevertheless beautiful, and eerie to walk around. The shade and privacy they provide also makes them good camping spots.

About 50km north are two flat-topped mountains known as the **Twin Peaks**, a key navigation point for travellers. A favourite destination of local tour operators, the view from the top of the surrounding symmetrical hills, all shaped like giant ant hills, is spectacular. Just beyond here, the road climbs a steep escarpment known as **Naqb as-Sillim** (Pass of the Stairs); this is the main pass that leads into and out of the Farafra depression and marks the end of the White Desert.

A few kilometres further along, the desert floor changes again and becomes littered with quartz crystals. If you look at the rock formations in this area you'll see that they are also largely made of crystal. The most famous of the formations is the **Crystal Mountain**, actually a large rock made entirely of quartz. It sits right beside the main road some 24km north of Naqb as-Sillim, and is easily recognisable by the large hole through its middle.

## KNOW YOUR DUNE

Formal classification of types of sand dune was made in the 1970s, when scientists could examine photographs of dune fields taken on an early space mission. They identified five types of dune, four of which are found in Egypt.

### Parallel Straight Dunes

Called *seif* (sword) in Arabic because they resemble the blades of curved Arab swords, these dunes are formed by wind and are primarily found in the Great Sand Sea and the northern Western Desert. Usually on the move, they will even fall down an escarpment, reforming at its base.

### Parallel Wavy (or Barchan) Dunes

These are crescent-shaped dunes, with a slip face on one side. They are as wide as they are long and are usually found in straight lines with flat corridors between them. Usually on the move, they can travel as far as 19m in one year. They are predominant in Al-Kharga and Dakhla Oases and are also found in the Great Sand Sea.

### Star Dunes

Created by wind blowing in different directions, these dunes are usually found alone. Instead of moving, they tend to build up within a circle. They are rare in Egypt.

### Crescent (or Whaleback) Dunes

These are hill-like dunes formed when a series of smaller dunes collide and piggyback one another. Distinctive, with sides pointing in different directions, they can be seen in the area between Al-Kharga and Dakhla Oases.

Unfortunately, the White Desert is in danger of becoming a victim of its own popularity as more and more people choose to make the journey here. On busy nights, the horizon is filled with the lights of campfires, the still night filled with the sound of drums and singing. Daylight reveals burned-out campfires, discarded refuse and, most depressing of all, tyre tracks over the white rocks. The fragile white chalk formations are now threatened, and although the area has been designated a protectorate, there is not enough funding to pay for adequate protection. If you are going to visit – and we are not suggesting you don't – consider going by foot or camel, be sure to leave nothing behind and, if you are driving, discourage your guide from driving over the rocks.

For information on getting to the White Desert see right.

### Black Desert

The change in the desert floor from beige to black, 50km south of Bawiti, signals the beginning of the Black Desert (Sahara Suda). No surprises there. Formed by the erosion of the mountains, which have spread a layer of black powder and rubble over the ground, the desert stands as a particularly stark contrast to the White Desert further south. Small, black, volcano-shaped mountains mark the end of the desert and are part of a fault that runs

through Bahariya Oasis. The Black Desert is a popular stop-off for tours running out of Bahariya, though it's mostly ill-suited for overnight camping. Other sights in the region include **Gebel Gala Siwa**, a pyramid-shaped mountain that was formerly a lookout post for caravans coming from Siwa. **Gebel az-Zuqaq** is a mountain known for the red, yellow and orange streaks in its limestone base. There is an easily climbed path leading to the top.

### Getting There & Away

Ordinary vehicles are able to drive the first kilometre or so off the road into the White or Black Deserts, but only 4WD vehicles can advance deeper into either area. Some travellers simply get off the bus and take themselves into the White Desert – but be very sure that you have adequate supplies, and remember that traffic between the neighbouring oases is rarely heavy.

There are plenty of safari outfits that can take you around these sights. See boxed text, p352, and p344 for listings.

### BAHARIYA OASIS

☎ 02 / pop 33,680

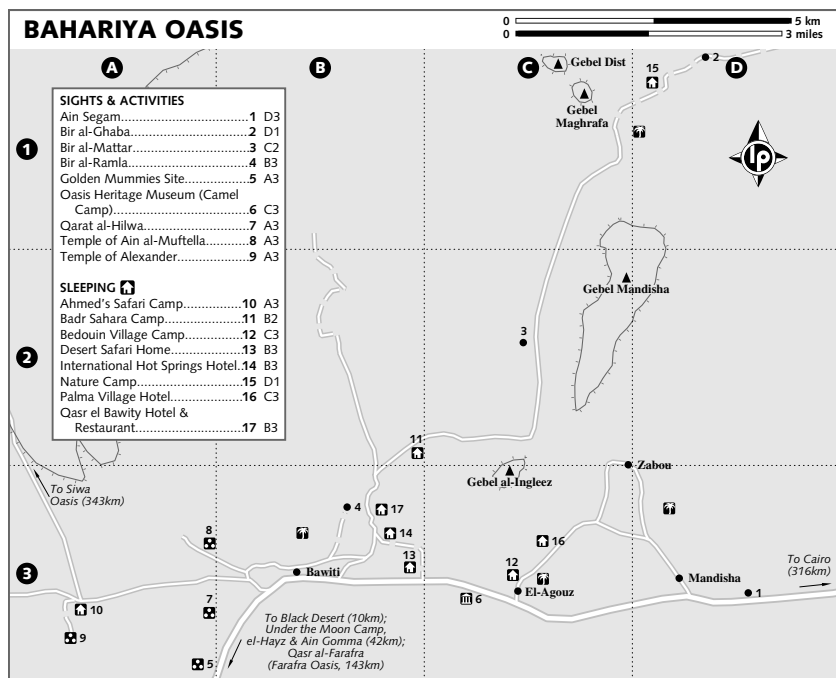
Bahariya is one of the more fetching of the desert circuit oases, and at just 365km from Cairo is also the most accessible. Surrounded on all sides by towering ridges, much of the oasis floor is covered by verdant plantations

### BAHARIYA'S GOLDEN MUMMY CACHE

Put it down to the donkey: until 1996, no-one had any idea of the extent of Bahariya's archaeological treasure trove. Then a donkey stumbled on a hole near the temple of Alexander the Great and its rider saw the face of a golden mummy peering through the sand. Since then Dr Zahi Hawass, head of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and his team have done extensive research in a cemetery that stretches over 3 sq km (see Map p349). Radar has revealed more than 10,000 mummies, and excavation has revealed more than 230 of them in what has come to be called the Valley of the Golden Mummies.

These silent witnesses of a bygone age could shed new light on life in this part of Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period, a 600-year interlude marking the transition between the Pharaonic and Christian eras. Bahariya was then a thriving oasis, and with its rich, fertile land watered by natural springs, was a famous producer of wheat and wine. Greek and, later, Roman families set up home here and became a kind of expatriate elite.

Research has shown that after a brief decline when Ptolemys and Romans fought for control of the oasis, Roman administrators embarked on a major public works programme, expanding irrigation systems, digging wells, restoring aqueducts and building roads. Thousands of mud-brick buildings sprang up throughout the oasis. Bahariya became a major source of grain for the empire and was home to a large garrison of troops; its wealth grew proportionately. Researchers are hoping that continued excavation of the necropolis will provide more answers about the region's early history and its inhabitants.



of date palms and pockmarked with dozens of refreshing springs.

The conical hills that lie strewn around the valley floor may have once formed islands in the lake that covered the area during prehistoric times. During the Pharaonic era, the oasis was a centre of agriculture, producing wine sold in the Nile Valley and as far away as Rome. Its strategic location on the Libyan-Nile Valley caravan routes ensured it prospered throughout later ages. In recent years, stunning archaeological finds, such as that of the Golden Mummies (see boxed text, opposite), and easy access to the White and Black Deserts have earned Bahariya a firm spot on the tourist map.

## Bawiti

The sandy streets of the region's modern administrative capital may at first sight seem pretty underwhelming. But scratch beneath the surface and you might walk away with a different picture: stroll through its fertile palm groves, soak in one of the many hot springs or explore its quiet back roads, where donkeys still outnumber combustion engines.

Until recently, Bawiti was a quiet town dependent on agriculture, but it's gaining a new lease on life as more people head to the desert or come to see the Golden Mummies, and now has a good selection of hotels. Be warned, however, that upon arrival you're likely to be accosted by overzealous touts before you even step off the bus (see boxed text, p352).

## INFORMATION

**Hospital** (Map p350; ☎ 3847 2390) Head to Cairo except in dire emergency.

**M&N Internet** (Map p350; per hr E£10; ☎ 8.30am-9pm Sat-Thu) Near Popular Restaurant, has a couple of newish computers.

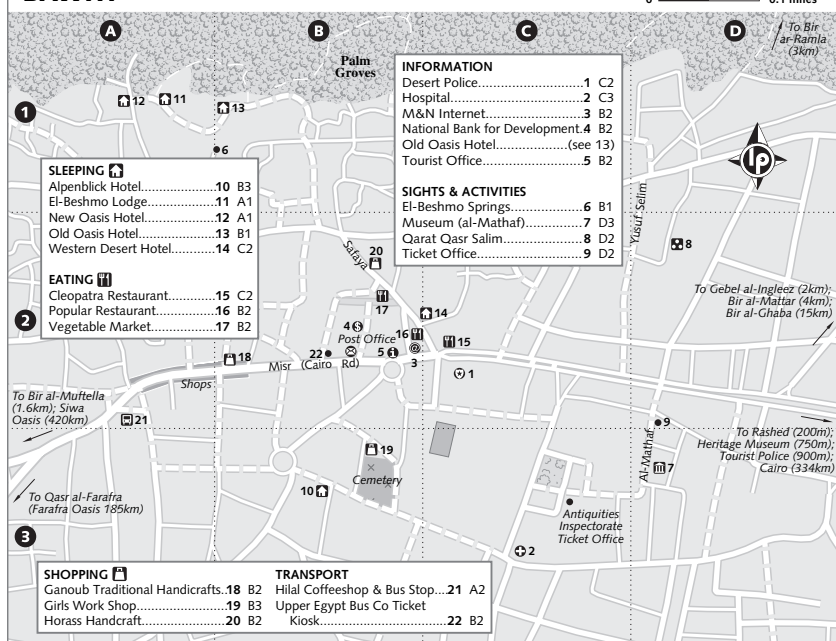
**National Bank for Development** (Map p350; ☎ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu) Changes cash only. No ATM.

**Old Oasis Hotel** (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3028) Offers internet access.

**Tourist office** (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3035/9; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu, also 7-9pm Sat-Thu Nov-Apr) Run by the eager and helpful Mohamed Abd el-Kader, who can also be contacted on ☎ 012 373 6567 or by email (mohamed\_kader26@hotmail.com).

**Tourist police** (off Map p350; ☎ 3847 3900; Sharia Mistr)

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**Museum (Al-Mathaf)**

Since the discovery of the Golden Mummies in the 1990s (see boxed text, p348), growing interest in Bahariya's ancient past has led to the opening of this new **museum** (Map p350; Sharia al-Mathaf; ☞ 8am-2pm). Yes, that building resembling a war-time bunker is the museum, but don't let that put you off (the ticket office is the hut situated 50m from the museum towards Sharia Misr; see boxed text, opposite). This is where the mummies come to rest. Some of the 10 mummies on show are richly decorated and while the motifs are formulaic and the work is second-rate, the painted faces show a move away from stylised Pharaonic mummy decoration towards Fayoum portraiture (see boxed text, p209). Underneath the beautiful wrappings, the work of the embalmers appears to have been sloppy: in some cases the bodies decayed before the embalming process began, which suggests that these mummies mark the beginning of the end of mummification. Nevertheless, they serve as an eloquent reminder of Bahariya's antiquity.

This small moun

This small mound (Map p350) amid the houses of Bawiti is likely to have been built upon centuries of debris. There are two well-preserved 26th-dynasty tombs here that were robbed in antiquity and reused as collective burial sites in Roman times. The rock-cut **Tomb of Zed-Amun-ef-ankh** (☉ 8.30am-4pm) is a fascinating glimpse of Bahariya in its heyday. It appears that Zed-Amun-ef-ankh was not a government official but was given the richness of colourful tomb paintings anyway, hinting at his wealth and importance. Researchers assume he was a trader, perhaps a wine merchant or landowner making money out of Bahariya's thriving wine-export business. Unusually, his tomb contains only one chamber, with four circular (as opposed to the usual square) pillars and seven squat false doors.

Next to it lies the **Tomb of Bannentiu** (☞ 8.30am-4pm), his son. Consisting of a four-columned burial chamber with an inner sanctuary, it is covered in fine reliefs depicting Bannentiu in various positions with the gods. The most interesting pictures flank the entrance to the burial chamber. On one side, the journey of

the moon is shown, with the moon, in the form of the god Khons, depicted as a source of life and flanked by the goddesses Isis and Nephthys. The other side of the entrance is decorated with the journey of the sun.

### Oasis Heritage Museum

You can't miss Mahmoud Eed's **Oasis Heritage Museum** (Map p349; ☎ 3847 3666; [www.camelcamp.com](http://www.camelcamp.com); Bahariya-Cairo rd; admission E£5-10; ☹ no set opening times), about 2km east of the town's edge on the road to Cairo: this hilltop bastion is announced by massive clay camels gazing longingly onto the street. Inspired by Badr's Museum (p344) in Farafra, its creator wishes to capture, in clay, scenes from traditional village life, among them men hunting or playing *siga* (a game played in the dirt with clay balls or seeds), women weaving and a painful-looking barber/doctor encounter. There is also a display of old oasis dresses and jewellery. Look for the sign saying 'Camel Camp', which is the plain and overpriced accommodation that's also offered here.

### Hot & Cold Springs

The closest springs to central Bawiti are the so-called Roman springs, known as **El-Beshmo** (Map p350), beside El-Beshmo Lodge. The view over the oasis gardens and the desert beyond is wonderful, but unfortunately the spring is not suitable for swimming.

The hot sulphurous spring of **Bir al-Ramla** (Map p349), 3km north of town, is very hot (45°C) and suitable for a soak, though you may feel a bit exposed to the donkey traffic passing to and fro. Women should stay well covered.

At **Bir al-Mattar** (Map p349), 7km northeast of Bawiti, cold springs pour into a viaduct, then down into a concrete pool where you can splash around during the hot summer months. As with all the springs the mineral content is high and the water can stain clothing. One of the most satisfying springs to visit is **Bir al-Ghaba** (Map p349), about 15km northeast of Bawiti. It's quite a trek to get out here, but there is nothing quite like a moonlit hot bath on the edge of the desert.

Just past the village of Mandisha, near the Bahariya-Cairo road, huddles **Ain Segam** (Map p349) spring. Hidden behind a large pump house on the edge of a lush palm grove, this is a great place to have a dip or bring a picnic and laze in the shade of the swaying palm fronds.

### YOUR TICKET TO ANTIQUITIES

In a move to make their lives a little easier, Bahariya's authorities have decided to issue a one-day ticket that gives entry to five of the oasis' ancient sites: the museum, the tomb of Zed-Amun-ef-anekh, the tomb of Bannentiu, the Bir al-Muftella and the Temple of Alexander. Tickets are available at the **ticket office** (adult/student E£35/20; ☹ 8.30am-4pm) of the Museum (Al-Mathaf; opposite). This is annoying as most visitors either don't have the time or the desire to see all the sights the oasis has to offer, yet have to pay for them.

### SLEEPING

Unlike most places in the New Valley, there is a very good selection of budget and mid-priced hotels in Bawiti, as well as elsewhere around Bahariya Oasis. The few options approaching the top-end range can be found outside the town; see p354.

### Budget

It makes sense to sort out accommodation in Bawiti before you arrive, especially in high season due to the fray of touts that swarm each bus arrival (see boxed text, p352). A tourist policeman now often escorts new arrivals to the Bawiti tourist office where sleeping arrangements can be made in peace.

**Desert Safari Home** (Map p349; ☎ 3847 1321, 012 731 3908; [www.desert-safari-home.com](http://www.desert-safari-home.com); dm E£15, s/d without bathroom E£35/50, s/d E£45/65, with air-con E£80/100; ☹) The friendly family that runs this place looks ready to sign your adoption papers the minute you walk in the door. The whitewashed rooms encircle the sort of cute greenery that garden gnomes would feel right at home in and the vine-shaded sitting area is refreshingly cool. The restaurant here serves the usual full dinner for E£20 and has beer. Although it's a long walk from town, patriarch Bardy Khozam will pick you up and offers bicycles for hire.

**Alpenblick Hotel** (Map p350; ☎ 3847 2184; alp-pen-blick@hotmail.com; off Sharia Misr; d/tr E£50/70) This granddaddy of the Bahariya hotel scene just keeps getting dragged out of retirement by its consecutive owners, though seemingly against its wishes. In a continual state of 'expansion', you can't ignore the fact that the current rooms here are pretty grimy and overpriced.



## BAHARIYA TOURS

There is furious competition throughout the oases – and even in Cairo – for tour business, but it is particularly intense in Bahariya. Here, every hotel offers tours, as do a number of eager young men who have taken out bank loans to pay for their cars. The battle for customers is so fierce that most buses arriving in Bahariya are now greeted by a tourist police officer, who will escort foreigners through the throng of aggressive touts to the safe haven of the tourist office. Here Mohamed Abd el-Kader can give you up-to-date information about local hotels and tour operators. He usually suggests only going with a driver approved by your hotel or the tourist office; others may be cheaper, but you will have no comeback if something goes wrong. And things do go wrong: there have been several serious injuries in the past few years and at least one death.

A typical itinerary will take you to the sights in and around Bahariya (Temple of Alexander, Ain el-Muftella, Gebel Dist and Maghrafa) then out through the Black Desert, with a stop at the Crystal Mountain and then into the White Desert.

A day trip to the local sights of Bawiti is around ££100 to ££150, while a one-night camping trip into the White Desert will cost ££150 to ££400 per day. If you're travelling into the remote corners of the desert, you'll be looking at ££550 to ££650 per day. One of the variables is how much of the distance is covered off-road (which uses more fuel and is more wearing on the cars).

Before signing up, check vehicles to make sure they're roadworthy, confirm how much food and drink is supplied (and what this will be), ask how long the operators have been conducting safaris, confirm start and end times (some operators start late in the afternoon and return early in the morning but charge for full days) and try to talk with travellers who have just returned from a trip to get their feedback.

If you're planning on exploring remote parts of the desert such as the Gilf Kebir, Gebel Oweinat or the Great Sand Sea it is absolutely imperative that you go with an outfit that supplies new 4WDs (travelling in convoy), GPS, satellite phones and experienced Bedouin guides. You'll need an official permit for the Great Sand Sea (US\$100, takes 14 days to process).

If you are at all unsure of arrangements, check with Mohamed Abd el-Kader. And be sure to inspect the car, its spare tyres, water and communications before leaving.

**New Oasis Hotel** (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3030; max\_rfs@hotmail.com; by El-Beshmo spring; s/d ££50/80, with air-con ££100/120; 🚗) A study in curvaceous construction, this small but homely hotel has several teardrop-shaped rooms, some with balconies overlooking the expansive palm groves nearby. Inside, the rooms are aged but kept in good condition, though someone seems to have been a little overzealous with the powder-blue paint.

## Midrange & Top End

**Western Desert Hotel** (Map p350; ☎ 3847 1600; www.westerndeserthotel.com; off Sharia Misr; s/d US\$20/35; 🚗 🚗) A new hotel right in the middle of town, opposite Popular Restaurant, the 17 rooms are small, clean, simple and good value. You pay the same price with or without air-con, so it's worth booking ahead and specifying. It has a swish-looking restaurant downstairs that's open 24 hours (though not always in a row, it seems).

**Old Oasis Hotel** (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3028, 012 232 4425; www.oldsaisafari.com; by El-Beshmo spring; s/d

££80/140, with air-con ££120/180; 🚗 🚗 🚗) Astute owner Saleh Abdallah is at the helm of this hotel, which is one of the most charming places to stay in Bawiti town. The Old Oasis Hotel sits above a pretty, shaded garden of palm and olive trees and has 13 simple but impeccable fan rooms, as well as a few fancier stone-wall air-con rooms. A large pool receives steaming hot water from the nearby spring; the runoff waters the hotel garden. A good restaurant serves full meals (dinner ££30) and you can rent a motorbike form here (££150 per day) and access the internet (££10 per hour).

**El-Beshmo Lodge** (Map p350; ☎/fax 3847 3500; www.beshmolodge.com; by El-Beshmo spring; s/d ££130/200; 🚗 🚗) Another old-timer, El-Beshmo Lodge sits beside the spring of the same name (the small pool is filled with spring water). The 25 rooms are simply furnished and reasonably comfortable, with both fan and air-con rooms the same price. There is also a good café-restaurant serving meals, tea, coffee and *sheesha* in a pleasant atmosphere.

## EATING

The market houses several places that fire up the barbecue pits and roast cheap chicken and kebab meals after dusk.

**Cleopatra Restaurant** (Map p350; meals ££5-15; ☎ 6am-10pm) It's worth popping in here just for the smiling welcome and friendly evening chats, though it's also popular for its yummy chicken, *fuul*, *ta'amiyya* and eggs.

**Rashed** (off Map p350; meals ££12-15) More a cafeteria than a restaurant, Rashed serves hot and cold drinks and *sheeshas* (££2) as well as simple meals of rice, chicken or meat, and vegetables. It's near the petrol station at the far eastern end of town.

**Popular Restaurant** (Map p350; meals ££15-20; ☎ 5.30am-10pm) Name it popular, and they will come. Off the main road in Bawiti, this small roadside restaurant is the chosen stopping-off point for many passing through Bawiti. The irrepressible Bayoumi serves the usual selection of chicken, soup, rice and vegetable dishes, though quality seems to be slipping while prices are creeping up. There's cold beer too.

## SHOPPING

There is a living craft tradition in the oases, though puzzlingly many handicraft stores sell crafts made elsewhere.

**Girls Work Shop** (Map p350; south of Sharia Misr; ☎ 10am-1pm Sat-Thu) This great handicrafts store bucks the trend and sells only crafts made in Bahariya Oasis, thus providing local women with skills and much-needed work. Nice one!

**Ganoub Traditional Handicrafts** (Map p350; Sharia Misr; ☎ closed Tue) A tasteful little shop with the best selection of crafts in Bawiti, brought from all over Egypt, including camel-wool blankets and traditional oasis robes. It also has a small selection of books on the desert as well as postcards.

**Horass Handcraft** (Map p350; on the way to El-Beshmo spring; ☎ 8am-8pm) Sells some locally made crafts, including hand-decorated pouches cleverly marketed as 'mobile phone holders' or, our favourite, 'guidebook holder'. It also has standard adorned traditional Bedouin costumes and camel-hair socks. If the shop is closed knock on the door directly across the street.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Bus

**Upper Egypt Bus Co** (Map p350; ☎ 3847 3610; Sharia Misr; ☎ roughly 9am-1pm & 7-11pm) runs buses to Cairo (££25, three to four hours) at 6.30am,

10am, 3pm and around midnight. Extra buses originate in Dakhla and pass through town around noon and midnight, stopping at the Hilal Coffeehouse at the western end of town and at the ticket office.

If you're heading to Farafra (££20, one to two hours) and Dakhla (££40, four to five hours), you can pick up one of the buses from Cairo that are supposed to leave Bahariya at 12.30pm and 11.30pm. Passengers are usually dropped off at Popular Restaurant before the bus continues down the street to one of the coffeehouses at the western end of town, stopping for 30 minutes.

Only some bus tickets can be booked from the Upper Egypt Bus Co booking office in Bawiti. As most of the buses don't originate here, you either have to book in Cairo or take your chances on standing.

## Service Taxi

Microbus service taxis run from Bawiti to Moneeb (near the bus station) in Cairo whenever they have enough customers. A seat costs about ££20. A microbus to Farafra (they're not very frequent) will cost ££20. Tickets can be bought opposite the desert police station (Map p350) or ask at Popular Restaurant (left).

There are no service taxis to Siwa, so you will have to hire a private 4WD for the rough journey (permit required). Expect to pay around ££800 to ££1500. If there is a 4WD that has arrived from Siwa and is returning empty, you might be able to get a ride with it for half that amount. Recent changes in legislation make it easy to arrange same-day permits to travel to Siwa (US\$5 per person).

## Around Bawiti

The area's antiquities (eg Tomb of Alexander and Temple of Ain al-Muftella) have been recently spruced up and mostly reopened to the public. Surrounding the town are mud-brick villages and palm gardens, many fed by springs that are ideal for a night-time soak. Further afield lies some spectacular desert scenery; Black Desert, Gebel Dist and Gebel Maghrafra can be seen on a day trip or on an overnight safari.

The following sights and sleeping options feature on the Bahariya Oasis map (p349).

## SIGHTS

### Temple of Alexander

Southwest of Bawiti, just beyond Ahmed's Safari Camp, is the only place in Egypt where

Alexander the Great's image and cartouche have been found – although since being uncovered by archaeologists in the late 1930s these have been mostly worn away by the wind. Alexander was known to have visited Siwa, but there is no evidence to suggest that he passed through Bahariya, so his likeness here is puzzling. The corrosive desert winds, combined with some insensitive restoration, have left this site pretty bare with few clues to its original splendour.

### Temple of Ain al-Muftella

Slightly south of the spring of the same name are four 26th-dynasty chapels that together form the Temple of Ain al-Muftella. The bulk of the building was ordered by 26th-dynasty high priest Zed-Khonsu-ef-ankh, whose tomb was recently discovered under houses in Bawiti (but is still closed to the public). Archaeologists suspect that the chapels could have been built during the New Kingdom and then significantly expanded during the Late Period and added to during Greek and Roman times. All have been extensively restored and have been given wooden roofs to protect them from the elements.

### Qarat al-Hilwa

This sandstone ridge is about 3km southwest of Bawiti, northwest of the road to Farafra. In the New Kingdom this was a necropolis, a burial place of successive governors who, as representatives of the pharaoh, were the most powerful figures in the oasis. The 18th-dynasty **Tomb of Amenhotep Huy** is the only inscribed tomb left in the necropolis, but there is little to see there now. The faded, sunken reliefs here once showed scenes of Amenhotep's dreams for the afterlife: banquet tables groaning with fruit, cakes, flowers and casks of wine.

### Other Sights Around Bawati

There are a number of other sights in Bahariya that are included as part of a tour by the many safari operators in Bawiti. Most can also be done on foot if the weather is cool.

**Gebel Mandisha** is a ridge capped with black dolomite and basalt that runs for 4km behind the village of the same name, just east of Bawiti.

Clearly visible from the road to Cairo, flat-topped **Gebel al-Ingleez**, also known as the Black Mountain, takes its name from the remains of a WWI lookout post. From here Captain

Williams, a British officer, monitored the movements of Libyan Senussi tribesmen.

**Gebel Dist** is an impressive pyramid-shaped mountain that can be seen from most of the oasis. A local landmark, it is famous for its fossils – dinosaur bones were found here in the early 20th century, disproving the previously held theory that dinosaurs only lived in North America. In 2001 researchers from the University of Pennsylvania found the remains of another huge dinosaur, *Paralititan stromeri*. The discovery of this giant herbivore, which the team deduced was standing on the edge of a tidal channel when it died 94 million years ago, makes it likely that Bahariya was once a swamp similar to the Florida everglades. About 100m away is **Gebel Maghrafa** (Mountain of the Ladle).

For a brief glimpse of what Bawiti might have been like before cement had its way with it, it's worth venturing to the bucolic hamlet of **El-Agouz**. The village, 3.5km east of Bawiti, was supposedly founded by several families cast out from Siwa for the promiscuity of their womenfolk, though it's probably best not to remind locals of that. Here you'll still find low-slung, mud-brick buildings among the swaying palms and extremely friendly inhabitants dishing out smiles like they're going out of style. The road to El-Agouz, which is off the Bahariya–Cairo road, continues for several kilometres to the town of **Zabou**, which lies nearly engulfed by the shifting desert sands, and loops back to **Mandisha** on the main highway. To get here, hop on any microbus heading east from Bawiti and ask to be let off at El-Agouz.

One of the most magnificent springs we have yet seen is **Ain Gomma** (off Map p349), a fair distance away at 45km south of Bawiti. Cool and crystal-clear water gushes into this small spring as it sits surrounded by the vast desert expanse on all sides – the views are amazing. There's a shady, cushioned café here where you can buy tea and soft drinks. Situated near the town of El-Hayz, it's difficult to reach without your own transport, though many safari trips to the White Desert will stop here en route. You can also stay at nearby Under the Moon Camp (below).

### SLEEPING & EATING

#### Budget

**Badr Sahara Camp** (☎ 3847 2955; [www.badrysaharacamp.com](http://www.badrysaharacamp.com); Gebel al-Ingleez; huts per person ££25) A couple of

kilometres from town, Badr Sahara Camp has a handful of bucolic, African-influenced, two-bed huts each with small patio sitting areas out front. Hot water and electricity can't always be counted on, but cool desert breezes and knockout views of the oasis valley can. Pick-ups available.

**Bedouin Village Camp** (☎ /fax 3847 6811; [www.beduinvillage.com](http://www.beduinvillage.com); El-Agouz; s/d E£30/60) A Bedouin-themed camp with small, shabby rooms circling a central thatched area. The atmosphere is friendly and the place is not without charm; as a bonus, owner Abdelsadiq Elbadrmani, an accomplished Bedouin musician, provides the evening entertainment. It's in the ambrosial village of El-Agouz (see also opposite).

**Ahmed's Safari Camp** (☎ /fax 3847 2090; [www.ahmedsafariacamp.com](http://www.ahmedsafariacamp.com); r per person E£45, with air-con E£95; ☎ ☎ ☎) About 4km west of Bawiti, near the Siwa road, Ahmed's is an old favourite among travellers and trans-Africa groups. There are cool, pleasant, domed double rooms as well as more basic ones (some of which have air-con, the rest fans), or you can sleep under the stars on the roof (E£5). Simple meals (E£55) and beer are available, which is just as well because it's a long walk to town if you have no transport. There's a hot spring a few steps from the hotel.

**Nature Camp** (☎ 012 337 5097, in Cairo 02-847 2184; [naturecamps@hotmail.com](mailto:naturecamps@hotmail.com); Bir al-Ghaba; r half board per person E£70) At the foot of Gebel Dist, Nature Camp sets new standards for environmentally focused budget accommodation. The peaceful cluster of candlelit and intricately designed thatch huts looks out onto the expansive desert beside Bir al-Ghaba. The food is very good (meals E£25) and the owner, Ashraf Lotfe, is a skilled desert hand. Only some rooms have bathrooms attached. Staff will drive you the 17km into Bawiti if you arrive without transport.

**Under the Moon Camp** (off Map p349; ☎ 3847 2838, 012 423 6580; [www.helaltravel.com](http://www.helaltravel.com); El-Hayz; s/d half board E£90/160) Isolated in the small oasis hamlet of El-Hayz, 45km south of Bawiti, this neat camp has several round mud-brick huts scattered around a desert compound. The accommodation is very modest, but the pyramid-roofed abodes are cheerfully painted and well kept. The lovely Ain Gomma spring (opposite) is nearby, but apart from that, and the brilliant desert scenery, there's not a whole lot to do out here. The owners run safari trips and arrange pick-ups from Bawiti.

## Midrange & Top End

**International Hot Springs Hotel** (☎ 3847 3014; [www.whitedeserttours.com](http://www.whitedeserttours.com); s/d/tr half board US\$38/60/78) About 3km outside Bawiti on the road to Cairo, this German-run three-star spa resort has forgettable architecture, but its 36 rooms and eight chalets are very comfortable, built around a hot spring and set in a delightful garden. As well as a deep pool of therapeutic spring water there's a gym, sauna, rooftop lounging area and a good restaurant. Owner Peter Wirth is an old Western Desert hand and organises recommended trips throughout the area.

**Qasr el-Bawity Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 3847 1880, in Cairo 02-753 8108; [www.qasrelbawity.com](http://www.qasrelbawity.com); s/d half board US\$40/80, ste US\$200/250; ☎ ☎) The relatively new Qasr el-Bawity offers some of the swankiest accommodation in Bahariya. With a finely trained eye for environmentally friendly design, this place has sumptuous rooms finished in cool stonework and sporting ornate domed roofs, fine furniture and arty, frilly touches. There are two pools (one natural and one chlorinated) and the restaurant here is suitably good.

**Palma Village Hotel** (☎ 3849 6969/99, 012 468 1024; s/d half board US\$45/60; ☎) Along the desert road between El-Agouz and Mandisha villages, this place has a whiff of the Wild West about it (the stagecoach out front is a dead giveaway). If you can ignore the chintzy foyer, the rooms are great value, with wrought-iron furniture and some of the nicest bathrooms in all of Bahariya with, wait for it, real baths. It also runs nearby horse stables that offer rides for E£18 per hour.

## SIWA OASIS

☎ 046 / pop 21,800

If, like most visitors to Siwa, you are driving the 300km south from the coast through the monotonously featureless and desolate desert, you'll be rubbing your eyes thinking that your first sight of Siwa is an emerald mirage. Set against a backdrop of jagged sandstone hills, backed by the rolling silica ocean of the Great Sand Sea and carpeted thick with palm groves, this is easily the most captivating oasis in Egypt. Here, an abundance of free-flowing freshwater springs support hundreds of thousands of olive and fruit trees and date palms, which also shade and cool the valley's mud-brick villages as they rest concealed in the greenery.

Siwa's very isolation helped protect a unique society that until today stands apart from mainstream Egyptian culture. Originally settled by Berbers (roaming North African tribes), Siwa was still practically independent only a few hundred years ago. For centuries the oasis had contact with only the few caravan traders that passed along this way via Qara, Qattara and Kerdassa (near Cairo), and the occasional determined pilgrim seeking the famous Oracle of Amun. Even today local traditions and Siwi, the local Berber language, dominate.

Siwa is less about rushing around any major sights than it is about sitting back with a cup of tea or a *sheesha* and letting the halcyon days wash over you. It's hard to feel pressured in a place where donkey carts still outnumber combustion engines. The hectares of palm groves invite casual strolling, numerous comfortable and cushioned cafés are perfect for chilling and meeting fellow travellers, and dozens of clear springs practically beg for you to dip your toes. As increasing numbers of independent travellers discover the tranquil joys of this remote paradise, local inhabitants are ever more mindful of retaining their traditions and limiting the sort of uncontrolled 'development' that has scarred more popular tourist destinations in Egypt.

## History

Siwa has a long and ancient, ancient past: in late 2007 a human footprint was found that could date back three million years, making it the oldest known human print in the world. Flints discovered in the oasis further prove that it was inhabited in Palaeolithic and Neolithic times, but beyond that Siwa's early history remains shrouded in mystery.

The oldest monuments in the oasis, including the Temple of the Oracle, date from the 26th dynasty, when Egypt was invaded by the Assyrians. Siwa's Oracle of Amun (p359) was already famous then, and Egyptologists suspect that it dates back to the earlier 21st dynasty, when the Amun priesthood and oracles became prominent throughout Egypt.

Such was the fame of Siwa's oracle that it threatened the Persians, who invaded Egypt in 525 BC and ended the 26th dynasty. One of the Western Desert's most persistent legends is of the lost army of Persian king, Cambyses, which was sent to destroy the oracle and disappeared completely in the desert (see boxed

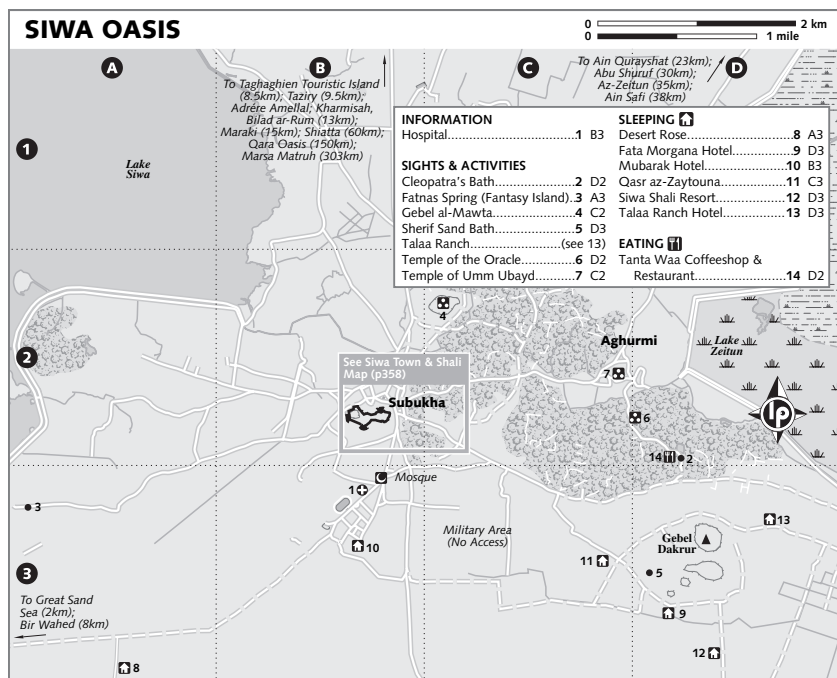
text, p346). This only helped increase the prestige of the oracle and reinforce the political power of the Amun priesthood.

The oracle's power, and with it Siwa's fame, grew throughout the ancient world. The young conqueror Alexander the Great led a small party on a perilous eight-day journey across the desert in 331 BC. It is believed that the priests of Amun, who was the supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon and later associated with the Greek god Zeus, declared him to be a son of the god. On coins minted after this time, Alexander was often portrayed with the ram's horns associated with Amun. Ptolemaic leaders, anxious to prove their credentials, also made the trek. The tombs at Gebel al-Mawta (p359) are testament to the prosperity of the oasis during this period.

The end of Roman rule, the collapse of the trade route and the gradual decline in the influence of oracles in general all contributed to Siwa's gentle slide into obscurity. While Christianity spread through most of Egypt, there is no evidence that it ever reached Siwa and priests continued to worship Amun here until the 6th century AD. The Muslim conquerors, who crossed the desert in 708, were defeated several times by the fierce Siwans. However, there was a cost to this isolation: it is said that by 1203 the population had declined to just 40 men, who moved from Aghurmi to found the new fortress-town of Shali. The oasis finally converted to Islam around the 12th century, and gradually built up wealth trading date and olive crops along the Nile Valley, and with Libyan Fezzan and the Bedouins.

European travellers arrived at the end of the 18th century – WG Browne in 1792 and Frederick Hornemann in 1798 – but most were met with a hostile reception and several narrowly escaped with their lives. The Siwans thus gained a reputation for being fiercely independent and hostile to non-Muslim outsiders. Throughout the 19th century, the Egyptian government also had problems trying to gain the loyalty of the oasis. Siwa was again visited in WWII, when the British and Italian/German forces chased each other in and out of Siwa and Jaghub, 120km west in Libya, until Rommel turned his attention elsewhere. By then the Siwans were politically incorporated into Egypt, but the oasis remained physically isolated until an asphalt road connected it to Marsa Matruh in the 1980s. As a result, Siwans still speak their own





distinct Berber dialect and have a strong local culture, quite distinct from the rest of Egypt. The oasis is now home to 20,000 Siwans and just over 1000 Egyptians.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Tourist police** (Map p358; ☎ 460 2047; Siwa Town)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**El-Jawhara International Call** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1180; Sidi Suleyman, Siwa Town; per hr E£10; ☎ 8am-1am) Has three computers and what might just be the fastest connection in town. Just.

**El-Negma Internet Centre** (Map p358; ☎ 460 0761; 59 central market sq, Siwa Town; per hr E£10; ☎ 9am-midnight) Also reasonably good computers.

**Siwa Oasis Net** (Map p358; ☎ 460 2049; central market sq, Siwa Town; ☎ 10am-2.30pm & 6-11pm)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hospital** (Map p357; ☎ 460 0459; Sadat St, Siwa Town) Only for emergencies.

**Pharmacy Al-Ansar** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1310; central market sq & Sharia Sadat, Siwa Town; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4pm-2am)

### MONEY

**Banque du Caire** (Map p358; Siwa Town; ☎ 8.30am-2pm, also 5-8pm Oct-Apr) Purported to be the only all mud-brick bank in the world, there's an ATM here that works more often than not. Located next to the police station.

### PERMITS

A permit is needed to venture off the beaten track from Siwa, but this is easily arranged by local guides. Mahdi Hweiti at the Siwa tourist office (p358) will arrange permissions quite quickly (but not on Friday), at the fixed rate of US\$5, plus an extra E£11 for the local Mukhabarat (Intelligence Police) office. The same rate applies for the permit needed to travel from Siwa to Bahariya. You'll need your passport.

Note that most permits will be valid for one day only, and although overnight trips can be easily arranged, they are not always permitted.

### POST & TELEPHONE

**Main post office** (Map p358; behind Arous al-Waha Hotel, Siwa Town; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)



**Telephone centrale** (Map p358; Siwa Town; ☎ 24hr)  
Located at the beginning of the Marsa Matruh road.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1338; mahdi\_hweiti@yahoo.com; Siwa Town; ☎ 9am-2pm Sat-Thu, plus 5-8pm Oct-Apr) The local tourist officer Mahdi Hweiti is very helpful and knowledgeable and has plenty of information about travelling in the oases. He also sells an informative local guide (££20) and can help arrange trips to some of the surrounding villages or the desert. He can be reached on his mobile (☎ 010 546 1992). In the evening, you can watch an interesting documentary about Siwa in English, French or German.

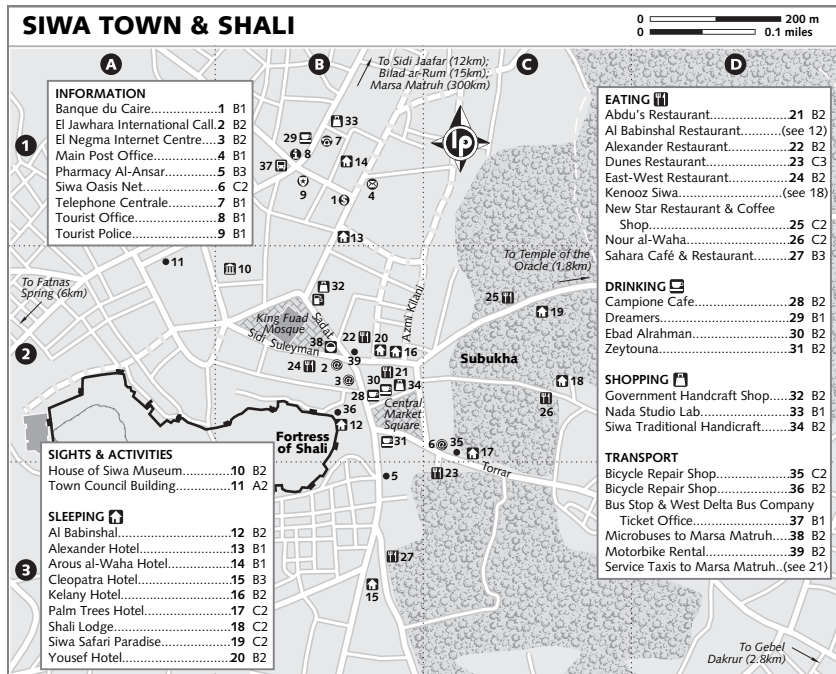
## Sights & Activities

Even though there are a number of fascinating sights hidden in the dense palm greenery of this oasis, the main attraction in Siwa remains its serene ambience. Strolling through the palm groves or relaxing over a cup of tea as the townspeople go about their languid paces seems to be the order of the day. Occasional visits to one of the wonderful springs in the area offer further distractions, and bicycles are a suitably paced form of transport that can

be rented nearly everywhere. In Siwa Town there's a good ethnographic museum and the old fort of Shali, as well as the ancient remains at Aghurmi and the Gebel al-Mawta. Day trips by jeep to the surrounding villages, the desert or to Bir Wahed, a cold freshwater lake and a hot spring in the dunes, can easily be arranged. Or you can go further and arrange an overnight safari into the Great Sand Sea.

## SIWA TOWN

Siwa is a pleasant little town centred around a market square, where roads lead off into the palm groves in nearly every direction. Around the corner from the local council offices is the small **House of Siwa Museum** (Map p358; adult/student ££10/5; ☎ 10am-noon Sun-Thu), which contains a modest display of traditional clothing, jewellery and crafts typical of the oasis. It was inspired by a Canadian diplomat who feared that Siwan culture and its mud-brick houses would disappear in a flood of poured cement and modernity. You can arrange to see the museum through the tourist office or find the custodian at the nearby Town Council Building (Map p358).



### RESPECTING LOCAL TRADITION

Siwans are very proud of their traditions, which are part of what makes the place so unique. They are particularly sensitive where female modesty is concerned. The least visitors can do to help preserve Siwa's culture is to respect local sensibilities and act accordingly. Modest dress is appreciated and women travellers in particular should make sure they cover their upper arms and their legs, and wear baggy T-shirts over bathing suits when taking a dip in any of the numerous springs. Do not, as the tourist office puts it, show 'displays of affection' in public.

The centre of the town is dominated by the spectacular organic shapes of the remains of the 13th-century mud-brick **fortress of Shali** (Map p358). Built from a material known locally as *kershef* (large chunks of salt from the lake just outside town, mixed with rock and plastered in local clay), the labyrinth of huddled buildings was originally four or five storeys high and housed hundreds of people. For centuries, few outsiders were admitted inside – and even fewer came back out to tell the tale. But three days of rain in 1926 caused more damage than any invader had managed and, over the last decades, inhabitants moved to newer and more comfortable houses with running water and electricity. Now only a few buildings around the edges are occupied or used for storage, including the **mosque** (Map p358) with its old, chimney-shaped minaret. Those who wander around the outskirts of the fort are likely to be rewarded with glimpses of life as it used to be; there's an old donkey-powered oil press back here, and you should listen out for the clanging of a real-life metal smith plying his trade.

With each rainfall more of these buildings disintegrate. However, Siwans are beginning to value the uniqueness of their heritage, as well as the need to preserve it. Recently authorities have been working with an international NGO to reinforce what's left of the fortress using traditional building techniques.

### AGHURMI

Before Shali was founded in the 13th century, Siwa's main settlement was at Aghurmi, 4km

east of the present town of Siwa. It was here that in 331 BC Alexander the Great consulted the oracle (see p356) at the 26th-dynasty **Temple of the Oracle** (Map p357; adult/student ££20/10; ☼ 9am–4pm). Built in the 6th century BC, probably on top of an earlier temple, it was dedicated to Amun (occasionally referred to as Zeus or Jupiter Ammon) and was a powerful symbol of the town's wealth. One of the most revered oracles in the ancient Mediterranean, its power was such that some rulers sought its advice while others sent armies to destroy it (see boxed text, p346).

Today the Temple of the Oracle sits in the northwest corner of the ruins of Aghurmi village. Though treasure hunters have been at work here and the buttressed temple was poorly restored in the 1970s, it remains an evocative site, steeped in history. Surrounded by the ruins of Aghurmi, it has awesome views over the oasis palm-tops.

About 200m further along the track stands the remains of the almost totally ruined **Temple of Umm Ubayd** (Map p357), also dedicated to Amun. This was originally connected to the Temple of the Oracle by a causeway and was used during oracle rituals. Early drawings have revealed that the structure was built by Nectanebo II during the 30th dynasty. Nineteenth-century travellers saw more of it than we can: a Siwan governor in need of building material blew up the temple in 1896 to construct the town's modern mosque and police building. Today only part of a wall covered with inscriptions survives.

### GEBEL AL-MAWTA

A small hill at the northern end of Siwa Town, **Gebel al-Mawta** (Map p357; adult/student ££20/10; ☼ 9am–4pm) – whose name means Mountain of the Dead – is honeycombed with rock tombs, most dating back to the 26th dynasty, Ptolemaic and Roman times. Only 1km from the centre of town, the tombs were used by the Siwans as shelters when the Italians bombed the oasis during WWII. Many new tombs were discovered at this time but were not properly excavated. In his book *Siwa Oasis*, Ahmed Fakhry recalls British soldiers paying Siwan families a few piastres to cut away large chunks of tomb paintings to keep as souvenirs.

Despite the damage, some paintings have survived. The best are in the **Tomb of Si Amun**, where beautifully coloured reliefs portray the dead man, thought to be a wealthy Greek

landowner or merchant, making offerings and praying to Egyptian gods. Also interesting are the unfinished **Tomb of Mesu-Isis**, with a beautiful depiction of cobras in red and blue above the entrance; the **Tomb of Niperpathot**, with inscriptions and crude drawings in the same reddish ink you can see on modern Siwan pottery; and finally the **Tomb of the Crocodile**, whose badly deteriorating wall paintings include a yellow crocodile representing the god Sobek.

### HOT & COLD SPRINGS

Siwa has no shortage of active, bubbling springs hidden among its palm groves. Following the track that leads to the Temple of the Oracle and continuing past the Temple of Umm Ubayd, will lead you to the most famous spring, **Cleopatra's Bath** (Spring of the Sun; Map p357). The crystal-clear natural spring water gurgles up into a large stone pool, which is a popular bathing spot for locals. Women should think twice about swimming here during the day, and if they decide to brave the stares then they should only bathe with their clothes on. There are changing rooms at the nearby Tanta Waa café.

There's a similar but slightly more secluded pool at **Fatnas Spring** (Map p357), the small island in the salty Birket Siwa (Lake Siwa) accessible across a narrow causeway. Nicknamed 'Fantasy Island' for its idyllic setting, the pool is about 6km from Siwa Town, and surrounded by palm trees and lush greenery. Although it is a safer place for a swim than Cleopatra's Bath, women should not swim alone and, again, should leave their bikinis for the Red Sea beaches. There's a small café among the palms, which is good for sitting and puffing on a *sheesha*, or drinking a cold beer if it's available. This is an idyllic place to watch the sunset. A ministry of agriculture project to try and improve the lake's drainage has left the 'island' high and dry, so that the café now looks out over salty mudflats rather than water.

A favourite excursion among local guides is the cold freshwater lake at **Bir Wahed** (off Map p357), 15km away on the edge of the Great Sand Sea. Once over the top of a high dune, you come to a hot spring, the size of a large Jacuzzi, where sulphurous water bubbles in a pool and runs off to irrigate a garden. Cooling down in the lake, and then watching the sun setting over the dunes while soaking in a hot

### WARNING

To oasis dwellers, a woman walking alone in palm gardens is provocative and she could find herself in trouble. Single women should either avoid the palms or find a companion to stroll with.

spring is a surreal experience. The thorns in this rose are the mosquitoes that bite at sunset. Because it's far from town, women can wear bathing suits here without offending locals. Bir Wahed can only be reached by 4WD, so if you don't have your own, you'll need to hire a guide and car. Permits are needed to visit Bir Wahed (see p357).

### PALM GARDENS

One of Siwa's greatest attractions is the oasis itself, which boasts more than 300,000 palm trees, 70,000 olive trees and a great many fruit orchards. The vegetation is sustained by more than 300 freshwater springs and streams, and the area attracts an amazing variety of bird life, including quail and falcons.

### OUTLYING VILLAGES

There are a few tumbledown villages about 15km northwest of Siwa Town (all shown off the Siwa Oasis map, p357). **Kharmisah** has five natural springs and is renowned for the quality of its olive gardens. **Bilad ar-Rum** (City of the Romans) has about 100 tombs cut into the rock of the nearby hills and the ruins of a stone temple, which is rumoured to be the final resting place of Alexander the Great. Both are Berber villages and can be reached by local bus.

About 2km west of here is **Maraq**, where Lianna Souvaltzi, a Greek archaeologist, claimed in 1995 to have found the tomb of Alexander the Great. Her findings proved controversial and the Egyptian authorities revoked her permit and closed the site.

Sixty kilometres west of Siwa Town, the town of **Shiatta** sits lapping at the edge of the Great Sand Sea. There's a salt spring here, thought to be all that's left of a lake that once reached all the way to Siwa Town, where an ancient Egyptian boat was discovered lying 7m down, possibly used to sail to the Temple of the Oracle. These days, this area is mainly used by Bedouin tribes for grazing livestock and has some first-rate views of the desert mountains.

There are more springs to the east of Siwa Town (shown off the Siwa Oasis map, p357). **Ain Qurayshat** is 27km out from the town and has the largest free-flowing spring in the oasis. **Abu Shuruf**, a clean spring said by locals to have healing properties, is 7km further east from Ain Qurayshat in the next palm thicket. The clear water here is about 3m deep and spills into Lake Zeitun, another huge saltwater lake. Another 5km brings you to **Az-Zeitun**, an abandoned mud-brick village beaten by the sand and wind that sits alone on the sandy plain. Hundreds of Roman-era tombs have been discovered about 2km beyond Az-Zeitun and are currently under excavation, although little of interest has so far been found.

From Az-Zeitun, another 3km brings you to **Ain Safi**, the last human vestige before the overwhelming wall of desert dunes that stretches for hundreds of kilometres, all the way south to Al-Kharga Oasis. Some 30 Bedouin families live at Ain Safi.

To visit these sights you'll need your own sturdy vehicle. Mahdi Hweiti at the tourist office (p358), and almost every restaurant and hotel in town, organises trips. None of these sights, with the exception of Shiatta, require permits.

## Tours

Almost all restaurants and hotels in Siwa offer tours, ranging from half a day in the desert around Siwa Town to a full five- or six-day safari. Siwa Safari Paradise (p362) arranges tours using its own fleet of 4WDs, though this is an expensive option. The Palm Trees Hotel (p362) and Abdu's Restaurant (p364) have established a good reputation for their trips. The tourist office (p358) can also be a great help in organising tours around the oasis.

All desert trips require permits, which cost US\$5 plus E£11 and are usually obtained by your guide from the tourist office. Prices and itineraries vary, but one of the most popular trips takes you to the desert hot spring at Bir Wahed, on the edge of the Great Sand Sea. Here you can have a simple meal or tea, then move on to the nearby spring-fed lake, where, in the summer, you can take a dip. Usually you will do a spot of dune driving, stop at fossil sites and see some fantastic desert vistas before returning to Siwa. This half-day trip costs about E£80 per person plus permission costs.

Other popular half-day itineraries include a tour of the springs Ain Qurayshat, Abu Shuruf, Az-Zeitun and Ain Safi (E£50 per person); and a tour of Siwa Town and its environs (Temple of the Oracle, Gebel al-Mawta, Cleopatra's Bath, Shali fortress and Fatnas; E£30). Overnight trips vary in length according to destination but a popular one-night trip is to Qara Oasis (E£300 to E£500 per vehicle, depending on whether asphalt or desert track is taken). Most trips are done by 4WD, so ensure that the vehicle is roadworthy before you set out and, as with any desert trip, that you have enough water.

Camels were recently introduced to the oasis to do desert trips. Sherif Fahmy of the **Talaa Ranch** (Map p357; ☎ 010 588 6003; talaranchsiwa@hotmail.com; Gebel Dakrur) can arrange camel tours to watch the sunset from the sand dunes or a longer desert safari, though prices are a bit steep at E£350 for a day and night or E£150 per half-day. Abdul at **Shali Camel Safaris Ranch** (☎ 010 194 1653) also organises camel tours, with all meals included, at a slightly lower cost.

## Festivals & Events

Gebel Dakrur is the scene of the annual **Siyyaha festival**. For three days around the October full moon, thousands of Siwans gather to celebrate the date harvest, renewing friendships and settling any quarrels that might have broken out over the previous year. All Siwans, no matter what their financial or social standing, eat together at a huge feast after the noon prayer each day during the festival. The festival is intertwined with Sufism, and each evening, hundreds of men form a circle and join together in a *zikr*, a long session of dancing, swaying and singing repetitive songs in praise of God. Siwan women do not attend the festivities, although girls up to about the age of 12 are present until sunset. Each year hundreds of non-Siwans – Egyptians and foreigners – attend the festival.

Once a year, just after the corn harvest in late summer, the small tomb shrine of Sidi Suleiman, behind the King Fuad Mosque in the centre of Siwa Town, is the scene of a *moulid* (Saints' festival), known in Siwi as the **Moulid at-Tagmigra**. Banners announce the *moulid*, and *zikrs* are performed outside the tomb.

Occasionally on Thursday nights, after the evening prayer, local Sufis of the Arusiya order

gather near the tomb shrine for a *zitr* and they don't mind the odd foreigner watching.

## Sleeping

Siwa has a great collection of places to bed down in, with everything from competitively priced budget pads to dazzling top-end options. The choices here are expanding yearly, and the competition helps keep standards high and prices down. Many midrange and top-end sleeping options can also be found further afield in Siwa Oasis, around Gebel Dakrur and Sidi Jaafar.

The police here are jittery about people camping close to town. If you really want to avoid other people, you're better off organising a trip to the desert with one of the many local operators (see p361).

## SIWA TOWN

### Budget

**Yousef Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 460 0678; central market sq; dm/d without bathroom £8/16, d £24) With the cheapest beds in town, Yousef is perennially full with backpacking budgeters. The rooms are a bit tattered and kept barely above minimum hygiene levels, but the four-storey rooftop has great views of the oasis and a kitchen that guests are free to use. Noise can be an issue.

**Palm Trees Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1703; salahali2@yahoo.com; Sharia Torrar; s/d without bathroom £15/25, s/d £35/45, bungalows £50) This deservedly popular budget hotel has sufficiently tidy rooms, all with screened windows, fans and balconies. The shady, tranquil garden with date-palm furniture is delightful (but mosquito intensive), and the few ground-level bungalows have porches spilling onto the greenery. Breakfast costs ££5.

**Cleopatra Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 460 0421; www.cleopatra-siwa.net; s/d £18/31, with balcony £35/45) A respectable budget option at the southern end of town. While the cheaper rooms in the main building are a little scruffy, the quieter building out back is much neater and has respectable, balconied rooms.

**Alexander Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 460 0512; s/d £20/30, with air-con £30/60; ☎) Another humble ode to concrete and tile, the Alexander has typically austere rooms, clean sheets and bathrooms that have seen better days. However, it does boast the cheapest air-con abodes in town.

**Kelany Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1052, 012 403 9218; zaitisafari@yahoo.com; central market sq; r £50-70, with

breakfast ££60-80) A modern hotel in a good location, the Kelany has 10 sparkling rooms, spic-and-span bathrooms, hot and cold water and friendly management, though it comes up a bit short on the character front.

**Arous al-Waha Hotel** (Map p358; ☎ 460 0028; s/d £51/63; ☎) If it wasn't for the sand-coloured paint job, we'd swear this old hotel had escaped from a communist housing block. The rooms at this former government rest house are austere, orderly and spacious, though the management seems a little bewildered by walk-in guests. It's opposite the tourist office, at the beginning of the Marsa Matruh road.

**Desert Rose** (Map p357; ☎ 012 440 8164; ali\_siwa@hotmail.com; s/d/tr £60/90/125; ☎) Overlooking the magnificent dunes that stretch out to the southeast of Siwa, this friendly and cosy little hotel has creatively decorated, spotless rooms in a funky octagonal building. Extremely good value, it has its own clear pool of natural spring water, a roof terrace for sunset adulation, indoor and outdoor fireplaces and a smattering of cushioned chill-out areas. Guests can prepare their own meals in the kitchen or eat food prepared by the staff. The silence is only disturbed by the barking of dogs.

### Midrange & Top End

**Mubarak Hotel** (Map p357; ☎ 460 0883; s/d £150/200; ☎) Based in the sports complex, this modern, pink, curving monolith has rooms perpetually kept in spotless condition, access to a gym, squash courts and sauna. Pity it's fairly characterless, usually empty and isolated at the southern end of town.

**Siwa Safari Paradise** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1590; www.siwaparadise.com; s/d bungalow half board US\$35/49, with air-con US\$40/55, ste US\$60/75; ☎ ☎) Laid out along a maze of garden paths, this three-star resort mainly attracts northern Europeans looking to sunbake by the natural spring pool. The decoration is quite tacky but the rooms are cool and comfortable, so it is not a bad option if other recommended hotels are full.

**Shali Lodge** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1299; info@eqi.com.eg; Sharia Subukha; s/d US\$45/60; ☎) This tiny, beautiful mud-brick hotel, owned by environmentalist Mounir Neamatallah, nestles in a lush palm grove about 300m from the main square. The palms are a feature of the building wherever possible and the seven large, extremely comfortable rooms have lots of curving mud-brick goodness, massive exposed-brick bathrooms and lie arranged courtyard-style around a



small pool. Tasteful and quiet, this is how small hotels should be. Breakfast not included.

**Al-Babinshal** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1499; s/d US\$45/60) Literally attached to the fortress of Shali, this place continues the ecolodge footprint left by Shali Lodge – and Adrére Amellal – owner Mounir Neamatallah. The cunning architects have seamlessly grafted this mud-brick hotel onto the front of Shali fort, and a maze of tunnels and stairways connects the spacious and cool cave-like rooms, making it impossible to tell where the hotel ends and the fort begins. Entirely made from the same materials as the original fort, each intimate abode has wood-floor panelling, traditional wooden-shuttered windows and exposed palm-log supports. Some locals, however, are not convinced that this augmentation of their town's landmark is necessarily for the better.

#### SIDI JAAFAR

**Taziry Ecolodge** (off Map p357; ☎ 02-3337 0842, ext 115, 012 340 8492; Gaary; low season per person full board from €70; 🍽️) This lovely hotel was designed and built by its friendly owners, an artist and an engineer, both from Alexandria. The large natural-material rooms are decorated with local crafts and Bedouin rugs, and have their own bathroom. Tranquil and laid-back, with no electricity and a natural spring pool overlooking the lake, it is a great place to unwind and experience Siwa's magic.

**ourpick Adrére Amellal** (off Map p357; ☎ in Cairo 02-736 7879, 02-738 1327; [www.adreeramellal.net](http://www.adreeramellal.net); Sidi Jaafar, White Mountain; s/d incl all meals, drinks & desert excursions US\$336/448; 🍽️) Backed by the dramatic White Mountain (called Adrére Amellal in Siwi), this impeccable desert retreat lies coddled in

its own oasis, with stunning views over the salt lake of Birket Siwa and the dunes of the Great Sand Sea beyond. It is a truly unique place, built by environmentalist Mounir Neamatallah out of *kershef*, and using revived traditional building techniques. It's a real getaway from the regular pace of Egyptian life: mobile phones are banned outside the rooms and there is no electricity, with the gardens lit by torches and the rooms by candlelight. It offers the ultimate in spartan chic, as gourmet dinners are eaten under the stars or in salt-encrusted chambers. The swimming pool is an ancient stone natural spring and the rooms and suites are palatial, yet simple and beautiful. Together with inventive food that uses produce from its own organic garden and the feel-good factor of environmentally sound luxury, Adrére Amellal has featured in countless travel and style magazines and is one of the most innovative places to stay in the country.

#### GEBEL DAKRUR

**Qasr az-Zaytouna** (Map p357; ☎ /fax 460 0037; d without bathroom ££100, s/d ££120/150) This place has simple, clean rooms with fans, set in a large, hushed garden. The rooms on the 1st floor have pleasant views over the garden. It's run by a German–Siwan couple.

**Fata Morgana Hotel** (Map p357; ☎ 460 0237, 010 294 5850; s/d ££150/200; 🍽️) The Fata Morgana has several cool and spacious rooms, jazzed up by tall, domed ceilings and curving arches. The two-storey, stonework building here stays amazingly chilled in the desert heat, and the small, clear pool will help you cool down if you're still breaking a sweat. Each chamber

#### SAND BATHING

If you thought a soak in a hot spring was invigorating, wait until you try a dip in one of the scalding-hot sand baths of **Gebel Dakrur** mountain, several kilometres southeast of Siwa Town. From July to September, people flock here from all over the world to take turns being immersed up to their necks in a bath of very hot sand for up to 20 minutes at a time. Local doctors claim that a treatment regime of three to five days can cure rheumatism and arthritis – and judging by the number of repeat customers they get they might just be onto something. There are several places around the western slope of the mountain where you can get therapeutically sand-dunked; **Sherif sand bath** (Map p357) has a good reputation. Expect to pay around ££60 for each medicinal dip, which includes several necessary hours of recovery while sipping tea (though the tea is optional).

The mountain also supplies the oasis with the reddish-brown pigment used to decorate Siwan pottery. Siwans believe that the mountain is haunted and claim that *afrit* (spirits) can be heard singing in the gardens at night.



has a balcony with great views of either Gebel Dakrur mountain or the desert expanse – top marks in the bang-for-buck department.

**Siwa Shali Resort** (Map p357; ☎ 010 111 9730; www.siwashaliresort.com; s/d half board US\$55/65, ste US\$100; ☼ ☼) One of the few places in the deserts that earns its 'resort' label, this self-contained village of traditionally styled bungalows snakes its way along a 500m spring-fed pool. Nearly everything here is sand-coloured and subdued, almost to the point of being dull, but it offers all the mod cons, a restaurant, fitness facilities, a Bedouin-style café and gift shops.

**Tala Ranch Hotel** (Map p357; ☎ 010 588 6003; www.talaranch-hotel.com; per person with breakfast E£450) This newcomer offers a very different experience of Siwa, with six stylish and comfortable rooms on the edge of the desert. It promises generous helpings of hush and is as relaxing as things get, with the camels, the desert and the wind as the only distractions. Sherif can organise camel trips or safaris for guests, while his wife, Siham, prepares commendable Egyptian food served in a Bedouin tent (four-course dinner E£80).

## Eating

Many of the restaurants and cafés in Siwa cater to tourists. With the exception of the delicious restaurant at the Adrère Amellal, and the home-cooked food at places such as Taziry and Talaa Ranch, which is for guests only, most restaurants offer a similar menu of simple dishes, and the service and quality can vary from day to day.

**East-West Restaurant** (Map p358; dishes E£4-12) Named after the historical divide between the two parts of Siwa Town, this restaurant serves a cheaper, more pedestrian version of Abdu's menu and has lethargic service.

**Alexander Restaurant** (Map p358; off central market sq; dishes E£5-15) Alexander serves the usual budget-restaurant fare, with pizzas, veggie stews, very good chicken and, innovatively for Siwa, curries. Service can be slow here too, but the food usually arrives with a smile.

**Nour al-Waha** (Map p358; ☎ 460 0293; Sharia Subukha; dishes E£5-20) A popular hang-out in a palm grove opposite Shali Lodge, Nour al-Waha has shady tables, and plenty of tea and games on hand for those who just want to while away the day in the shade. The food is a mixture of Egyptian and Western and while it couldn't be called gourmet, it is generally fresh and

good. At night *sheeshas* are available for E£5, and sometimes there is live music.

**Abdu's Restaurant** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1243; central market sq; dishes E£5-25; ☼ 8.30am-midnight) Before internet and mobile phones, there were places like Abdu's – a village hub where people gathered nightly to meet, catch up and swap stories. This is the longest-running restaurant in town and remains the best eating option around, with a huge menu of breakfast, pasta, traditional dishes, vegetable stews, couscous, roasted chickens and fantastic pizza whipped to your table by the efficient service.

**Tanta Waa Coffeshop & Restaurant** (Map p357; ☎ 010 472 9539; meals E£7-25; ☼ 8am-late) This super-chilled and creatively clad mud-brick café at Cleopatra's Bath is the perfect place for a cool drink or tasty meal in between splashes in the spring. The food here is surprisingly good, with a small selection of salads, pastas, meat dishes and fruit smoothies. The lasagne alone, which follows a genuine Italian recipe, is worth the trip out here (E£12). Slung with hammocks and with a background of funky tunes (it also occasionally holds evening parties), it's easy to while away an entire day at this haven.

**Dunes Restaurant** (Map p358; ☎ 010 653 0372; Sharia Torrar; dishes E£8-25) With tables set under the palm trees and a large menu covering everything from herbal tea to couscous, Dunes is just another place to hang out and relax. The usual traveller stalwarts (from pancakes to smoothies) can be found here, as well as local specialities such as stuffed pigeon (by special order). *Sheeshas* are *de rigueur* and the owner can arrange special evenings with traditional Siwan music.

**Al-Babinshal Restaurant** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1499; meals E£8-35) On the roof of the hotel of the same name, this might just be the most romantic dining spot found in the oases. Moodily lit in the evenings, it's practically attached to the fortress of Shali and has sweeping views over all of Siwa. The food is prepared by the same chef as at Kenooz Siwa (below), but unfortunately Al-Babinshal Restaurant does not quite live up to the promise of its chic ambience.

**Kenooz Siwa** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1299; Sharia Subukha; dishes E£8-35) This café-restaurant on the roof terrace of the Shali Lodge is a great place to hang out with a mint tea or a cold drink, although the quality of the food, once the best in town, has definitely deteriorated of late.

## GAY SIWA?

Much attention has been paid to Siwa's unique history of intimate male relations. Back when Siwa's citizens still lived in Shali fort, young men between the ages of 20 and 40 were expected to spend their nights outside the fortress to tend to the fields and protect the town from attack. These men of Siwa had a notorious reputation, not only for their bravery (they were known as *zaggalah*, or 'club bearers'), but for their love of palm wine, music and openly gay relations. Single-sex marriages were still practised in Siwa right up until WWII, although they had been outlawed in Egypt decades earlier.

Even though Siwa has been listed as a place to visit in several gay travel directories, the situation today is quite different. Residents of Siwa vehemently deny that local gay men exist in their town, and international travellers coming to Siwa in hope of 'hooking up' have been faced with increasingly homophobic sentiment. Siwan men are not amused at being propositioned by passing strangers – they are much more likely than foreigners to bear the brunt of antigay attitudes. Violent attacks on local men accused of homosexuality are not unheard of.

There are several other cosy palm-garden restaurants around Siwa serving the usual combination of Egyptian and Western fare, including:

**Sahara Café & Restaurant** (Map p357; ☎ 010 856 9532; meals E£7-20) A nice place to chill, if you can find someone to serve you.

**New Star Restaurant & Coffee Shop** (Map p358; ☎ 460 0293; Sharia Subukha; dishes E£8-30) Also has a small shop selling traditional crafts.

## Drinking

Many of the cafés around town are no-name places where Siwan men gather to watch TV and chat, but no alcohol is served. The cafeteria at Fatnas Spring (p360) sometimes has beer.

**Campione Cafe** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1719; coffee E£3-6; ☎ 9am-midnight) Recently opened by an enterprising Alexandrian, we can't argue with its slogan: 'life is too short for bad coffee'. It serves imported Italian coffee made with a bona-fide imported espresso machine and prepared any way you like it. Latte anyone?

**Dreamers** (Map p358; opposite Arous al-Waha Hotel) Lively café open late where you can smoke a *sheesha* on an old-fashioned sofa while watching TV with locals, or drink a juice listening to reggae music.

**Taghaghien Touristic Island** (off Map p357; ☎ 921 0060; admission E£10) If you're desperate for a beer, this small island 12km northwest of Siwa Town and connected by a causeway is one of the few places selling the amber nectar (for a whopping E£25 a bottle). There is some humble accommodation and a restaurant here, but its many shaded tables and chairs, paddleboat rentals and sweet sunset vistas make it better

suited for a day trip or picnic. You'll need your own transport to get here.

Right in town, **Zeytouna** (Map p358; central market sq) and **Ebad Alrahman** (Map p358; central market sq) are two cafés facing each other at opposite ends of the square and taking turns nightly to fill up with locals smoking *sheesha*, downing tea and slapping backgammon pieces with triumphant vigour. Their tables often spill out onto the town square.

## Shopping

Siwa's rich culture is well represented by the abundance of traditional crafts that are still made for local use as well as for tourists. Unfortunately, an estimated 98% of the older artefacts have become collectors' items and been sold to collectors worldwide. These pieces of Siwan heritage may be lost, but young Siwan craftsmen are slowly starting to make the pieces again.

Siwans love to adorn themselves and they are second only to the Nubians in their quest for the biggest and most ornate pieces of jewellery to be found in Egypt. Siwan women only wear the heavy silver jewellery on special occasions these days, but several interesting pieces are still made. Siwan wedding dresses are famous for their red, orange, green and black embroidery, which is often embellished with shells and beads. The black silk *asherah nazitaf* and the white cotton *asherah namilal* dresses can be found at the shops.

Baskets woven from date-palm fronds are still made here by women and girls. You can spot old baskets by their finer workmanship and the use of silk or leather instead of vinyl

and polyester. The *tarkamt*, a woven plate that features a red leather centre, is traditionally used for serving sweets, the larger *tghara* is used for storing bread, and smaller baskets include the *aqarush* and the red-and-green silk-tasselled *nedibash*.

Local clays are mixed with straw and coloured with pigment from Gebel Dakrur to make pottery water jugs, drinking cups and incense burners. The *maklay*, a round-bottomed cup, and the *adjra*, used for washing hands, are among the most popular buys, as are *timjamait* (incense burners).

There has been an explosion of craft shops around Siwa Town in recent years catering to the lucrative tourist demand for this traditional handiwork. Most sell very similar items, but a good place to get an idea of prices and what's available is at the **Government Handicraft Shop** (Map p358; opposite mosque; ☎ 9am-4pm Sun-Thu). If you blink, however, you might miss its erratic opening hours. From there you can wander through the many other handicrafts shops and stalls in town to compare the quality of the craftsmanship, the range of what's available and prices. Happy haggling.

One of the better handicrafts shops in Siwa, run by Ali Abd Allah, is the **Siwa Traditional Handicraft** (Map p358; ☎ 460 1063, 010 304 1191), around the corner on the main market square. He sells a wide range of quality merchandise at fixed prices.

Siwa is also known for its dates and olives, available in shops around the main market square. Usually someone will open a jar so you can try the olives to find the variety you like. Everyone has a favourite brand of dates; Jawhara are particularly good.

Camera film and batteries can be bought at Nada Studio Lab (Map p358), just past the telephone centrale on the main road out of Siwa Town.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Buses depart from the bus stop opposite the tourist police station, although when you arrive you'll be let off the bus in the central market square. You can purchase tickets to Marsa Matruh or Alexandria at the West Delta Bus Company ticket office at the bus stop. It's sensible to buy your ticket ahead of time as buses are often full.

There are three daily buses to Alexandria (E£27 to E£30, eight hours), stopping at Marsa

Matruh (E£12, four hours). These leave at 7am, 10am and 10pm. There's an extra daily bus leaving at 3pm in the winter and 5pm in the summer. The 7am and 10am buses also connect with buses to Cairo at Marsa Matruh (1½-hour transit, if you're lucky). There's a daily service to Marsa Matruh only at 1pm.

Microbuses going to Marsa Matruh leave from the main square near the King Fuad Mosque (Map p358). They are more frequent but not as comfortable as the West Delta Bus. Tickets cost the same.

### SERVICE TAXI

There is no service-taxi station, but those making the trip to Marsa Matruh (E£12) leave from the area in front of Abdu's Restaurant (p364). The taxis (mostly minibuses) tend to leave in the early morning or after sunset, but ask around to confirm this.

A new road linking the oases of Siwa and Bahariya began construction in 2005, but funds dried up the following year and any finishing date is now a distant mirage. The old road, which passes through some jaw-dropping desert landscapes, is asphalted, though you can't tell by the awful shape it's in, and a permit (see p357) is needed to drive along it. In winter a police escort on this route is also usually required. There are no buses or service taxis here, but Siwan drivers are willing to make the 10-hour trip for about E£800 to E£1500 per car. If you do go, ensure that the vehicle is a roadworthy 4WD and that you have food and water.

### TO/FROM LIBYA

Siwans visit their families in Libya and vice versa, but at the time of writing it is still illegal to cross into Libya and go on to the town of Jaghub, about 120km away, unless you travel via Sallum (see p405). Although the border is only 50km away it is reportedly mined, so things are unlikely to change soon.

## Getting Around

### BICYCLE

Bicycles are one of the best ways to get around and can be rented from several sources, including most hotels and a number of shops dotted around the town centre. Getting a bike from one of the bicycle repair shops (see Map p358) gives you a better chance of finding a bike in good condition. The going rate is E£10 per day.

**DONKEY CART**

Donkey carts, or *caretas*, are a much-used mode of transport for Siwans and can be a more amusing, if slower, way to get around than bicycles or cars. Some of the boys who drive the carts speak English and can be fierce hagglers. Expect to pay about ££25 for two to three hours or ££5 for a short trip.

**MOTORCYCLE**

Though not as enjoyable or tranquil as bicycles, motorbikes can also be rented from enterprising locals and can help you visit a lot more sights if you are short on time. Ahmed, who works at a handicrafts store near the petrol station, arranges **motorbike rental** (☎ 016 203 5959), as does Palm Trees Hotel (p362). Expect to pay around ££100 per day.

**SERVICE TAXI**

Pick-up trucks serve as communal taxis linking Siwa Town with the surrounding villages. To get to Bilad ar-Rum costs ££1 each way; closer destinations are 50pt. If you want to get to more remote sites, Mahdi Hweiti at the tourist office or any of the restaurants will be able to help. Prices depend on haggling skills, the duration of the trip and the distance to be covered.

**BEYOND SIWA****Qara Oasis**

About 120km northeast of Siwa, near the Qattara Depression, is another oasis, Qara. This remote oasis is home to 317 Berbers who, like the Siwans, built their fortresslike town on top of a mountain. According to legend, the harsh environment and scarce resources in the area meant that whenever a child was born in Qara an older person would have to leave in order to keep the population at a sustainable level. Whether or not this was ever true, it is no longer practised, although the Qarans remain small in number and their life is harsh. Unlike in Siwa, the old fortress is still inhabited, but an increasing number of new concrete houses are being built down below.

To get there, take the narrow asphalt road that branches off the Siwa–Marsa Matruh road at the rest house, 150km from Siwa. You can either rent a pick-up to take you there for about ££400 or talk to the many people in town offering desert safaris. For more information, see p361.

**Great Sand Sea**

One of the world's largest dune fields, the Great Sand Sea straddles Egypt and Libya, stretching over 800km south to the Gilf Kebir. There are 18 sand seas around the world, four of them in North Africa. The Great Sand Sea begins south of the Mediterranean coast. A branch splits off in Libya, south of Siwa, forming the Calanscio Sand Sea; the rest carries on southeast within Egypt. Sitting on a rise in the desert floor and covering a colossal 72,000 sq km, it contains some of the largest recorded dunes in the world, including one that is 140km long. Crescent, *seif* (sword) and parallel wavy dunes are found here (see boxed text, p347), some of which are on the move while others remain in place. Undulating and beautiful, the dunes are treacherous and have challenged desert travellers for hundreds of years. The Persian king Cambyses is thought to have lost an army here (see boxed text, p346), while the WWII British Long Range Desert Group spent months trying to find a way through the impenetrable sands to launch surprise attacks on the German army. Aerial surveys and expeditions have helped the charting of this vast expanse, but it remains one of the least-explored areas on earth.

The Great Sand Sea is not a place to go wandering on a whim, and you will need military permits as well as good preparation. Guides will take you to the edges of the Great Sand Sea from Siwa and many safari outfits will take you on expeditions that skirt the area (see p329). Remember that you don't need to penetrate far into the desert in order to feel the isolation, beauty and enormous scale of this amazing landscape.

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# Alexandria & the Mediterranean Coast



The boundaries of Northern Egypt run smack bang into this dazzling 500km stretch of the Mediterranean seaboard. Here, the fabled city of Alexandria takes its rightful place as the cultural jewel in the coastal crown, while elsewhere the sea's turquoise waters lap up against pristine but mostly deserted shores. It has been dealt the short straw in life-giving fresh-water, and Egyptian holiday-makers, and a few intrepid travellers, have only recently begun to discover the potential of its untouched beaches.

Alexandria wins the unfortunate accolade of being the 'greatest historical city with the least to show for it'. Once the home of near-mythical historical figures and Wonders of the World, only fragmented memories of Alexandria's glorious ancient past remain. Today, however, the city is too busy gussying up its graceful 19th-century self to lament what's been and gone. The town shivers at the thought of its own potential: its streets and cafés buzzing with the boundless energy of a new wave of creative youth.

Nearby Rosetta is famous for the black-stone key that deciphered hieroglyphics and was unearthed here – though this Nile-side port once rivalled Alexandria during that town's more woeful days. Halfway across the coast to Libya, the memorials of El Alamein loom as solemn reminders of the lives lost during the North Africa campaigns of WWII. Meanwhile, not far off, a battalion of resorts offers a white-sand beach distraction from too much war-time reflection. Slumbering on a marvellous, aqua-lined bay for three-quarters of the year, Marsa Matruh screams into life in the summer months as half of the Nile Valley drops in for a visit.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak in the 19th-century grandeur through a puff of *sheesha* (water pipe) smoke or a kick-start-strong coffee at one of Alexandria's beautiful **period cafés** (p390)
- Try to grapple with the immense amount of ancient history made in Alexandria at the city's impressive **Alexandria National Museum** (p376)
- Wander down the dusty, donkey-filled street of **Rosetta** (p395) and admire the beautifully restored Ottoman architecture of this once-important seaport
- Be reminded of the ultimate toll paid by soldiers on all sides of the WWII North Africa campaign at **El Alamein** (p398)
- Soak in the stunning white sands and aqua waters of the *Dr Jekyll* and *Mr Hyde* town of **Marsa Matruh** (p403) – a comatose hamlet in the low season or a heaving holiday metropolis in the summer months



# ALEXANDRIA

📍 03 / pop 4.1 million

The city of Alexandria (Al-Iskendariyya) is the stuff that legends are made of: the city was founded by none other than Alexander the Great; sassy queen Cleopatra made this the seat of her throne; the entrance to its harbour was marked by the towering Pharos lighthouse (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World); and its Great Library of Alexandria was renowned as the ultimate archive of ancient knowledge. Alas, fate dealt the city a spate of cruel blows: today no sign remains of the great Alexander; the city of Cleopatra's day has been mostly swallowed up by the ocean; the Pharos lighthouse collapsed long ago; and the literary treasures of the Great Library were set to numerous torchings. To add insult to injury, Egypt's consequent Muslim rulers moved the capital to nearby Cairo, ignobly thrusting the once influential metropolis into near obscurity for centuries.

In the 19th century a cosmopolitan renaissance had Alexandria flirting with European-style decadence, but it was cut short in the 1950s by Nasser's wave of change. Today, even though the city plays second fiddle to Cairo, modern Alexandria feels like a teenager eager to forge its own identity. The daring new library of Alexandria signalled a brave leap into modernity, the first tentative steps of a city ready to revamp itself for the future. This town is also swooping in on the role of Egypt's culture vulture – legions of young artists and writers are finding their voices and new cutting-edge venues are providing a stage for their prolific output. But whether the new Alexandria forges its own unique path forward, or follows the West's shopping-mall model of a brave new (air-conditioned) world, remains to be seen.

Alexandria, the famed ancient metropolis of the ages, is not easy to find in the city that bears its name today. Nevertheless, the city doffs its hat to an impressive past and successfully marries its 19th-century grandeur with the vibrancy of an energetic youth. This is an ideal place to spend a few days sipping coffee in grand, old-world cafés at breakfast; pondering the city's glorious past at its copious museums before or after lunch; and topping it all off with mouthwatering fish fare over sunset-lit dinners.

## HISTORY

Alexandria's history is the bridging link between the time of the pharaohs and the days of Islam. The city gave rise to the last great Pharaonic dynasty (the Ptolemies), provided the entry into Egypt for the Romans and nurtured early Christianity before rapidly fading into near obscurity when Islam's invading armies passed it by to set up camp on a site along the Nile that later become Cairo.

The city was initiated with the conquests of Alexander the Great, who arrived from Sinai having had his right to rule Egypt confirmed by the priests of Memphis. Here, on the shores of his familiar sea, he chose a fishing village as the site for a new city that he hoped would become a bridge between the old Pharaonic world and the new world of the Greeks. Foundations were laid in 331 BC and almost immediately Alexander departed for Siwa to consult the famous oracle, before marching for Persia. His conquering army went as far as India, where he died just two years later, having his body returned to Egypt for burial. When the priests at Memphis refused to bury him, the Greek pharaoh was buried in Alexandria, the city he had conceived as the cultural and political centre of his empire.

Alexander had left one of his generals, Ptolemy, to oversee the development of the new city and the viceroy eagerly continued this work after Alexander's death. Alexandria was filled with architecture to rival the cities of Rome or Athens. To create a sense of continuity between his rule and that of the Pharaonic dynasties, Ptolemy made Alexandria look at least superficially Egyptian by adorning the city with sphinxes, obelisks and statues scavenged from the old sites of Memphis and Heliopolis. The city developed into a major port and became an important halt on the trade routes between Europe and Asia. It's newfound economic wealth was equally matched by its intellectual standing. Its famed library (see the boxed text, p383) stimulated some of the great advances of the age: this was where Herophilus discovered that the head, not the heart, is the seat of thought; Euclid developed geometry; Aristarchus discovered that the earth revolves around the sun; and Erastotenes calculated the earth's circumference. A grand tower, the Pharos (see the boxed text, p382), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was



built on an island just offshore and acted as both a beacon to guide ships entering the booming harbour and, at a deeper level, as an ostentatious symbol of the city's greatness.

During the reign of its most famous regent, Cleopatra, Alexandria rivalled Rome in everything but military power – a situation that Rome found intolerable and was eventually forced to act upon. Under Roman control, Alexandria remained the capital of Egypt, but during the 4th century AD, civil war, famine and disease ravaged the city's populace and it never regained its former glory. Alexandria's decline was sealed when the conquering Muslim armies swept into Egypt in the 7th century and bypassed Alexandria in favour of a new capital further south on the Nile.

The city went into slow decline all through the Middle Ages and was even superseded in importance as a seaport by the nearby town of Rosetta. Over the centuries its monuments were destroyed by earthquakes and their ruins quarried for building materials, so much so that one of the greatest cities of the classical world was reduced to little more than a fishing village (now Anfushi) on the peninsula between two harbours, with a population of less than 10,000.

The turning point in Alexandria's fortunes came with Napoleon's invasion of 1798; recognising the city's strategic importance, he initiated its revival. During the subsequent reign of the Egyptian reformist Mohammed Ali, a new town was built on the top of the old one. Alexandria once more became one of the Mediterranean's busiest ports and attracted a cosmopolitan mix of people, among them wealthy Turkish-Egyptian traders, Jews, Greeks, Italians and others from around the Mediterranean. Multicultural, sitting on the foundations of antiquity, perfectly placed on the overland route between Europe and the East, and growing wealthy from trade, Alexandria took on an almost mythical quality and served as the muse for a new string of poets, writers and intellectuals. But the wave of anticolonial, pro-Arab sentiment that swept Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser to power in 1952 also spelled the end for Alexandria's cosmopolitan communities. Those foreigners who didn't stream out of the country in the wake of King Farouk's yacht found themselves forced out a few years later, in the wake of the Suez crisis, when Nasser confiscated

many foreign properties and nationalised many foreign-owned businesses.

Since that time the character of the city has changed completely. In the 1940s some 40% of the city's population was made up of foreigners, while today most of it is native Egyptians. And where there were 300,000 residents in the 1940s, Alexandria is now home to more than four million, a figure swelled by the steady drift of people from the country to the city.

## ORIENTATION

Modern Alexandria lies protracted along a curving shoreline, stretching for 20km and rarely extending more than 3km inland. The centre of the city arcs around the Eastern Harbour, almost enclosed by two spindly promontories. The city's main tram station, Mahattat Ramla (Ramla Station) on Midan Ramla, where most lines terminate, is considered the epicentre of the city. Two of the city centre's main shopping streets, Sharia Saad Zaghloul and Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul, run off this square. Just west of the tram station is the larger and more formal square, Midan Saad Zaghloul, with a popular garden facing the seafront. Around these two *midans* (city squares) are the central shopping areas, the tourist office, restaurants and the majority of the cheaper hotels.

To the west of this central area are the older quarters of the city, notably Anfushi, and further on the city's best beaches at the more upmarket resort town of Agami. Heading east, a succession of newer districts stretches along the coast to the upmarket residential area of Rushdy, the trendy suburbs of San Stefano and further on to Montazah, with its palace and gardens, which marks the eastern limits of the city. The Corniche (Al-Corniche) is the long coastal road that connects nearly all parts of the city, though crossing it involves playing chicken with swarms of hurtling buses and taxis.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

All of the following stock only a smattering of fiction and nonfiction books in English.

**ACML Bookshop** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 545 3714; 181

Ahmed Shawky; ☞ 10am-9pm Sat-Thu) Has one of the better selections in Alexandria.

**Al-Ahram Bookshop** (Map p374; ☎ 487 4000; cnr Tariq al-Horreyya & Talaat Harb; ☞ 9am-4pm Sat, Mon-Thu, 9am-1.30pm Sun)

## ALEXANDRIA IN...

## Two Days

On day one, grab breakfast and a strong coffee at one of the city's many **period cafés** (see the boxed text, p390) and get a taste of the past at the excellent **Alexandria National Museum** (p376), and the **Greco-Roman Museum** (p375) if renovations are completed. A tasty lunch at one of the many fish restaurants in **Anfushi** (p388) is a must. In the afternoon venture to the cavernous Roman **Catacombs of Kom ash-Shuqqafa** (p377). Back at the Corniche, stop at the delectable **El-Qobesi** (p389) for the best mango juice. Ever. Near **Fort Qaitbey** (p381), grab a sundowner beer at the **Greek Club** (p390). Treat yourself to a great dinner at the **Fish Market** or the **Tikka Grill** (p388) and then, after a stroll down the Corniche, head to the fascinating **Tugareya** (see the boxed text, p391) to relax over a nightcap *sheesha* (water pipe) and some good conversation.

On day two, get an early start to the **fish market** (p384) in Anfushi. Follow with a visit to the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** (p381), which is a must-see modern confabulation, and the Roman amphitheatre at **Kom al-Dikka** (p377), worth a trip for its exquisite mosaics. In the afternoon you can pop into the **Royal Jewellery Museum** (p383) and finish off with an evening drink at either the atmospheric **Cap d'Or** (p390) or the **Centro De Portugal** (p390).

## Four Days

Follow the two-day itinerary, then add a day trip to **Rosetta** (p395) and the mouth of the Nile, and on the fourth day head to **El Alamein** (p398) and spend the afternoon on the beach in **Sidi Abdel Rahman** (p400).

**Dar al-Mustaqbal Bookshop** (Map p374; ☎ 487 2452; 32 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; ☎ 9am-4pm Sat, Mon-Thu, until 1pm Sun)

## Cultural Centres

Many of the city's cultural centres operate libraries and organise occasional films, lectures, exhibitions and performances. Take along your passport as you may have to show it before entering.

**Alexandria Centre of Arts** (Map p374; ☎ 495 6633; 1 Tariq al-Horreyya; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu) This active cultural centre, housed in a whitewashed villa, hosts contemporary arts exhibitions, poetry readings and occasional free concerts in its theatre. There is also an art studio, library and cinema (free films 6pm each Sunday) on the 1st floor.

**American Cultural Center** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 486 1009; www.usembassy.egnet.net; 3 Sharia al-Pharaana, Azarita; ☎ 10am-4pm Sun-Thu)

**British Council** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 545 6512; www.britishcouncil.org.eg; 11 Sharia Mahmoud Abu al-Ela, Kafr Abdu, Rushdy; ☎ 11am-7pm Sat-Thu)

**French Cultural Centre** (Map p374; ☎ 391 8952; www.alexfrance.org.eg; 30 Sharia al-Nabi Daniel; ☎ 9am-noon & 5-7.30pm Sun-Thu)

**Goethe Institut** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 487 9870; www.goethe.de/alexandria; 10 Sharia al-Batalsa, Bab Sharqi; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Thu, until 2pm Sun)

## Internet Access

Internet cafés in Alexandria seem to have the life span of a fruit fly, though as soon as one closes another opens not too far away. Here are but a few.

**Farous Net Café** (Map p374; ☎ 497 6905; Sharia Tariq al-Horreyya; per hr E£2; ☎ 11am-midnight)

**MG@Net** (Map p374; ☎ 485 6981; 10 Sharia Shohada; per hr E£2; ☎ 9.30am-2am)

**Mougy Internet Cafe** (Map p374; ☎ 487 5675; 18 Sharia Koleyat el-Tiba; per hr E£3; ☎ 8am-1am Sat-Thu, 3pm-1am Fri)

**Tantan Internet Centre** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 485 7353; 18 Sharia Dr Ahmed Badawy; per hr E£2; ☎ 10am-1am)

**Zawiya Internet Cafe** (Map p374; ☎ 484 8014; Sharia Dr Hassan Fadaly, off Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; per hr E£4; ☎ 11am-11pm)

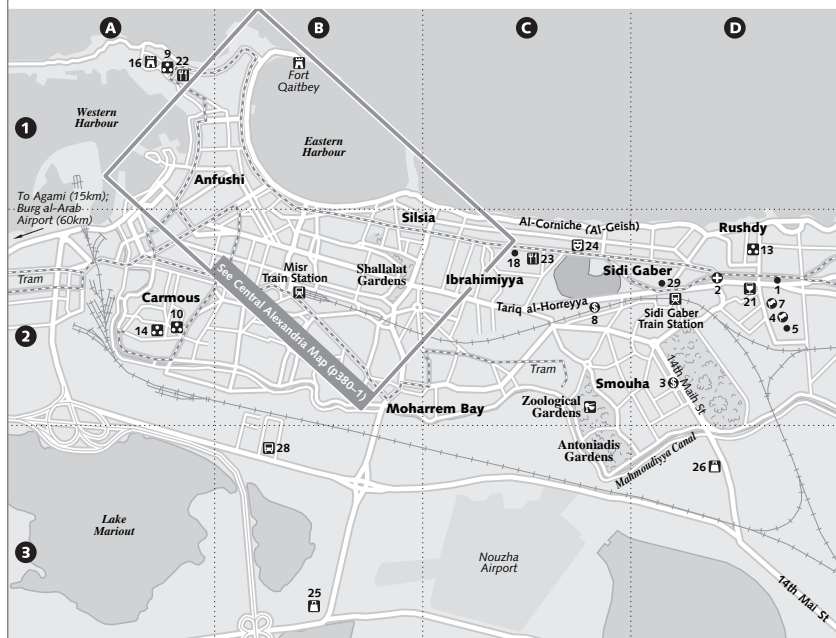
## Medical Services

## HOSPITALS

**Al-Madina at-Tibiya** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 543 2150/7402; Sharia Ahmed Shawky, Rushdy; ☎ 24hr) Well-equipped private hospital, accustomed to dealing with foreign patients.

**German Hospital** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 584 0757; 56 Sharia Abdel Salaam Aarafa, Glymm; ☎ 24hr) Next to Al-Obeedi Hospital. Well equipped and staffed by highly qualified doctors. It also has a private day clinic with specialised doctors for nonemergency patients.

## ALEXANDRIA



## PHARMACIES

There's no shortage of pharmacies around the Midan Ramla, all with at least one English-speaking staff member.

**Khalil Pharmacy** (Map p374; ☎ 480 6710; Sharia al-Ghorfa at-Tigariya, off Midan Saad Zaghloul; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun)

## Money

For changing cash or cashing travellers cheques it's simplest to use one of the many exchange bureaus on the side streets between Midan Ramla and the Corniche. Otherwise, try the following:

**American Express** (Amex; Map pp372-3; ☎ 420 1050; 14 Mai, Elsaladya Bldg, Smouha; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu) This office is also a travel agency.

**Thomas Cook** (Map p374; ☎ 484 7830; www.thomascookegypt.com; 15 Midan Saad Zaghloul; ☎ 8am-4pm)

## ATMS

There are dozens of ATMs in central Alexandria, particularly on Sharia Salah Salem and Talaat Harb, the city's banking district. You can also find one at the following banks:

**Banque du Caire** Sharia Salah Salem (Map p374; 5 Sharia Salah Salem); Sharia Sisostris (Map p374; cnr Sharia Sisostris & Talaat Harb)

**Barclays** (Map pp380-1; 41 Sharia Sultan Hussein)

**Credit Agricole** (Map p374; 20 Sharia Salah Salem)

**HSBC** (Map pp380-1; 47 Sharia Sultan Hussein)

**MIBank** (Map p374; 45 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul)

## MONEY TRANSFER

For receiving money from overseas or wiring money abroad, Western Union has two offices in town.

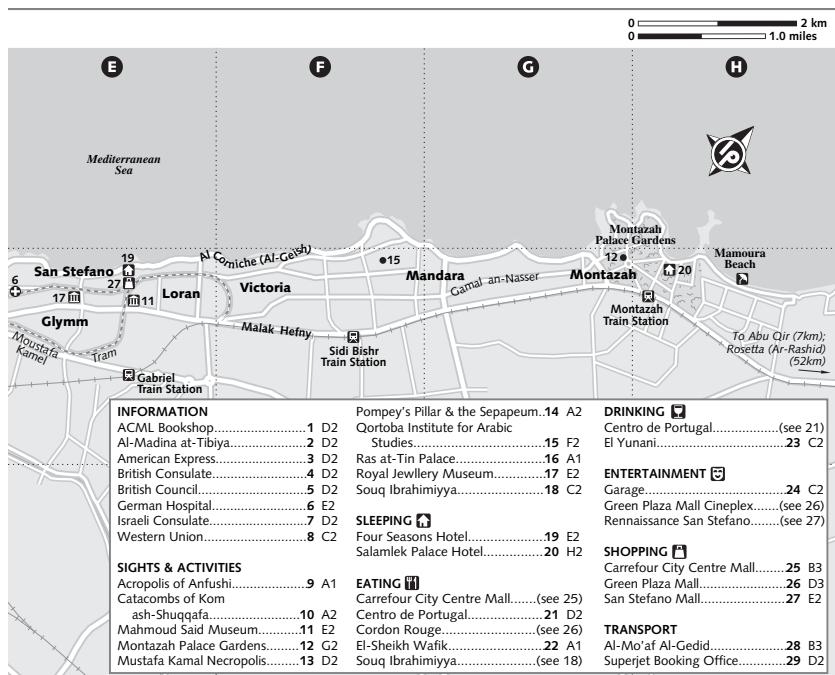
**Western Union** Tariq al-Horeyya (Map pp380-1; ☎ 420 1148; 281 Tariq al-Horeyya); Tariq al-Horeyya (Map pp372-3; ☎ 492 0900; 73 Tariq al-Horeyya)

## Photography

**Kodak Express** (Map p374; ☎ 486 4072; 36 Safiyya Zaghloul; ☎ 10am-1am) Sells film and memory cards for digital cameras, and prints digital photos.

## Post

The main post office is just east of Midan Orabi, and several other branches are dotted around the city.



To pick up poste restante, which is unreliable at the best of times, go to the mail-sorting centre one block west of Midan Orabi.

**DHL** (Map p374; ☎ 485 19111; 9 Sharia Salah Salem; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu)

**Express Mail Service (EMS)** (☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu)  
At all post offices.

**Main post office** (Map p374; Al-Bursa at Qadima; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu)

**Poste restante** (Map pp380-1; Mail-sorting centre, Sharia Sahafa; ☎ 6.30am-6pm Sat-Thu) Mail is usually held for three weeks.

## Telephone

Menatel cardphones can be found all over the city, although the policy of placing them on street corners can make it hard to hear and be heard. Private call centres are everywhere and they are a much more convenient option.

**Telephone centrale** (Map p374; Saad Zaghloul; ☎ 24hr)

## Tourist Information

**Mahattat Misr tourist office** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 392 5985; Platform 1, Misr Train Station; ☎ 8am-6pm) A friendly satellite tourist office.

**Main tourist office** (Map p374; ☎ 485 1556; Midan Saad Zaghloul; ☎ 8.30am-6pm, 9am-4pm during Ramadan) Marginally useful.

**Tourist police** (Map p374; ☎ 485 0507) Upstairs from the main tourist office.

## Visa Extensions

The **passport office** (Map p374; ☎ 482 7873; 25 Sharia Talaat Harb; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Mon-Thu, 10am-2pm Fri, 9-11am Sat & Sun) does visa extensions, usually on the same day. You need to provide one passport-size photo, a photocopy of the relevant pages of your passport, the passport itself and £12. Head straight to counter 6 on the 2nd floor, though note that extension applications are only accepted until noon.

## SIGHTS

The sights of Alexandria lie scattered along its extensive shore. As always, a good place to start is at the beginning: around Midan Ramla, the ancient heart of the city's many incarnations. From here you can explore the Alexandria National Museum, the Graeco-Roman Museum (which might still be closed for renovations – check ahead), the Roman

## MIDAN RAMLA &amp; AROUND

0 200 m  
0 0.1 miles

A

B

C

D

## INFORMATION

Al-Ahram Bookshop.....	1	C5
Alexandria Centre of Arts.....	2	C5
Banque du Caire.....	3	B5
Banque du Caire (ATM).....	4	B5
Credit Agricole (ATM).....	5	A5
Dar al-Mustaqbal Bookshop.....	6	D5
DHL.....	7	A5
Farous Net Café.....	8	C5
French Consulate.....	9	A4
French Cultural Centre.....	10	C5
Italian Consulate.....	11	C3
Khalil Pharmacy.....	12	B4
Kodak Express.....	13	A4
Main Post Office.....	14	A4
Main Tourist Office.....	15	B4
Mena Tours.....	16	B3
MC@Net.....	17	B4
MIbank (ATM).....	18	D4
Mougy Internet Café.....	19	C5
Passport Office.....	20	B3
Telephone Centrale.....	21	A4
Thomas Cook.....	22	C3
Tourist Police.....	(see 15)	
Zawiya Internet Cafe.....	23	C4

Pharmacie Suisse.....	28	C3
Roman Amphitheatre (Kom al-Dikka).....	29	D5
Synagogue.....	30	C4
Villa of the Birds.....	31	D5

## SLEEPING

Cecil Hotel.....	32	B3
Egypt Hotel.....	33	C3
Hotel Acropole.....	34	B4
Hotel Crillon.....	35	B4
Hotel Union.....	36	B3
Metropole Hotel.....	37	C3
New Capri Hotel.....	38	B4
Nile Excelsior Hotel.....	39	A4
Sea Star Hotel.....	40	C3
Swiss Canal Hotel.....	41	A4
Triomphe Hotel.....	42	B4
Windsor Palace Hotel.....	43	B4

## EATING

Al-Shark.....	44	A4
Awalad Abdou.....	45	C6
China House.....	(see 32)	
Elite.....	46	D4
Gad.....	47	B5

Gad.....	48	C3
Mohammed Ahmed.....	49	C4
Taverna.....	50	C3

## DRINKING

Athineos.....	51	C3
Bistrot.....	52	C5
Brazilian Coffee Store.....	53	B5
Brazilian Coffee Store.....	54	B4
Cap d'Or.....	55	A5
City Café.....	56	B5
Coffee Roastery.....	57	D4
Delices.....	58	C4
Drinkies Beer Shop.....	59	B4
El-Tugareya.....	60	A4
El-Tugareya.....	61	A4
Pastroudis.....	62	D5
Sofianopoulo Coffee Store.....	63	A4
Sofitfire.....	64	A4
Sultan Hussein.....	65	C4
Trionon.....	66	C3
Vinous.....	67	C5

## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

Amphitheatre Ticket Office.....	24	D6
Athineos.....	(see 51)	
Cavafy Museum.....	25	C4
Church of St Mark.....	26	A5
Mosque of An-Nabi Daniel.....	27	C5

To Fort  
Qaitbey (1.5km)



## ENTERTAINMENT

Alexandria Opera House.....	68	C5
Amir Cinema.....	69	D5
Cinema Metro.....	70	D4

## SHOPPING

Attareen Antique Market.....	71	B6
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## TRANSPORT

Airport Bus Departures.....	(see 32)	
Avis.....	(see 32)	
Egypt Air.....	72	C3
No 1 Minibus to Sidi Gaber.....	73	B3
West Delta Booking Office.....	74	B4

Amphitheatre, and zip over to Pompey's Pillar and the Catacombs of Kom ash-Shuqqafa. Further afield, you can zip along the seafront in a succession of taxis, trams or hustling microbuses to see Fort Qaitbey, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, and then further east to the Royal Jewellery Museum, Mahmoud Said Museum and Montazah.

## Ancient Alexandria

The history of ancient Alexandria borders on the mythical, a place of legends inspired by bedtime tales of Cleopatra, the Wonders of the World and that great library. Today a column, some catacombs and a few sculptures in the city's museums are only tangible hints that it all might once have been real. All is not lost, however; thanks to ongoing archaeological research more and more evidence is being unearthed to give physical shape to the ancient city. While the Alexandria of Cleopatra's time lies buried 6m down, every now and then the city gives up more of its secrets as modern developers stumble across new antediluvian finds. In recent years underwater archaeology has been all the rage and has produced some dramatic discoveries (see the boxed text, p376).

Nevertheless, Alexandria remains a city for nostalgics with a fertile imagination. The modern city, built directly on top of the ancient one, often follows the ancient street pattern. The street now known as Tariq al-Horreyya was the ancient Canopic Way, extending from the city's Gate of the Sun in the east to the Gate of the Moon in the west. Two thousand years ago Sharia al-Nabi Daniel was called the Street of the Soma. Standing at the intersection of Sharia al-Nabi Daniel and Tariq al-Horreyya (Map p374), you find yourself at the crossroads at the heart of the ancient city. This, according to the 1st-century-AD geographer Strabo, was where Alexander's tomb once stood. Heinrich Schliemann, who came to Alexandria in 1888 after rediscovering the ruins of Troy, believed that the tomb lay underneath the modern and fairly unnoteworthy **Mosque of An-Nabi Daniel** (Map p374). Recent trial excavations revealed that the mosque does indeed rest on the site of a 4th-century Roman temple, but religious authorities have placed a halt on any further digging. Since then some respected archaeologists have turned their attention elsewhere. The most likely location is now believed to

be the intersection of Tariq al-Horreyya and a street known as R1, which runs through the middle of the Chatby necropolis (p382). Here, where there are extensive Greek graveyards, archaeologists have discovered an impressive alabaster antechamber, which would originally have led to a massive tumulus tomb.

## GRAECO-ROMAN MUSEUM

As part of Alexandria's effort to spruce itself up, many of its prime tourist attractions are in the process of being renovated. Unfortunately, the wonderful **Graeco-Roman Museum** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 486 5820; 5 Al-Mathaf ar-Romani; adult/student ££30/15; ☎ 9am-4pm) is currently one of them. Although restoration work is scheduled to be finished by 2009, regular delays and budget overruns mean that this might prove to be a lofty goal. Home to one of the most extensive collections of Graeco-Roman art in the world, with more than 40,000 objects, the collection is on a world tour while the museum is closed, but is scheduled to return upon completion. The following descriptions will be applicable once the new museum reopens.

One of the sights not to miss is the large collection of realistic **terracotta statuettes** (*tanagra*) from the Hellenistic period. Also look for three different **carved heads** representing the city's founder, Alexander. From the Delta region, an impressive wall-hung **mosaic** from the 3rd century BC portrays Berenice, wife of Ptolemy III. Equally impressive is the giant Apis bull in basalt from the time of Hadrian, found at the Serapeum, and two carvings of the god **Serapis** – one in wood, the other in marble. Serapis is a wholly Alexandrian creation, a divinity part Egyptian (the husband of Isis) and part Greek, with echoes of Zeus and Poseidon. Ptolemy I promoted him as a way of bringing together his Egyptian and Greek subjects in shared worship. It worked, and the museum is full of images of the god.

No museum in Egypt would be complete without at least one mummy, and this one has a **mummified crocodile**, which would have been carried in processions devoted to the god Sobek. A temple discovered at Al-Fayoum has been rebuilt in the museum's garden and its ornate carved **wooden door** can be found inside the museum.

There are lots of examples of the melding of Greek and Egyptian culture here, including pink-granite statues of Egypt's **Greek-Ptolemaic pharaohs** shown wearing Pharaonic dress and



## NAUTICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Alexandria has sunk 6m to 8m since antiquity, so most of what remains of the ancient city lies hidden beneath the modern city or the waters of the Mediterranean. On land, much has been destroyed as the city has grown. Rescue archaeologists such as Jean-Yves Empereur, who has been working in Alexandria for more than 25 years, are allowed to excavate before a new building, tunnel or road project goes ahead, but they are rarely given enough time – usually only a few weeks, or months at most.

But underwater the story is different and each year reveals more finds from the Ptolemaic period. So far, exploration has been concentrated around the fortress of Qaitbey where the Pharos (see the boxed text, p382) is believed to have stood, the southeastern part of the Eastern Harbour where parts of the submerged Ptolemaic royal quarter were found, and Abu Qir (p394) where remains of the two sunken cities of Herakleion and Menouthis were found.

The Qaitbey dive has recorded hundreds of objects, including sphinx bodies, columns and capitals, and fragments of obelisks. Divers have also discovered giant granite blocks, some of them broken as if by a fall from a great height – more circumstantial evidence for the likely end of the Pharos.

In the royal-quarter area, a French-Egyptian diving team has discovered platforms, pavements and red-granite columns that they speculate were part of a former palace ('Cleopatra's Palace', as it is being euphemistically called), as well as a remarkably complete shipwreck carbon dated to between 90 BC and AD 130. In October 1998, in front of a crowd of international journalists, archaeologists raised a beautiful black-granite statue of a priest of Isis, followed by a diorite sphinx adorned with the face of what's thought to be Ptolemy XII, father of Cleopatra.

The most recent excavations in Abu Qir have revealed *L'Orient* (Napoleon's flagship that sunk in 1798); the city of Menouthis with a harbour, houses, temples, statues and gold jewellery; and another city believed to be Herakleion or Thonis, a port that guarded the Canopic branch of the Nile.

Some recovered treasures can be seen in the city's museums, and there are tentative plans for the world's first underwater museum. But the best way of seeing what's in the water is to dive the submerged harbour sites. **Alex Dive** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 03-483 2045; [www.alexandra-dive.com](http://www.alexandra-dive.com); Corniche, Anfushi) in Alexandria arranges dives to several of the above-mentioned locales. A two-day package will set you back around US\$90, with equipment rental an extra US\$20. Be warned, however, that the visibility in the bay can be as poor as 1m depending on the time of year, with September to November offering the clearest water for diving.

crowns, an attempt to legitimise them as the heirs of the pharaohs.

In this museum you will find just about the only historical depictions of the **Pharos** in Alexandria; several terracotta lanterns dating back to the 3rd century BC and shaped according to the three stages of the tower (see the boxed text, p382). There are also several coins presented here from Alexander's time, displaying a portrait of the Macedonian, and several bearing profiles of a large-nosed Cleopatra.

## ALEXANDRIA NATIONAL MUSEUM

The excellent **Alexandria National Museum** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 483 5519; 110 Tariq al-Horreyya; adult/student ££30/15; ☎ 9am-4pm) sets new benchmarks for summing up Alexandria's impressive past. With a small, thoughtfully selected and well-labelled collection singled out from

Alexandria's other museums, it does a sterling job of relating the city's history from antiquity until the modern period. Housed in a beautifully restored Italianate villa, it stocks several thousand years of Alexandrian history, arranged chronologically over three cryogenically air-conditioned floors.

The ground floor is dedicated to Graeco-Roman times, where highlights include a sphinx and other sculptures found during underwater excavations at Abu Qir. Look for the small statue of the Greek god Harpocrates with a finger to his lips (representing silence), who was morphed from the original Egyptian god Horus. Also check out the beautiful statue of a Ptolemaic queen, with Egyptian looks and a Hellenistic body. The basement covers the Pharaonic period, with finds from all over Egypt, including an unusual New

Kingdom pottery jar with the god Bes and the head of Queen Hatshepsut in painted limestone. The top floor displays artefacts from Islamic and modern periods, with coins, Ottoman weapons and jewels from the Royal Jewellery Museum (p383). Early coexistence of Alexandria's major religions is represented by a carved wooden cross encircled by a crescent. Well-written panels on the walls provide useful insights into the life, art and beliefs of the Alexandrians through the centuries.

### ROMAN AMPHITHEATRE (KOM AL-DIKKA)

While the 13 white-marble terraces of the only **Roman Amphitheatre** (Map p374; ☎ 486 5106; Sharia Yousef, off Midan Gomhuriyya; adult/student E£15/10; ☹ 9am-5pm) in Egypt may not be impressive in scale, they remain a superbly preserved ode to the days of the centurion. This site was discovered when foundations were being laid for apartments building on a site known unceremoniously as Kom al-Dikka (Mound of Rubble). Excavation has currently shifted to the north, where a team is working to expose the remains of Roman-era baths and a villa. In Ptolemaic times this area was known as the Park of Pan, a pleasure garden where citizens of Alexandria could indulge in various lazy pursuits. There's a large, nine-panel floor mosaic masterpiece here known as the **villa of the birds**. To see it, you will need to buy a separate ticket (adult/student E£10/5) at the amphitheatre main ticket office opposite Mahattat Misr train station.

### POMPEY'S PILLAR & THE SERAPEUM

This massive 30m-high column, hewn from red Aswan granite, is known as **Pompey's Pillar** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 484 5800; Carmous; adult/student E£15/10; ☹ 9am-4pm), looming over the debris of the glorious ancient settlement of Rhakotis, the original township from which Alexandria grew. For centuries the column has been one of the city's prime sights, a single shaft of tapered granite, 2.7m at its base and capped by a fine Corinthian capital. The column was named by travellers who remembered the murder of the Roman general Pompey by Cleopatra's brother, but an inscription on the base (presumably once covered with rubble) announces that it was erected in AD 291 to support a statue of the emperor Diocletian.

The column rises out of the disappointing ruins of the **Temple of Serapeum**, a magnificent structure that stood here in ancient times. It had 100 steps leading past the living quarters

of the priests to the great temple of Serapis, the manmade god of Alexandria (see p375). Also here was the 'daughter library', the second great library of Alexandria, which was said to have contained copies and overflow of texts held in the Great Library of Alexandria, the Mouseion library (see the boxed text, p383). These rolls could be consulted by anyone using the temple, making it one of the most important intellectual and religious centres in the Mediterranean. In AD 391 Christians launched a final assault on pagan intellectuals and destroyed the Serapeum and its library, leaving just the lonely pillar standing. The site is now little more than rubble pocked by trenches and holes with a few sphinxes (originally from Heliopolis), a surviving Nilometer and the pillar – the only ancient monument remaining whole and standing today in Alexandria.

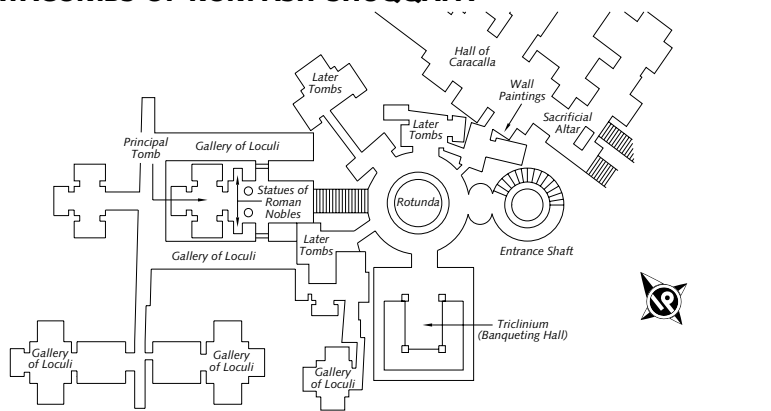
To reach the pillar, walk west from Midan Gomhuriyya (the Misr train station square), following the tram tracks along Sharia Sherif. The entrance to the Serapeum is 300m past the major bend in the road on the right.

### CATACOMBS OF KOM ASH-SHUQQAFA

About five minutes' walk south of Pompey's Pillar is **Kom ash-Shuqqafa** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 484 5800; Carmous; adult/student E£25/15; ☹ 9am-5pm). Discovered accidentally in 1900 when a donkey disappeared through the ground, these catacombs are the largest known Roman burial site in Egypt. This impressive feat of engineering was one of the last major works of construction dedicated to the religion of ancient Egypt. Demonstrating Alexandria's hallmark fusion of Pharaonic and Greek styles, the architects used a Graeco-Roman approach in their construction efforts. The catacombs consist of three tiers of tombs and chambers cut into bedrock to a depth of 35m. The bottom level, some 20m below street level, is flooded and inaccessible but the areas above are impressive enough on their own.

Entering through a spiral staircase, the bodies of the dead would have been lowered on ropes down the centre of this circular shaft. The staircase leads off to a **rotunda** with a central well piercing down into the gloom of the flooded lower level. When the catacombs were originally constructed in the 2nd century AD, probably as a family crypt, the rotunda would have led to the **tridinium** (to your left) and principal tomb chamber (straight ahead) only. But over the 300 years the tomb was in

## CATACOMBS OF KOM ASH-SHUQQAFA



use, more chambers were hacked out until it had developed into a complex that could accommodate more than 300 corpses.

The triclinium was a banqueting hall where grieving relatives paid their last respects with a funeral feast. Mourners, who returned to feast after 40 days and again on each anniversary, reclined on the raised benches at the centre of the room around a low table. Tableware and wine jars were found when the chamber was excavated.

Back in the rotunda, head down the stairs to the **principal tomb**, the centrepiece of the catacombs. Here, an antechamber with columns and pediment leads through to an inner sanctum. The typical Alexandrian-style decoration shows a weird synthesis of ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman funerary iconography. The doorway to the inner chamber is flanked by figures representing Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead, but dressed as a Roman legionary and with a serpent's tail representative of Agathos Daimon, a Greek divinity.

From the antechamber a couple of short passages lead to a large U-shaped chamber lined with **loculi** – the holes in which the bodies were placed. After the body (or bodies, as many of the loculi held more than one) had been placed inside, the small chamber was sealed with a plaster slab.

Back up in the rotunda, four other passageways lead off to small clusters of tombs. One of these gives access to an entirely different complex, known as the **Hall of Caracalla**. This had its own staircase access (long-since caved

in) and has been joined to Kom ash-Shuqqafa, which it predates, by the efforts of tomb robbers who hacked a new passageway. Beside the hole in the wall, a painting shows the mummification of Osiris and the kidnapping of Persephone by Hades, illustrating ancient Egyptian and Greek funerary myths.

### Central Alexandria

'Like Cannes with acné' was Michael Palin's verdict on Alexandria's sweeping seafront **Corniche** (in his book *Around the World in 80 Days*). Right in the middle of the broad Corniche is the legendary **Cecil Hotel** (Map p374), overlooking Midan Saad Zaghloul. Built in 1930, it's an Alexandrian institution and a memorial to the city's *belle époque*, when guests included Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward and Winston Churchill, and the British Secret Service operated out of a suite on the 1st floor. The hotel was eternalised in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*.

The area around **Midan Ramla** is full of mini time capsules of the city's cosmopolitan past; take a look in the **Pharmacie Suisse** (Map p374), with its beautiful dark-wood and glass cabinets painted with skull and crossbones and the warning '*substances toxique*'. Next door is **Athineos** (see the boxed text, p390), a once-grand tearoom formerly frequented by Greek girls and besuited Egyptian pashas.

Midan Ramla was roughly the site of the **Caesareum**, a large sanctuary and temple initiated by Cleopatra in honour of the deified Julius Caesar, and continued by Augustus, the

first Roman ruler of Egypt. Two great obelisks brought up from Heliopolis marked the entrance to the sacred site. Long after the Caesareum disappeared the obelisks remained standing, until the 19th century when Mohammed Ali gave them away. They now grace London's Victoria Embankment and New York's Central Park.

Just south of here is Alexandria's fabulous Italian-built **synagogue** (Map p374). Erected more than a century ago, it served a thriving, wealthy, cosmopolitan Jewish community of about 15,000. Since the wars with Israel and the 1956 Suez crisis, that community has dwindled so that now when the synagogue opens each Shabbat, it rarely has the necessary 10 men to hold a service. Casual visitors are not usually admitted.

## MIDAN TAHRIR

Midan Tahrir (Liberation Square; Map pp380–1) was laid out in 1830 as the centrepiece of Mohammed Ali's new look: Alexandria goes to Europe. The impressive **statue** (Map pp380–1) on a plinth at the centre of the *midan* is Mohammed Ali on horseback. A recent clean up has done wonders to accentuate the fine architecture of the square's surrounding buildings.

Near the eastern end of the square, in a peaceful garden, is the Anglican **Church of St Mark** (Map p374) with memorials to British residents and soldiers. **Midan Orabi** (Map p374), which runs from Tahrir to the sea, was once the fine French Gardens. A passage into the grand building of the Okelle Monferrato department store on the corner of both squares leads to the wonderful **Ahwa al-Hind** (Map pp380–1), a coffeehouse where the men who play dominoes and smoke *sheeshas* (water pipe) look like they've been entrenched there for centuries (for more details, see p390).

## ANFUSHI

Charismatic Anfushi, the old Turkish part of town, was once where stuffy Alexandria came to let down its hair. While Midan Ramla and the Midan Tahrir area were developed along the lines of a European model in the 19th century, Anfushi remained untouched, an indigenous quarter standing in counterpoint to the new cosmopolitan city. This is where writer Lawrence Durrell's characters came in search of prostitutes and a bit of rough trade. Today it remains one of the poorest parts of the city, where a huge number of people live squeezed into atmospheric but old and

decaying buildings, many of which seem to be teetering on the verge of collapse.

The beautiful little **Terbana Mosque** (Map pp380–1) stands at the junction of Sharia Fransa and Souq al-Kharateen. This entire quarter, known as Gumruk, stands on land that was underwater in the Middle Ages. Late-17th-century builders managed to incorporate bits of ancient Alexandria in the mosque's structure, reusing two classical columns to support the minaret. The red-and-black-painted brickwork on the façade is typical of the Delta-style architecture. The **Shorbagi Mosque** (Map pp380–1; Sharia Nokrashli), nearby, is also built with salvaged remnants of antiquity.

Continuing on Sharia Fransa the street narrows before opening suddenly into a *midan* dominated by the large, white **Mosque of Abu Abbas al-Mursi** (Map pp380–1). Built in 1943 on the site of an earlier mosque that covered the tomb of a 13th-century Muslim saint, this is a modern, but nonetheless impressive, example of Islamic architecture.

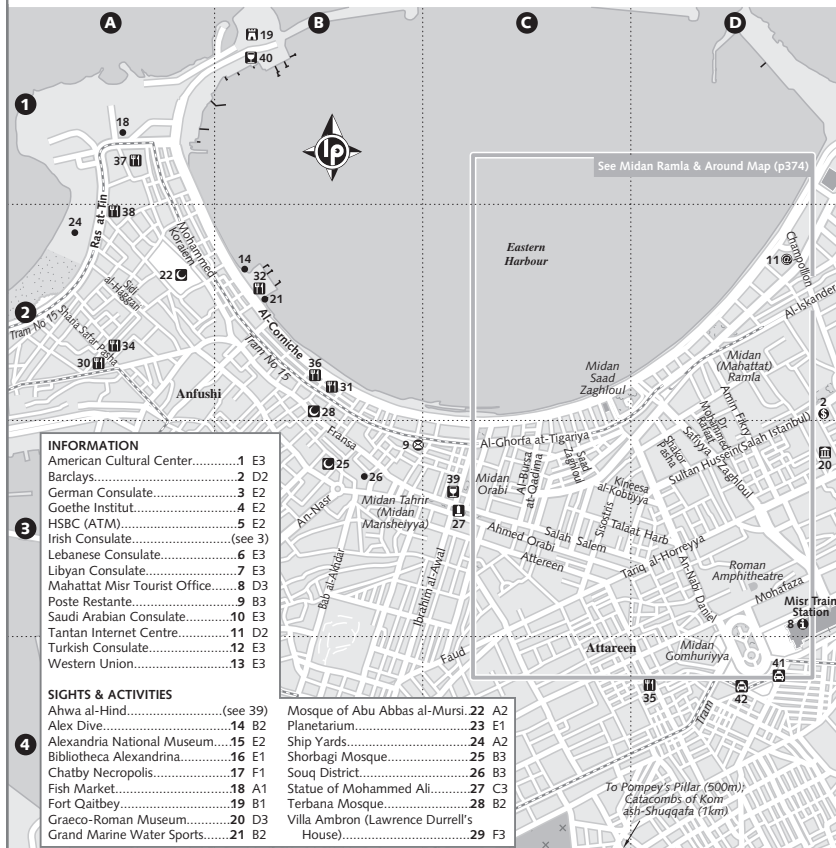
If you're keen on tombs, and who isn't, check out nearby **Necropolis of Anfushi** (Map pp372–3; ☎ 486 5820; Qasr Ras at-Tin; adult/student EE15/10; ☞ 10am–5pm), with five tombs dating back to the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. The two principal tombs contain some faded wall decoration intended to imitate marble and alabaster. Though not quite as eloquent as the catacombs of Kom ash-Shuqqafa, the Anfushi tombs reiterate the way the Greeks of Alexandria assimilated Egyptian beliefs into their funerary practices. Just beyond the tombs is the **Ras at-Tin Palace** (Map pp372–3), a centre of power during the first half of the 19th century when Mohammed Ali summered here. It's from here that King Farouk boarded his yacht and departed from Egypt after abdicating on 26 July 1956. It's now closed to the public.

## Literary Alexandria

Many a traveller arrives at Misr Train Station with a copy of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* in hand, for Alexandria is better known for its literature and writers than for any bricks-and-mortar monuments. Unlike the Alexandria of ancient days past, the Alexandria evoked by Durrell, EM Forster and the Alexandrian-Greek poet Constantine Cavafy can still be seen draped over the buildings of the city's central area.

Born of Greek parents, **Cavafy** (1863–1933) lived all but a few of his 70 years in Alexandria.

## CENTRAL ALEXANDRIA



In some poems he resurrects figures from the Ptolemaic era and classical Greece, in others he captures fragments of the city through its routines or chance encounters. He was born into one of the city's wealthiest families, but a reversal of fortune forced him to spend most of his life working as a clerk for the Ministry of Public Works, in an office above the Trianon café (see the boxed text, p390).

Cavafy spent the last 25 years of his life in a 2nd-floor apartment, above a ground-floor brothel, on the former rue Lepsius (now Sharia Sharm el-Sheikh). With a Greek church (St Saba Church) around the corner and a hospital opposite, Cavafy thought this was the ideal place to live; somewhere that could cater for the flesh, provide forgiveness for sins

and a place in which to die. The flat is now preserved as the **Cavafy Museum** (Map p374; ☎ 486 1598; 4 Sharia Sharm el-Sheikh; admission E£8; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun), with two of the six rooms arranged as Cavafy kept them. Editions of the poet's publications and photocopies of his manuscripts, notebooks and correspondence lie spread out on tables throughout the rooms.

Cavafy was first introduced to the English-speaking world by EM Forster (1879-1970), the celebrated English novelist who'd already published *A Room With A View* and *Howards End* when he arrived in Alexandria in 1916. Working for the Red Cross, Forster spent three years in the city and, although it failed to find a place in his subsequent novels, he compiled what he referred to as an 'antiguide'. His





*Alexandria: A History & Guide* was intended, he explained, as a guide to things not there, based on the premise that 'the sights of Alexandria are in themselves not interesting, but they fascinate when we approach them from the past'.

The guide provided an introduction to the city for Lawrence Durrell (1912–90), who arrived in Egypt 22 years after Forster's departure. Durrell had been evacuated from Greece and resented Alexandria, which he called a 'smashed up broken down shabby Neapolitan town'. But as visitors discover today, first impressions are misleading and between 1941 and 1945 Durrell found great distraction in the slightly unreal air of decadence and promiscuity engendered by the uncertainties of the ongoing desert war.

Committed fans of the *Alexandria Quartet* might like to search out the **Villa Ambron** (Map pp380–1) where Durrell lived and wrote during the last two years of the war. Gilda Ambron, whose name appeared in the *Quartet's* 'Balthazar', painted with her mother in a studio in the garden which they shared with their neighbour Clea Badaro, who provided inspiration for the character of Clea in the *Quartet*. Durrell's room was on top of an octagonal tower in the garden, though sadly the place has deteriorated badly over the past couple of decades. If you're in for a pilgrimage anyway, from Misr Train Station walk southeast down Sharia Moharrem Bey, then at the little square at the end turn left onto Sharia Nabil al-Wakad. Sharia Maamoun is about 200m along on the right. The Villa Ambron is No 19.

## Fort Qaitbey

The Eastern Harbour is dominated by the fairy-tale perfect **Fort Qaitbey** (Map pp380–1; ☎ 486 5106; Eastern Harbour; adult/student E£20/10; 🕒 9am–6pm summer, 9am–4pm winter). Built on a narrow peninsula by the Mamluk sultan Qaitbey in AD 1480, it sits on the remains of the legendary Pharos lighthouse (see the boxed text, p382).

The lighthouse, which had been in use for some 17 centuries, was finally destroyed by an earthquake and was in ruins for more than 100 years when Qaitbey ordered the fortification of the city's harbour. Material from the fallen Pharos was reused, and if you get close to the outer walls you can pick out some great pillars of red granite, which in all likelihood came from the ancient lighthouse. Other parts of the ancient building are scattered around the nearby seabed.

The fort has recently been renovated and is now open to the public. It makes for a pleasant walk and the view back across the harbour is spectacular, with a foreground of colourful bobbing fishing boats and, in the distance, the sunlike disk of the new library. There's also a lively fish market nearby (see p384).

From Midan Ramla, it's a 30- to 45-minute walk along the Corniche. Otherwise take yellow tram 15 from Midan Ramla or flag down any of the minibuses barrelling along the Corniche. A taxi should cost E£5.

## Eastern Suburbs

### BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA

While trying to find a fitting replacement for the original library of Alexandria might seem



## THE PHAROS

The Egyptian coast was a nightmare for ancient sailors, the flat featureless shoreline making it hard to steer away from hidden rocks and sand banks. To encourage trade, Ptolemy I ordered a great tower to be built, one that could be seen by sailors long before they reached the coast. After 12 years of construction, the tower, or Pharos, was inaugurated in 283 BC. The structure was added to until it acquired such massive and unique proportions that ancient scholars regarded it as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

In its original form the Pharos was a simple marker, probably topped with a statue, as was common at the time. The tower became a lighthouse, so historians believe, in the 1st century AD, when the Romans added a beacon, probably an oil-fed flame reflected by sheets of polished bronze. According to descriptions from as late as the 12th century, the Pharos had a square base, an octagonal central section and a round top. Contemporary images of the Pharos still exist, most notably in a mosaic in St Mark's Basilica in Venice and another in a church in eastern Libya, and in two terracotta representations in Alexandria's Graeco-Roman Museum.

In all, the Pharos withstood winds, floods and the odd tidal wave for 17 centuries. However, in 1303 a violent earthquake rattled the entire eastern Mediterranean and the Pharos was finally toppled. A century later the sultan Qaitbey quarried the ruins for the fortress that still stands on the site.

a Herculean task, the new **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 483 9999; www.bibalex.org; Corniche al-Bahr, Chatby; adult/student E£10/5; ☎ 11am-7pm Sun-Thu, 3-7pm Fri & Sat) has managed it with aplomb. Officially opened in 2002, and inspired by the grandeur of the original, this impressive piece of 20th-century architecture has firmly replanted the city back on the world cultural map. The original library was founded by the first Ptolemy in the late 3rd century BC, shortly after the city itself, and was one of the greatest of all classical institutions (see the boxed text, opposite).

The impressive building housing the modern library was designed as a gigantic angled discus embedded in the ground – a second sun rising out of the Mediterranean. The ancient wealth of learning is lyrically evoked on the curved exterior walls, which are carved with giant letters, pictograms, hieroglyphs and symbols from every known alphabet. In keeping with its declared intention of becoming 'the world's window on Egypt and Egypt's window on the world', the new library has room for eight million books in a vast rotunda space that looks like it might have been sculpted from airplane wings. And it, of course, has lots of windows. The complex has become one of Egypt's major cultural venues and a stage for numerous international performers.

The permanent **Impressions of Alexandria** exhibit, tracing the history of the city through drawings, maps and early photographs, is definitely worth a visit. Also included in the ticket price is a guided tour in several languages introducing visitors to the history of the an-

cient library and explaining the significance of the modern one. **Culturama** (☎ 483 9999, ext 1574; admission free; ☎ shows in French 12.30pm, in English 1.30pm Sun-Thu) is an interactive show (15 to 30 minutes) portraying Egypt's history on nine screens. Adjacent rooms hold the **Manuscript Museum** (adult/student E£20/10), containing ancient manuscripts and antiquarian books, and a temporary art exhibition space. In the library's basement is the **Antiquities Museum** (adult/student E£20/10), containing some overspill from the Graeco-Roman Museum, including a fine Roman mosaic of a dog discovered when the foundations of the library were dug. Free high-tech PDA (personal digital assistant) guides are available in English, Arabic and French. There's also a bookshop in the foyer, a conference centre with exhibition halls and a **Planetarium** (☎ 483 9999, ext 1451; admission E£25; ☎ shows at 11.30pm & 1.30pm daily, also 4pm & 5pm Thu-Sat), which is a separate, spherical structure looming on the outside plaza like the Death Star from *Star Wars*.

Entry tickets can be bought just outside the main library entrance, where all bags must also be checked. Tickets for the Antiquities Museum, Manuscript Museum and the Planetarium are bought at their respective entrances.

## NECROPOLI

The **Chatby necropolis** (Map pp380-1; Sharia Port Said, Chatby; adult/student E£15/10; ☎ 9am-4pm) is considered to be the oldest necropolis in Alexandria. Discovered in 1904, the burials here date from the 4th century BC, soon after the city's found-

ing, and belong to the earliest generations of Alexandrians. Appropriately, if current archaeological thinking is correct, Alexander the Great may also have been interred here at one time. Further east is the **Mustafa Kamal necropolis** (Map pp372-3; Sharia al-Moaskar ar-Romani, Rushdy; adult/student £15/10; ☎ 9am-4pm), which has four tombs, two in mint condition, and is interesting for the Doric columns at their centre.

Bus 218 from Midan Ramla will drop you near the Chatby necropolis. To get to the Mustafa Kamal necropolis, take tram 1 or 2 to the Mustafa Kamal as-Sughayyer stop and walk east a couple of blocks to Sharia al-Moaskar ar-Romani. Turn left here (towards the sea) and walk a couple more blocks.

### ROYAL JEWELLERY MUSEUM

It's not easy, in a country with such a long line of monarchs, to make a name for yourself, but Farouk, the last king of Egypt, succeeded. Renowned for extravagance, excess, womanising and a love of gambling, he once lost US\$150,000 in a single sitting at the gaming tables, at a time when the majority of his subjects struggled in poverty.

The 1952 Revolution would no doubt have happened without him, but his decadence only hastened the demise of the house of Mohammed Ali. The **Royal Jewellery Museum** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 582 8348; 27 Sharia Ahmed Yehia Pasha, Glymm; adult/student £35/20; ☎ 9am-4pm) is a testament to his excesses, housing a glitzy collection of personal and family heirlooms. Aside from the standard (medals, jewels etc), exhibits include diamond-encrusted garden tools, jewelled watches with hand-painted miniature portraits and a golden chess set. The collection is housed in a lovely villa formerly belonging to the family of Farouk's first queen. It retains some wonderfully eclectic décor: the ceilings reach new heights of kitsch with pink cherubs on cottonwool clouds.

To get to the museum take tram 2 from Midan Ramla and get off at the Qasr as-Safa stop. The museum was closed for renovation at our last visit, with a scheduled opening time of 'two months'. However, that was the same line given to us on our previous visit two years prior – check with the tourist office before you head out here.

### THE GREAT LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA

The original Library of Alexandria was the greatest repository of books and documents in all of antiquity. Ptolemy I established the library in 283 BC as part of a larger research complex known as the Mouseion ('Shrine of the Muses', the source of today's word museum). This dedicated centre of learning housed more than 100 full-time scholars and boasted lecture areas, gardens, a zoo, shrines and the library itself. Uniquely, this was one of the first major 'public' libraries and was open to all persons with the proper scholarly qualifications.

Demetrius Phalereus, a disciple of Aristotle, was charged with governing the library and together with Ptolemy I and his successors established the lofty goal of collecting copies of all the books in the world. Manuscripts found on ships arriving at Alexandria's busy port were confiscated by law and copied, and merchants were sent to scour the markets of other Mediterranean cities looking for tomes of all descriptions. Most books back then consisted of papyrus scrolls, often translated into Greek, and rolled and stored in the library's many labelled pigeon holes. At its height the library was said to contain more than 700,000 works, which indicated some duplication as this was believed to be more than the number of published works in existence. The library soon exceeded its capacity and a 'daughter library' was established in the Temple of Serapeum (see p377) to stock the overflow. The vast collection established Alexandria's position as the pre-eminent centre of culture and civilisation in the world.

It is uncertain exactly who was responsible for the destruction of the ancient world's greatest archives of knowledge, though there are several suspects. Julius Caesar is the first. Caesar set fire to Alexandria's harbour, which also engulfed the part of the city the library stood in, in his scrap with Pompey in 48 BC. In AD 270 Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra (now Syria), had captured Egypt and clashed with Roman emperor Aurelian here, the resulting siege destroying more of the library. At this time Alexandria's main centre of learning moved to the 'daughter library'. Early Christians are next in line for the blame: the daughter library, located in the Temple of Serapeum, was finally destroyed as part of an antipagan purge led by Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius in 391 AD.

### MAHMOUD SAID MUSEUM

He might be little known outside his home country, but Mahmoud Said (1897–1964) was one of Egypt's finest 20th-century artists. A judge by profession, he moonlighted as a painter and became a key member of a group of sophisticates devoted to forging an Egyptian artistic identity in the 1920s and 1930s. Said's work has echoes of the past (some of his portraits bear resemblance to the Graeco-Roman Fayoum Portraits; see the boxed text, p209) but he also blended European and American influences, at times experimenting with cubism and social realism. The **Mahmoud Said Museum** (Map pp372–3; ☎ 582 1688; 6 Sharia Mohammed Said Pasha, Gianacis; adult/student E£10/5; 🕒 9am–1.30pm & 5–9pm Sat–Thu) presents about 40 of his works housed in the beautiful Italianate villa in which he once lived.

To get here take tram 2 from Midan Ramla to the San Stefano stop, then cross the tracks and go up the steps to the raised road. Go right and Sharia Mohammed Said Pasha is a short distance on the left.

### MONTAZAH PALACE GARDENS

Khedive Abbas Hilmy (1892–1914) built Montazah as his summer palace, a refuge when Cairo became too hot. Sited on a rocky bluff overlooking the sea, it's designed in a pseudo-Moorish style, which has been given a Florentine twist with the addition of a tower modelled on one at the Palazzo Vecchio. Now used by Egypt's president, the palace is off limits to the public but the surrounding lush groves and **gardens** (Map pp372–3; admission E£5), planted with pine and palms, are accessible. They're popular with courting couples and picnicking locals. There's also an attractive sandy cove here with a semiprivate beach (E£10 to use it, although it's not particularly clean), and an eccentric Victorian-style bridge running out to a small island. If you ignore the fast-food restaurants, it makes a pleasant escape from the city-centre's traffic and build-up. A second royal residence, known as the Salamlek and built in an Austrian style, has now been converted into a luxury hotel (see p386).

The simplest way to get here is to stand on the Corniche or on Tariq al-Horreyya and flag down a microbus; when it slows, shout 'Montazah' and if it's going that way (and most of them are), it'll stop and you can jump on.

### Souqs

Although you won't find the sort of antediluvian bazaars that you do in Cairo, Alexandria has several busy *souqs* (markets) that are ideal spots for people-gazing. **Souq Ibrahimyya** (Map pp372–3; Sharia Omar Lofty) is one of our favourite little markets in town for peeking into daily Egyptian life as it goes about its business. Down several tiny, covered side streets near the Sporting Club, it's packed to the brim with bright fruits and vegetables, piles of still-wet seafood, and stalls selling all kinds of clucking poultry and meats, both before and after they've seen the butcher's block. It's best in the morning when the vendors are at their most vocal and enthusiastic.

For a city that devours more fish than a hungry seal, you'd expect to find a pretty impressive fish market – and Alexandria delivers. The **fish market** (Map pp380–1; Qasr Ras at-Tin) at the northern tip of Anfushi bustles daily with flapping seafood that's literally just been thrown off the boat. Here, overalled vendors belt out the prices of their wares, while ever-sceptical buyers prod the merchandise and ponder the quality of the catch of the day. Be sure to get here early when the market is at its bustling best, as things die down by midmorning.

At the southwestern corner of Midan Tahrir, the battered, grand architecture switches scale to something more intimate as you enter the city's main **souq district** (Map pp380–1). Sharia Nokrashi runs for about a kilometre and is one long, heaving bustle of produce, fish and meat stalls, bakeries, cafés and sundry shops selling every imaginable household item. Sharia Fransa begins with cloth, clothes and dressmaking accessories. The tight weave of covered alleys running off to the west are known as Zinqat as-Sittat, or 'the alley of the women'. Here you'll find buttons, braid, bangles, beads and much more, from junk jewellery to frighteningly large padded bras. Beyond the haberdashery you will find the gold and silver dealers, then herbalists and spice vendors.

### Beaches

There are plenty of public and private beaches along Alexandria's waterfront, but the ones between the Eastern Harbour and Montazah are often crowded and very grubby. **Mamoura Beach** (Map pp372–3), about 1km east of Montazah, is slightly better – it even has a few small waves rolling in. The local authorities

## SHIPBUILDING, THE OLD WAY

Alexandria's importance as a strategic port is intertwined with its history as a city, with the ships of countless empires docking here over several thousand years. From humble beginnings of the papyrus-reed boats of ancient Egypt, to today's steel-hulled monoliths, shipbuilding has played a pivotal role in this harbour city's personality.

While steel and fibreglass construction techniques dominate the modern shipbuilding industry, more traditional methods of construction remain in Alexandria. At the **ship yards** (Map pp380-1; Qasr Ras at-Tin) at the northern end of Anfushi, yacht's are still constructed by hand and made entirely from wood. Along this stretch of coast lie dozens of yachts in various stages of completion, many with the slick modern designs more reminiscent of their fibreglass cousins. Here, skeletal wooden hulls of three-storey vessels tower over the sand like beached dinosaur exhibits and dozens of smaller craft compete with them for beach space. In between curving hulls, small shacks line the beach housing building materials, many with artisans specialising in particular components, such as intricately carved helms (steering wheels) and fine cabinets. It's a fascinating place to wander around and appreciate the sort of craftsmanship that has been replaced by industrial machinery in other parts of the world.

are trying to keep this beach suburb exclusive by charging everyone who enters the area ££5; but then there's a further fee of ££20 to get onto the sand. Women should note that even here modesty prevails and we recommend covering up when swimming – wear a baggy T-shirt and shorts over your swimsuit. To get here jump in an Abu Qir-bound microbus at Midan al-Gomhuriyya – make sure that the driver knows you want Mamoura.

## ACTIVITIES

If you're willing to get wet, the bay of Alexandria hides untold archaeological riches underwater that can be explored by keen divers (see the boxed text, p376).

If you prefer to keep your head above water, you can zoom around the bay on a jet-ski rented from **Grand Marine Water Sports** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 012 222 5555; Corniche, Anfushi; ☼ 10am-sunset). Rentals range from ££300 to ££450 per hour, though you'd be well advised to keep your mouth shut – the water in the bay is far from hygienic.

If the unhurried trams of Alexandria aren't quite slow and relaxed enough for you, you can take it down another notch by getting a **horse-drawn carriage** ride. Popular during the summer months, these Victorian-style carriages clip-clop their way along the Corniche and are happy to take you to the major tourist attractions. A sunset trip along the waterfront could be quite romantic if it wasn't for the occasional blaring horns of taxis and minibuses trying to get past. Expect to pay around ££50 to ££80 per hour.

## COURSES

If you want to take classes in Arabic, the **Qortoba Institute for Arabic Studies** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 556 2959, 010 584 3438; [www.qortoba.com/alex](http://www.qortoba.com/alex); cnr Muhammad Nabeel Hamdy & Khalid Bin Waleed, Miami; ☼ 9am-4pm Sun-Thur) arranges private tuition for €4 to €4.50 per hour. Classes and schedules can be tailored for absolute beginners or more experienced speakers. It's quite a trek out here from the city centre, but if you're serious about study, the institute can arrange accommodation nearby in student apartments for US\$130 to \$160 per month.

## SLEEPING

As Alexandria has had an overhaul, the accommodation scene is also slowly getting better. While several five-star hotel chains are setting up shop, hotels in the midrange category are still few and far between. Budget places run the whole gamut from downright seedy to pretty darn comfortable, but the selection from here mostly shoots straight into the US\$100 a night top-end category.

The summer months of June to September are the high season in Alexandria, when half of Cairo seems to decamp here to escape the heat of the capital. At the peak of the season, in August, you may have difficulty finding a room at some of the more popular hotels.

## Budget & Midrange

Quite a few of the budget hotels front at least partly onto the Corniche – one of the pleasures of staying in Alexandria is pushing open

the shutters in the morning to get a face full of fresh air off the Mediterranean.

**Hotel Acropole** (Map p374; ☎ 480 5980; [acropole\\_hotel@yahoo.com](mailto:acropole_hotel@yahoo.com); 4th fl, 1 Sharia Gamal ad-Din Yassin; d E£35-55, s/d with shared bathroom E£65/75) At the bottom of the rung, the Acropole is very run down these days, the rooms are shabby and the management seems a bit blasé about the whole endeavour. Some rooms have a side glimpse of the harbour, though, and others have a good view over Midan Saad Zaghloul. Tram noises ('bucking, clicking' as Durrell described it) are thrown in for free.

**Triomphe Hotel** (Map p374; ☎ 487 1787; 3rd fl, Sharia Gamal ad-Din Yassin; s/d with shared bathroom E£50/70) This old-timer has managed to cling to some shreds of its faded grace: the rooms are old but well maintained and not without a lick of charm. There's a comfortable communal sitting area and immaculate shared bathrooms but no real sea views. A few rooms are also available with private bathrooms for E£20 extra, and fans cost E£5 more. Breakfast not included.

**Nile Excelsior Hotel** (Map p374; ☎ 480 0799; [nile\\_hotel@yahoo.com](mailto:nile_hotel@yahoo.com); 16 Sharia al-Bursa al-Qadima; s/d E£60/100, with air-con E£100/180; ☎) Very central hotel on the same street as the Spitfire Bar (handy for stumbling to bed). The stairs up to the hotel are rather dirty and uninviting, but the small rooms have high ceilings and fly the 'clean and comfortable' flag with pride.

**New Capri Hotel** (Map p374; ☎ 480 9310; 8th fl, 23 Sharia el-Mena al-Sharkya; s/d with shared bathroom E£62/81, s/d E£75/136) This hotel has managed a valiant attempt at sprucing itself up, with a whiff of arabesque-style décor and the occasional gilded mirror or carved wooden chair. The large, bright rooms are straightforward, squeaky clean and many have views of the water. The dining room is particularly impressive – with gusty vistas of the bay. A solid sleeping option.

**Hotel Union** (Map p374; ☎ 480 7312; 5th fl, 164 Sharia 26th of July; s E£70-140, d E£90-160; ☎) While this used to be our budget place of choice in Alexandria, the Union let it go to its head a bit – with standards slipping and prices creeping up. The smallish rooms are still quite charming, relatively well maintained and come in a bewildering mix of bathroom/view/air-con options and rates. Our rates quoted include a Byzantine mix of taxes, but no breakfast.

**Hotel Crillon** (Map p374; ☎ 480 0330; 3rd fl, 5 Sharia Adib Ishaq; s/d E£72/99) Two blocks west from the Cecil Hotel, the Crillon is a poster child for

what all budget hotels should be. The staff are friendly and attentive, there are big, glistening rooms and regular renovations just keep the improvements rolling in. Some rooms have polished wooden floors and French windows that open onto balconies with that great harbour view, and we particularly love the pre-Revolutionary reception-lounge area. Reservations recommended.

**Sea Star Hotel** (Map p374; ☎ 487 1787; 24 Sharia Amin Fikry; s/d Jun-Sep E£120/170, Oct-May E£75/100; ☎) Don't let the sketchy-looking corridors put you off, this reliable hotel boasts speckless and tidy accommodation. All abodes come with TV and cost the same regardless of their size or the quality of the view – be sure to take a gander at several options.

**Swiss Canal Hotel** (Map p374; ☎ 480 8373; 14 Al-Bursa al-Qadima; s/d E£78/90, with air-con E£100/130; ☎) A true *Cinderella* story, this little establishment is fresh from a transformational makeover that would make the stepsisters squirm. The bright upstairs rooms have whimsically pink walls, oodles of fresh pine trim and range from small and cute to huge, bright and airy. Don't be tempted by the discount unrenovated rooms – they're icky.

**Egypt Hotel** (Map p374; ☎ 481 4483; 1 Degla; s E£250-320, d E£290-350; ☎) The new kid on the block, the Egypt singlehandedly fills a desperate niche for decent midrange digs. The rooms are super-comfy, with lush beds and lots of frilly period touches thrown in for good measure. All have perfectly neat bathrooms, and either sea or street views, and there's a homy sitting room filled with antique-ish furniture. Best of all, the staff are all bright eyed and bushy tailed.

## Top End

**Metropole Hotel** (Map p374; ☎ 486 1467; [www.paradiseinegypt.com](http://www.paradiseinegypt.com); 52 Sharia Saad Zaghloul; s US\$100-135, d US\$120-155; ☎ ☎) Location, location, location! The Metropole sits right in the thick of things, with most rooms overlooking the Midan Ramla or Midan Saad Zaghloul and the Mediterranean. It's a classy old joint, entirely renovated in the 1990s to earn its four-star stripes. The lobby is rather overdone, but high-ceilinged rooms are more tasteful and ooze character, while the staff are meticulously polite.

**Windsor Palace Hotel** (Map p374; ☎ 480 8123; [www.paradiseinegypt.com](http://www.paradiseinegypt.com); Sharia ash-Shohada; s US\$125-135, d US\$145-155; ☎ ☎) This bejewelled Edwardian gem is an institution unto itself, towering over the Corniche and keeping a watchful eye on



the Med since 1907. In the 1990s the Windsor was bought by Paradise Inn, after its success with the Metropole, and given a much-needed nip and tuck. Thankfully the wonderful old elevators and grand lobby have been retained, and the rooms boast the sort of old-world, green- and gold-flavoured pizzazz that wouldn't be out of place on the *Orient Express*. The pricier rooms have splendid sea views.

**Salamlek Palace Hotel** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 547 7999; [www.sangiovanni.com](http://www.sangiovanni.com); Montazah Palace Gardens; d US\$200; ☞) Khedive Abbas II must have really been smitten when he decided to build this former royal hunting lodge for his Austrian mistress, right next door to the presidential summer palace in the Montazah Gardens. The building looks like a rich Viennese pastry and the rooms are opulently furnished in swanky period style. The hotel boasts the only casino in town, a private beach and two international restaurants (ties required). The park setting is fantastic, but it's a long way to the city centre (a 30- to 45-minute drive) and the service can be a over-starched and painfully slow.

**Cecil Hotel** (Map p374; ☎ 487 7173; [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com); 16 Midan Saad Zaghloul; s/d US\$205/245, with sea view US\$265/306) The historical Cecil Hotel, an Alexandria legend (see p378) now managed by the international Sofitel chain, has been refitted several times over the last couple of decades. Sometimes for the better. The rooms are fully equipped, though a little sombre, while the grand lobby and famous bar (now relocated to the 1st floor) have retained only a fraction of the lustre they had when Durrell and Churchill came to visit. To that extent the Cecil very much reflects the city in which it stands, where the past has to be imagined. The big consolation is the sweeping view over the Eastern Harbour.

**our pick Four Seasons Hotel** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 581 8080; [www.fourseasons.com/alexandria](http://www.fourseasons.com/alexandria); Corniche, San Stefano; s/d from US\$320/350, ste US\$800-9000; ☞ ☑ ☎) The most luxurious place to doff your hat in Alexandria, the new five-star Four Seasons sings an ode to decadence. It's sumptuously finished and will leave you wanting for nothing: the gleaming marble lobby is chilled to perfection; the army of staff are zealous to please; and rooms are generous, filled with period furniture and come with all the modern conveniences (suites even have flat-screen TVs in the bathroom – now that's convenient). There are several restaurants, a 3rd-floor infinity pool overlooking the ocean, and to top it all off a tunnel is being dug

under the Corniche to a private beach and an exclusive marina where one can dock one's Mediterranean yacht if one so wishes.

## EATING

The old and once-grand restaurants, such as Pastroudis and the Union, have long closed, leaving central Alexandria something of a culinary wilderness. Western-style cooking is now often found in upmarket hotels and noisy shopping malls where Alexandrians love to hang out. Still, one of the delights in old Alexandria is to eat the freshest catch from the Mediterranean in one of the seafood restaurants overlooking the Eastern Harbour. Equally enjoyable is to stroll around the city centre, where you can sit in one of its many cafés and watch Alexandrians at play. Many restaurants don't serve alcohol.

## Restaurants

### CENTRAL ALEXANDRIA

**Elite** (Map p374; ☎ 486 3592; 43 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; dishes ££4.50-30; ☞ 9am-midnight) Near the Cinema Metro, this is one of those Alexandrian time-warped affairs. Cut from the same cloth as an old US diner, it seems sealed in a 1950s bubble, now almost slipping back in time. The menu traverses from the oriental to the occidental and tries to cover everything in between, though it's best to stick to the simple things. The big, street-facing windows make it a great place for an afternoon beer.

**Taverna** (Map p374; ☎ 487 8591; Saad Zaghloul; medium pizza ££12.50-18.50; ☞) While its plucky menu tries to take on the whole culinary spectrum, with pasta dishes, pies, sandwiches and *shwarma* (meat off the pit, tomatoes and garnish in pita), most people know that the wood-fired pizzas are really what it's all about – hand thrown and thin crust. Along with its spotless interior, the Taverna is a deservedly popular hit with Alexandrian families.

**China House** (Map p374; ☎ 487 7173; Cecil Hotel, 16 Midan Saad Zaghloul; meals ££16-70; ☞ 11am-11.30pm; ☞) The prime views over the Eastern Harbour just don't get any better than here, Alexandria's best Chinese restaurant (although admittedly there is little competition). Chicken dumplings are first rate, as is the grilled beef with garlic. Its decent selection of Japanese dishes will have you fumbling for your chopsticks. Beer and Egyptian wine is served.

**our pick Hood Gondol Seafood** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 476 1779; cnr Omar Lofty & Mohammed M Motwe; meals



around ££25) When Alexandrians need a quick fix of delicious, fresh and ridiculously cheap seafood, they make a beeline for this local favourite near the Bibliotheca Alexandria. A massive plate of mixed seafood, including prawns, calamari, spicy clams and fried fish, as well as salads and bread, will barely make a dint in your wallet at ££25. There's no menu and little English is spoken here, just turn up, point to the trays of fresh fish lining the downstairs display and find yourself a seat. It's located down an unmarked alley; ask for directions as everyone knows it by name.

**Malek as-Samaan** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 390 0698; off Sharia Attareen, Attareen; two birds ££25; ☎ 8pm-3am) Just south of the junction with Sharia Yousef, by day this is a small courtyard clothes market, by night an open-air restaurant serving just one dish: quail. Diners sit under an awning on a rough dirt floor and tuck into grilled or stuffed birds served with rice and salad. A bit hard to find, but look for a painted sign with a small bird.

## ANFUSHI

For some authentic Alexandrian flavour and atmosphere, head for the simple good-value, streetside restaurants in Anfushi's *baladi* (working-class) district. Sharia Safar Pasha is lined with a dozen places where the fires are crackling and flaming under the grills barbecuing meat and fish. You could chance a table at any of them and probably come away satisfied, but those listed here deserve a special mention.

**El-Sheikh Wafik** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 010 279 9570; Qasr Ras at-Tin; desserts ££3-9; ☎ 24hr) This unassuming and breezy corner café has a secret – the best dessert in town. You can get the usual ice cream in several flavours, but the real treats are Egyptian classics such as *couscousy* (££8) – a yummy mix of couscous, shredded coconut, nuts, raisins, sugar and topped with hot milk.

**Housnay Grill** (Map pp380-1; Sharia Safar Pasha, Bahari; dishes ££20-40) If you're a little fished out in Anfushi, Housnay Grill, opposite Abu Ashraf, is a semioutdoor restaurant specialising in tasty grilled chicken, kebabs and other meats, served with the usual triumvirate of vegetables, salad and rice.

**Abu Ashraf** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 481 6597; 28 Sharia Safar Pasha, Bahari; dishes ££35-60; ☎ 24hr) One of this street's fish specialists, make your selection from the day's catch then take a seat under the

green awning and watch it being cooked. Sea bass stuffed with garlic and herbs is a speciality, as is the creamy prawn *kishk* (casserole). Price is determined by weight and type of fish, ranging from grey mullet at ££40 per kilo to jumbo prawns at ££150.

**Qadoura** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 480 0405; 33 Sharia Bairam at-Tonsi; meals ££35-80; ☎ 9am-3am) Pronounced 'Adora', this is one of Alexandria's most authentic fish restaurants. Pick your fish from a huge ice-packed selection, which usually includes sea bass, red and grey mullet, bluefish, sole, squid, crab and prawns, and often a lot more. Food is served at tables in the narrow street. A selection of meze is served with all orders (don't hope for a menu). Most fish is around ££40 to ££80 per kilo, prawns ££180 per kilo. It has a second, air-conditioned (though less atmospheric) branch along the Corniche.

**Samakmak** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 481 1560; 42 Qasr Ras at-Tin; dishes ££40-90; ☎) Owned by Zizi Salem, the retired queen of the Alexandrian belly-dancing scene, Samakmak is definitely one step up from the other fish eateries in the neighbourhood. The fish is as fresh as elsewhere, but customers flock to this place for its specials, including crayfish, marvellous crab *tagen* (stew cooked in a deep clay pot) and a great spaghetti with clams.

**Fish Market** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 480 5119; Corniche, beside the Kashafa Club, Bahari; dishes ££50-80; ☎ noon-2am; ☎) Well-heeled locals will argue that this is the best place to eat in town, and who are we to argue with local knowledge? It's definitely the most upmarket fish restaurant in Alexandria, with prime views over the Eastern Harbour and flashy silver service where you can pick your own seafood and have it cooked to perfection in the way you desire. The same owners run the Tikka Grill (☎ 480 5114), on the floor below, which offers a similar dining experience for the meat-eaters among you.

## RUSHDY

**Centro de Portugal** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 542 7599; 42 Sharia Abd al-Kader, off Sharia Kafr Abduh; admission ££10, dishes ££40-55; ☎ 6pm-1am; ☎) The Portuguese Club is a favourite with local expats, a place where American petrol workers get together over a beer or game of snooker. With a rowdy, male-centric atmosphere, it serves the best steak and fries in town, as well as other international cuisine, and has a pleasant garden.

## SMOuha

**Cordon Rouge** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 420 8666; Green Plaza Mall, 14th of Mai St; dishes E£45-90; ☎ noon-2am; ☎) Lively bar-restaurant in a contemporary setting, popular with Alexandrians and expats who prop up the bar and chat to the cool barman, or grab a bite at the Mediterranean-style restaurant. The international menu focuses on salads, pasta dishes and grills. A live DJ pumps up the volume on Thursday night.

## Quick Eats

The place for cheap eats is around the corner of Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul and Midan Ramla. There are plenty of little *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* places here as well as sandwich shops.

**Gad** (Map p374; Saad Zaghloul, also Mohammed Azmy; snacks E£1-9; ☎ 24hr) Egypt's answer to McDonalds (although a vast improvement), this chain of absurdly popular takeaway joints has people flocking (think Gad-flies) day and night. It serves a huge range of filled sandwiches, kebabs, *ta'amiyya* and mouth-watering *shwarma*.

**Awalad Abdou** (Map p374; Sharia Yousef; sandwiches E£2-3; ☎ 24hr) With only minor concessions made to hygiene, this überbudget place is nonetheless a smashing find. In two shakes of a lamb's tail, these guys will whip up micro sandwiches with a scrumptious, meat-centric filling of your choice. Just point to what looks good and quaff it down while standing at the counter. During Ramadan, after sundown, the street outside swarms with hungry punters.

**Mohammed Ahmed** (Map p374; ☎ 483 3576; 17 Sharia Shakor Pasha; dishes E£2-5) The king of *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* has a widespread reputation that has Alexandrians queuing here to fill that gap in their stomachs. There's a menu in English, which, in addition to sandwiches, includes other staples such as omelettes and fried cheese. Sit in or takeaway.

**El-Qobesi** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 486 7860; 51 Corniche; juices E£3-6; ☎ 24hr) El-Qobesi has crowned itself the 'king of mango', but take one sip and you will bow down a loyal peon. Slivers of several ripe mangoes are cajoled nearly whole into a tall, chilled glass to make the single best mango juice we've ever tried. Ever. It's open 'round the clock and is always bustling, often with locals parked outside for a quick in-car slurp (we've even seen full minibuses stop by!). It's not signposted in English – but you can't miss the thousands of mangoes arranged out the front.

**Al-Shark** (Map p374; Sharia al-Bursa al-Qadima, opposite Nile Excelsior Hotel; main courses E£3.40-15.50) Extremely popular Egyptian eatery with traditional dishes, such as Egyptian baked macaroni, rice with gizzards, *fatta* (dish involving rice and bread soaked in a garlicky-vinegary sauce) with mutton and grilled kebab by the kilo. Simple surroundings and quick service. There's a takeaway and sit-down area.

## Self-Catering

For fruit and vegetables, either head for Sharia Nokrashi in the Souq District (Map pp380-1) just west off Midan Tahrir, or the Souq Ibrahimiyya (Map pp372-3), which is a couple of stops east of Midan Ramla on any tram – get off at the Al-Moaskar stop. These two areas are also good for *ba'als* (groceries) where you can get cheese, olives, yogurt, bread and the like. The Alexandria **Carrefour City Center Mall** (Map pp372-3 beginning of the Cairo Desert Rd) has a large Carrefour supermarket, but it's way out of the city centre.

## DRINKING Cafés

Different worlds came together and mingled in the cafés of Alexandria for hundreds of years. For an introduction to some of the more historically seasoned cafés, see the boxed text, p390. Today Alexandrians prefer modern Western-style cafés, such as the ones listed here.

**Bistrot** (Map p374; ☎ 486 9061; 6 Sharia Fuad; ☎) A modern venue with decent coffee, fresh juices, good pasta dishes, salads and sandwiches, and a pastry corner for breakfast. The décor is simple but has character and there is a terrace in the shade for alfresco lunches – it's often busy with flirty young couples playing footsies.

**Coffee Roastery** (Map p374; ☎ 483 4363; 48 Sharia Fuad; ☎ 7am-2am; ☎) The hip young things that flock here to listen to MTV blaring on the telly don't seem to mind that the English proverbs around the place make little sense. It's one of the more ritzy places in town, bedecked in dark-wood trim and with a food menu that could have been lifted from an English pub: burgers, steak and fries dominate the choices among token references to Egyptian fare. It also does great coffee, milk shakes and fresh juices.

**City Café** (Map p374; ☎ 484 7994; 21 Salah Salem; ☎ 9am-12pm; ☎) A slick, bright and modern air-con alternative to musty-time grandeur,

## A MAGICAL HYSTORY (CAFFEINATED) TOUR

In case you hadn't noticed, Alexandria is a café town – and we're not talking Starbucks double-decaf-soy-low-fat-vanilla-grande latte's here. Ever since the first half of the 20th century, Alexandria's culture has centred around these venues, where the city's diverse population congregated to live out life's dramas over pastries and a cup of tea or coffee. Famous literary figures met here, chatted and pondered the city they could not quite grasp. Many of these old haunts remain and are definitely worth a visit for nostalgic purposes, historical associations and grand décor, but not always for the food or drink.

As good a place start as any is by grabbing your first coffee of the day at **Athineos** (Map p374; ☎ 487 7173; 21 Midan Saad Zaghloul) opposite Midan Ramla. This place lives and breathes nostalgia. The café part on the Midan Ramla side still has its original '40s fittings, period character and quite possibly some of its original customers – a loyal following of old men drinking tea who haven't moved for decades. Come for the history, skip the food.

Also facing Midan Ramla is **Trianon** (Map p374; 56 Midan Saad Zaghloul; ☎ from 7am; ☺), a favourite haunt of the Greek poet Cavafy, who worked in offices on the floor above. You can stop here for a while to grab one of its decent Continental-style breakfasts, but give the adjoining restaurant a wide berth as it's seen better days.

After you polish off breakfast, walk around the corner to check out **Delicies** (Map p374; 46 Sharia Saad Zaghloul, Attareen; ☎ from 7am; ☺). This enormous old tearoom drips with atmosphere and it, too, can whip up a decent breakfast. It serves tea and cakes in the afternoon. If you're starting to tire, pop in next door for a strong kick-start espresso at the counter (no seats) of old java haunt **Brazilian Coffee Store** (Map p374; Sharia Saad Zaghloul; ☺). Popular with local business folk and old Greek men, it also has a branch on Sharia Salah Salem in Attareen (with seats).

Now don't you think you've earned a dessert? **Vinous** (Map p374; ☎ 486 0956; cnr Al-Nabi Daniel & Tariq al-Horeyya; ☎ 7am-1am) is an old-school patisserie with more grand Art Deco-styling than you can poke a puff-pastry at, but secretly we love it for the period scales labelled with the 'Just' brand. From here you can make a historical detour (to work off those extra calories you just imbibed) to the place where the famous **Pastroudis** (Map p374; Tariq al-Horeyya) once stood. Though now closed, this was a frequent meeting point for the characters of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*.

Finally, exhausted, you might just need one last pick-me-up coffee. Head over to Sharia Saad Zaghloul for the **Sofianopoulos Coffee Store** (Map p374; Sharia Saad Zaghloul), a gorgeous coffee retailer that would be in a museum anywhere else in the world. Dominated by huge silver coffee grinders and sacks of shiny, dark aromatic coffee beans, it's the perfect place to grab one last, expertly prepared, espresso at its standing-only bar.

this café serves excellent Italian Illy coffee and is popular among the well heeled to sit and chat or discuss business.

## Ahwas

Alexandria has nothing like the density of *ahwas* (coffeehouses) found in Cairo, but during summer the whole 20km length of the Corniche from Ras at-Tin to Montazah becomes one great strung-out coffeehouse. With a few exceptions, these are not the greatest places – they're catering for a passing holiday trade and so they tend to overcharge.

**Sultan Hussein** (Map p374; cnr Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul & Sharia Sultan Hussein) One of our favourite Alexandrian *ahwas*, this is a good,

no-nonsense place with first-rate *sheesha*. It is popular with chess players and has a separate family area where women can sit unharassed.

**Ahwa al-Hind** (Map pp380-1; Midan Tahrir) You have to squeeze through a passageway almost blocked by clothes stalls to find this *ahwa* in the central courtyard of the big, battered old building on the corner where Midan Orabi meets Midan Tahrir. It's scruffy, but the setting bristles with atmosphere and is the perfect place to while away a hot afternoon or lazy evening.

## Bars

Sixty years ago, pre-Revolution, Alexandria was thriving with Greek tavernas and divey

little watering holes. Sadly, today only a few fine places survive. **Cap d'Or** (Map p374; ☎ 487 5177; 4 Sharia Adbi Bek Ishak; ☎ 10am-3am) The Cap d'Or, just off Sharia Saad Zaghloul, is a top spot to relax, and one of the only surviving typical Alexandrian bars. With beer flowing generously, stained-glass windows, a long marble-topped bar, plenty of ancient memorabilia decorating the walls and crackling tapes of old French *chanson* (type of traditional folk music) or Egyptian hits, it feels very much like an Andalusian tapas bar. Crowds come to drink cold Stella beer, snack on great seafood, or just hang out at the bar and chew the proverbial fat with fellow drinkers. Thursday and Friday nights are more 'open minded' than most nights in Alexandria.

**our pick Greek Club** (Club Nautique Hellenique; Map pp380-1; ☎ 480 2690; Corniche, Anfushi; admission ££6; ☎ noon-11pm) The Greek Club is the perfect place for a sunset drink, inside its large newly restored rooms or, even better, on the wide terrace catching the afternoon breeze or watching the lights on this legendary bay. The beers are cold and the atmosphere is perfectly Mediterranean. The menu has a selection of fresh fish cooked any way you like it (grilled with olive oil, oregano and lemon, baked or Egyptian style), as well as Greek classics such as moussaka (££14) and souvlaki (££32).

**Spitfire** (Map p374; 7 Sharia L'Ancienne Bourse; ☎ noon-1am Mon-Sat) Just north of Sharia Saad Zaghloul, Spitfire feels almost like a Bangkok bar – sans go-go girls. It has a reputation as a sailors' hang-out and the walls are plastered with shipping-line stickers, rock-and-roll memorabilia and photos of drunk regulars. It's a great place for an evening out in one of the world's finest harbours, listening to American rock and roll from the 1970s.

**El-Yunani** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 592 0026; Sharia Memphis; ☎ noon-midnight) Near Souq Ibrahimiyya, this Greek taverna is the poor-man's version of the posher Greek Club (opposite). With baby-blue walls covered in faded 1960s Greek tourism posters and slow-turning fans, it clings to musty remnants of allure. Look for the bumble-bee striped pillars at the entrance.

You can also grab a beer at **Centro de Portugal** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 542 7599; 42 Sharia Abd al-Kader, off Sharia Kafr Abduh; admission ££10; ☎ 6pm-1am; ☎ ) and **Elite** (Map p374; ☎ 486 3592; 43 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul; ☎ 9am-midnight). Takeaway beer is available in the city centre at the aptly named **Drinkies** (Map p374; ☎ 19330; Al-Ghorfa at-Tigariya; ☎ noon-midnight), below the Hotel Acropole. It also delivers.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Alexandria's cultural life has never really recovered from the exodus of Europeans

### BUSINESS THROUGH A PUFF OF SMOKE

Although it may not look like much to the uninitiated (it doesn't even sport a sign), **El-Tugareya** (Map p374; Corniche; ☎ 9am-late) is one of the most important *ahwas* (coffeehouses) in Alexandria. This 90-year-old institution has been an informal centre of business and trade for much of that time (its name roughly translates to 'commerce'), where deals are brokered in the time-honoured tradition – over a glass of tea.

The café is separated into two parts. On the eastern side of the block is a male-dominated area dedicated to games and informal socialising, where old timers slap down backgammon pieces with rambunctious gusto. The other side of the block, closer to Midan Orabi, is where Alexandrian's have traditionally come to discuss contracts, haggle over agreements and dissect the politics of the day. Taking its role in the history of the city's business community seriously, El-Tugareya has evolved special, unwritten rules: only tea, coffee and *sheesha* are served; standing is not allowed (to prevent heated discussions getting too out of hand); and customers' privacy is always respected (anything seen or overheard by staff is kept in the strictest confidence). El-Tugareya's time-honoured customs mean that, these days, wheeling and dealing customers are rarely alone as locals from all walks of life flock here to meet and discuss the issues of the day in relative freedom.

This place is well worth a visit – on any given evening you're likely to see writers, film makers, poets, students, expats, courting young couples and liberal-minded revolutionaries of all stripes filling its hall with a cacophony of animated conversation. Look for the café with the green window trim.

and Jews in the 1940s and '50s, but in recent years things have started to change for the better. Since the opening of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the town is once again trying to compete with Cairo as the proprietor of Egyptian arts.

The **Alexandria International Film Festival** takes place every September, offering Alexandrians a rare opportunity to see uncensored films from around the globe. Films are screened at several cinemas around town – ask at the tourist office for more information.

## Cinemas

The following cinemas often screen English-language films.

**Amir Cinema** (Map p374; ☎ 391 7972; 42 Tariq al-Horreyya) A refitted grand old cinema now with six screens, showing almost exclusively Hollywood tripe.

**Cinema Metro** (Map p374; ☎ 487 0432; 26 Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul) Situated in central Alexandria, this beautiful old place has been very well looked after – pity the movies it screens are often so uninspired.

**Green Plaza Mall Cineplex** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 420 9155; 14th Mai St, Smouha) This large cinema, part of the buzzing Green Plaza Mall complex, has six screens all showing first-run American blockbusters. A taxi out here will cost about ££10 and take 25 minutes from the city centre.

**Renaissance San Stefano** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 469 0056; 2nd fl, San Stefano Mall, Sharia Abdel Salam Aref, San Stefano; tickets ££15-25; ☎ 1pm-1am) The newest screens in town, with eight spiffy cinemas showing mostly Hollywood offerings, it's currently the 'it' spot for young Alexandrians. A taxi from the city centre will cost about ££10.

## Music, Theatre & Dance

The free monthly booklet *Alex Agenda*, available at many hotels, is extremely useful for its extensive list of concerts, theatre events and live gigs throughout Alexandria. The Elite restaurant (p387) usually posts notices advertising anything that's happening; alternatively see *Egypt Today*. Also, check the French Cultural Centre (p371) as it organises quite a few performances.

**Alexandria Opera House** (Map p374; ☎ 486 5106; 22 Tariq al-Horreyya) The former Sayyid Darwish Theatre has been refurbished and now houses the city's modestly proportioned but splendid opera house. Most performances of

opera and classical music are staged in this gorgeous auditorium.

**Bibliotheca Alexandrina** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 483 9999; www.bibalex.org; Corniche al-Bahr, Chatby) The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is the most important cultural venue in town now, hosting major music festivals, international concerts and performances.

**Alexandria Centre of Arts** (Map p374; ☎ 495 6633; 1 Tariq al-Horreyya) This place hosts twice-weekly concerts, but there is little going on in the way of theatre or music.

**our pick Garage** (Map pp372-3; tftouh@yafund.org; Jesuit Centre, Sharia Bur Said, Sidi Gaber) The renovated garage of the Jesuit Centre and maintained by the Young Arab Theatre Fund, Garage is a breath of fresh air on the city's cultural scene, presenting new performances by local and international youth theatre groups.

## SHOPPING

There is a *souq* (Map pp380-1) just west of Midan Tahrir, and Sharia Safiyya Zaghloul and Sharia Saad Zaghloul are lined with an assortment of old-fashioned and more trendy clothes and shoe shops, but overall the city centre is not shopper's paradise. Alexandrians have only recently discovered the joys of shopping malls, but there is no stopping them now. Today malls have replaced town squares as popular gathering spots, boasting entertainment, cafés, *ahwas* and restaurants. Younger Alexandrians find them great places to mingle with the opposite sex.

**Carrefour City Center Mall** (Map pp372-3; beginning of the Cairo Desert Rd) A 20-minute drive south of the city, this is one of the largest malls, with the massive French superstore Carrefour. It sells everything from groceries to TVs.

**Green Plaza Mall** (Map pp372-3; 14th of Mai St, Smouha) Slightly older but still a big hit with locals is Green Plaza Mall, out beyond the suburb of Smouha on the Agricultural Rd to Cairo. It is about as kitsch as things get, a local shopping version of Disneyland, with shops and shops and shops plus a noisy funfair, snooker hall, bowling alley, food court, cineplex, Hilton hotel, and a gaudy 'Roman temple' that houses a conference and marriage centre.

**San Stefano Mall** (Map pp372-3; Sharia Abdel Salam Aref, San Stefano) The latest ode to international label shopping, this swanky mall sits behind the Four Seasons Hotel and has a four food court and cinemas. It is the

current place to see and be seen for chic young Alexandrians.

Antique collectors might have some fun diving through the confusion of backstreets and alleys of the Attareen district. When Alexandria's European high society was forced en masse to make a hasty departure from Egypt following the 1952 Revolution, they largely went without their personal belongings – much of what they left has found its way over the years into the Attareen Antique Market (Map p374). Today there are fewer and fewer wonderful finds, and even less bargains. Dealers here recognise quality and their bedtime reading may well include Christie's and Sotheby's catalogues.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

There are direct international flights from Alexandria to London (British Airways), Athens (Olympic Airways) and Frankfurt (Lufthansa), as well as most Middle Eastern capitals. Alexandria's airport **Burg al-Arab** (☎ 459 1483) is 60km west of the city. The air-con airport bus 555 (one-way £E6 plus £E1 per bag, one hour) leaves from in front of the Cecil Hotel (Map p374) on Midan Saad Zaghloul two hours before all departures. A taxi to/from the airport should cost no more than £E100.

There's a second smaller airport at **Nouzha** (Map pp372-3 ☎ 425 0527), much closer to the city, where some **Egypt Air** (Map374; ☎ 487 3357, 486 5937; 19 Midan Saad Zaghloul; ✈ 8am-8pm) and other flights land. Catch minibuses 711 or 703 (50pt) from Midan Orabi or Midan Ramla. A taxi to/from the airport should cost no more than £E10 to £E15.

### Bus

Long-distance buses now all leave from the one bus station in Moharrem Bay, **Al-Mo'af al-Gedid** (New Garage; Map pp372-3). It's several kilometres south of Midan Saad Zaghloul; to get there either catch a microbus from Misr Train Station (50pt), or grab a taxi from the city centre (£E10 to £E15).

The main companies operating from here are **West Delta Bus Co** (☎ 362 9685) and **Superjet** (☎ 363 3552), which has more expensive but considerably nicer buses. Also nearby are several little cabins for the East Delta Travel Company and Upper Egypt Bus Company ticket offices.

West Delta has a convenient city-centre **booking office** (Map p374; ☎ 480 9685; Midan Saad Zaghloul; ✈ 9am-10pm) close to the main tourist office. Superjet has a slightly less convenient **booking office** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 543 5222; ✈ 8am-11pm) opposite the Sidi Gaber Train Station.

### CAIRO

Superjet has buses to Cairo (also stopping at Cairo airport) every hour from 5am to 10pm, plus a further service at 1am. The trip takes 2½ hours and costs around £E25; the fare to Cairo airport is £E35. West Delta also has buses to Cairo every 30 minutes between 5am and 2am (5.30am to 1am from October to April) and charges £E21 to £E25, and £E35 to the airport.

### NORTH COAST & SIWA

West Delta has buses to Marsa Matruh (£E17 to £E30, four hours, around 20 daily) between 6am and 1.30am. Many of these buses continue on to Sallum (£E28, nine hours) on the border with Libya. Four services go to Siwa (£E27, nine hours) at 8.30am, 11am, 2pm and 10pm. Otherwise just take any Marsa Matruh bus and change there.

Most of the Marsa Matruh buses stop in El Alamein (one hour), and will stop at Sidi Abdel Rahman if you want to get off, though you will have to pay the full Matruh fare.

Superjet runs buses to Marsa Matruh (£E30) daily during summer (June to September) at 8am, 10am, 1pm, 3pm and 5.30pm.

### SINAI

Superjet has a daily 9pm service to Sharm el-Sheikh (£E100, eight to 10 hours); West Delta has one at 9pm (£E80).

### SUEZ CANAL & RED SEA COAST

Superjet has a daily service to Hurghada (£E85, nine hours) at 8pm. West Delta has several services a day to Port Said (£E22), two to Ismailia (£E25) at 7am and 2.30pm, and four to Suez (£E25) at 6am, 11am, 2.30pm and 5pm. It also has buses to Hurghada and Port Safaga at 9am and 6.30pm (£E85, six to eight hours). The Upper Egypt Bus Company has three daily Hurghada buses (£E75 to £E80) that continue on down to Port Safaga (£E60).

### INTERNATIONAL BUSES

For information on international services from Alexandria, see p524.



## Service Taxi & Microbus

Service taxis and minibuses for Abu Qir, and service taxis for Cairo, depart from outside Misr Train Station (Map pp380–1); all others go from the Al-Mo'af al-Gedid (New Garage; Map pp372–3) bus station out to Moharrem Bay. Fares cost E£15 to E£18 to Cairo or Marsa Matruh, depending on who you ask. To more local destinations, some sample fares are Zagazig E£10, Tanta E£8, Mansura E£10, Rosetta E£3 and Abu Qir E£1.

## Train

There are two train stations in Alexandria. The main terminal is **Mahattat Misr** (Misr Train Station; Map pp380–1; ☎ 426 3207), about 1km south of Midan Ramla. **Mahattat Sidi Gaber** (Sidi Gaber Train Station; Map pp372–3; ☎ 426 3953) serves the eastern suburbs. Trains from Cairo stop at Sidi Gaber first, but the only reason to get off there is if you're staying in that part of town.

At Misr Train Station, 1st- and 2nd-class air-con tickets must be bought from the ticket office next to the Misr Train Station tourist office; 3rd-class and 2nd-class ordinary tickets are purchased from the front hall. Cairo-bound trains leave from here at least hourly, from 4.30am to 10pm, stopping five minutes later at Sidi Gaber Train Station. The best trains, the *Turbini* and *Espani*, don't stop again until 2½ hours later when they arrive in Cairo. They depart from Misr Train Station at 7am, 8am, 2pm, 3pm, 4.45pm, 7pm and 10.15pm. Tickets for 1st-/2nd-class air-con cost E£46/29.

The next-best train, the *Faransawi*, stop at Damanhur, Tanta and Benha, taking three hours to get to Cairo. It departs at 6am, 8.15am, 10am, 11am, 1pm, 3.30pm and 8pm and cost E£35/19 in 1st/2nd class.

From June to September a luxury sleeper train passes through Alexandria on its way from Cairo to Marsa Matruh (about six hours) at 1.30am; beds in double/private berths cost US\$45/60 (book in Alexandria on ☎ 393 2430). However, the bus service on this route is a more convenient and faster option.

## GETTING AROUND

### Bus & Minibus

As a visitor to Alexandria, you'll rarely use the buses – the trams and minibuses are a much better way of getting around. There are no set departure points or stops for minibuses, but most whizz by either Midan Saad Zaghloul or Midan Ramla and cost around

50pt for short trips. Just wave to flag one down and yell out your destination.

## Car

For rental cars, visit **Avis** (Map p374; ☎ 485 7400; Cecil Hotel, 16 Midan Saad Zaghloul), though you'd have to be half-mad to try and take on Alexandria traffic on your own. Prices start at US\$38 per day and include the first 100km.

## Taxi

There are no working meters in Alexandria. A short trip, say from Midan Ramla to Misr Train Station, will cost E£5; from the city centre to Fort Qaitbey E£5; from the city centre to the Royal Jewellery Museum or Mahmoud Said Museum E£15; and from the city centre to Montazah or Maamoura around E£25.

## Train

About the only conceivable, but not recommended, service you might use in Alexandria is the very slow 3rd-class train (50pt) from Misr Train Station to Abu Qir. It stops, among many other places, at Sidi Gaber, Montazah and Maamoura, but only serious train buffs would consider taking it.

## Tram

Tram is the best, if not slowest, way to travel in Alex. Mahattat Ramla is the main train station and from here lime-yellow-coloured trams go west. Tram 14 goes to Misr Train Station and Moharrem Bey, and tram 15 goes past the Mosque of Abu Abbas al-Mursi and Fort Qaitbey to Ras at-Tin.

The blue-coloured trams travel east: trams 2 and 36 to Sidi Gaber, Rushdy and San Stefano; tram 36 to Victoria via Rushdy and San Stefano; and tram 25 from Ras at-Tin to Sidi Gaber via Midan Ramla.

Some trams have two or three carriages, in which case one of them is reserved for women. It causes considerable amusement when a poor unsuspecting foreigner gets in the wrong carriage. The standard fare is 25pt.

# AROUND ALEXANDRIA

## ABU QIR

Abu Qir (abu ear), a small coastal town 24km east of Alexandria, was slingshot into fame by several major 18th-century battles that

took place off its shores. The Battle of the Nile saw the British Admiral Horatio Nelson administer a crushing defeat over Napoleon's French fleet. Although Napoleon still controlled Egypt, his contact with France by sea was effectively severed. In 1799 the British landed 18,000 Turkish soldiers at Abu Qir, but with a thirst for revenge the French force of 10,000 men, mostly cavalry led personally by Napoleon, forced the Turks back into the sea, drowning at least 5000 of them. In 1801, however, the French lost a further battle with the British troops at the same place and the French expeditionary corps was then forced out of Egypt.

Recent underwater excavation (see the boxed text, p376) has revealed two sunken cities believed to be the legendary Herakleion and Menouthis, with several rescued treasures now on display at the Alexandria National Museum (p376). The beach here is rubbish strewn, so the main reason to head in this direction is for lunch at one of the excellent fish restaurants, particularly at the **Zephyrion** (☎ 03-562 1319; seafont Abu Qir; dishes £25-90). This old Greek fish taverna (the name is Greek for 'sea breeze') was founded in 1929 and serves first-class fish and seafood on the sweeping blue-and-white terrace that overlooks the bay. There is no wine list but you can bring your own bottle and it will be uncorked for you without complaint.

There are plenty of buses from central Alexandria to Abu Qir daily (including buses 260 and 261 and minibus 729 from Midan Orabi), but it's probably easier to take microbus 728 from in front of Misr Train Station, microbus 729 from Midan Orabi or one of several minibuses from Al-Mo'af al-Gedid station for ££1.

## ABU MINA

☎ 03 / pop 84,300

St Mina is said to have fallen victim to anti-Christian sentiment in the Roman Empire of the early 4th century. Born in West Africa, he did a stint in the Roman army before deserting and finally being tortured and beheaded for his faith. He was buried at a place near the present site of Abu Mina, which eventually became a place of pilgrimage. Churches and even a basilica were built, and all subsequently destroyed. In the 14th century a Mamluk army supposedly rediscovered the site and the bones of St Mina, which could

not be burned (proving to the Mamluks that they belonged to a saint).

A German team has been working at Abu Mina since 1969 (excavations have uncovered the early medieval Church of the Martyr, where St Mina's remains are believed to be buried), although at present the site is not open to visitors.

## ROSETTA (AR-RASHID)

☎ 03 / pop 194,693

It's hard to believe that this dusty town, squatting on the western branch of the Nile 65km from Alexandria, was once Egypt's most significant port. Also known as Ar-Rashid, Rosetta was founded in the 9th century and outgrew Alexandria in importance during that town's 18th- and 19th-century decline. Alas, as Alexandria got back on its feet and regained its power in the late 19th century, Rosetta was thrust once again back into near irrelevance.

Today Rosetta is most famous as the discovery place of the stone stele that provided the key to deciphering hieroglyphics (see the boxed text, p397). The town makes a great detour from the modern turmoil of nearby Alexandria. The streets, though mostly unpaved, are packed with market stalls selling all manner of produce, and donkey carts outnumber cars in the nearly impassable, windy dirt streets. Rosetta is dotted with attractive Ottoman merchant houses, several of them restored and accessible to tourists. A boat trip is another reason to visit, as the Nile is particularly beautiful here, wide and full, with boat builders along the Corniche and loads of palms on the far bank.

Note that it's best to avoid Rosetta within days of any significant rain when the unsealed streets become one big, messy mud bath.

There is currently no tourist office in Rosetta, though the eager staff at the **tourist police** (Museum Garden) can point you in the right direction for the town's majors sights.

## Sights

Rosetta's main draw are its beautifully crafted **Ottoman-era merchants' houses**. Built in the traditional Delta style using small, flat bricks painted alternately red and black, the three-storey structures are interesting in that the upper floor slightly overhangs the lower one. Together with their jutting and ornate *mashrabiyyas*, (the intricately assembled wooden screens that serve for windows), the



One of the most impressive of all Rosetta's fine buildings is the **House of Amasyali** (☎ 9am-4pm), one of two restored houses on Al-Anira Feriel. The façade here is one of the most impressive in Rosetta, with beautiful small lantern lights and vast expanses of *mashrabiyya* screens, which circulate cool breezes around the house. Although inside it's devoid of furniture – as are all the buildings – it's still possible to get a clear idea of how the house worked. A series of rough stone chambers, which would have been used for storage, make up the ground floor. The 1st floor is for the men. One of the rooms here is a reception room, where guests would have been entertained by groups of musicians, and is overlooked by a screened wooden gallery behind which the women would have sat, obscured from view. The stair to the gallery is hidden behind a false cupboard and there are some fine examples of mother-of-pearl inlay

## THE ROSETTA STONE

Now a crowd-pulling exhibit at the British Museum in London, the Rosetta Stone is the most significant find in the history of Egyptology. Unearthed in 1799 by a French soldier doing his duty improving the defences of Fort St Julien near Rosetta, the stone is the lower half of a large dark granitic stele. It records a decree issued by the priests of Memphis on 27 March 196 BC, the anniversary of the coronation of Ptolemy V (205–180 BC), and it announces their decision to honour the 13-year-old pharaoh with his own cult in return for tax exemptions and other perks. In order to be understood by Egyptians, Greeks and others then living in the country, the decree was written in the three scripts current at the time – hieroglyphic, demotic (a cursive form of hieroglyphs) and Greek, a language that European scholars would have read fluently. The trilingual inscription was set up in a temple beside a statue of the pharaoh. At the time of its discovery, much was known about ancient Egypt, but scholars had still not managed to decipher hieroglyphs. It was quickly realised that these three scripts would make it possible to compare identical texts and therefore to crack the code and recover the lost world of the ancient Egyptians.

When the British defeated Napoleon's army in 1801, they wrote a clause in the surrender document insisting that antiquities be handed to the victors, the Rosetta Stone being foremost among them. The French made a cast and the original was shipped to London, where Englishman Thomas Young established the direction in which the hieroglyphs should be read, and recognised that hieroglyphs enclosed within oval rings (cartouches) were the names of royalty.

But in 1822, before Young was able to devise a system for reading the mysterious script, Frenchman Jean François Champollion recognised that signs could be alphabetic, syllabic or determinative, and established that the hieroglyphs inscribed on the Rosetta Stone were actually a translation from the Greek, and not the other way around. This allowed him to establish a complete list of signs with their Greek equivalents. His obsessive work not only solved the mystery of Pharaonic script but also contributed significantly to a modern understanding of ancient Egypt.

work in wooden panels along the same wall. Be sure to look up at the ceiling to see intricately carved decorations painted brilliant blue. Also notice the little revolving turntable, designed so that women could serve tea and coffee without being seen. The nearby bedroom has several smaller rooms attached, one that would have been a walk-in wardrobe and another a *hammam* (bathhouse) with separate toilet.

## OTHER HOUSES

Right next door to the House of Amasyali, the **House of Abu Shaheen** (Mill House) incorporates an impressive reconstructed mill on the ground floor. In the courtyard, the roof of the stables is supported by granite columns with Graeco-Roman capitals. Nearby, the large and still-functioning 18th-century **Mosque of Sheikh Ali al-Mahalli** contains 99 columns recycled from Roman and Mamluk monuments.

The first examples of Ottoman architecture you're likely to come across, if you arrive at the service-taxi stand and microbus station, is a huddle of houses comprising of the **Abou**

**Houm, Bassiouni, Al-Gamal, Kohiya, Moharrem and Ramadan Houses**. Though not open to the public, this cluster of ornate façades makes it easy to imagine entire streets of Rosetta lined with similarly decadent abodes.

On Sharia Amasyali you will find more fine houses along the street and in the alleyways that lead off it. The **House of Al-Toqatli**, though closed to the public, has an interesting façade. On Sharia Amasyali there are a few more traditional houses that are all still closed to the public. Nearby, the four-storey **House of Al-Mizuni** was the home of the French General Mineau after he married Zubayda al-Bawab, the daughter of a rich local merchant.

One of the most extraordinary buildings in Rosetta has to be the **Hammam Azouz**, a 19th-century bathhouse. Just south of the city centre, this restored ode to Ottoman ablution has a fine marble interior with elaborately carved wooden beams and trimmings. Several bathing rooms encircle the main, fountain-centred bath room, and tall domed ceilings crown each chamber. Tiny round holes in the domes let in piercing shafts of light (and would have

let out steam), with some still covered in colourful stained glass that further bathes the place in a faint rainbow of surreal colours. Tickets for the bathhouse are available at the House of Amasyali (see p396).

The **Fort of Qaitbey** (adult/student £12/6) was built in 1479, just before the sultan's fort in Alexandria, to guard the mouth of the Nile. Boats depart from the Corniche near the museum garden and make the tour to the mouth of the Nile, 5km upriver, for £50 per person (1½ hours).

## Sleeping & Eating

Rosetta sees few travellers and has limited tourist facilities, with only a handful of hotels and restaurants.

**El-Nile Hotel** (☎ 045 292 2382; Corniche; s/d with shared bathroom ££30/60) The pick of the accommodation bunch before the Rasheed International rolled into town, El-Nile is a long, slippery slide down the quality ladder. The rooms are musty and ragged – don't even ask about the shared bathrooms. At least the front-facing rooms have balconies with views over the river.

**Rasheed International Hotel** (☎ 045 293 4399; [www.rossettahotel.jeeeran.com](http://www.rossettahotel.jeeeran.com); Museum Garden Sq; s/d ££90/123; ☺) Proudly Rosetta's newest, finest and first nice-smelling hotel. This skinny, 11-storey place has plainly decorated but spotless new rooms, all with satellite TV, minibar and balconies with top views of the town – on a clear day you can see the Mediterranean from the higher floors. Its restaurant serves some of the better food in town, with Egyptian favourites and some Western dishes thrown in to boot. Expect to pay around ££40 for dinner.

**Andrea Park Restaurant** (☎ 010 260 6497; meals ££25-40) Locals swear by this Nile-side place, 1.2Km north of town. It's in a lovely spot by the river, with trim trees and breezy outdoor seating. There's no menu, but staff will happily whip up most of the Egyptian usuals, or whatever the catch of the day might be.

Alternatively, as with any small Egyptian town, you can usually hunt down a few *ta'amiyya* stands and roast-chicken places in the town's busy market streets.

## Getting There & Away

Although buses and trains operate between Alexandria and Rosetta, the easiest way to make the trip is by service taxi or microbus (££3 to ££35, one hour) from the Al-

Mo'af al-Gedid long-distance bus station in Alexandria. Alternatively take a minibus from Alexandria's Misr Train Station to Abu Qir (££1.50). Ask to be dropped at the Rosetta minibus stand (££2.50, 45 minutes) near Abu Qir. Coming back, it's easiest to get a microbus (££3) from Rosetta straight to Al-Mo'af al-Gedid bus station in Alexandria. If you are with several people, you can share a private taxi from Alexandria to Rosetta for ££100 to ££150, including waiting time.

# MEDITERRANEAN COAST

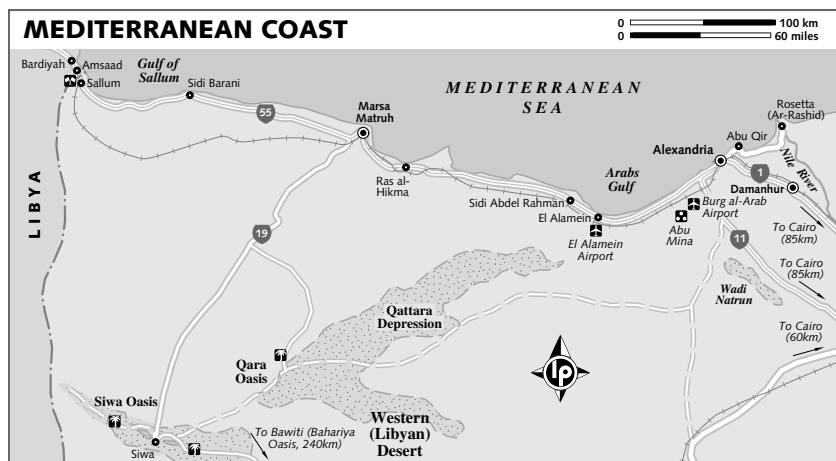
Almost the entire stretch of coastline between Alexandria and Sidi Abdel Rahman is jam-packed with resorts paying homage to the modern gods of concrete construction. This is where well-to-do Cairenes and the top brass of Egypt's military establishment now come to escape the oppressive city heat of the summer. It's so busy here that when driving past, the only glimpses you're likely to get of the ocean are through the skeletal structures of unfinished holiday villages. While some of these getaways border on the truly luxurious, there's little for the independent traveller. Halfway down the coast to Libya, El Alamein is home to several poignant memorials to the WWII battles that ensued here. Past here, and all the way to the Libyan border, the striking coast lies deserted until you reach Marsa Matruh, sitting on a brilliant, sandy bay. Matruh is either heaving with Egyptian holiday-makers in summer or completely deserted in the winter months.

## EL ALAMEIN

☎ 046

This small coastal outpost (not a 'city' as the brochures would have you believe) is famed for the decisive victory that was doled out here by the Allies in the WWII North Africa campaign.

In June 1942 the Afrika Korps, headed by German General Erwin Rommel (nicknamed 'Desert Fox'), launched an all-out offensive from Tobruk, Libya. Determined to take control of Alexandria, and the strategically important Suez Canal, the Axis powers and their 500 tanks came within nearly 100km of their goal. It was not the first attempt in what had been two years of seesaw battles, but this time the Axis forces were confident of a breakthrough. However, the Allies, under the command



of General Bernard Montgomery ('Monty'), stopped their advance with a line of defence stretching southward from El Alamein to the Qattara Depression. On 23 October 1942 Montgomery's 8th Army swooped down from Alexandria with a thousand tanks, and within two weeks routed the combined German and Italian forces, driving Rommel and what was left of the Afrika Korps back to Tunisia.

More than 80,000 soldiers were killed or wounded at El Alamein and in the subsequent battles for control of North Africa. The thousands of graves in the three massive war cemeteries in the vicinity of the town are a bleak reminder of the losses.

El Alamein's War Museum and the Commonwealth War Cemetery are along a side road that leaves the main highway at the Greek war memorial and rejoins it again after passing right through the town.

Though it's possible to stay overnight nearby in Sidi Abdel Rahman, El Alamein is best visited as a day trip from Alexandria; there really isn't much here that would detain any but the most enthusiastic of military historians for more than a few hours.

## Sights

### COMMONWEALTH WAR CEMETERY

On the eastern side of town, this **cemetery** (admission free) is a haunting place where more than 7000 tombstones cover a slope overlooking the desert battlefield of El Alamein. Soldiers from the UK, Australia, New Zealand, France,

Greece, South Africa, East and West Africa, Malaysia and India who fought for the Allied cause lie here. Outside, a small separate memorial commemorates the Australian contingent and a little further east is another memorial for the Greeks.

### GERMAN & ITALIAN WAR MEMORIALS

About 7km west of El Alamein, what looks like a hermetically sealed sandstone fortress appears on a bluff overlooking the sea. Inside this silent but unmistakable reminder of war lie the tombs of German servicemen and, in the centre, a memorial obelisk.

About 4km further on, the Italian memorial has a tall, slender tower as its focal point. Before reaching the German memorial, you'll notice on the left side of the road what appears to be a glorified milestone. On it is inscribed in Italian '*Mancò la fortuna, non il valore*' – 'We were short on luck, not on bravery'.

### WAR MUSEUM

There is a good collection of memorabilia, uniforms and pictorial material of each country involved in the Battle of El Alamein and the North African campaigns at the **War Museum** (☎ 410 0031/21; adult/student ££10/5; ☎ 9am-4pm). Maps and explanations of various phases of the campaign in Arabic, English, German and Italian complement the exhibits, and there's a 30-minute Italian-made documentary that you can watch. A collection of tanks, artillery and hardware



from the fields of battle is displayed outside the museum.

### Sleeping & Eating

Al-Amarna Hotel almost opposite the War Museum has a small cafeteria where you can get a greasy omelette, a drink and some biscuits but nothing more. It has a few spartan bedrooms, only used as an emergency by drivers to the nearby beach resorts.

The closest viable place to stay or eat is the El Alamein Hotel at Sidi Abdel Rahman (right), 23km west of El Alamein town. It may be possible to camp on the beaches nearby, but you'll have to hunt around for the police and attempt to get a *tasreeh* (camping permit).

### Getting There & Away

The easiest option is to organise a car and English-speaking driver through **Mena Tours** (Map p374; ☎ 480 9676; [menatoursalk@yahoo.com](mailto:menatoursalk@yahoo.com); ☹ 9am–5pm Sat–Thu), based next to the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria. This will cost approximately ££450 to ££500 per car. A private taxi will charge ££200 to ££300 to take you to the War Museum, ferry you around the cemeteries and bring you back to Alexandria.

Alternatively, catch any of the Marsa Matruh buses from the Al-Mo'af al-Gedid long-distance bus station in Alexandria (see p393). You'll be dropped on the main road about 200m down the hill from the War Museum.

Service taxis, mostly minibuses, sometimes leave from Al-Mo'af al-Gedid in Alexandria and cost about ££8 to ££10. You can pick up one of these from El Alamein back to Alexandria or to head further west to Sidi Abdel Rahman. Some travellers have found the return trip to Alexandria more of a challenge. You'll need to flag down the minibus by the side of the highway.

Charter flights have recently started operating from the UK and Germany to El Alamein airport in combination with a week's stay at the Mövenpick El Alamein Resort & Spa (for more details, see right).

### SIDI ABDEL RAHMAN

☎ 046

The gorgeous beaches of Sidi Abdel Rahman are the *raison d'être* for this growing resort hamlet, and with charter flights starting between Europe and nearby El Alamein (23km east), development is likely to con-

tinue. Several resorts take prime position on the sparkling waters and white sands of the Mediterranean and are the major draw – though there is little else to see or do here.

Bedouins from the Awlad Ali tribe occasionally congregate in a small village about 3km in from the beach. Originally from the Libyan Cyrenaica, they came to the region several hundred years ago and settled, subduing the smaller local tribes of the Morabiteen. The Egyptian government has been attempting to settle these nomads, so today most Bedouins have forsaken their tents and herd their sheep and goats from the immobility of government-built houses, though you're still likely to see people ushering herds of livestock around.

### Sleeping & Eating

**El Alamein Hotel** (☎ 492 1228; [alamein\\_hotel@yahoo.com](mailto:alamein_hotel@yahoo.com); s/d half-board ££450/800; ☹ ) This small resort has rooms and villas that tend to be both completely booked and fully functioning all summer, but quite desolate for the rest of the year. People flock here for the magnificent views over the clear aqua-blue waters, not for the average food served at the restaurant. About 3km west, a turn-off leads to Hanna Beach (Shaah al-Hanna), where during summer you might find a few tents set up for passers-by.

**Mövenpick El Alamein Resort & Spa** (☎ 419 0061/71; [www.moevenpick-hotels.com](http://www.moevenpick-hotels.com); 140km from Alexandria on the Matruh rd, Ghazala Bay, s/d half-board US\$140/180; ☹ ) Another 12km further west, this large new resort caters for European package tourists who fly in on charters. The large comfortable rooms have views over the azure waters of the sea and the large swimming pool. Also on offer are a spa, fitness centre, indoor swimming pool and several restaurants – good thing, too as there's absolutely nowhere to go and nothing to do nearby. Check its website for promotional offers, particularly in summer.

### Getting There & Away

The same buses that can drop you at El Alamein en route to or from Marsa Matruh can also drop you here. They generally stop for a break just after the Hanna Beach turn-off. There are service taxis operating between El Alamein and Sidi Abdel Rahman and to places further west, but nothing much happens after early afternoon.

## MARSA MATRUH

☎ 046 / pop 159,710

Your experience of the brilliant white sand and turquoise-lined bays of Marsa Matruh will depend on what time of year you arrive. In the summer months of June to September, half of the lower Nile valley descends on this sleepy Mediterranean town for their holiday spell. At this time the streets buzz with people late into the night, throngs of street stalls sell hot food and souvenirs, and impromptu street musicians bang out rhythmic tunes. But the beaches are sardine-packed full of picnicking families, hotels raise their rates to astronomical heights and buses to and from town overflow. The rest of the year, Marsa Matruh returns to its usual near-comatose state. Many hotels shut their doors at this time, the city's beautiful bay of white, sandy beaches lies empty, and the only visitors are Bedouins and Libyans stocking up on goods. Whatever the time of year, few foreign tourists make the trip out here, except to break the journey to Siwa.

### Orientation

The two key streets in Marsa Matruh are the Corniche (Al-Corniche), which winds its way around the waterfront, and Sharia Iskendariyya, which runs perpendicular to the Corniche, towards the hill behind the town. The pricier hotels are along the Corniche, while most others are near Sharia Iskendariyya, as well as most of the restaurants and shops.

### Information

There are several exchange bureaus on Sharia al-Galaa.

**Banque Misr** (Map p402; Sharia al-Galaa; ☎ 9am-2.30pm & 6.30-8pm Sun-Thur) Has an ATM.

**Main post office** (Map p402; Sharia ash-Shaati; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Fri)

**Military Hospital** (Map p402; ☎ 493 5286; Sharia ash-Shaati)

**National Bank of Egypt** (Map p402; off Sharia al-Matar; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-9pm Sun-Thur)

**Passport office** (Map p402; ☎ 493 5351; off Sharia Iskendariyya; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-9pm Jun-Sep, 8.30am-2pm & 5-8pm Oct-May)

**Telephone centrale** (Map p402; Sharia ash-Shaati; ☎ 24hr)

**Tourist office** (Map p402; ☎ 493 1841; cnr Sharia Omar Mukhtar & Al-Corniche; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Jun-Sep, 8.30am-5pm Oct-May)

**Tourist police** (Map p402; ☎ 493 5575; cnr Sharia Omar Mukhtar & Al-Corniche)

### Sights & Activities

#### ROMMEL'S MUSEUM & BEACH

German commander of the Afrika Korps Erwin Rommel is said to have used the caves near as his headquarters during part of the El Alamein campaign. The rather scarce **Rommel's Museum** (Map p404; ☎ 494 6830; admission E£5; ☎ 8am-5pm) contains a few photos, a bust of the Desert Fox, some ageing German, Italian and British military maps, and what is purported to be Rommel's greatcoat. The museum is about 3km east of the town centre, out by the beach of the same name.

### BURIED FUNGAL TREASURE

Believe it or not truffles, those precious, pungent, underground fungi so beloved of Italian and French gourmards, are also found in the barren plains of Egypt's northern coastline. Terfeziaceae, or desert truffles, are endemic to the sort of arid and semiarid regions found throughout the Middle East and North Africa's Mediterranean coast. Apparently, these tasty delicacies have been known to Arabs for thousands of years (by their classical name *kamaa*). It's also believed that the Pharaohs of Egypt sampled them on occasion, and the caliphs of Cairo were known to have a nibble as well.

The flavour of the desert truffle, known as *terfas* to the Bedouin, is slightly less intense than its European counterpart, but tends to be more affordable since it is more abundant. Local belief has it that the fungus only grows wherever lightning strikes the desert. The lightning bit might be a bit of a stretch, but *terfas* do require a minimal amount of rain to germinate. Desert truffles are prepared locally in several ways: fried in butter, boiled in camel's milk or, best of all, roasted. Although Marsa Matruh is a major Egyptian truffle-gathering centre, much of the precious cargo is whisked away to lucrative international markets. But the *terfa* also has a long history in Egypt, so don't be surprised to find a small pile of this buried treasure at the local market.



**Rommel's Beach**, a little west of the museum, is where the field marshal supposedly took time off from war to have his daily swim. It would have been a good choice and is now packed with holidaying Egyptians in summer; women will feel uncomfortable bathing here. To get here you can walk around the little bay (45 minutes), hire a bike or take a taxi (££4 to ££5) from Marsa Matruh.

## OTHER BEACHES

The luminescence of the water along this stretch of the coast is only marred by the town's overflowing hotel scene. Further away, the water is just as nice and you can still find a few places where the developers have yet to start pouring cement. During the hot summer months women cannot bathe in swimsuits, unless they can handle being the object of intense harassment and ogling. The exception is the private beaches at Hotel Beau Site and San Giovanni Cleopatra, although even here most Egyptian women remain fully dressed and in the shade.

If you do manage to get into the azure waters, offshore lies the wreck of a German submarine, and sunken Roman galleys reputedly rest in deeper waters off to the east.

The **Lido**, the main beach in town, is no longer an attractive swimming spot.

The next choice is either **Cleopatra's Beach** or **Shaati al-Gharam** (Lovers' Beach), which are about 14km and 17km respectively west of town around the bay's thin tentacle of land. The rock formations here are worth a look and you can wade to Cleopatra's Bath, a natural pool where legend has imagined the great queen and Mark Antony enjoying a swim. In summer several boats leave from near Hotel Beau Site to go across the bay to Cleopatra's Beach and Shaati al-Gharam. Taxis will charge about ££70 to bring you here and to wait while you enjoy the beach.

Agiba means 'miracle' in Arabic and **Agiba Beach**, about 24km west of Marsa Matruh, is just that. It is a small but spectacular cove, accessible only via a path leading down from the cliff top. There is a café nearby (open in summer only) where you can get light refreshments. Again, it is absolutely packed in summer and near empty the rest of the year.

## Sleeping

The accommodation situation in Marsa Matruh leaves a lot to be desired. With a few

exceptions, hotels generally specialise in mediocrity at unreasonable rates, but demand for rooms over summer is such that hoteliers really don't need to try very hard. We list a few of the better, more central options.

Prices fluctuate wildly from winter to summer. In the June to September summer months you're advised to book well ahead, though note that many hotels will make you pay for a double room even if you are travelling solo.

## BUDGET

**El-Ghazala Hotel** (Map p402; ☎ 493 3519; Sharia Alam ar-Rum; dm ££15, s/d ££25/40) The cleaning lady here packed her bags and left long ago (the whiffy communal toilets still miss her) but this bare-bones hotel remains one of the cheapest and most popular places to bed down year-round. Entry to this backpackers' grotto is hidden between two shops.

**Hotel Hamada** (Map p402; ☎ 493 3300; Sharia Tahrir; s/d with shared bathroom ££25/50) Located right in the centre of town, the Hamada is a rudimentary budget option with reasonably clean rooms and friendly staff. Note that in summer the riotous party noise from Sharia Iskendiyya below can be deafening.

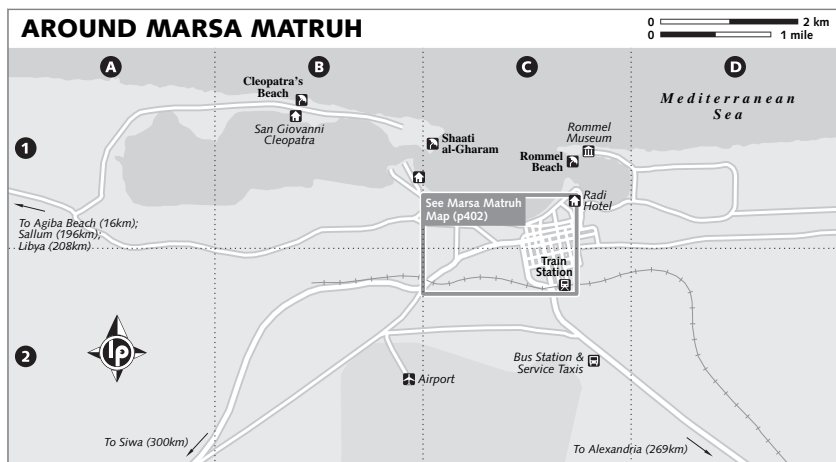
**Rommel House Hotel** (Map p402; ☎ 493 5466; fax 493 2485; Sharia al-Galaa; s/d half-board Jun-Sep ££85/130, Oct-May ££50/65; ☎) Well away from the hub-bub of the Corniche and Sharia Iskendiyya, rooms at this dependable, long-standing and cavernous hotel come with private bathroom, TV and refrigerator. Respect goes out to it for the relatively mild summer price hike.

**Radi Hotel** (Map p404; ☎ 493 4827/8; Al-Corniche; s/d half-board Jun-Sep ££145/224, Oct-May s/d ££50/70; ☎) This three-star hotel overlooking Rommel Beach has spacious rooms with private bathroom and satellite TV. It is blockbooked in the summer with Cairenes, when half-board is obligatory.

**El-Lido** (Map p402; ☎ 493 2248; Sharia Iskendiyya; r Jun-Sep ££200, s/d Oct-May ££50/70; ☎) Even though the rooms in this centrally located tower block see less daylight than Dracula, it's still a fair deal by Marsa Matruh's low standards – especially considering you get air-con thrown in.

## MIDRANGE

**Reem Hotel** (Map p402; ☎ 493 3605; Al-Corniche; d Jun-Sep ££250, s/d Oct-May ££120/180; ☎) The Reem has lots of institutionally white halls and rooms



with balconies facing the ocean. While the abodes may suffer a serious charisma deficit, they do offer a spick-and-span place to sleep. View-deprived rooms are a little cheaper.

**Riviera Palace Hotel** (Map p402; ☎ 493 3045; fax 493 0004; Sharia Iskendariyya; s/d half-board Jun-Sep US\$50/70, Oct-May US\$40/60; ☹) When it's not fully booked by holidaying Cairenes, the rooms here are big and tidy. Try as it might, the schizophrenic foyer design, oscillating from a chandelier-clad nautical theme to a stuffed-tiger motif, does little to add any real character to the place.

**Negresco Hotel** (Map p402; ☎ 493 4491/2; fax 493 3960; Al-Corniche; s/d half-board Jun-Sep E£400/560, Oct-May E£300/400; ☹) The Negresco adds a much needed dollop of Mediterranean charm to Marsha Matruh's hotel scene, with white-washed walls and pretty blue balconies. The rooms are overpriced but immaculate and the facilities adequate.

## TOP END

**Hotel Beau Site** (Map p402; ☎ 493 2066; [www.beausiteho.tel.com](http://www.beausiteho.tel.com); Al-Corniche; s/d half-board Jun-Sep from US\$125/155, s/d Oct-May US\$65/81; ☹) This is one of the most comfortable options in Matruh town, particularly if you choose the more expensive 'luxury' rooms on the beach, with satellite TV. The Beau Site boasts the only private beach in the town centre, a few bars, several good restaurants, as well as a few unadvertised 'budget' rooms (with shared bathroom). Beware that a plethora of taxes and hidden charges is usually tacked onto every bill – check it carefully.

**San Giovanni Cleopatra** (Map p404; ☎ 494 7600; [www.sangiovanni.com](http://www.sangiovanni.com); near Cleopatra Beach, 14km west of Marsa Matruh; s/d Jun-Sep US\$110/150, Oct-May US\$75/110) The most recent arrival is the town's only five-star beach resort, part of the San Giovanni chain. Designed to imitate a souped-up Italianate villa, its 67 spacious rooms overlook a private beach and swimming pool. The hotel offers a range of beach activities, a health club and video games for the kids. The hotel's boats make trips to nearby beaches.

## Eating

The dining situation in Matruh is nothing to write home about. In winter you may have a hard time finding something to eat, although Abdu Kofta is open year-round.

## RESTAURANTS

If you've been traversing through the Western Deserts for several weeks, you might just be tempted by a shamefully greasy taste of home: KFC, McDonalds and Baskin Robbins all have outlets along the Corniche during the July to September summer months.

**Abu Rabie** (Map p402; Sharia Iskendariyya; dishes E£3-15) A very popular takeaway with *fuul*, *ta'amiyya* and *salads*, as well as fried *gambari* (prawn) and *kalamaari* (squid).

**Panyotis Greek Restaurant** (Map p402; Sharia Iskendariyya; dishes E£5-30) Matruh's oldest restaurant rests a little on its laurels, but it's still okay. Fish and seafood are accompanied by tahini and salads and, a rarity in town, a cold beer.

**Abdu Kofta** (Map p402; ☎ 012 314 4989; Sharia Gamal Abd an-Nasser, off Sharia at-Tahrir; dishes E£5-60; 🍴) Locals will swear black and blue that this is the best restaurant in town. In the clean and cool 1st-floor room, it serves *kofta* (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer) or grilled meat by the weight served with good mezze and salads.

**Camona Restaurant** (Map p402; Sharia Galaa; meals E£8-20) This simple restaurant does a roaring daily trade in grilled meats (ie just chicken and kebabs). Follow your nose when you get to the Iskendariyya corner and you can't miss it.

**Abou Aly Pizza** (Map p402; Sharia Iskendariyya; pizzas E£12-18) For as-close-as-you'll-get-to-the-real-thing Western-style pizza, you can't go past Abou Aly. It has lots of seating upstairs, and as a bonus you can people-watch the action on Sharia Iskendariyya below while tucking in.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Twice-weekly flights between Cairo and Marsa Matruh are available with **EgyptAir** (Map p402; ☎ 493 6573; Sharia al-Matar) from June to September, leaving Cairo at 3.15pm and returning at 5pm. Tickets are about E£700 one-way.

### BUS

Matruh's bus station (Map p402) is 2km out of town on the main coastal highway. Expect to pay about E£7 for a taxi to the town centre.

**Superjet** (☎ 490 4787) has several services a day from June to September. Buses to Alexandria (E£30, four hours) leave at 2.30pm and to Cairo (E£50, five hours) at 1pm, 2pm, 3.30pm and 4pm.

**West Delta Bus Co** (☎ 490 5079) has hourly services to Alexandria from 7am to 2am (E£17 to E£30, four hours). Buses to Cairo (E£35 to E£50, five hours) leave at 7.30am, noon, 3.30pm, 8pm and 2am in winter; from June to September they leave hourly from 7.30am to midnight. Buses to Sallum (E£15, four hours) run six times a day from 6am to midnight.

Buses to Siwa (E£12, four hours) leave at 7am, 1.30pm, 4pm and 7.30pm.

### SERVICE TAXI

The service-taxi lot is beside the bus station. Service taxis to Siwa, if there are enough passengers, cost E£12. Other fares include El Alamein (E£10), Alexandria (E£15), Cairo (E£25 to E£30), Sallum (E£12) and Sidi Barani (E£12).

## LIBYA BORDER CROSSING

The border crossing point of Amsaad, just north of Halfaya Pass, is open 24 hours (sometimes even in a row). It's 12km west of Sallum or a E£5 service taxi-ride away. For information about visas for Libya, see p525.

## TRAIN

Between June and September there is a daily luxury sleeper train between Cairo and Marsa Matruh. Trains leave Matruh at 10pm and arrive in Cairo at 6am. Tickets are US\$45 per person in a double cabin, US\$60 in a single. Reservations can either be made in Cairo (☎ 02-738 3682/4) or by purchasing your ticket on the train.

Otherwise, avoid the rails. Even the stationmaster at Marsa Matruh calls the trains 'horrible'.

## Getting Around

Private taxis or pick-ups can be hired for the day, but you must negotiate and bargain aggressively, especially in summer. Expect to pay E£80 to E£150, depending on the distance.

Bikes can be rented from makeshift rental places along Sharia Iskendariyya during the high season for around E£10 to E£20 per day. A taxi to the airport will cost around E£7 to E£10.

## SIDI BARANI

☎ 046

About 135km west of Marsa Matruh on the way to Libya is this small but busy Bedouin town. It serves a bit of a food and petrol to traffic coming from Libya, but that's about it. There's a small hotel and a few unsanitary places to eat.

## SALLUM

☎ 46

Look up in the dictionary 'middle of nowhere' and you might just find the town of Sallum, a mere 12km from the Libyan border. Nestled at the foot of Gebel as-Sallum and lying on the gulf of the same name, Sallum was once the ancient port of Baranis. While a few Roman wells testify to its history, it is now mostly a Bedouin trading post that sees few international visitors.

The sea here, as along the rest of this stretch of coast, is crystal clear and aquamarine in



colour, but don't think about frolicking in the water – dumped rubbish lines the sand, government property surrounds the town and permits are needed to be on the beach after 5pm.

On the eastern entrance to the town there is a modest WWII Commonwealth War Cemetery, commemorating the destruction of hundreds of British tanks by the Germans at nearby 'Hell Fire' pass.

There are no banks open and no exchange office in Sallum, although some hotels may agree to exchange money.

### Sleeping & Eating

If you can, you will want to avoid staying in Sallum, but if you have no choice the **Hotel al-Ahram** (☎ 480 0148; s/d £14/21) is the best of an unattractive bunch. The rooms are spartan and when there is water, it's cold.

There are a couple of rough *lokandas* (basic, cheap places to doss) with their names in Arabic only, of which the Sirt Hotel is the better one.

At the border, 12km further on, is Hotel at-Ta'un (signed in Arabic only). There are two modest *fuul* stands around, but check on the price first as it may be higher for the lone foreigner passing by.

### Getting There & Away

There are buses and the odd service taxi leaving from Alexandria (p393) and Marsa Matruh (p405). See those sections for details.

From Sallum, buses for Marsa Matruh (££15, four hours) depart hourly between 7am and 2am; some of these continue on to Alexandria (££28, eight hours). A service taxi to Marsa Matruh will cost about ££12.

# Suez Canal



The Suez Canal is truly one of the world's greatest engineering marvels. Slicing through the sands of the Isthmus of Suez, the canal separates mainland Egypt from the Sinai Peninsula as well as Africa from Asia. At 163km in length, the Suez Canal facilitates the transit of more than 20,000 ships a year between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and serves as the lifeline of the Egyptian economy.

Despite these impressive statistics, however, the Suez Canal is not well set up for tourism, unlike its Panamanian counterpart. Strict security measures prevent tourists from transiting the canal on private boats, and independent travel in the region is tightly controlled. As a result, few foreigners set their sights on the Suez, aside from European yachties bound for the Red Sea.

With that said, the appeal of the region lies in the three cities that sit along the western banks of the canal, namely Port Said, Ismailia and Suez. Colonial creations that emerged when the canal grew in prominence, these cities were on the front line during the wars with Israel and suffered greatly from bombardments. However, their 19th-century beginnings still survive in the wide, leafy boulevards and graceful colonial architecture that line their picturesque town centres, setting them apart from the rest of Egypt.

If you have the time and the inclination to step off Egypt's more trodden trails, the canal's urban trio offers an altogether distinctive experience. In contrast with the temples, pyramids and ruins that characterise other parts of Egypt, the Suez Canal offers an intriguing combination of *belle époque* architecture, modern shipping infrastructure and portside energy.

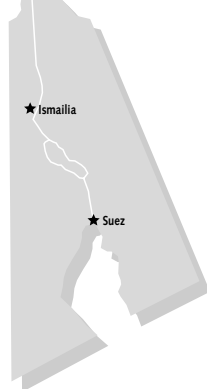
## HIGHLIGHTS

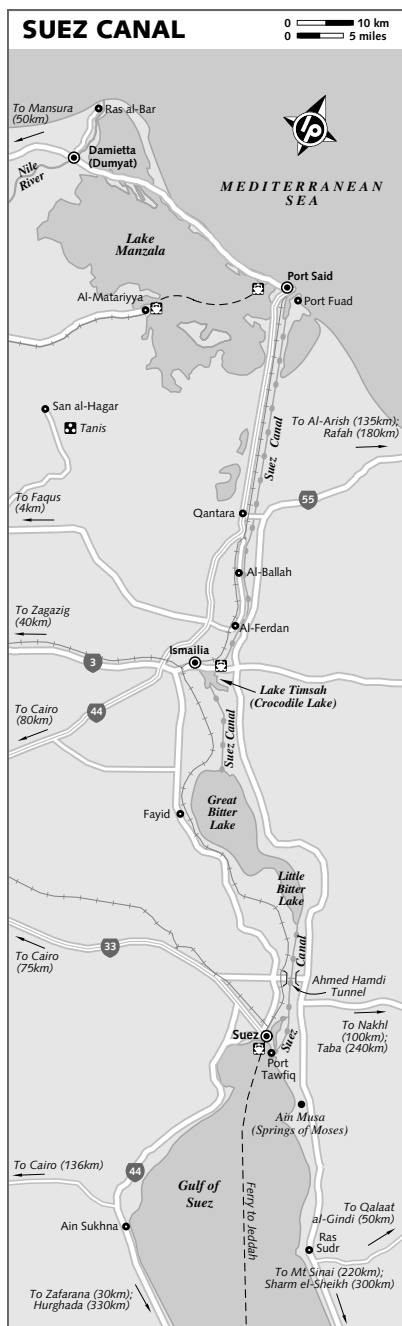
- Stroll along the waterfront while admiring the graceful 19th-century architecture of **Port Said** (p408)
- Take the **ferry** (p411) from Port Said to Port Fuad to get a brief taste of life on the canal
- Step into Egypt's colonial past while wandering through the old European quarter of **Ismailia** (p412)
- Admire more than 4000 objects from Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman times at the rarely visited **Ismailia Museum** (p412)
- Watch supertankers appear to glide through the desert in the city of **Suez** (p414), the canal's southern terminus

Port Said ★★ Port Fuad

★ Ismailia

★ Suez





## PORT SAID

☎ 066 / pop 550,000

Port Said's main attraction, and the reason for its establishment on the Mediterranean, is the Suez Canal. Watching enormous ships and tankers lining up to pass through the canal's northern entrance is an impressive sight to behold. Although heavily damaged in the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel, much of the city has been rebuilt along its historic lines. Today, Port Said exudes a prosperous and bustling air, particularly its historic waterfront of late 19th-century colonial buildings. The city is also home to the leafy suburb of Port Fuad, which can be reached by a free ferry that crosses the Suez Canal – perfect for anyone who doesn't own their own yacht.

## Orientation

Port Said is connected to the mainland by a bridge to the south and a causeway to the west. There is also a ferry between Port Said and its sister town of Port Fuad on the opposite side of the canal.

Most banks and important services are on Sharia Palestine, which runs along the canal, or on Sharia al-Gomhuriyya, two blocks inland.

## Information

### CUSTOMS

Port Said was declared a duty-free port in 1976. In theory, everyone must pass through customs when entering and leaving the city, though in practice this is seldom enforced. Regardless, be sure to have your passport with you.

### EMERGENCY

**Tourist police** (☎ 322 8570; post office bldg, off Sharia al-Gomhuriyya)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Compunet** (per hr E£3; ☎ 9am-midnight) Next to Ferial Gardens.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Delafant Hospital** (☎ 322 3663; Sharia Orabi)

**Public Hospital** (☎ 322 0694; Sharia Safiyya Zaghلول)

### MONEY

**American Express Bank** (Sharia Palestine; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6.30-8pm Sun-Thu)



🕒 8.30am-2pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu)

🕒 9am-2pm & 6.30-8pm Sat-Thu)

**Main post office** (Sharia al-Geish; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

**Tourist office** (☎ 323 5289; 8 Sharia Palestine; 🕒 9am-6pm Sat-Thu)

**Passport office** (window 7, left wing, 4th fl, Governorate Bldg, Sharia 23rd of July; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

**SUEZ CANAL HOUSE**

If you've ever seen a picture of Port Said, it was probably of the striking green domes of the Suez Canal House, which was built in time for the inauguration of the canal in 1869. Unfortunately, the building is off-limits to visitors.

The heart of Port Said is located along the edge of the canal, on and around Sharia Palestine. Here, the waterfront is lined with late-19th-century five-storey buildings complete with wooden balconies, louvered doors and high verandas in grand *belle époque* style.

## THE SUEZ CANAL

The Suez Canal represents the culmination of centuries of effort to enhance trade and expand the empires of Egypt by connecting the Red Sea with the Mediterranean Sea. Construction of the first recorded canal was begun by Pharaoh Nekau II between 610 and 595 BC. The canal stretched from the Nile Delta town of Bubastis, near present-day Zagazig, to the Red Sea via the Bitter Lakes. After reputedly causing the death of more than 100,000 workers, construction of the canal was quickly abandoned.

The project was picked up again and completed about a century later under Darius, one of Egypt's Persian rulers. The canal was improved by the Romans under Trajan, but over the next several centuries it was either neglected and left to silt up, or dredged for limited use depending on the available resources. The canal was again briefly restored in AD 649 for a period of 20 years by Amr ibn al-As, the Arab conqueror of Egypt.

Following the French invasion in 1798, the importance of some sort of sea route south to Asia was again recognised. For the first time, digging a canal directly from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, across the comparatively narrow Isthmus of Suez, was considered. The idea was abandoned, however, when Napoleon's engineers mistakenly calculated that there was a 10m difference between the two sea levels.

British reports detected that mistake several years later, but it was Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French consul to Egypt, who pursued the Suez Canal idea through to its conclusion. In 1854, de Lesseps presented his proposal to the Egyptian khedive Said Pasha, who authorised him to excavate the canal; work began in 1859.

A decade later the canal was completed amid much fanfare and celebration. When two small fleets, one originating in Port Said and the other in Suez, met at the new town of Ismailia on 16 November 1869, the Suez Canal was declared open and Africa was officially severed from Asia.

Ownership of the canal remained in French and British hands for the next 86 years until, in the wake of Egyptian independence, President Nasser nationalised the Suez in 1956. The two European powers, in conjunction with Israel, invaded Egypt in an attempt to retake the waterway by force. In what came to be known as the 'Suez Crisis', they were forced to retreat in the face of widespread international condemnation.

Today, the Suez Canal remains one of the world's most heavily used shipping lanes and toll revenues represent one of the largest contributors to the Egyptian state coffers. However, despite the hundreds of ships that pass through the Suez Canal each week, canal enthusiasts who want to do the same will find that it's not so easy. Organised trips don't exist and the police do not allow private boats to cruise the canal for security reasons.

Still, if you want to try to hitch a ride, the yacht club in Port Fuad (opposite) is the best place to inquire about passage on a vessel plying the canal, as the captains are sometimes looking for crew members. If you do manage to get on some sort of vessel, remember that taking photographs is generally prohibited, as there is a strong military presence all along the canal. Of course, the easiest way to get a fleeting taste of life on the canal is to simply take the free ferry over to Port Fuad from in front of the tourist office on Sharia Palestine in Port Said.

Take a stroll down Sharia Memphis, in particular, with its old Woolworth's building (now a souvenir emporium), and around the streets just north of the Commercial Basin. There are some wonderfully odd colonial remnants, such as the old Postes Françaises, a sign for the ship chandlers of the pre-Soviet 'volunteer Russian fleet' and another for the Bible Society.

Northeast of here, on Sharia 23rd of July, is the Italian consulate building, erected in the 1930s and adorned with an engraved piece

of the propaganda of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini: 'Rome – once again at the heart of an empire'.

Several blocks inland, on and around Sharia Salah Salem, is an impressive collection of churches, including the Coptic Orthodox church of St Bishoi of the Virgin and the Franciscan compound.

At the very northern end of Sharia Palestine, near the Sonesta Hotel, is a large stone plinth that once held a statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps, until it was torn down in 1956

with the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. Although the statue was restored at the expense of the French government in the early 1990s, it has yet to be re-erected.

### MILITARY MUSEUM

This compact **museum** (☎ 322 4657; Sharia 23rd of July; admission ££5; ☎ 9am-4pm Sat-Thu) houses relics from the 1956 Suez Crisis and the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel, such as a few captured US tanks with the Star of David painted on them, as well as an odd collection of UXOs (unexploded ordnance).

### PORT FUAD

Across the canal from Port Said is the genteel suburb of Port Fuad, founded in 1925. The streets near its quay invite a stroll, with their sprawling residences, lush gardens and sloping tiled roofs recalling the one-time European presence. Free ferries from Port Said to Port Fuad offer impressive views of the canal, and leave about every 10 minutes throughout the day from the terminal at the southwestern end of Sharia Palestine.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel de la Poste** (☎ 322 4048; 42 Sharia al-Gomhuriyya; s/d/tr ££40/50/55) Port Said's best budget option, this faded classic still manages to maintain a hint of its original charm. That said, it will definitely take a bit of imagination (and perhaps some hazy vision) to invoke the colonial yesteryear of the Hotel de la Poste. However, clean and comfortable rooms (some with balconies) and a decent on-site restaurant are good perks if your imagination starts to fail you.

**Helnan Port Said** (☎ 332 0890; [www.helnan.com](http://www.helnan.com); Sharia Atef as-Sadat; s/d from US\$75/120; ☎ ☎ ☎) Overlooking the Mediterranean at the north end of town, the five-star Helnan is Port Said's most sophisticated option. Offering low-key luxury rather than opulent pleasure, the Helnan has well-appointed rooms that boast views over the end of the canal and the Mediterranean. The hotel is also home to a number of top-notch restaurants that serve up some of the best eats in town.

**Abou Essam** (☎ 323 2776; Sharia Atef as-Sadat; meals ££20-30; ☎) This favourite serves a help-yourself salad bar featuring tahini, *baba ghanoug* (purée of grilled aubergines with tahini and olive oil) and other delicacies, as well as a selection of fish, pasta and grilled meat.

### Getting There & Away BOAT

Numerous five-star cruise ships ply the waters between Port Said and Limassol (Cyprus), with most sailing between April and October; see p525 for details.

### BUS

The bus station is about 3km from the town centre at the beginning of the road to Cairo (about ££3 to ££5 in a taxi).

**Superjet** (☎ 372 1779) has hourly buses to Cairo (££16, three hours) from 7am until about 8pm, and a bus to Alexandria (££22, four hours) at 4.30pm daily. Bookings are advisable.

**East Delta Bus Co** (☎ 372 9883) also has hourly buses to Cairo (££14 to ££16, three hours) from 6am to 10pm daily. Buses to Alexandria (££18 to ££21, four hours) leave at 7am, 11am, 3.30pm and 7pm. Buses to Ismailia (££4 to ££6, one to 1½ hours) depart hourly between 6am and 7pm. Buses to Suez (££11 to ££13, 2½ to three hours) depart at 10am and 3.30pm.

### SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis have an area in the bus station (about ££3 to ££5 in a taxi; ask for *al-mahattat servees*). Sample destinations and fares include: Cairo (££15 to ££20), Ismailia (££7 to ££12), Qantara (££5 to ££10) and Suez (££10 to ££15).

### TRAIN

The five daily trains to Cairo via Ismailia (2nd-class service ££11 to ££15) are slow (five hours) and run at 5.30am, 9.45am, 1pm, 5.30pm and 7.30pm. There are no 1st-class services. Delays on these routes are common, so going by bus is more efficient and more comfortable than taking the non-air-con trains.

### Getting Around

#### HANTOUR

The most enjoyable way to tour Port Said, especially around sunset, is by *hantour* (horse-drawn carriage). *Hantours* can be found along all the main streets, and cost about ££10 per hour after some bargaining.

#### MICROBUS

Microbuses run along main arteries such as Sharia Orabi and Sharia ash-Shohada, and cost 50pt for a short ride.



## LIBERTY ON THE CANAL

New York's Statue of Liberty was originally designed to stand in Port Said at the entrance to the Suez Canal. Inspired by the colossal statues at Abu Simbel (see p323), French sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi formulated the idea of a huge statue of a woman bearing a torch. She was to represent progress – 'Egypt carrying the light of Asia', to use Bartholdi's own words. The idea was ultimately abandoned due to the cost, and the 'Light of Asia', which had developed from one of Bartholdi's models, was sent to New York, where she became Lady Liberty.

## TAXI

There are plenty of blue-and-white taxis around Port Said. Fares for short trips within the town centre average E£1 to E£3.

## ISMAILIA

☎ 064 / pop 900,000

Ismailia was founded by and named after Pasha Ismail, who was khedive of Egypt in the 1860s while the Suez Canal was being built. The city was also the temporary home of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the director of the Suez Canal Company, who lived here until the canal was completed. Not surprisingly, Ismailia grew in the image of the French masters who had ensconced themselves in Egypt during the colonial era. Today, Ismailia's historic town centre, with its elegant colonial streets, expansive lawns and late-19th-century villas, is one of the most peaceful and picturesque neighbourhoods in the country.

## Orientation

The heart of Ismailia and the area most worth exploring is the old European quarter around Sharia Thawra and the central square, Midan al-Gomhuriyya. Sharia Thawra runs south from the train line to the placid Sweetwater Canal, with Midan al-Gomhuriyya several blocks to the west.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Rodu Internet Café** (Sharia Thawra; per hr E£2; ☎ 10am-8pm)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hospital** (☎ 337 3902/3; Sharia Mustashfa)

## MONEY

**Bank of Alexandria** (Midan Orabi; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu)

## POST

**Main post office** (Sharia al-Horreyya; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (☎ 332 1078; 1st fl, New Governorate Bldg, Sharia Tugay, Sheikh Zayed area; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu) About 1.5km north of Midan Orabi.

**Tourist police** (☎ 333 2910; tourist village, beach area)

## VISA EXTENSIONS

**Passport office** (☎ 391 4559; Midan al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu)

## Sights & Activities

### ISMAILIA MUSEUM

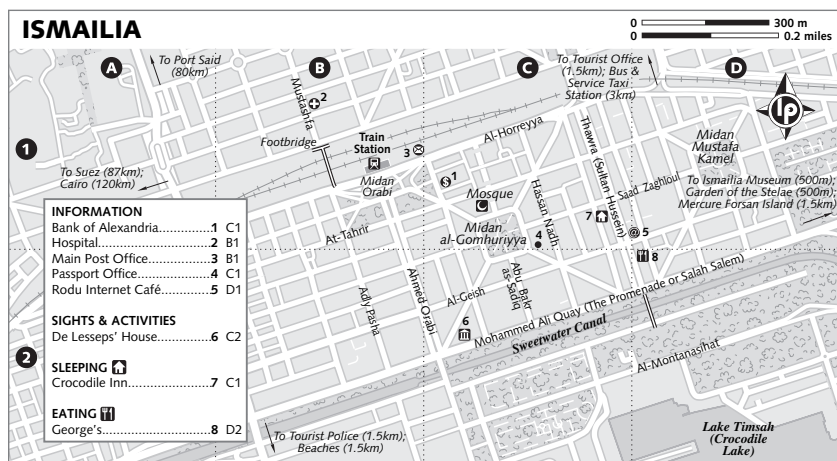
More than 4000 objects from Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman times are housed at the small but interesting **Ismailia Museum** (☎ 391 2749; Mohammed Ali Quay; adult/child E£6/3; ☎ 8am-4pm, closed for Fri noon prayers), located on the eastern edge of town. The collection includes statues, scarabs, stelae and records of the first canal, built between the Bitter Lakes and Bubastis by the Persian ruler Darius. The highlight of the museum is a 4th-century AD mosaic depicting characters from Greek and Roman mythology. At the top Phaedra is sending a love letter to her stepson Hippolytus, while below Dionysus is riding a chariot driven by Eros. The bottom section recounts the virtues of Hercules.

### GARDEN OF THE STELAE

Just southwest of the Ismailia Museum is a garden containing a rather forlorn little sphinx from the time of Ramses II (1279-1213 BC). You need permission from the museum to visit the garden, but you are able to see the unremarkable statue from the street. The attractive grounds of the majestic residence between the garden and the museum belong to the head of the Suez Canal Authority and are off limits to the public.

### DE LESSEPS' HOUSE

The residence of the one-time French consul to Egypt used to be open to the public. These days, however, you can see the interior only if you're a VIP of some sort, as the building currently serves as a private guesthouse for visitors of the Suez Canal Authority.



If you're not a privileged guest, you might be interested to know that de Lesseps' bedroom looks as if it has hardly been touched in over a century – old photos, books and various utensils are scattered around the desk by his bed and on the floor. Inside the grounds is also de Lesseps' private carriage, which has been encased in glass and remains in impeccable condition.

The house is located on Mohammed Ali Quay near the corner of Sharia Ahmed Orabi.

## BEACHES

There are several beaches around Lake Timsah, on the southeastern edge of town. The better ones are owned by the various clubs dotting the shore and you'll need to pay to use them (on average about E£20). The public beaches charge between E£3 and E£5.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Crocodile Inn** (☎ 391 2555; cnr Sharias Thawra & Saad Zaghloul; s/d E£75/115; ☞) Though it's nothing to write home about, this centrally located spot is one of the better hotels in the town centre. Despite the spiffy exterior, the rooms themselves are drab and decidedly lacking in character. However, it's a fairly cheap place to spend a night or two and a good base for exploring the European quarter.

**Mercure Forsan Island** (☎ 391 6316; [www.accor.com](http://www.accor.com); Gezirat Forsan; s/d/chalet from US\$120/135/400; ☞) About 1.6km southeast of the old centre of town, the four-star Mercure is easily the most

attractive hotel in the canal zone. Occupying a private island and overlooking a tranquil beach, the Mercure makes for a relaxing getaway. Even if you're not staying here, stop by for a refreshing dip – the pool costs E£15 Monday to Thursday, and E£25 Friday to Sunday (including towel hire) for nonguests.

**George's** (☎ 391 8327; 11 Sharia Thawra; dishes E£20-60; ☞) An Ismailia classic, George's has been around since 1950, and serves up seafood dishes amid a cosy British pub-style ambience.

## Getting There & Away

**BUS**  
Ismailia's bus station is about 3km north-west of the old quarter; taxis to the town centre cost from E£3 to E£5. **East Delta Bus Co** (☎ 332 1513) has buses to Cairo (E£7.25, 2½ hours) every half-hour between 6am and 8pm. Buses to Alexandria (E£25, five hours) leave at 7am, 10.30am and 2.30pm. Buses to Port Said (E£4 to E£6, two hours) and Suez (E£4 to E£6, 1½ hours) depart every hour from 7am to 6pm.

There are also hourly buses to Al-Arish (E£10 to E£12, three to four hours) between 8.30am and 5.30pm. Buses to Sharm el-Sheikh (E£30 to E£35, six hours) leave frequently throughout the morning, starting at 6.30am. Afternoon and evening departures include those at noon, 2.30pm, 5.30pm, 10pm and 11pm, with the 2.30pm and 11pm services going on to Dahab (E£45 to E£50, eight hours).

**SERVICE TAXI**

These taxis depart from the bus station. Destinations include Suez (££5 to ££10), Port Said (££5 to ££10), Zagazig (££5 to ££10), Cairo (££10 to ££15) and Al-Arish (££10 to ££15).

**TRAIN**

Trains in the canal zone are slow and inefficient. If you must use them, 2nd-class trains to Cairo (four to five hours, eight daily) cost ££11 to ££14. To Port Said, there are six trains per day (££3 to ££7) in 2nd class. There are also frequent trains to Suez (££1 to ££3 in 3rd class only).

**Getting Around****MICROBUS**

Microbuses ply the main arteries of the city. Fares average 50pt.

**TAXI**

There are plenty of taxis around town. Short trips cost ££1 to ££3; between town and the beaches expect to pay ££5.

**SUEZ**

☎ 062 / pop 550,000

Balmy, bustling Suez sprawls around the shores of the gulf where the Red Sea meets the southern entrance of the Suez Canal. Although it was heavily damaged during the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel, little evidence of the devastation remains. Of course, the rebuilt main streets are mostly a façade hiding a maze of ramshackle backstreet neighbourhoods. However, Suez remains one of the best places in the region to view colossal cargo ships gliding through the canal. Viewed from afar, they appear to be ploughing through the desert, a surreal and unforgettable sight.

**Orientation**

Suez is divided between Suez proper and Port Tawfiq – the latter is at the mouth of the canal and is an ideal place for watching the ships go by. Port Tawfiq also has several streets with gracious old colonial buildings that managed to escape the bombing.

Joining Port Tawfiq with Suez proper is Sharia al-Geish, a wide thoroughfare that cuts through an industrial area before leading through the heart of Suez. Here, you'll find a few staid old buildings and a surpris-

ing number of colonial-era churches crowded among a proliferation of sombre high-rises.

**Information****EMBASSIES & CONSULATES**

**Saudi Arabian consulate** (☎ 333 4017/8; Sharia al-Geish, Port Tawfiq; ☎ 9am–3pm Sat–Thu) Mainly processes work and hajj visas; allow up to one month for transit or tourist visas. The best bet is to go through Mena Tours (below), which will simplify the lengthy process and make sure you have the correct documents in advance.

**INTERNET ACCESS**

**CACE** (Sharia al-Geish, Suez; per hr ££2; ☎ 9am–8pm)

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**General Hospital** (☎ 333 1190; Sharia al-Baladiya)

**MONEY**

**Bank of Alexandria** (off Sharia al-Geish, Suez; ☎ 9am–2pm Sun–Thu)

**Banque Misr** (Sharia al-Geish, Suez; ☎ 9am–2pm Sun–Thu)

**POST**

**Main post office** (Sharia Hoda Shaarawi; ☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Sat–Thu)

**Port Tawfiq post office** (Sharia al-Marwa; ☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Sat–Thu)

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Tourist office** (☎ 333 1141; Sharia al-Marwa; ☎ 8am–8pm Sat–Thu, 8am–3pm Fri)

**Tourist police** (Sharia al-Marwa) Next to the tourist office.

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

**Mena Tours** (☎ 322 8821, 322 0269, 010 516 9841; Sharia al-Marwa; ☎ 9am–3pm Sat–Thu) On the waterfront in Port Tawfiq, diagonally behind the Saudi Arabian consulate. Arrange transit and tourist visas for Saudi Arabia here.

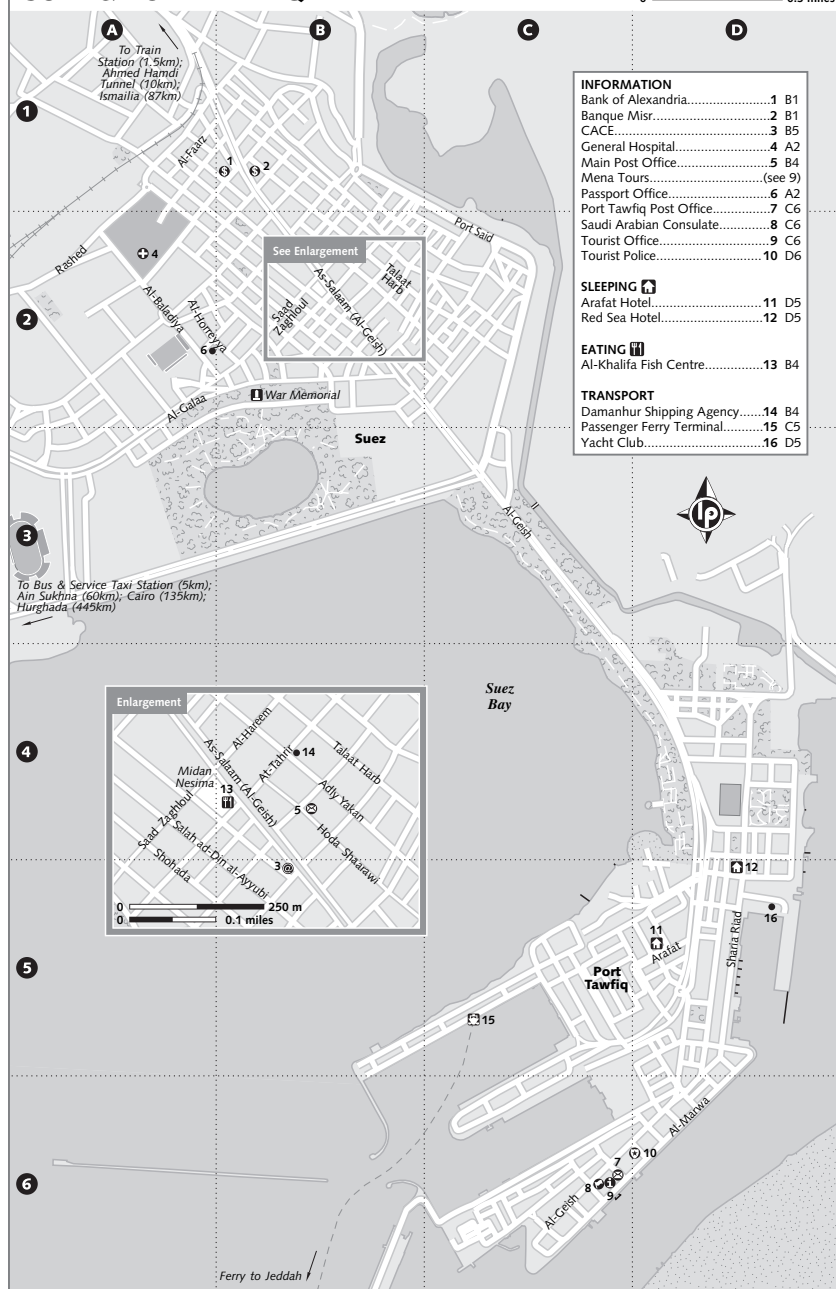
**VISA EXTENSIONS**

**Passport office** (Sharia al-Horreyya; ☎ 8.30am–3pm) Issues visa extensions.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Arafat Hotel** (☎ 333 8355; Sharia Arafat, Port Tawfiq; s/d ££35/45, with shared bathroom ££30/35) If you're heading out to Saudi Arabia in the morning, this budget hotel is conveniently located near the port on a small side street off Sharia al-Geish. Like most portside hotels, however, the Arafat is a little rough around the edges, and isn't exactly the best choice for female travellers. However, if you only want to crash for a night

0 500 m  
0 0.3 miles



before setting sail across the Red Sea, you'll do just fine here.

**Red Sea Hotel** (☎ 333 4302; www.redseahotel.com; 13 Sharia Riad, Port Tawfiq; s/d from US\$45/55; ☼) The city's premier establishment is an affordable mid-range hotel located near the yacht club in Port Tawfiq – look for the large white-and-red sign poking out above the rooftops. No-nonsense rooms are a bit on the smallish side, though they're a good deal considering the professionalism of the management. If you're looking to sample the bounty of the Red Sea, there is a good on-site restaurant.

**Al-Khalifa Fish Centre** (☎ 333 7303; Sharia al-Geish, Suez; dishes ££20-50) Tucked away on the edge of Midan Nesima in the congested town centre, this no-frills place sells the day's catch by weight; pick your fish, then wait for it to be grilled.

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

It's possible to travel by boat from Suez to Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), from where you can arrange onward boat travel to Port Sudan (Sudan); see p526 for details. Tickets to Jeddah can be booked through Mena Tours (p414). Be advised that you'll need to have your visa in order to purchase a ticket, and it's virtually impossible to get a ticket during the hajj.

Sometimes you can find passage on private yachts to destinations such as India, South Africa and even Australia. A good contact for arranging this is Mohammed Moseilhy at the **Damanhur Shipping Agency** (☎ 333 0418, 012 798 6338; Sharia at-Tahrir).

### BUS

The bus station is 5km out of town along the road to Cairo. **Upper Egypt Bus Co** (☎ 356 4258) has buses to Cairo (££7.25, two hours) every 15 to 30 minutes from 6am to 9pm daily. Buses to Hurghada (££35 to ££40, four to five hours) leave almost hourly between 5am and 11pm. There are buses to Luxor (££45 to ££55, eight to 10 hours) via Safaga (££35 to ££45, four to five hours) and Qena (££45 to ££50, five to six hours) at 8am, 2pm and 8pm. Buses to Aswan (££55 to ££65, 11 to 12 hours) leave at 5am, 11am and 5pm. Buses to Quseir (££35 to ££40, seven hours) leave at 9am, 11.30am and 3pm.

**East Delta Travel Company** (☎ 356 4853) has buses to Sharm el-Sheikh (££30 to ££35, five to six hours) departing at 8.30am, 11am, 1.30pm, 3pm, 4.30pm, 5.15pm and 6pm. There is a bus at 11am to Dahab (££40 to ££45, five hours), and at 2pm to St Katherine Protectorate (££25, three to four hours). Buses to Taba and Nuweiba (both ££45 to ££50) leave at 3pm and 5pm. Buses to Ismailia (££4 to ££6, 1½ hours) depart every half-hour from 6am to 4pm. Departures to Port Said (££11 to ££13, 2½ to three hours) are daily at 7am, 9am, 11am, 12.15pm and 3.30pm.

### SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis leave from beside the bus station to many of the destinations that are also serviced by buses and trains, including Cairo (££10 to ££15), Ismailia (££5 to ££10), Port Said (££10 to ££15) and Hurghada (££30 to ££50). The only place in Sinai that service taxis go to is Al-Tor (££15 to ££20).

With a group of seven people you can hire a 'special' taxi to get you to various other destinations, including St Katherine's Monastery (££225 per vehicle) and the Red Sea monasteries (££350, return).

### TRAIN

Six very slow and uncomfortable 2nd-class Cairo-bound trains depart Suez daily, leaving at 5.30am (££15 to ££18, three hours) and going only as far as Ain Shams, 10km northeast of central Cairo. There are eight very slow trains to Ismailia (££1 to ££3 in 3rd class only, three hours).

## Getting Around

### MICROBUS

There are regular microbus services along Sharia al-Geish to Port Tawfiq. They will pick up or drop off anywhere along the route and cost 50pt.

### TAXI

Taxis (painted blue) are easy to find almost everywhere. Expect to pay from about ££5 between the bus station and town, about ££10 between the bus station and Port Tawfiq, and about ££3 between Suez and Port Tawfiq.

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# Red Sea Coast



Arguably the world's most famous stretch of coast, it was here that Moses allegedly parted a great sea and set free the Hebrew slaves. Of course, Hollywood movie-magic and biblical allegory aside, most visitors to this coastline seem perfectly content in letting the Red Sea lie still. Famed for its brilliant turquoise waters and splendid coral reefs, the Red Sea Coast attracts tens of thousands of tourists annually. In fact, it's Egypt's most rapidly developing area, with more hotels and resorts than anywhere else in the country.

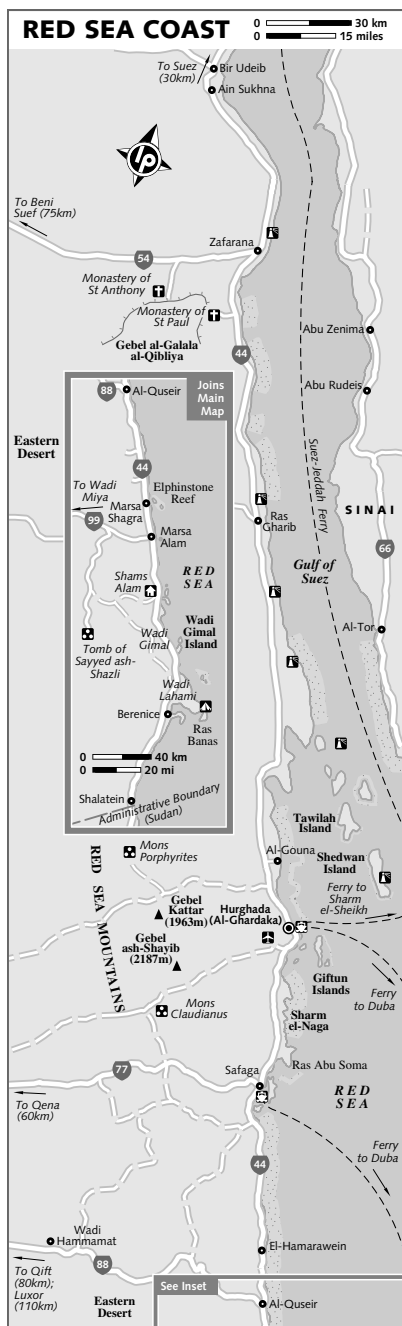
Unfortunately, the overall picture is anything but pretty, especially since large tracts of the 800km coastline are nothing short of an environmental disaster. Fuelled by decades of European-driven package tourism, and compounded by the lack of any kind of sustainable development plan, illegal landfill operations and irresponsible mooring have destroyed off-shore reefs, and the construction of solid concrete jetties have simply eroded away parts of the coastline. Furthermore, declining tourism amid increasing fears of a wider Middle East war has spooked investors, and today much of the coastline remains a construction site of half-finished hotels.

For independent travellers weary of package tourism, the Red Sea Coast can be a frustrating place to visit, though it shouldn't be overlooked all together. Far removed from the coastal scene is the Eastern Desert, which harbours Christianity's two oldest monasteries, plus traces of Pharaonic, Roman and other settlements. The inland is also home to wadis, ancient rock art and nomad cultures, and offers countless opportunities for travellers seeking a healthy dose of desert adventure. And of course, if you do happen to find yourself in any of the Red Sea's coastal resort towns, the diving here truly is world-class.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Discover Christian monasticism's centuries-old roots at the **monasteries of St Anthony and St Paul** (p418)
- Trek through mountains and wadis, visit old mines and ruins and gaze at ancient rock art in the **Eastern Desert** (p435)
- Interact responsibly and sustainably with the **Ababda** and **Besharin** (p437), two nomadic peoples who maintain their traditions in a changing world
- Plunge into the underwater world of the **Red Sea** (p424)
- Wander along the picturesque waterfront of the sleepy coastal town of **Al-Quseir** (p432)





## RED SEA MONASTERIES

The Coptic monasteries of St Anthony and St Paul are Egypt's and Christianity's oldest monasteries, and are among the holiest sites in the Coptic faith. In fact, the establishment of the religious community of St Anthony's, hidden in the barren cliffs of the Eastern Desert, marks the beginning of the Christian monastic tradition.

If you're at all interested in Egypt's lengthy Christian history, both monasteries make for fascinating and inspiring visits, and the surrounding desert scenery is simply breathtaking. And, depending on where you're coming from, the Red Sea monasteries are a refreshing change of scene from the hassles and touts of Cairo and the Nile Valley, or the package tourism and rampant commercialism of the coastline.

## Orientation & Information

St Anthony's and St Paul's monasteries are only about 25km apart, but thanks to the cliffs and plateau of Gebel al-Galala al-Qibliya (which lies between 900m and 1300m above sea level), the distance between them by road is around 85km.

Both monasteries are open daily throughout the year (St Anthony's from 7am to 5pm, St Paul's from 8am to 3pm), except during Advent and Lent, when they can only be visited on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. During Holy Week they are closed completely to visitors. For inquiries or to confirm visiting times, contact the monasteries' Cairo headquarters: **St Paul's** (☎ 02-590 0218; 26 Al-Keneesa al-Morcosia) or **St Anthony's** (☎ 02-590 6025; 26 Al-Keneesa al-Morcosia), located off Clot Bey, south of Midan Ramses in Cairo.

If you don't have your own vehicle, the easiest way to visit the monasteries is to join an organised tour from Cairo or Hurghada (any hotel or travel agency can organise these). It's also possible to join a pilgrimage group from Cairo – the best way to arrange this is by inquiring at local Coptic churches.

## Sights

### MONASTERY OF ST ANTHONY

This historic monastery traces its origins to the 4th century AD when monks began to settle at the foot of Gebel al-Galala al-Qibliya, where their spiritual leader, Anthony (see the boxed text, opposite), lived. Over the next few centuries, the community moved from

## THE FATHER OF MONASTICISM

Although St Paul is honoured as the earliest Christian hermit, it is St Anthony who is considered to be the Father of Monasticism. Anthony was born around AD 251, the son of a provincial landowner from a small Upper Egyptian town near Beni Suef. Orphaned with his sister at the age of 18, he was already more interested in the spiritual than the temporal, and soon gave away his share of the inheritance to the poor. After studying with a local holy man, Anthony went into the Eastern Desert, living in a cave and seeking solitude and spiritual salvation. However, word of his holiness soon spread, and flocks of disciples arrived, seeking to imitate his ascetic existence.

After a brief spell in Alexandria ministering to Christians imprisoned under Emperor Maximinus Daia in the early 4th century, Anthony returned to the desert. Once again, he was pursued by eager followers, though he managed to flee even further into the desert in search of solitude. However, after establishing himself in a cave on a remote mountain, his disciples formed a loose community at its base, and thus was born the first Christian monastery.

The number of Anthony's followers grew rapidly, and within decades of his death, nearly every town in Egypt was surrounded by hermitages. Soon after, the whole Byzantine Empire was alive with monastic fervour, which by the next century, had spread throughout Italy and France.

It is ironic that for all his influence, Anthony spent his life seeking to escape others. When he died at the advanced age of 105, his sole wish for solitude was finally respected, and the location of his grave became a closely guarded secret.

being a loosely organised grouping of hermits to a somewhat more communal existence in which the monks continued to live anchoritic lives, but in cells grouped together inside a walled compound.

In the 8th and 9th centuries, the monastery suffered Bedouin raids, followed in the 11th century by attacks from irate Muslims, and in the 15th century, a revolt by blood-thirsty servants that resulted in the massacre of the monks. The small mud-brick **citadel** into which they would retreat during attacks can still be seen, although visitors are not usually admitted. It's also possible to see the large basket and wooden winch that were the only means of getting into the monastery in times of attack.

Today the monastery is a large complex surrounded by high walls (it's possible to walk along the top of some sections), with several churches and chapels, a bakery, a lush garden and a spring. The source of the latter, deep beneath the desert mountains, produces 100 cu metres of water daily, allowing the monks to cultivate olive and date trees as well as a few crops.

The oldest part of the monastery is the **Church of St Anthony**, built over the saint's tomb and containing one of Egypt's most significant collections of Coptic wall paintings. Painted in *secco* (whereby paint is applied to dry plaster), most date back to the early 13th century, with a few possibly much

older. Stripped of the dirt and grime of centuries, the paintings are clear and bright, and demonstrate how medieval Coptic art was connected to the arts of the wider Byzantine and Islamic eastern Mediterranean (for more information on Coptic art, see the boxed text, p421). The monks who live here, following centuries-old traditions and the examples set by St Anthony, St Paul and their followers 16 centuries ago, have dedicated their lives to seeking God in the stillness and isolation of the desert, in a life centred completely around prayer.

Perched about 300m – or 1158 wooden steps – above the monastery on a nearby cliff is the **Cave of St Anthony**, where Anthony spent the final 40 years of his life. The climb up is hot and steep, and takes about half an hour if you're reasonably fit. At the top is a small clearing (now littered with the graffiti of countless pilgrims) with wide vistas over the hills and valley below. In the cave itself, which is for the *svelte* and nonclaustrophobic only (you need to squeeze through a narrow tunnel to get inside), there is a small chapel with an altar as well as a tiny recessed area where Anthony lived – bring a torch (flashlight) along to illuminate the interior.

There is usually an English-speaking monk on hand to give tours of the monastery (free, but a donation is expected). The monastery bookstore has a good selection of materials on Coptic Christianity.

## MONASTERY OF ST PAUL

St Paul's monastery dates to the 4th century, when it began as a grouping of hermitages in the cliffs of Gebel al-Galala al-Qibliya around the site where St Paul had his hermitage. Paul, who was born into a wealthy family in Alexandria in the mid-3rd century, originally fled to the Eastern Desert to escape Roman persecution. He lived alone in a cave here for over 90 years, finding bodily sustenance in a nearby spring and palm tree. According to tradition, in AD 343 the then 90-year-old St Anthony had a vision of Paul. After making a difficult trek through the mountains to visit him, Paul died, and was buried by Anthony's hands.

The heart of the monastery complex is the **Church of St Paul**, which was built in and around the cave where Paul lived. It's cluttered with altars, candles, ostrich eggs (the symbol of the Resurrection) and murals representing saints and biblical stories. The **fortress** above the church was where the monks retreated during Bedouin raids.

St Paul's monastery is quieter and much more low key than St Anthony's, and is often bypassed in favour of its larger neighbour. However, a visit is well worthwhile, and gives a glimpse into the life of silence, prayer and asceticism that has flowered here in the Eastern Desert for almost two millennia. Visitors are welcome, and there is usually an English-speaking monk available to give a guided tour (free, but donation appreciated).

## Activities

### HIKING

It is possible to hike between the two monasteries along a trail across the top of the plateau. However, hiking this rugged area, commonly known as 'Devil's Country', is only for the fit and experienced, and should under no circumstances be attempted without a local guide. In 2001, a lone tourist attempting the walk died of thirst after losing his way – this is clearly not a trip to undertake lightly. Those who have made the hike recommend starting from St Paul's, and the hike (about 30km) is possible in one long day, but better broken up into two.

## Sleeping & Eating

There is no accommodation for the general public at either monastery, although the guards at St Paul's will usually allow you

to pitch a tent outside the main monastery gate. Note that the monastery guesthouses are reserved for pilgrimage groups.

**Sahara Inn Motel** (s/d E£60/80, with air-con E£100/120; ☎) Consider spending the night in the nearby junction town of Zafarana where you'll find this motel, which offers up some bare-bones concrete cubicles and a basic roadside restaurant. It's not the Hilton, but if a day trip to the monasteries from Cairo or Hurghada just isn't enough time for you, this is probably your best option.

**Zafarana Resort** (☎ 418 6703; reservation@pharao-hotels.com; s/d half board E£220/320; ☎ ☎) Another place to call home for the night is located on a pleasant stretch of sand just off the coastal road, about 13km south of the main Zafarana junction. Perfectly adequate (though somewhat sterile) rooms are housed in long blocks (some with views of the water), and there's a restaurant with buffets and à la carte meals.

Both monasteries have canteens that sell snacks, drinks and simple meals.

## Getting There & Away

Zafarana is located 62km south of Ain Sukhna and 150km east of Beni Suef on the Nile. Buses running between Cairo or Suez and Hurghada will drop you at Zafarana, but direct access to the monasteries is limited to private vehicles and tour buses from Cairo or Hurghada. There's also one bus daily to and from Beni Suef, departing Zafarana from the main junction about 11.30am and Beni Suef at about 8am (E£20, three to four hours).

To get to St Anthony's, start from the main Zafarana junction, and follow the road west to Beni Suef for 37km to the monastery turn-off. From here, it's 17km further south along an unsurfaced but good road through the desert to St Anthony's. The bus between Zafarana and Beni Suef will drop you at the turn-off, from where the only option is walking or hitching (and you'll need to wait until the next day for a bus from the turn-off back to Zafarana or on to Beni Suef). If you do decide to hike in from the main road (which isn't the best idea), don't go alone, and be sure you're properly equipped, especially with water, as it's a long, hot, dry and isolated stretch.

The turn-off for St Paul's is about 27km south of the Zafarana lighthouse along the road to Hurghada (watch for a small sign-post). Once at the turn-off, it's then 10km further along a good tarmac road to the main

## COPTIC ART 101

Before you step foot into the Coptic monasteries of the Eastern Desert, here is a quick introduction to the history and tradition of Egyptian Coptic art.

### Overview

Coptic art refers to the distinct Christian art of Egypt. Although it originated from the ancient Egyptian and Greek heritages, Coptic art has also been influenced by the Persians, Byzantines and Syrians. In fact, due to its myriad influences, the exact nature of Coptic art can be difficult to define, though it is fortunately easy to identify. Since early Christian artisans were extremely utilitarian in their aims, Coptic art typically manifests itself in daily items including textiles and religious illustrations. Furthermore, Coptic art has a strong tradition of painting, particularly portraits and wall paintings.

### Textiles

The Coptic Church inherited a strong tradition of textile-making from the ancient Egyptians, particularly loom and tapestry weaving. For the most part, Coptic textiles are made from linen, though there is some evidence of sophisticated silk-weaving. In regards to design, Coptic textiles borrow heavily from Greek-Egyptian themes, and include traditional pattern motifs such as cupids, dancing maidens and animals. However, these are typically incorporated with unique Christian motifs such as fish, grapes and biblical scenes, especially the Immaculate Conception.

### Religious Illustrations

Religious illustration originated in ancient Egypt when pharaohs started adorning papyrus texts with liturgies and prayers. Coptic Christians retained this tradition, and early papyrus texts maintained the original Egyptian design of protective illustrations surrounded by elaborate borders and text. Like the Egyptians, Coptic artisans used bright colours for vignettes, and striking black ink for all texts. Later on, however, Coptic illustrations began to take on greater complexity as they started to incorporate religious imagery, landscapes and intricate geometric designs.

### Portraits

In comparison to other early Christian movements, the Coptic Church is unique in regard to their abundance of martyrs, saints and ascetics. Since the actions and deeds of these individuals helped to form the foundation of the church, their images were immortalised in portraits, and hung in every chapel and church throughout the land. In these paintings, the human figure is usually depicted in the front position, with placid, almond-shaped eyes and idealised expressions. Coptic portraits of Jesus Christ are unique in that they usually depict him enthroned by saints and angels as opposed to suffering on the cross.

### Wall Paintings

Early Coptic wall paintings were unsophisticated in comparison to later endeavours, though this is primarily due to the fact that ancient Egyptian temples were being converted into churches. In order to complete the transformation, Pharaonic reliefs were covered with layers of plaster, and Christian themes were painted on top. However, as Coptic art developed and prospered, wall painting became increasingly complex, particularly following the mastery of dye-mixing and gold stencilling. Some of the finest Coptic wall paintings depict spiritual scenes that are awash with vibrant colours and accented with gold.

### Coptic Art Today

Long overshadowed by both ancient Egyptian and Islamic themes, Coptic art is not given much attention in Egypt despite its lengthy history and established tradition. Fortunately, this cultural heritage has been preserved in museums, churches and monasteries throughout Egypt and the world, and the artistic traditions continue to flourish among communities of modern-day Copts.

gate of the monastery, and about 3km further to the monastery itself. Buses running between Suez and Hurghada will drop you along the main road at the turn-off, from where the only options are walking or hitching.

## HURGHADA (AL-GHARDAKA)

📞 065

Once an isolated and modest fishing village, Hurghada has metamorphosed into a sprawling collection of more than 100 hotels, and is today Egypt's most popular resort destination. Despite its popularity, however, Hurghada is a frightful mix of endless construction and environmental degradation, served with a heaping dose of Russian package tourism.

Modern Hurghada is a dense band of concrete in the form of gated resorts, which sprawls along the coastline for more than 20km. Scattered amid these ageing pleasure palaces are literally thousands of construction sites, all in varying degrees of abandonment and neglect. Not surprisingly, the reefs close to shore have been degraded by illegal landfill operations and irresponsible reef use, and even the government concedes that it made planning mistakes here.

And then there are the Russians – while wealthy Western Europeans prefer the air-brushed shine of Sharm el-Sheikh (p462), Moscow's emerging middle class is flocking to Hurghada in droves. Attracted by the hot sun and warm sea (which are indeed rarities in Mother Russia), Russians are cashing in on cheap flights and discount package deals. Unfortunately, the Egyptian-Russian mix is anything but natural, especially since the Russian propensity for binge drinking and promiscuous dress is, needless to say, less than welcome in the Muslim world.

To be fair, Hurghada was put on the map because of its superb diving, and there are some incredible offshore sites here. If you want to combine a diving holiday with a visit to Luxor and other Nile Valley sites, Hurghada is a convenient destination if you don't mind the packaged resort feel. However, independent travellers would be wise to press on to Dahab in Sinai (p472) where the diving is better, and package tourism is still the exception rather than the norm. With that said, infrequent ferry connections to Sharm el-Sheikh mean that you will most likely have to spend at least

one night in Hurghada whether you like it or not.

## Orientation

Hurghada is split into three main areas. To the north is Ad-Dahar, where most budget accommodation is located. This is also the most 'Egyptian' part of the city, with lively backstreet neighbourhoods and a bustling souq. The main inland artery through Ad-Dahar is Sharia an-Nasr.

Separated from Ad-Dahar by a sandy mountain called Gebel Al-Afish is the fast-growing and congested Sigala area, where resort hotels jostle for sea frontage, while smaller two- and three-star establishments and dozens of restaurants fill the spaces inland. This is also where you'll find the port for ferries to Sharm el-Sheikh. Sigala's main thoroughfare is Sharia Sheraton.

South of Sigala, lining the coastal road and increasingly some inland arteries as well, is the resort strip. Here you'll find an increasingly lengthening row of mostly upmarket pleasure domes, Western shopping malls and half-finished shells of hotels.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Air ambulance** (📞 010 154 1978)

**Ambulance** (📞 354 6490, 123)

**Police** (Map p428; 📞 354 6303/6; Sharia Shedwan, Sigala)

**Tourist police** Ad-Dahar (Map p426; 📞 344 4774; Sharia Al-Tahrir); Resort Strip (Map p423; 📞 344 4773/4; next to the tourist office)

### INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet cafés all over the city and in many hotels, most charging between E£5 and E£10 per hour.

**Café Online** (Map p423; Resort Strip; per hr E£16;

🕒 10.15am–11.15pm; 📶) Has a juice bar.

**El Baroudy Internet** (Map p426; Sharia Sheikh Sabak, Ad-Dahar; per hr E£5; 🕒 24hr; 📶)

**Speed.Net** (Map p428; Sharia Al-Hadaba, Sigala; per hr E£10; 🕒 10am–midnight; 📶)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

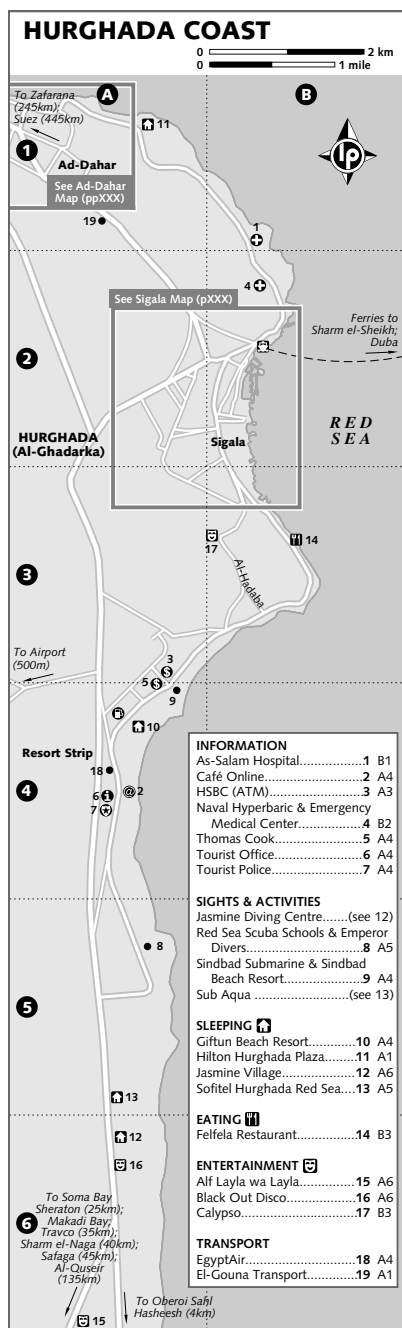
**Al-Gouna Hospital** (📞 358 0011; Al-Gouna)

**Al-Saffa Hospital** (Map p426; 📞 3546 965; Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar)

**As-Salam Hospital** (Map p423; 📞 354 8785/6/7; Corniche) Just north of Iberotel Arabella.

**Decompression Chambers** Al-Gouna (📞 358 0011, 012 218 7550; Al-Gouna); Naval Hyperbaric & Emergency





Medical Center (Map p423; ☎ 344 9150, 354 8450; Corniche, near Iberotel Arabella)

**Public Hospital** (Map p426; ☎ 354 6740; Sharia Mustashfa, Ad-Dahar)

## MONEY

ATMs are all over the city, including at the following locations:

**HSBC** (Map p423; opposite Sindbad Beach Resort, Resort Strip)

**National Bank of Egypt** (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu)

**Triton Empire Beach** (Map p426; Sharia Sayed al-Qorayem, Ad-Dahar)

Other money outlets:

**Thomas Cook** Ad-Dahar (Map p426; ☎ 354 1870/1; Sharia an-Nasr; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-10pm); Sigala (Map p428; ☎ 344 3338; Sharia Sheraton; ☎ 9am-3pm & 4-10pm); Resort Strip (Map p423; ☎ 344 6830; ☎ 9am-5pm)

**Western Union** (Map p428; ☎ 344 2771, 19190; Sharia Sheraton, Sigala; ☎ 8.30am-10pm Sat-Thu, 3-10pm Fri)

## POST

**Main post office** (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

## TELEPHONE

**Telephone Centrale** Ad-Dahar (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr; ☎ 24hr); Port area (Map p428; Midan Shedwan; ☎ 24hr); Sigala (Map p428; Sharia Sheraton; ☎ 24hr)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (Map p423; ☎ 344 4420; Resort Strip; ☎ 9am-8pm Sat-Thu, 2-10pm Fri)

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Abanoub Travel** (Map p428; ☎ 344 2843; abanoub@menanet.net; 2nd fl, Cotton House Bldg, Sigala)

**Thomas Cook** (☎ 344 3338; www.thomascookegypt.com); Ad-Dahar (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-10pm); Sigala (Map p428; Sharia Sheraton; ☎ 9am-3pm & 4-10pm); Resort Strip (Map p423; ☎ 9am-5pm)

## VISA EXTENSIONS

**Passport & Immigration Office** (Map p426; Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) For visa extensions and re-entry visas.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Although Hurghada is a resort town, many of the workers here come from the conservative towns that don't receive tourists, so their attitude towards women travellers is less than progressive (there have been rapes

and assaults in the past). To avoid hassle, women should dress modestly when walking around town, especially in the souq area of Ad-Dahar.

## Sights

### BEACHES

Although many of Hurghada's beaches are bare and stark, developers have snapped up almost every available spot. Apart from the not-so-appealing **public beach** (Map p428; Sigala; ☎ 8am-sunset), the main option for enjoying sand and sea is to go to one of the resorts, most of which charge nonguests between ££20 and ££60 for beach access. One of the best is the **Jasmine Village** (Map p423; ☎ 344 7442; Resort Strip), which has a small reef that allows you to combine snorkelling with sunbathing.

Other options include **Papas Beach Club** (Map p428; [www.papasbar.com](http://www.papasbar.com); Sigala; admission ££20; ☎ 9am-4am), where you can spend the day lazing under a palm shade listening to laid-back sounds; and the highly popular **Liquid Lounge** (Map p428; [www.papasbar.com](http://www.papasbar.com); Sharia Sheraton, Sigala; minimum food/beverage charge ££25; ☎ 9am-3am), a very chilled out beach bar/restaurant, with hammocks and floor pillows.

### AQUARIUM

If you don't want to put your head under the water, you can still get an idea of some of the life in the Red Sea's waters at the **aquarium** (Map p426; ☎ 354 8557; Corniche, Ad-Dahar; admission ££5; ☎ 9am-10pm). It's just north of the public hospital in Ad-Dahar and has a reasonable, if somewhat neglected selection of fish and other marine creatures.

## Activities

### SNORKELLING & DIVING

Although there is some easily accessible coral at the southern end of the resort strip, the best reefs are offshore, and the only way to see them is to take a boat and/or join a snorkelling or diving excursion. For all excursions, shop around a bit. Relying on your hotel may not be the best way to do things as travellers often complain about not getting everything they thought they would. For any boat excursion, take your passport with you as you'll need to show it at the port.

For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, including recommended operators and dive sites, see p439.

## SUBMARINE RIDES

A ride in the yellow **Sindbad Submarine** (Map p423; ☎ 344 4688; [www.sindbad-group.com](http://www.sindbad-group.com); Sindbad Beach Resort; adult/child US\$25/50), which takes up to 46 people to a depth of 22m, is one way to plumb the depths of the Red Sea while staying dry. Bookings can be made at any hotel or travel agency.

## Tours

Tours to almost anywhere in Egypt can be organised from Hurghada, including whirlwind one-day jaunts to Cairo (from ££250), slightly more leisurely two-day tours (from ££500) and one-day excursions to Luxor (££250). The most popular option from Hurghada is a desert jeep safari (from ££150), which usually includes visits to either Mons Porphyrites (p436) or Mons Claudianus (p436). Other possibilities include a full-day excursion to the monasteries of St Paul and St Anthony (p418), camel treks and sunset desert excursions.

To arrange any of the tours mentioned above, inquire at either your hotel or a travel agency in town – there are dozens, so you shouldn't have a problem finding one. Note that a minimum number of people are needed for most trips, so it's best to inquire several days in advance.

## Sleeping

Hurghada has the greatest selection of accommodation outside Cairo, though virtually everything in town is midrange to top-end resorts. Travel agencies in Europe and the UK can offer often-significant reductions if you book in advance, especially since prices fluctuate according to the season and state of the tourism industry. If you haven't booked a package deal in advance, however, you can still show up and request a room, though accommodation can get expensive. Fortunately, supply outstrips demand, so there is always room for negotiation – be patient and shop around.

Accommodation in Hurghada is split into three principle areas: Ad-Dahar, Sigala and the resort strip. Most budget accommodation is located within Ad-Dahar not far from the sea, though the water is rarely within sight. Sigala is a convenient base if you want to be near the nightlife, though it is extremely congested and noisy. The resort strip, which extends south of Hurghada along the coast, is home to the majority of the city's four- and

five-star resorts. If you stay down here, you will be able to enjoy a bit of privacy (a prized rarity in Egypt), though you will be dependent on your hotel for meals.

#### AD-DAHAR

**Shakespears Hotel** (Map p426; Sharia Sayyed al-Qorayem; r from E£50) We're not exactly sure what the owners of this hotel were thinking when they chose the name (no – Shakespears is not a typo), though we do know that it is one of only a few palatable shoestring options in Hurghada. The rooms are dingy, cramped and definitely not worthy of the playwright extraordinaire, though it will do if you just need a place to crash for the night. On a brighter note, there is a decent outdoor restaurant that is a good spot for a falafel sandwich or an apple-flavoured *sheesha* (water pipe).

**El-Arosa Hotel** (Map p426; ☎ 354 8434; elarosa hotel@yahoo.com; off Corniche; s/d from E£100/150; ☞ ☑ ☒) El-Arosa overlooks the sea in the distance from the inland side of the Corniche, though few of the rooms actually have ocean views. However, it is one of the best deals in town, especially considering that the rooms are equipped with modern amenities, and there's a small pool for cooling off (albeit it's located in the dining

room). A better option for cooling off is the nearby Geisum Village – guests at the El-Arosa have free access to the pools and beach.

**Cindrella Hotel** (Map p426; ☎ 355 6571; cindrella-sea-view@yahoo.com; off Corniche; s/d from E£120/160; ☞ ☑ ☒) The Cindrella (again, it's not a typo) overlooks the sea in the distance from the inland side of the Corniche, though (again) few of the rooms actually have ocean views. But, this newish hotel does have spic-and-span rooms that are awash with bright pastel colours, and the spacious balconies are a nice touch. Like El-Arosa, guests at the Cindrella have free access to the pools and the beach at the nearby Geisum Village.

**Geisum Village** (Map p426; ☎ 354 6692; Corniche; s/d from E£150/300; ☞ ☑ ☒) Although it's fading fast and filled to the brim with sunburnt Russians, the Geisum Village is one of the cheapest resorts in Hurghada. The rooms themselves are fairly nondescript and in need of a fresh coat of paint, though the grounds are surprisingly attractive considering the low price. The centre of the action here is the large swimming pool surrounded by a grassy lawn, though you can always take a dip in the ocean or lie on the beach (er, spot of sand).

**Triton Empire Beach** (Map p426; ☎ 354 7816; www.threecorners.com; Sharia Sayyed al-Qorayem; s/d from

### RESCUING THE RED SEA

Conservationists estimate that more than 1000 pleasure boats and almost as many fishing boats ply the waters between Hurghada and the many reefs situated within an hour of the town. Fifteen years ago, there was nothing to stop captains from anchoring to the coral, or snorkellers and divers breaking off a colourful chunk to take home. However, due largely to the efforts of the Hurghada Environmental Protection & Conservation Association (Hepca) and the Egyptian National Parks Office in Hurghada, the Red Sea's reefs are at last being protected.

Set up in 1992 by 15 of the town's larger, more reputable dive companies, Hepca's programme to conserve the Red Sea's reefs includes public-awareness campaigns, direct community action and lobbying of the Egyptian government to introduce appropriate laws. Thanks to these efforts, the whole coast south of Suez Governorate is now known as the Red Sea Protectorate. Over 570 mooring buoys have been set up at popular dive sites around Hurghada and further south, enabling boat captains to drop anchor on a buoy rather than on the coral itself, and marine rangers from the Egyptian National Parks Office police the waters.

The Egyptian National Parks Office is also trying to establish new dive sites to ease the pressure on existing sites, as well as trying to reduce the number of new boats licensed in the Red Sea. Finally, a symbolic 'reef conservation tax' of E£1 has been introduced, and is payable by anyone using the reefs for diving, snorkelling or any other boating activities. It is designed to make the public aware that the reefs and offshore islands are now protected areas, rather than simply a source of revenue.

For more information on safe diving practices or about how you can help **Hepca** (Map p428; ☎ 344 6674; www.hepca.com; off Corniche, Sigala) in its efforts to protect the Red Sea's reefs, check the organisation's website or call in between 9am and 5pm Saturday to Thursday.

## AD-DAHAR

0 300 m  
0 0.2 miles

## INFORMATION

ATM.....	(see 18)
Al-Saffa Hospital.....	1 D6
Banque Misr (ATM).....	2 B5
El Baroudy Internet.....	3 B4
Main Post Office.....	4 C5
National Bank of Egypt (ATM).....	(see 2)
Passport & Immigration Office.....	5 A6
Public Hospital.....	6 C2
Telephone Centrale.....	7 A4
Thomas Cook.....	8 B5
Tourist Police.....	9 A4

RED SEA



## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

Aquanaut Red Sea &amp; Shedwan

Hotel.....	10 B2
Aquarium.....	11 B2
Easy Divers.....	(see 18)
Subex.....	12 C2

## SLEEPING

Cindrella Hotel.....	13 D2
El-Arosa Hotel.....	14 C2
Geisum Village.....	15 C2
Sand Beach.....	16 C2
Shakespears Hotel.....	17 B3
Triton Empire Beach.....	18 C2

## EATING

Chez Pascal.....	19 C3
Gaucho.....	20 B2
Pizza Tarboush.....	21 B4
Portofino.....	22 C3
Red Sea I.....	23 B5
Red Sea II.....	24 C3

## ENTERTAINMENT

Papas II.....	25 B2
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## TRANSPORT

Service Taxi Station.....	26 A5
Superjet Bus Station.....	27 A3
Upper Egypt Bus Co.....	28 D6



To El-Gouna Transport (500m);  
Sigala (3.5km); Resort Strip (8km);  
Airport (10.5km); Safage (53km)

US\$45/60; 🏠 📶 📶) Decidedly more upmarket than other accommodations in Ad-Dahar, this enormous three-star hotel caters almost exclusively to foreign tour-groups. However, there is usually space for a few independent travellers, and the recently renovated rooms make for a comfortable base. The grounds here are well-landscaped and full of lush grass, and there's even a bit of sand here for lying down and soaking up the sun.

**Sand Beach** (Map p426; ☎ 354 7992; www.sandbeach.hurghada.com; Corniche; s/d from US\$55/70; 🏠 📶 📶) One of the largest hotels in Ad-Dahar, this three-star option occupying some choice real-estate on the Corniche is a Russian favourite. The grounds here are about as expansive as they get in this part of town, and the private sand here just about qualifies as a proper beach. Of course, the atmosphere here can be a bit overwhelming if you're an independent traveller (and you don't speak Russian), though it is a decent midmarket option nevertheless.

## SIGALA

**White Albatross** (Map p428; ☎ 344 2519; walba.tros53@hotmail.com; Sharia Sheraton; s/d from ££100/180; 🏠 📶 📶) One of the better budget hotels in the Sigala area, this no-nonsense hotel is run by a welcoming family. Standard rooms of varying degrees of sterility face out towards the street, though this is as good a base as any if you're planning on hitting the nightlife. Although you're far from the beach, you can always cross the road and drop into any of the larger resorts for a small fee.

**Zak Royal Wings Hotel** (Map p428; ☎ 344 6012; www.zakhotel.com; Sharia al-Hadaba; s/d from US\$25/35; 🏠 📶 📶) Located next to the infamous Papas Bar, this is the best choice if you're planning on getting blotto, and don't want to stumble too far home. Rooms are slightly bare considering the price, though they're clustered around a nice pool and a tropical garden. Obviously, it can get really loud here at night, though you won't care if you're a part of the mayhem.

**Sea Garden** (Map p428; ☎ 344 7493; www.seagarden.com.eg; off Sharia Sheraton; s/d from US\$55/65; 🏠 📶 📶) Only a few years old, this high-rise block isn't much to look at, though the Sea Garden is a discernible step-up in quality. With a three-star rating, you can expect well-cared-for rooms and a professional level of service. You're far from the beach of course, though

the pool here is one of the nicer ones on the block.

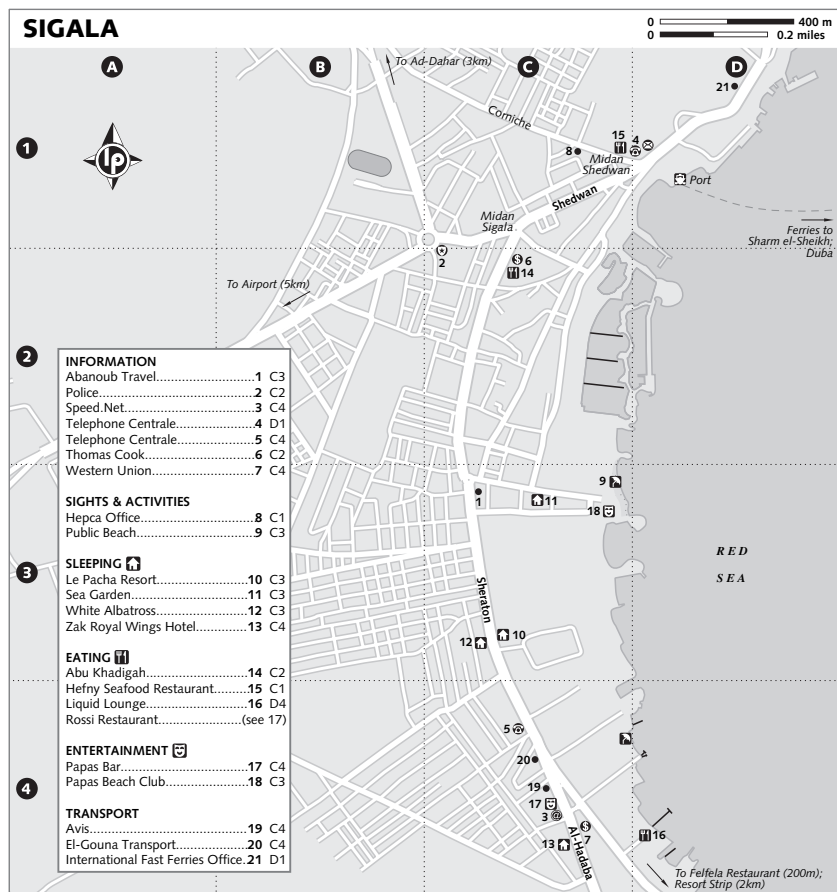
**Le Pacha Resort** (Map p428; ☎ 344 4150; www.lepacharesort.com; Sharia Sheraton; s/d from US\$70/120 with all meals; 🏠 📶 📶) If you're looking for a comparatively cheap all-inclusive, this centrally located Sigala hotel is a good choice. Although not as upscale as the four- and five-star hotels on the resort strip, Le Pacha offers a wide range of amenities including outdoor pools, a private beach and an on-site shopping mall. If being close to the action is important, this is a good choice, though intimacy seekers might want to head further down the coast.

**Hilton Hurghada Plaza** (Map p423; ☎ 354 9745; www.hilton.com; Corniche; s/d from US\$100/125; 🏠 📶 📶) This sprawling gated complex is five-star all the way, though if you book in advance through the web or a travel agent, it's sometimes possible to snag cheap rooms as part of a package. True to the Hilton name (we'll refrain from making any Paris jokes), service here is impeccable, and you can expect the same resort standards here as you would at any other Hilton in the world. The private beach here is also one of the nicest around, and those towering gates serve to keep all the pesky touts away.

## RESORT STRIP

**Giftun Beach Resort** (Map p423; ☎ 346 3040; www.giftunbeachresort.com; s/d all-inclusive from US\$60/85; 🏠 📶 📶) Giftun is one of the older resorts in Hurghada. This all-inclusive place is a good choice if you're looking for low-key luxury. Unlike some of the more upmarket choices in this part of the city, the Giftun caters mostly to families and Russians looking for a cheap package holiday. Accommodation is in pleasant chalet-style rooms, and guests can take advantage of the popular onsite diving centre and windsurfing facilities.

**Jasmine Village** (Map p423; ☎ 346 0460; jasmine@tut2000.com; s/d all-inclusive from US\$75/100; 🏠 📶 📶) Another oldie but a goodie, the Jasmine Village has also found a home among families and Russians trying to save a quick buck (or ruple). Guests stay in one of 400-plus bungalow-style rooms, which look out onto a proper beach, a stunning coral reef and the open ocean. Even if you're not staying here, the Jasmine has one of the best beaches around, and is a good place to stop by for a bit of sunbathing and snorkelling.



**Sofitel Hurghada Red Sea** (Map p423; ☎ 346 4641; [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com); Resort Strip; s/d half board from US\$100/150; ☒ ☑ ☐ ☐) True to its high-class moniker, the Sofitel is a sophisticated and refined spot that is perfect for intimacy and seclusion. Immaculate rooms decorated in classical Arabesque-style front the deep-blue expanse of the Red Sea. The Sofitel is also brimming with amenities, including a 700m-wide beach, as well as a kids club, jogging track, tennis and squash courts and several restaurants and bars.

**Soma Bay Sheraton** (☎ 354 5845; [www.sheraton-somabay.com](http://www.sheraton-somabay.com); s/d from US\$250/350; ☒ ☑ ☐ ☐) Located 35km south of Hurghada proper, this 298-room resort is part of the Ras Abu Soma 'resort cluster', one of a number of

self-contained tourist centres being built along the coast south of Hurghada. Built in pseudo-Pharaonic style, the Sheraton boasts the typical five-star amenities including a golf course, tennis courts and a postcard-perfect beach of powdery sand. The Soma Bay is noteworthy for its continued efforts to start a Red Sea sustainable tourism initiative targeted at helping hotels become environmentally friendly.

**Oberoi Sahl Hasheesh** (☎ 344 0777; [www.oberoi-hotels.com](http://www.oberoi-hotels.com); Sahl Hasheesh; ste from US\$310; ☒ ☑ ☐ ☐) Peaceful, exclusive and opulent beyond your imagination, the Oberoi features palatial suites decorated in minimalist Moorish style. Each individually decorated accommodation comes complete with sunken marble baths,



walled private courtyards – some with private pools – and panoramic sea views. Justifiably advertised as the most luxurious destination on the Red Sea, the Oberoi is world-class, and guests here are pampered to their hearts' content.

## Eating

With its diverse ex-pat population and large pool of tourists, Hurghada has a good variety of restaurants. If you're travelling on a budget, Ad-Dahar has dozens of inexpensive local-style eateries as well as several affordable Western-style ones. Sigala – and increasingly the northern end of the Resort Strip as well – has the greatest variety of restaurants in town, with new ones opening all the time.

### AD-DAHAR

**Pizza Tarboush** (Map p426; Sharia Abdel Aziz Mustafa; pizzas E£10-20) A popular takeaway pizzeria on the edge of the souq, Tarboush has a variety of topping choices, and a few chairs on the sidewalk for those who want to dine in and scope out the street scene.

**Portofino** (Map p426; Sharia Say-yed al-Qorayem; dishes E£25-40; ☼) A Hurghada institution, Portofino serves authentic Italian wood-fired pizzas and homemade pastas as well as a few staple Egyptian dishes including homemade tahini and baba ghanoush.

**Chez Pascal** (Map p426; Sharia Sayyed al-Qorayem; meals E£30-50; ☼) This charming, European-style bistro is a good spot for eclectic cuisine served amid bright and clean surroundings – this is the perfect spot to savour a Turkish coffee and indulge in a bit of people-watching.

**Gaucha** (Map p426; Corniche; meals E£40-80) Sometimes you just need to feed on a huge char-grilled slab of beef, and this open-air Argentinean restaurant is the perfect spot to indulge the carnivore in all of us.

**Red Sea I** (Map p426; off Sharia an-Nasr; dishes E£20-60; ☼) and its sister restaurant, **Red Sea II** (Map p426; Sharia Sayyed al-Qorayem; meals E£30-60), offer a wide selection of Egyptian-style seafood, steaks and poultry – check the views from the rooftop.

### SIGALA & THE RESORT STRIP

**Abu Khadigah** (Map p428; Sharia Sheraton; meals E£3-15) Patronised by an intriguing mix of workers and local businessmen as well as the odd tourist, this no-frills place is known for its koftas, stuffed cabbage leaves and other Egyptian staples.

**Hefny Seafood Restaurant** (Map p428; Sharia Shedwan; meals E£15-50; ☼) If you're looking for an affordable spot to sample the region's famed seafood, this colourful local is just the ticket – the catch of the day is sold by weight and served with salads and rice.

**Felfela Restaurant** (Map p423; Sharia Sheraton; dishes E£15-60; ☼ 8.30am-midnight) Sitting on a gentle bend in the coastline and overlooking the turquoise sea, this branch of the Felfela chain wins a prize for vistas, which you can enjoy while dining on serviceable Egyptian classics at reasonable prices.

**Rossi Restaurant** (Map p428; Sharia Sheraton; mains E£20-50) This popular hang-out for divers and expats serves a variety of pizza toppings on crispy crusts, and pasta dishes – the service is relaxed, and women can eat by themselves without being hassled.

**Liquid Lounge** (Map p428; www.papasbar.com; Sharia Sheraton; meals E£25-40; ☼ 9am-3am) A laid-back and very hip beach bar serving lunches and dinner, including a 'liquid lunch' special (main dish plus drink) for only E£30.

## Entertainment

Thanks to its large community of resident dive instructors, tour guides, hotel employees and other foreigners, Hurghada has some of Egypt's liveliest nightlife. Almost all the three- to five-star hotels and tourist villages have one or several bars, and there are many independent places as well.

Most of the large hotels offer some sort of spectacle – usually a Russian-themed show – as well as belly-dancing performances in their clubs. For dancing, most places don't get going until at least 11pm.

The centre of nightlife in Hurghada is the **Papas Bar** (Map p428; www.papasbar.com; Sharia Sheraton, Sigala), a popular Dutch-run bar attached to Rossi Restaurant in Sigala. Filled with diving instructors and other foreign residents, it is extremely lively and has a great atmosphere most nights.

Under the same management are the very chilled-out **Liquid Lounge** (Map p428; www.papasbar.com; Sharia Sheraton, Sigala), on the beach opposite El-Tabia hotel; and **Papas II** (Map p426; www.papasbar.com; Corniche, Ad-Dahar), with a dark wooden interior, cold beers and live music several nights weekly. All feature a constantly changing entertainment program – watch for their flyers around town, or check the website.

If you're looking to get drunk and silly, the **Papas Beach Club** (Map p428; [www.papasbar.com](http://www.papasbar.com); Sigala; admission E£50; ☎ 10pm-4am) is a popular beach club that brings DJs from Europe and has regular parties.

Other popular entertainment options:

**Alf Layla wa Layla** (Map p423; Safaga rd; dinner US\$15, show US\$25; ☎ 9.30-11.30pm) This is where *The Thousand and One Nights* meets Las Vegas: a kitsch confection of brightly coloured domes and arches in which you can eat dinner while watching an equally improbable belly-dancing extravaganza.

**Black Out Disco** (Map p423; Ali Baba Palace, Resort Strip; admission Wed-Mon E£30, Tue E£60) One of the most popular dance spots in town, the Black Out is locally famous for its Ibiza-style foam nights and equally popular Ladies' Nights.

**Calypso** (Map p423; [www.calypso-hrg.com](http://www.calypso-hrg.com); Sharia al-Hadaba, Sigala) A huge, purpose-built pleasure dome overlooking Sigala, this is the preferred nightspot for Russki dudes and divas – hedonists can easily live it up here, though it's probably wise to brush up on your Russian first.

## Shopping

Hurghada has a good selection of clothing boutiques in the small malls along the resort strip, as well as the obligatory abundance of overpriced T-shirts, hookahs, Pharaonic memorabilia, stuffed camels, etc. However, please avoid anyone selling marine curios. Stalls in the souq have been known to sell everything from stuffed sharks to lamps made from triggerfish – these are illegal and, quite frankly, would probably clash with your furniture anyway.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**EgyptAir** (Map p423; ☎ 344 3592/3; Resort Strip) has daily flights to Cairo, though prices tend to fluctuate wildly depending on the season and availability. If you book in advance, it is sometimes possible, snag a ticket for as little as E£400, though prices can climb as high as E£1000 during the busy summer and winter holiday seasons.

If you book a package holiday in either the UK or Europe, it is likely that your travel agent will arrange a charter flight directly to Hurghada for you. Even if you're an independent traveller, it's worth visiting a few travel agents before booking your ticket to Egypt – charter flights to Hurghada are often significantly cheaper than roundtrip airfares to Cairo, and the city is a quick and easy

jumping-off point for the Sinai Peninsula, Luxor and the Nile Valley.

### BOAT

Ferry tickets to Sharm el-Sheikh and to Dubai, Saudi Arabia are sold at the **International Fast Ferries office** (Map p428; ☎ 344 7571/2; [www.intlfastferries.com](http://www.intlfastferries.com); Corniche, Sigala) behind Fantasia restaurant, opposite the Hurghada Touristic Port entrance. Several travel agencies in town, including Thomas Cook (p423) also act as ticket agents. If you're staying at a four- or five-star hotel, the concierge can also help you book tickets in advance.

The ferry to Sharm el-Sheikh departs from Hurghada at 9.30am on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday (E£250/US\$40 one way, E£450/US\$70 roundtrip, 90 minutes). Note that departure times of the Sharm el-Sheikh ferry don't correspond with bus arrivals from Luxor, so you'll need to spend at least one night in Hurghada.

The rate of the dollar against the Egyptian pound and the whim of the ferry officials determine which currency you'll need to use for the Sharm ferry ticket – come prepared with dollars as they're not always available at banks in Hurghada. To avoid this extra hassle, it's wise to book your ticket in advance through either a travel agent or your hotel.

Note that the ferry is often cancelled during winter because of windy conditions, which unfortunately strands travellers in Hurghada for longer than they intended. For this reason, it's a good idea not to buy tickets in Luxor beforehand (trying to get refunds is difficult if not impossible). If the ferry is likely to be cancelled for a few days, you can then make alternative arrangements to get to Sharm by bus or service taxi.

Although the boarding process seems to make sense to the Egyptians, the entire system is somewhat lacking in clarity to foreign travellers. For starters, it's best to arrive at the ferry port at least one hour prior to departure, which usually isn't a problem as most independent travellers are itching to escape Hurghada. First, you will need to stop by the International Fast Ferries office to pick up your boarding pass, even if you've already purchased your ticket. Several touts will attempt to walk you through the process, though it's worth shooing them away and saving your baksheesh for a drink on-board. After you pick up your boarding pass, cross the road

and wait in line – about a half hour prior to departure, you will be ushered through security before boarding the ferry.

A few words of caution about the ferry – the Red Sea can get extremely rough, so much so that the staff on-board hands out Dramamine prior to departure. If you've never had the pleasure of witnessing dozens of people simultaneously emptying out their stomach contents, you're in for a memorable trip. With that said, try to get a seat by the window, and keep your eyes fixed on the horizon – this is a great way to beat seasickness. Also note that if the seas are particularly rough, the advertised 90-minute journey can take as long as three hours.

For information on the ferry to Duba, Saudia Arabia, see p526.

## BUS

**Superjet** (Map p426; ☎ 354 4722; Sharia al-Oruba, Ad-Dahar) has daily buses to Cairo (££60, six hours) departing at noon, 2pm, 5pm and midnight. A 2.30pm service also goes to Alexandria (££85, nine to 10 hours).

**Upper Egypt Bus Co** (Map p426; ☎ 354 7582; off Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar) has 10 daily buses to Cairo (££56 to ££61, six to seven hours) about every two hours from 10am to 1.30am. If you want an earlier connection to Cairo, you'll have to take your chances on getting a place on the 6am bus from Safaga, which reaches Hurghada about 7am. The 7.30pm Cairo bus goes on to Alexandria (££75 to ££80, at least nine hours). Buses for Suez (££35, five hours) leave almost hourly between 10am and 4pm, then at 5.30pm, 7pm, 11pm and 2am. There are daily buses to Luxor (££55, five hours), via Safaga (££10) and Qena (££20), leaving at 10am, 1pm, 7pm, 10.30pm, 12.30am, 1am, 3am and 4am. The 10am, 1pm, 10.30pm and midnight services go on to Aswan (££25 to ££32, eight hours). There is an occasional service to Luxor at 7.30pm. Services to Al-Quseir (££20 to ££25, three hours), Marsa Alam (££30 to ££35, five hours) and Shalatein (££55, nine hours) leave at 1am, 3am (terminating in Marsa Alam), 5am and 8pm.

Note that the schedules the two companies listed above are the officially advertised times, though in reality, the schedules seem to change randomly. For this reason, confirm departure times at the bus station, and try to book ahead for long-distance journeys such as to Luxor and Cairo.

## SERVICE TAXI

The **service taxi station** (Map p426; off Sharia an-Nasr, Ad-Dahar) has taxis to Cairo (££35 per person, six hours), Safaga (££5, 45 minutes), Al-Quseir (££10, two hours), Qena (££15, three hours), Marsa Alam (££25, four hours) and Suez (££32, 3½ to four hours). Note that service taxis cannot take you to Luxor or Aswan except on a private basis in a police convoy. With bargaining, it costs about ££200 per vehicle (up to seven passengers) to Luxor. For more information on police convoys, see the boxed text, below.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is close to the resort strip. A taxi to downtown Ad-Dahar will cost between ££10 and ££25.

## CAR

There are numerous car rental agencies along Sharia Sheraton in Sigala, including **Avis** (Map p428 ☎ 344 7400).

## MICROBUS

Microbuses run throughout the day from central Ad-Dahar south to the InterContinental hotel on the resort strip (££1), and along Sharia an-Nasr and other major routes. Short rides cost 25pt to 50pt.

**El-Gouna Transport** (Map p428; ☎ 354 1561) operates a more comfortable route (££5) between Al-Gouna, Ad-Dahar and the end of Sharia Sheraton in Sigala about every half hour, beginning at 9am. You can flag the bus down at any point along the way and pay onboard.

## POLICE CONVOYS

Whether you're going by taxi or private car, if you're heading across to the Nile Valley, you'll be forced to go in a police convoy (see p530 for more information). They depart from the police checkpoint at the northern edge of Safaga near the start of the Qena road at 7am, 9am and 4pm, but it is always wise to confirm these times with the tourist office. There are also convoys to Cairo, departing from the police checkpoint at the Al-Gouna turn-off (20km north of Hurghada) at 2.30am, 11am and 5pm, though convoy travel on the Cairo road is often not enforced.

**TAXI**

Taxis from Ad-Dahar to the start of the resort strip (around the Marriott hotel) charge about ££15. Travelling from the bus station to the centre of Ad-Dahar, expect to pay between ££5 and ££10.

**AL-QUSEIR**

☎ 065

The historic city of Al-Quseir was founded during Pharaonic times as the launching point for boats sailing to Punt. Although nothing remains of this ancient trading port, Al-Quseir's long history and sleepy present lend it a charm absent from other towns that lie along the coast of the Red Sea. Dominated by an Ottoman fortress, lined with old coral-block buildings and home to domed tombs of various saints, mostly pious pilgrims who died en route to or from Mecca, Al-Quseir has a soothing vibe that can be difficult to find in the clamour of modern Egypt. Even if you're just passing through, it's worth spending an hour or two strolling along the waterfront, and enjoying a quiet, reflective moment.

**History**

Prior to the 10th century, Al-Quseir was one of the most important ports on the Red Sea, and a major exit point for pilgrims who were travelling to Mecca. It also served as a thriving centre of trade and export between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea and beyond. Even during its period of decline, the city remained a major settlement, and was sufficiently important for the Ottomans to fortify it in during the 16th century. Later the British beat the French for control of Al-Quseir, and for some time it was the main import channel for the spice trade from India to Britain. However, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 put an end to all this, and the town's decline accelerated, with only a brief burst of prosperity as a phosphate-processing centre in the early decades of the 20th century.

**Information**

**Hot Line Internet Café** (Sharia Port Said; per hr ££10;

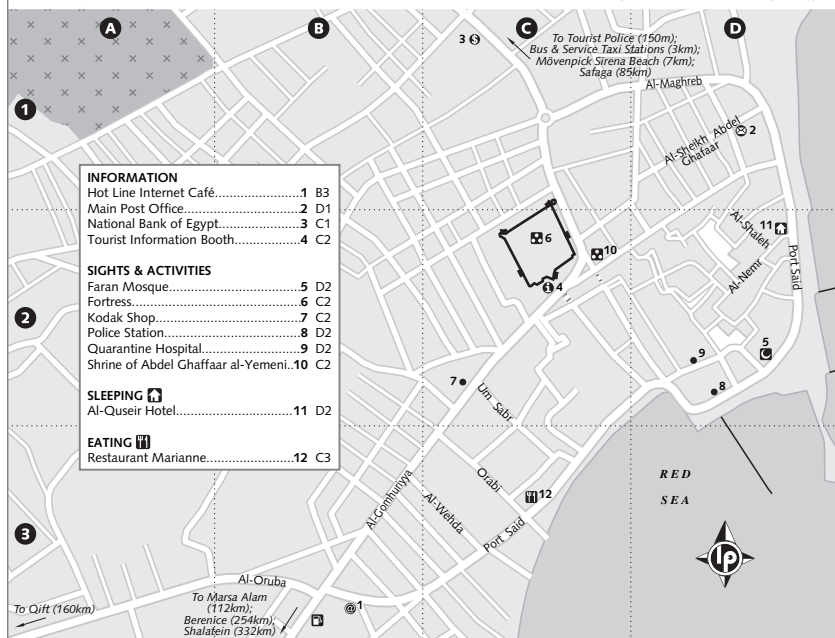
☎ 9am-3am)

**Main post office** (Sharia al-Sheikh Abdel Ghaffar;

☎ 8.30am-2pm Sat-Thu)

**AL-QUSEIR**

0 200 m  
0 0.1 miles



**National Bank of Egypt** (Safaga rd; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu) No ATM (yet).

**Tourist police** (☎ 335 0024; Safaga rd)

## Sights

The 16th-century Ottoman **fortress** (admission ££5; ☎ 9am-5pm) is Al-Quseir's most important historical building. Much of the original structure remains intact, although it was modified several times by the French, as well as the British, who permanently altered the fortress by firing some 6000 cannonballs upon it during a heated battle in the 19th century.

Just across from the fortress is the 19th-century **shrine** of a Yemeni sheikh, Abdel Ghaffaar al-Yemeni, which is marked by an old gravestone in a niche in the wall.

A few blocks south along the waterfront is the picturesque **police station**, originally an Ottoman *diwan* (council chamber) and later the town hall. Photos aren't permitted, and it's not open to the public.

Behind here is another fortresslike building, formerly a **quarantine hospital** built during the reign of the Ottoman sultan Selim II – just next to this is the **Faran Mosque**, dating to 1704.

Running between the waterside Sharia Port Said and the main street, Sharia Al-Gomhuriyya, are numerous small lanes good for wandering around to get a glimpse of local life. One of them, **Sharia Um Sabr**, has been restored – it's best reached from a turn-off on Sharia Al-Gomhuriyya, opposite the Kodak shop.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Al-Quseir Hotel** (☎ 333 2301; Sharia Port Said; s/d ££120/160; ☎) This charismatic hotel has six simple but spacious rooms in a renovated 1920s merchant's house on the seafront. With its original narrow wooden staircase, high wooden ceilings and latticework on the windows, it's full of atmosphere, and staying here is a pleasure. There are also good views from the seafront rooms, and a tiny restaurant serving breakfast (included in the room price) and other meals on order.

**Mövenpick Sirena Beach** (☎ 333 2100; [www.movenpick-quseir.com](http://www.movenpick-quseir.com); r from US\$200; ☎) This low-set, domed ensemble 7km north of the town centre is top of the line in Al-Quseir, and one of the best resorts along the coast. Its amenities include excellent food and the

## WARNING

Some coastal areas, especially in the southern Red Sea, are mined. While these remnants of earlier conflicts are being gradually removed, they remain a threat, particularly as sites are not always marked. Avoid entering any area demarcated with barbed wire, no matter how broken or old, and if you decide to check out that secluded beach, always look for tyre tracks or footprints. Better still, check with locals.

usual five-star facilities, a Subex diving centre, quiet evenings and a refreshing absence of the glitz so common in other resort hotels. The management is known for its environmentally conscious approach, which will definitely help you to sleep easier at night.

**Restaurant Marianne** (☎ 333 4386; Sharia Port Said; dishes ££15-50) One of the best places in town to sample the bounty of the Red Sea, this local favourite serves up some seriously delicious seafood.

## Getting There & Away

The bus and service-taxi stations are next to each other about 1.5km northwest of the Safaga road (££2 to ££3 in a taxi).

## BUS

Buses run to Cairo (££76, 11 hours) and Hurghada (££20 to ££25, three hours), departing at 6am, 7.30am, 9am, 7pm and 8.30pm. The 6am bus also stops at Suez. Buses to Marsa Alam (££5 to ££10, two hours) are at 5am, 9am, 7pm and 8pm, continuing to Shalatein.

## SERVICE TAXI

Sample fares include Cairo (££45 to ££50), Suez (££30 to ££35) and Hurghada (££25 to ££30). As in Hurghada, you have to hire the entire taxi for the trip to Luxor or Aswan – expect to pay from ££250 after negotiating.

## MARSA ALAM

☎ 065

The rather nondescript town of Marsa Alam is nothing more than a few scattered buildings surrounding a large army base, though this is set to change in the years to come. The area has been targeted as the site of the massive new Port Ghalib marina and resort complex being constructed near Marsa Alam airport

which, once opened, will give tourism in the region an entirely different profile.

The primary reason for this intense tourism push is simple – the seas lying just off the rugged coastline offer some of the best diving in Egypt, though up until now only serious divers have set their sights on this far-flung destination. With that said, the diving here truly is world-class, and there are a number of all-inclusive resorts in the area that serve as convenient bases for getting your feet wet.

## History

Despite its current remote location, the area around Marsa Alam has an ancient history. Gold and emeralds were once mined in the barren, mineral-rich mountains just inland, and the road leading from Marsa Alam west to Edfu in the Nile Valley follows an ancient route that was originally built by Ptolemy II. Today phosphate mining is the area's main industry, although it is fast being overtaken by tourism.

## Orientation & Information

Marsa Alam itself is little more than a T-junction where the road from Edfu meets the coastal road. Just south of the junction is a modest collection of shops, a pharmacy, a telephone centrale and a bustling market. The coast to the south and north is sprinkled with resorts.

## EMERGENCY

**Air ambulance** (☎ 010 154 7978)

**Decompression chamber** (☎ 012 218 7550, 019 510 0262, emergency VHF code 16; Marsa Shagra) 24km north of Marsa Alam.

**Tourist police** (☎ 375 0000; Quaraya Hotel, coastal rd)

## Sights & Activities

Diving and desert excursions are the main activities around Marsa Alam. For more on diving, which is primarily for experienced divers only, see p439. For more on desert safaris, see opposite.

## Sleeping

There is nowhere to stay in Marsa Alam village itself. But north and south along the coast there's an ever-growing number of four- and five-star all-inclusive resorts, plus a handful of simple, diver-oriented 'ecolodges' or diving camps. These usually consist of no-frills reed or stone bungalows, sometimes with

en-suites, generator-provided electricity, and a common area. They are run together with a dive centre, and offer a rugged alternative to the resort scene for backpackers or backpackers-at-heart.

## ECOLOGDGES

**Shaqla Eco-Lodge** (☎ 02-337 1833; [www.redsea-divingsafari.com](http://www.redsea-divingsafari.com); Marsa Shagra; tents/huts/chalets per person US\$45/55/70) This simple place owned by Hossam Helmi – lawyer, committed environmentalist and diving enthusiast – was one of the first ecolodges along the southern Red Sea coast, and remains the best. It offers simple but spotless and comfortable accommodation in a choice of two-bed tents, stone huts sharing bathroom facilities or en-suite stone chalets – all designed to be as kind to the environment as possible – plus first-rate diving. Nondivers in search of beautiful vistas and tranquillity are welcome, too. It's along the main road, 24km north of Marsa Alam.

The same owner also runs a similar camp with the same prices at **Marsa Nakari**, 18km south of Marsa Alam, plus a camp with 25 tents and 16 stone chalets in **Wadi Lahami**, a remote mangrove bay just north of Ras Banas, near Berenice and 120km south of Marsa Alam. There are live-aboards based in each of the three camps used for offshore diving. With his legal qualifications, Helmi has also developed a sideline in underwater weddings.




## ALL-INCLUSIVE RESORTS


Be advised that rooms at the following resorts listed are usually booked in advance as part of a package deal including roundtrip airfare from the UK and Europe and transfers from the airport to the resort. So, it's probably not a good idea to simply show up at the front door and request a room, though you can always stop by any of the ecolodges already listed.




Note that prices for the following all-inclusive resorts vary considerably depending on season and availability. So, it certainly pays to shop around and visit several travel agents in advance as it's sometimes possible to snag a five-star holiday at a three-star price. Also note that the listings are by no means comprehensive as this stretch of the Red Sea is currently experiencing a construction boom.





**Kahramana Beach Resort** (☎ 02-748 0883; [www.kahramanaresort.com](http://www.kahramanaresort.com); s/d all-inclusive from US\$120/200;



   Located 26km north of Marsa Alam at Marsa Shagra, the Kahramana is built on two hills that surround an attractive beach. The entire complex is built of natural stone, and consists of attached chalets in shades of ochre. One of the larger complexes along this stretch of coastline, the Kahramana has a particularly festive atmosphere, which means you'll have plenty of fun above and below the water.

**Lahami Bay Beach Resort** ( 195 100 354; [www.lahamibay.com](http://www.lahamibay.com); s/d all-inclusive from US\$135/215;

   Located 123km south of Marsa Alam, Lahami Bay has the distinction of being the most southerly resort on the Egyptian Red Sea. Boasting a unique fusion of Oriental and Mediterranean architecture, the Lahami Bay welcomes visitors with plush lodgings overlooking the deep-blue sea. The real attraction of this lodge is its remote location, which means that nearby reefs are about as pristine as they can come.

**Sol y Mar Solaya** ( 375 0015; [www.solymar-hotels.com](http://www.solymar-hotels.com); s/d all-inclusive from US\$150/235;    ) A plush, pleasure palace about 75km north of Marsa Alam and about 5km from the airport, this five-star resort is awash in Romanesque arches and verdant gardens. Boasting two swimming pools, a full spa complete with Jacuzzis, steam baths and saunas, and tennis courts overlooking the ocean, there are enough amenities on offer to keep nondivers entertained. Of course, you're here to dive, so don't spend too much time living the resort life.

## Eating

In town, there are a couple of cafés at the junction where you can find basic fare as well as a small supermarket with a modest selection of basics. However, all of the resorts and lodges have restaurants as well as full-board packages.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The **Marsa Alam International Airport** is 67km north of Marsa Alam along the Al-Quseir road. There is no public transport, so you'll need to arrange a transfer in advance with your hotel. Egypt Air has indefinitely suspended its flights to/from Cairo, and the airport is currently used only by charters.

## BUS

There is no bus station in Marsa Alam. For transport to Shalatein, wait at the coffee shop next to the police post at the entrance to Marsa Alam. For transport to the Nile Valley, wait at the petrol station in Marsa Alam, or at the T-junction about 1km further along on the Edfu road.

Buses from Shalatein pass Marsa Alam en route to Aswan (££15, six hours), via Edfu (££12, four hours) at around 7am and 9am daily. Buses to Shalatein (££20, four hours) come from Hurghada and depart Marsa Alam at around 5am, 7am, noon and 8.30pm.

There are four daily buses to Al-Quseir (££5 to ££10, two hours) and Hurghada (££30 to ££35, five hours), departing at 5am, 12.30pm, 2.30pm and 5pm. To Cairo direct, the fare is ££86 (10½ hours).

## EASTERN DESERT

The Eastern Desert – a vast, desolate area rimmed by the Red Sea Mountains to the east and the Nile Valley in the west – was once crisscrossed by ancient trade routes and dotted with settlements that played vital roles in the development of many of the region's greatest civilisations. Today the desert's rugged expanses are filled with fascinating footprints of this history, including rock inscriptions, ancient gold and mineral mines, wells and watchtowers, and religious shrines and buildings. Indeed, it is one of the highlights of any visit to the Red Sea Coast, and a world apart from the commercialised coastline.

## Orientation & Information

None of the roads crossing the desert can be freely travelled – some are completely closed to foreigners, and others require a convoy – and all the sites require a guide. As a result, it is strongly advised (in fact necessary) that you explore the Eastern Desert with the aid of an experienced tour operator.

Although second-rate travel agencies occupy every corner of the tourist hub of Hurghada (p422), it is recommended that you book a tour through **Red Sea Desert Adventures** ( 012 399 3860; [www.redseadesertadventures.com](http://www.redseadesertadventures.com); Marsa Shagra). This extremely professional safari outfit is run by Dutch geologist Karin Van Opstal and her Austrian partner, and offers tailor-made walking, camel and jeep safaris throughout the area. Van Opstal has lived in Marsa Alam for over a decade, and is

an authority on the local Ababda tribesmen, with whom she works closely.

Tours start at approximately US\$100 per person per day, though they vary depending on the specifications of your uniquely catered tour. Prices also vary considerably depending on the size of your party, and the time of year. In order for the necessary permits to be organised for multiday desert safaris, try to book at least one month in advance.

## Sights

One of the most impressive collections of **rock inscriptions**, many of which date to prehistoric times, is found in the barren tracts fringing the Marsa Alam–Edfu road, beginning close to Marsa Alam, where the smooth, grey rock was perfect for carving. They include hunting scenes with dogs chasing ostriches, depictions of giraffes and cattle, and hieroglyphic accounts of trade expeditions.

In the remote **Wadi Miya**, west of Marsa Alam, in what was likely an ancient mine works, are the remains of a temple said to be built by Seti I. **Wadi Sikait**, about 80km southwest of Marsa Alam, was an emerald-mining centre at least as early as the Ptolemaic period. It provided emeralds that were used throughout the ancient world and was the exclusive source of emeralds for the Roman Empire.

The high, smooth walls of **Wadi Hammamat**, about halfway along the road connecting Al-Quseir to the town of Qift, display a remarkable collection of graffiti dating from Pharaonic times down to Egypt's 20th-century King Farouk. The road through the wadi runs along an ancient trade route, and remains of old wells as well as other evidence of the area's long history can be seen along the way. In Graeco-Roman times, watchtowers were built along the trail at short enough intervals for signals to be visible, and many of them are still intact on the barren hilltops on either side of the road.

Starkly beautiful **Wadi Gimal**, which extends inland for about 85km from its coastal opening south of Marsa Alam, is home to a rich variety of birdlife, gazelles and stands of mangrove. In ancient times, the surrounding area was the source of emerald, gold and other minerals used in Pharaonic and Roman civilisations. Together with tiny Wadi Gimal Island, just offshore from the wadi's delta area, Wadi Gimal has been given protected status and targeted for development as an ecotour-

ism destination. Because of its long history and abundance of historical monuments, the area has also been proposed as a Unesco World Heritage site.

About 40km along the Safaga–Qena road, a signposted track breaks off northwest towards **Mons Claudianus**, an old Roman granite quarry/fortress complex, and one of the largest of the Roman settlements dotting the Eastern Desert. This stark and remote place was the end of the line for Roman prisoners brought to hack the granite out of the barren mountains, and was a hardship post for the soldiers sent to guard them. It was more a concentration camp than a quarry – you can still see the remains of the tiny cells that these unfortunates inhabited. There is also an immense cracked pillar, left where it fell 2000 years ago, a small temple and some other ruins. Once the granite was mined, it was carved and transported more than 200km across the desert to the Nile, from where it then was taken to the Mediterranean and the heart of the empire. The site is about 25km north of the turn-off along deteriorated tarmac.

**Mons Porphyrites** – about 40km northwest of Hurghada – is the site of ancient porphyry quarries worked by the Romans. The precious white-and-purple crystalline stone was mined and then transported across the desert along the Via Porphyrites to the Nile for use in sarcophagi, columns and other decorative work elsewhere in the Roman world. The quarries were under the direct control of the imperial family in Rome, which had encampments, workshops and even temples built for the workers and engineers here. Evidence of this quarry town can still be seen, although not much of it is standing. A road leading to the site branches off the main road about 20km north of Hurghada.

In addition to the many traces of Pharaonic and other ancient civilisations, the Eastern Desert is also home to numerous Islamic tombs and shrines. One of the best known is the tomb of Sayyed al-Shazli, a 13th-century sheikh who is revered as one of the more important Sufi leaders. His followers believe that he wanted to die in a place where nobody had ever sinned. Evidently such a place was difficult to find, as the site was a journey of several days from either the Nile Valley or the coast. Al-Shazli's tomb – which lies about 145km southwest of Marsa Alam at Wadi Humaysara – was restored under the orders of

## NOMADS OF THE EASTERN DESERT

Although the desert of the southern Red Sea may seem empty and inhospitable, the area has been home to nomadic Ababda and Besharin tribes for millennia. Members of the Beja, a nomadic tribe of African origin, they are thought to be descendants of the Blemmyes, the fierce tribesmen mentioned by classical geographers. Until well into the 20th century, the extent of the territory in which they roamed was almost exactly as described by the Romans, with whom they were constantly at war some 2000 years earlier.

Expert camel herders, the Ababda and Besharin lived a nomadic lifestyle that hardly changed until the waters of Lake Nasser rose and destroyed their traditional grazing lands. While most Besharin, many of whom do not speak Arabic, live in Sudan, most of the Arabic-speaking Ababda are settled in communities in the Nile Valley between Aswan and Luxor. A small number continue to live in their ancestral territory, concentrated in the area from Marsa Alam to Wadi Gimal, as well as on the eastern shores of Lake Nasser.

If you spend time in the region, you'll still likely see the traditional Ababda hut, lined inside with thick, hand-woven blankets, or hear Ababda music, with its rhythmic clapping and drumming and heavy use of the five-stringed lyrelike *tamboura*. At the centre of Ababda social life is *jibena* – heavily sweetened coffee prepared from fresh-roasted beans in a small earthenware flask heated directly in the coals.

Unfortunately, with the rapid expansion of tourism along the southern Red Sea, long-standing Ababda lifestyles have become increasingly threatened. Tourism has begun to replace livestock and camels as the main source of livelihood, and many Ababda men now work as guards or labourers on the resorts springing up around Marsa Alam, while others have started working with travel companies, offering camel safaris to tourists.

If you're planning a visit to the Eastern Desert, please consider the impact that you might have on these communities. On one hand, revenue from tourism can play a vital role in the development of the region, particularly if you are buying locally produced crafts or paying for the services of a local guide. However, the Eastern Desert is not a human zoo, had unfortunately indigenous tourism is often an exploitative force. Please remember that Western interests have already caused an irreversible amount of damage to the region – be aware of your surroundings, and be sensitive to the plight of the nomads.

King Farouk in 1947, and there is now an asphalt road leading to it. His *moulid* (religious festival), on the 15th of the Muslim month of Shawal, is attended by thousands of Sufis.

## Getting There & Away

With prior reservations, Red Sea Desert Adventures will organise your transport to and from the Eastern Desert as well as all of your travel between all of the sites.

## BERENICE

The military centre and small port of Berenice, 150km south of Marsa Alam, was founded in 275 BC by Ptolemy II Philadelphus. From about the 3rd to the 5th century AD, it was one of the most important harbours and trading posts on the Red Sea coast, and is mentioned in the 1st-century AD mariner's chronicle, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.

The ruins of the ancient town, including ruins of the **Temple of Serapis**, are located

just south of the present-day village, and have been the subject of ongoing archaeological investigations. About 100km to the northwest are ruins of the old Roman settlement of **Sikait**, which was once at the centre of major emerald-mining operations in the region.

Today the main activity is at Ras Banas peninsula – jutting into the sea just north-east of Berenice – which is an important military base. Because of this, and because of the region's proximity to the Sudanese border, independent visits are strongly discouraged – you can expect to be questioned by the tourist police, and to be accompanied by an escort even if you succeed in getting to Berenice.

There is no official accommodation, and camping needs to be cleared with the police.

Share taxis (££50, eight hours) departing from Hurghada bound for Shalatein stop in Berenice.

## SHALATEIN

This dusty outpost 90km south of Berenice marks the administrative boundary between Egypt and Sudan. With that said, Egypt considers the political boundary to be another 175km southeast, beyond the town of Halayeb, a once-important Red Sea port that has long since fallen into obscurity. Of course, Sudan strongly disagrees, resulting in a large swath of disputed territory that is probably worth avoiding in the interest of personal safety.

Now a trading post, Shalatein's colourful camel-market is a major stop on the camel-trading route from Sudan, which for many of the camels finishes in the Birqash camel market outside Cairo (p212). Amid the dust and the vendors, Rashaida tribesmen in their

lavender *galabiyyas* (men's robes) mix with Ababda, Besharin and other peoples from southern Egypt and northern Sudan.

As with Berenice, independent visitors are discouraged, and the area is sporadically closed to foreigners completely. Again, you can expect to be questioned by the tourist police, and to be accompanied by an escort even if you succeed in getting to Shalatein. However, you can easily avoid hassles by simply organising an excursion to the camel market through Red Sea Desert Adventures (for more information, see p435).

There is no official accommodation, and camping needs to be cleared with the police.

Share taxis (££55, nine hours) departing from Hurghada via Berenice terminate in Shalatein.

# Diving the Red Sea



With a living history stretching back several millennia, it's no wonder that so many tourists in Egypt never give a thought to exploring its underwater world. Of course, while landlubbers are busy sweating bullets and dodging touts in the desert, divers are plunging into the Red Sea's clear depths, and finding themselves surrounded by one of nature's most magnificent sights.

In 1989, a panel of scientists and conservationists chose the northern portion of this 1800km-long body of water as one of the Seven Underwater Wonders of the World. Here divers will find coral mountains, shallow reefs swarming with brightly coloured fish, sheer drop-offs disappearing into unplumbed depths and coral-encrusted shipwrecks, all bathed in an ethereal blue hue.

Indeed, the Red Sea boasts a legendary reputation among diving enthusiasts, and undoubtedly deserves its status as one of the world's premier underwater destinations. The two jewels in the Red Sea's crown are Ras Mohammed National Park, home to the 'Holy Trinity' of Shark Reef, Eel Garden and the Yolanda, and the WWII wreck of the Thistlegorm, a British warship first discovered in the 1950s by Jacques Cousteau.

The strongest appeal of the Red Sea is that you can tailor your diving holiday to your own travelling style. Independent travellers spend more time than they planned in the backpacker-friendly village of Dahab, and to a lesser extent Nuweiba, while package tourists enjoy their creature comforts in the resort towns of Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurghada. If you truly want to maximise your underwater time, there's no better option than a week on a dive safari.

Regardless of your travelling style, however, the Red Sea never fails to impress, and is one of the top highlights of any trip to Egypt.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Be overwhelmed at the magnificent underwater world of **Ras Mohammed National Park** (p447)
- Explore the remains of **The Thistlegorm** (p448), one of the top wreck dives in the world
- Push your limits by sinking into the deep blue abyss of Dahab's notorious **Blue Hole** (p446)
- Combine diving and Bedouin culture in a camel/dive safari from Dahab to **Gabr el-Bint** (p445)
- Spend your days sailing from one remote site to the next on a **live-aboard dive safari** (p453)



## MARE ROSTRUM

Surrounded by desert on three sides, the Red Sea was formed some 40 million years ago when the Arabian Peninsula split from Africa, allowing the waters of the Indian Ocean to rush in. Bordered at its southern end by the 25km Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Red Sea is the only tropical sea that is almost entirely closed. No river flows into it and the influx of water from the Indian Ocean is slight. These unique geographical features, combined with the arid desert climate and high temperatures, make the sea extremely salty. It is also windy – on average the sea is flat for only 50 days a year.

In regard to its name (the Red Sea is in fact deep blue), there are two competing schools of thought regarding etymology. Some believe that the sea was named after the surrounding red-rock mountain ranges. Others insist it was named for the periodic algae blooms that tinge the water a reddish-brown. Whatever the spark, it inspired ancient mariners to dub these waters *Mare Rostrum* – the Red Sea.

## Orientation

Diving tends to be concentrated at the northern end of the Egyptian Red Sea, although increasing numbers of advanced divers are pushing further south. The most popular sites are around the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, most famously the thin strip of land that juts out into the sea and forms Ras Mohammed National Park.

Another major diving area is in the Strait of Tiran, which forms the narrow entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba. The currents sweeping through the deep channel allow coral to grow prolifically, attracting abundant marine life. The reefs further north along the shores of the Gulf of Aqaba are also popular.

On the western side of the Sinai Peninsula lie the Straits of Gubal, a series of coral pinacles just beneath the surface of the sea, famous for snagging ships trying to navigate north to the Suez Canal. This is where the majority of Egypt's shipwrecks, including the Thistlegorm lie.

Heading south, the best reefs are found around the many offshore islands. Although most reefs near Hurghada have been damaged by uncontrolled tourist development, there is a plethora of pristine dive sites further south.

## Information BOOKS

*Lonely Planet's Diving & Snorkelling the Red Sea* is a full-colour guide that includes detailed descriptions of more than 80 dive sites in Egypt.

*Red Sea Diver's Guide from Sharm El Sheikh to Hurghada* by Shlomo and Roni Cohen has excellent maps and descriptions

of sites around Ras Mohammed, the Straits of Gubal and Hurghada.

*Sinai Dive Guide* by Pete Harrison has detailed maps and explanations of the main Red Sea sites. Also good is *Sharm el-Sheikh Diving Guide* by Alberto Siliotti, with maps and ratings of numerous sites around Sharm el-Sheikh and Ras Mohammed National Park. *Red Sea Diving Guide* by Andrea Ghisotti and Alessandro Carletti covers Egyptian sites, as well as others in Sudan, Israel and Eritrea.

*The Red Sea: Underwater Paradise* by Angelo Mojetta is one of the better glossy coffee-table books, with beautiful photos of the flora and fauna of Egypt's reefs.

*The Official HEPCA Dive Guide*, produced by the Hurghada Environmental Protection & Conservation Association (Hepca), details 46 sites with artists' drawings and a small fish index. Proceeds from the sale of this guide go towards maintaining mooring buoys on the Red Sea. For more on Hepca, see the boxed text, p425.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**GoRedSea.com** ([www.goredsea.com](http://www.goredsea.com)) A growing index of dive centres and live-aboards as well as links to jobs on offer for divers, and other information on the Red Sea.

**H2O Magazine** ([www.h2o-mag.com](http://www.h2o-mag.com)) The website of the quarterly publication of the Red Sea Association for Diving and Watersports, with articles and updates on diving in the region.

**Man & the Environment** (MATE; ☎ 069-364 1091; [www.mate-dahab.com](http://www.mate-dahab.com)) Environmental resource centre in Dahab where divers can learn more about the area's reefs and how to protect them. It also helps organise trash dives in an effort to keep rubbish off the reefs.

**Ras Mohamed** ([www.rasmohamed.com](http://www.rasmohamed.com)) A comprehensive site on Ras Mohamed National Park, which includes



good background information on local corals and other marine life.

### **Red Sea Association for Diving & Watersports**

(RSADW; ☎ 065-344 4802; [www.redseaxperience.com](http://www.redseaxperience.com); Hurghada) The goal of this NGO is to raise the quality of dive centres and other water sports throughout the Red Sea governorate.

### **Red Sea Virtual Dive Center** ([www.redseavdc.com](http://www.redseavdc.com))

Detailed descriptions of more than 73 dive sites.

### **Reef Check** ([www.reefcheck.org](http://www.reefcheck.org))

A membership organisation working to save coral reefs in the Red Sea and elsewhere in the world.

### **South Sinai Association for Diving & Marine**

**Activities** (SSDM; ☎ 069-366 0418; [www.southsinai.org](http://www.southsinai.org))

An entity similar to the Red Sea Association for Diving and Watersports, though with an emphasis on the Sinai.

## **MEDICAL SERVICES**

### **El Gouna Hospital & Hyperbaric Centre** (☎ 065-

358 0011, 012 218 7550, 012 219 0383; Al-Gouna)

**Marsa Shagra Decompression Chamber** (☎ 012 218 7550, satellite 0195-100 262; Marsa Shagra) Located 24km north of Marsa Alam.

### **Naval Hyperbaric & Emergency Medical Center**

(Map p423; ☎ 065-344 9150, 065-354 8450; Corniche, Hurghada)

### **Sharm el-Sheikh Hyperbaric Medical Center** (Map

p463; ☎ 069-366 0922/3, 24hr emergency 012 212 4292;

[hyper\\_med\\_center@sinainet.com.eg](http://hyper_med_center@sinainet.com.eg); Sharm el-Sheikh; ☎ 10.30am-6pm)

### **Sharm el-Sheikh International Hospital** (Map p463;

☎ 069-366 0893/4/5; Sharm-Na'ama Bay Rd, Sharm el-Sheikh)

Hyperbaric specialists:

**Dr Adel Taher** (☎ 012 212 4292; Sharm el-Sheikh)

**Dr Hanaa Nessim** (☎ 012 219 0383; Hurghada)

**Dr Hossam Nasef** (☎ 012 218 7550; Hurghada)

## **Dangers & Annoyances**

There is no government regulatory body responsible for overseeing dive clubs in Egypt, although two nongovernmental organisations – the **Red Sea Association for Diving & Watersports** (RSADW; ☎ 065-344 4802; [association@redseaxperience.com](mailto:association@redseaxperience.com)), for the area from Al-Gouna south to the Sudanese border, and the **South Sinai Association for Diving & Marine Activities** (SSDM; ☎ 069-366 0418; [www.southsinai.org](http://www.southsinai.org)), for all of southern Sinai – are increasingly taking on this function.

All dive guides must have a valid ID card from one of these entities, and in the southern Sinai, all dive centres and live-aboards must be members of the SSDM. However,

accidents still occasionally happen as a result of neglect and negligence. Before making any choices, carefully check out the club you're considering. Confirm with the relevant organisation that a club or guide is registered.

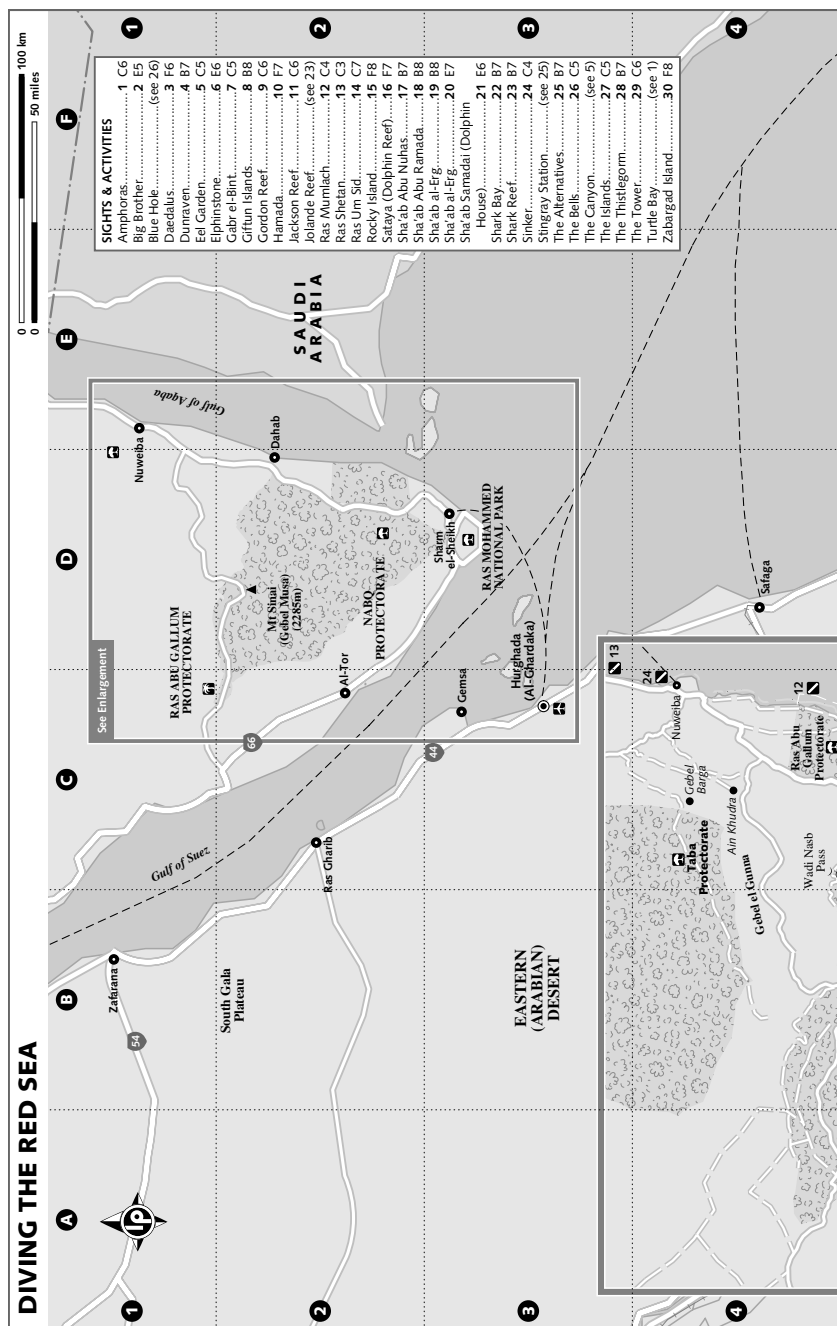
Before embarking on a scuba diving, skin diving or snorkelling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

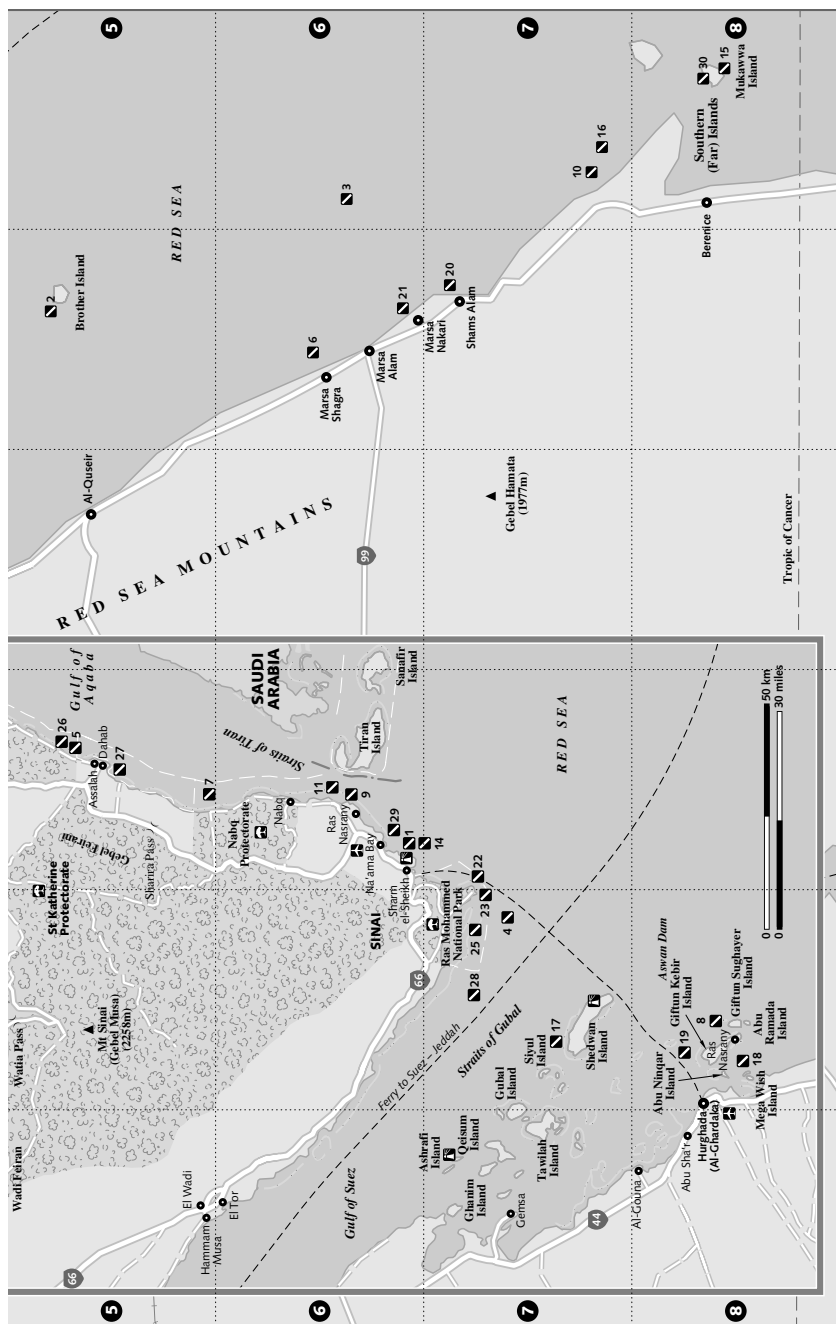
- Possess a current diving certification card from a recognised scuba diving instructional agency (if scuba diving).
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of the local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local trained divers deal with these considerations.

## **Watching Wildlife**

The Red Sea is teeming with more than 1000 species of marine life, and is an amazing spectacle of colour and form. Fish, sharks, turtles, stingrays, dolphins, corals, sponges, sea cucumbers and molluscs all thrive in these waters.

Coral is what makes a reef a reef – though thought for centuries to be some form of flowering plant, it is in fact an animal. Both hard and soft corals exist, their common denominator being that they are made up of polyps, which are tiny cylinders ringed by waving tentacles that sting their prey and draw it into their stomach. During the day corals retract into their tube, only displaying their real colours at night.





### TIPS FOR SAFE DIVING

The most important thing to remember when diving in the Red Sea is to use common sense. More often than not, most diving fatalities are caused by divers simply forgetting (or disregarding) some of the basic rules.

In Dahab, where the majority of accidents have occurred, drink and drugs have often played a starring role in these tragic and largely avoidable deaths. Many of those who lose their lives are experienced divers who should have known better than to go beyond safety limits or dive under the influence. Others are divers who were not experienced enough for the situations they found themselves in. The next time you complain about having to take a test dive, remember that dive clubs have a good reason to be cautious.

The following are a few common-sense tips for safe diving:

- Don't drink and dive. Alcohol dehydrates, especially in a dry climate such as Egypt's, and increases your susceptibility to decompression sickness.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving. If you are taking prescription drugs, inform your medical examiner that you intend to go diving. Sometimes diving can affect your metabolism and your dosage might need to be changed.
- Dive within your scope of experience. The Red Sea's clear waters and high visibility often lull divers into going too deep. The depth limit for sports divers is 30m. Stick to it.
- Do not fly within 24 hours of diving. You also shouldn't climb above 300m, so don't plan a trip to St Katherine's Monastery or into the Eastern Desert mountains for the day after a dive.
- Make sure you can recognise your boat from in the water. Some dive sites get crowded and boats can look similar from underneath. It's not unknown for divers to get left behind because they didn't realise that their boat had left without them.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary tremendously from site to site, and that both daily and seasonal weather and current changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence not only which sites you can dive on any particular day, but the way you'll need to dress for a dive and the necessary dive techniques.
- Be insured. If something happens to you, treatment in the decompression chamber can cost thousands. The most reputable clubs will make insurance a condition for diving with them. If you hadn't planned to dive before arriving in Egypt, many of the better clubs can provide insurance.

Most of the bewildering variety of fish species in the Red Sea – including many that are found nowhere else – are closely associated with the coral reef, and live and breed in the reefs or nearby sea-grass beds. These include such commonly sighted species as the grouper, wrasse, parrotfish and snapper. Others, such as tuna and barracuda, live in open waters and usually only venture into the reefs to feed or breed.

When snorkelling or diving, the sharks you're most likely to encounter include white- or black-tipped reef sharks. Tiger sharks, as well as the enormous, plankton-eating whale sharks, are generally found only in deeper waters. If you're skittish about these apex predators, you can take comfort in the fact that shark attacks in the Red Sea are extremely rare.

The most common type of turtle found in these waters is the green turtle, although the leatherback and hawksbill are occasionally sighted. Turtles are protected in Egypt, and although they're not deliberately hunted, they are sometimes caught in nets and end up on menus in restaurants in Cairo and along the coasts.

As intriguing as they may seem, there are some creatures that should be avoided, especially moray eels, sea urchins, fire coral, blowfish, triggerfish, feathery lionfish, turkeyfish and stonefish. To help protect yourself, it's a good idea to familiarise yourself with pictures of these creatures before snorkelling or diving – single-page colour guides to the Red Sea's common marine hazards can be bought in hotel bookshops around diving areas.

## DIVE SITES

Following are brief descriptions of some of the Red Sea's more popular diving destinations, listed from north to south – keep in mind that this list is by no means comprehensive. Although we've given a general indication of difficulty, you should always seek the advice of your dive guide when deciding where to go. Furthermore, remember that strong currents or winds can make an otherwise fairly tame site dangerous and at times undiveable.

### Nuweiba

A major port town that serves as the departure point for ferries to Jordan, Nuweiba attracts significantly less divers than its more famous cousins in Sinai. However, there are a handful of excellent dive sites in the area, and Nuweiba does serve as a low-key base that attracts independent-minded divers.

#### RAS SHETAN

**Location:** 15km north of Nuweiba

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Shore

Although hard corals are not a strong point of the dive, there is a profusion of graceful soft corals between 10m and 20m, as well as the usual array of reef fish. However, the highlight of the dive is undoubtedly the contoured topography, including narrow valleys, sand-filled depressions and deep chasms.

#### SINKER

**Location:** In Nuweiba

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Shore

A stone's throw away from the Hilton Coral Beach Resort, the Sinker is a massive submerged mooring buoy designed for cargo ships, which was sunk by mistake in the mid-1990s. Since then, it has developed into a fantastic artificial reef, attracting a host of small, colourful species.

### Dahab

Long dubbed the 'Ko Samui of the Middle East', the backpacker paradise of Dahab is a Thai-inspired collection of beachside hotels and restaurants. Banana pancakes and apple *sheesha* (water pipes) aside, the diving here is world-class, though independent travellers often use Dahab as a jumping-off point for dive sites around the Sinai.

### THE CANYON

**Location:** North side of Dahab

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Shore

One of the area's most popular dives, the Canyon is a long, narrow trench that runs perpendicular to the reef shelf, and is home to prolific hard and soft corals. If you're an experienced diver, you can descend to the bottom of the canyon (30m), and then swim towards shore through a chimney and past the 'fishbowl' (20m), a small chamber full of billowing curtains of glassfish and anthias.

### EEL GARDEN

**Location:** North side of Dahab

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Shore

Eel Garden takes its name from the countless garden eels that carpet the seafloor not far from the entry point of the dive – as you approach, the eels vanish into their burrows like synchronised swimmers. Although the eels are the main focus of the dive, other highlights include huge coral boulders, dense congregations of barracudas and big groupers and snappers.

### THE ISLANDS

**Location:** South side of Dahab

**Rating:** Novice

**Access:** Shore

Just south of Dahab before the lagoon, this underwater *Alice and Wonderland*-esque dive site offers an outstanding topography of coral alleyways, amphitheatres, valleys and gulleys. The quality and quantity of coral is phenomenal, with all shapes, colours and varieties imaginable – from massive elkhorns to delicate table corals.

### GABR EL-BINT

**Location:** 25km south of Dahab

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** 4WD / Camel

What makes this dive so unique is the unorthodox means of transport you must take to get here – from Dahab, the journey combines a 4WD Jeep trip and a Bedouin-led camel convoy (yes, camels can actually carry full scuba tanks and a full complement of dive gear!). The dive itself features a dramatic seascape that is highlighted by a 60m wall cut by numerous chasms, faults and sandy ravines.

**THE BELLS & BLUE HOLE****Location:** 8km north of Dahab**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Shore

The Blue Hole is Egypt's most infamous dive site. Carved into a reef just offshore, the Blue Hole is a gaping sinkhole that drops straight down to unfathomable depths – some say as deep as 130m. Unfortunately, the site has claimed several lives over the years, mainly thrill-seekers who took unreasonable risks, venturing well below the sport-diving limit.

An archway at approximately 65m connects the sinkhole to the open ocean – this is the trap. Solo divers, mostly Israelis who brought their own equipment here in years past, have attempted to swim beneath this archway. Victims have succumbed to narcosis, missed the archway entirely, lost all sense of direction or simply ran out of air.

If you leave the depths to the experienced technical divers the outer lip of the Blue Hole is full of marine life, and a reasonable plunge into the hole itself is somewhat akin to skydiving.

The entry point is at the Bells, a narrow breach in the reef table that forms a pool close to shore. From here, you descend through a chimney, exiting at 27m on a ledge that opens to the cobalt sea. If you swim south along the wall, a saddle in the reef at 7m allows you to enter the Blue Hole. As long as you monitor your depth carefully, you can finish up the dive by swimming across the sinkhole towards the shore.

**Sharm el-Sheikh & Na'ama Bay**

Near the southern tip of the Sinai and bordering Ras Mohammed National Park, Sharm el-Sheikh and the adjacent Na'ama Bay together are one of the busiest dive destinations in the world. Unfortunately, in recent years package holiday and upscale resorts have become the norm, though the diving here still remains world-class.

**JACKSON REEF****Location:** Strait of Tiran**Rating:** Intermediate to Advanced**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

Midway between Tiran Island and the mainland, Jackson Reef is crowned with the remains of a Cypriot freighter, the *Lara*, which ran aground here in 1985. Home to sharks and large pelagic fish, Jackson Reef is a stunning dive, though you should always inquire about sea conditions as the currents here are at times dangerous.

**GORDON REEF****Location:** Strait of Tiran**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

This reef is famous for the battered remains of the *Louilla*, which eerily sits atop the northern end of Gordon Reef. Descending from the wide plateau on the south side of the reef, lucky divers can spot whitetip reef sharks in the morning hours in a large circular depression known as 'The Amphitheatre'.

**THE TOWER****Location:** Just south of Na'ama Bay**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Shore, boat or live-aboard

Named for the tower of fossilised coral that rises from the water on the south side of the bay, this site features a deep canyon with walls that drop below 120m. Between 15m and 30m, you'll find some beautiful coral pinnacles, while the shallower depths are home to several caves that can easily be penetrated.

**AMPHORAS & TURTLE BAY****Location:** Just north of Ras Um Sid**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Shore, boat or live-aboard

Named after the resident wreck of a 17th-century Turkish galleon that went down with a full cargo of mercury, Amphoras is renowned for its ancient history and its stunning topography. Leaving Amphoras, you can easily drift into Turtle Bay, which is home to a sloping reef that attracts schools of fish.

**RAS UM SID****Location:** Opposite Hotel Royal Paradise**Rating:** Intermediate**Access:** Shore, boat or live-aboard

One of the best dive sites in the area, Ras Um Sid features a spectacular gorgonian forest along a dramatic drop-off that hosts a great variety of reef fish. As you pass by the swaying fans, be sure to look out into the abyss as manta rays and whale sharks



have been known to occasionally cruise by Ras Um Sid.

### Ras Mohammed National Park

Without a doubt, Ras Mohammed is one of the best dive destinations in the world, with superb and extensive corals and an unparalleled diversity of fish and other marine life. The national park protects 200 hard coral species and about 120 soft coral species, and is home to approximately 1000-plus species of tropical fish.

For detailed site descriptions and ratings of the park sites, check out the very informative [www.rasmohamed.com](http://www.rasmohamed.com).

### SHARK OBSERVATORY

**Location:** Eastern tip of Ras Mohammed

**Rating:** Advanced

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

Shark Observatory is a high promontory that is used to spot sharks in the surrounding waters, though the wall beneath is extremely sheer and there are no ledges to mark your depth – this is for advanced divers only. With that said, the wall is truly stunning, covered with soft corals and gigantic gorgonians, and there is a good chance you'll see a shark or two cruising in the distance.

### SHARK & JOLANDE REEFS

**Location:** Southern tip of Ras Mohammed

**Rating:** Advanced

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

This two-for-one special is among the most famous dives in the Red Sea, and rated one of the top five dives in the world – strong currents take divers on a thrilling ride along sheer coral walls, through vast schools of fish and eventually to the remains of the *Jolande*, a Cypriot freighter that sank in 1980. Although not much remains of the wreck, its cargo of bathtubs and toilets makes an interesting contrast to the deep blue water and surrounding reef shelves.

### DUNRAVEN

**Location:** Southeast tip of Sha'ab Mahmud

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

In 1876, the *Dunraven* was on her way from Bombay to Newcastle with a cargo of spices, timber and cotton when in seemingly good weather, she hit the Sha'ab Mahmud reef and sank to the bottom. Today, this enigmatic wreck is encrusted in coral, and home to

various knick-knacks including china plates, metal steins and jars of gooseberries and rhubarb among the detritus.

### THE ALTERNATIVES & STINGRAY STATION

**Location:** Southeast tip of Sha'ab Mahmud

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

The Alternatives are a 3km long stretch of seven coral pinnacles, which are sheltered from the weather conditions and home to varied wildlife including enormous leopard sharks and teeny-tiny nudibranchs. At the west end of the Alternatives is Stingray Station, marked by a large blocky coral outcrop at 15m, which is swamped with bluespotted, feathertail and honeycomb stingrays.

### Hurghada

In recent years, the reefs close to Hurghada have been heavily damaged by unfettered touristic development – experienced divers now generally prefer sites further afield. On a positive note, conservation measures are finally being implemented, spearheaded by groups such as Hepca (p425), and there is a chance that the situation around Hurghada will begin to improve.

### SHA'AB ABU NUHAS

**Location:** Southeastern Strait of Gubal

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

This group of small, submerged islands at the southern entrance to the Straits of Gubal has snagged more ships than any other reef group since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The most famous ships in this marine graveyard are the *Carnatic*, which went down in 1879, and the nearby wrecks of two Greek cargo ships, the *Giannus D* and the *Chrisoula K*, both of which sank in the early 1980s.

### SHA'AB AL-ERG

**Location:** Off El-Gouna

**Rating:** Novice

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

This huge horseshoe-shaped reef with a shallow lagoon is famous for attracting dolphins and manta rays as well as the occasional reef white-tips. The lack of strong currents and ease of access means that this is an excellent dive site for beginners, though veteran divers will still enjoy the towering brain corals and fan-encrusted rock formations.

## THE THISTLEGORM

**Location:** Southeast tip of Sha'ab Mahmud

**Rating:** Intermediate to Advanced

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

Built by the North East Marine Engineering Company, the 129m-long cargo ship christened the *Thistlegorm* was completed and launched in 1940 in Sunderland, England. Prior to setting out from Glasgow in 1941, she had previously made several successful trips to North America, the East Indies and Argentina. However, with a cargo full of vital supplies destined for North Africa where British forces were preparing for *Operation Crusader*, the relief of Tobruk against the German 8th Army, the *Thistlegorm* met her end at 2am on 6 October, 1941.

While waiting in the Strait of Gubal for a call sign to proceed up the Gulf of Suez, four German Heinkel He 111s that were flying out of Crete mounted an attack on the ship. The planes were returning from an armed reconnaissance mission up the Sinai coast, and targeted the ship to offload their unused bombs. One bomber scored a direct hit on the No 4 hold, which tore the ship into two and sent the two railway locomotives that the vessel was carrying hurtling through the air. Incredibly, they landed upright on the seabed, one on either side of the wreck. In less than 20 minutes, the ship sank to the ocean floor, taking along with it nine sailors out of a crew of 49.

The *Thistlegorm* lay undisturbed until 1956 when legendary French diver Jacques Cousteau located the wreck, laying at a depth of 17m to 35m to the northwest of Ras Mohammed. Cousteau found a cache of WWII cargo packed in the hold, including a full consignment of armaments and supplies, such as Bedford trucks, Morris cars, BSA 350 motorbikes and Bren gun carriers. Although Cousteau took the ship's bell, the captain's safe and a motorbike, he left the wreck as he found it, and proceeded to keep its location secret. However, it was rediscovered in 1993 when some divers stumbled upon its location, and it has since become one of the world's premier wreck dive sites.

The *Thistlegorm* is best dived on an overnight trip since it takes 3½ hours each way from Sharm el-Sheikh by boat, though dive operators throughout the Sinai can easily help you arrange this. On your first dive, you will do a perimeter sweep of the boat, which is highlighted by a swim along the soldier walkways on the side of the vessel. On your second dive, you will penetrate the ship's interior, swimming through a living museum of WWII memorabilia.

## UMM QAMAR

**Location:** 9km north of the Giftun Islands

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

A long, thin reef with a vertical wall plunging down on the east side, Umm Qamar is highlighted by three coral towers that are swathed in beautiful purple soft coral and surrounded by glassfish. Experienced divers will enjoy diving along the drop-offs, particularly if there are large pelagics cruising by.

## GIFTUN ISLANDS

**Location:** Off Hurghada

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

The islands of Giftun Kebir and Giftun Sughayer (Big Giftun and Little Giftun) are a short boat ride from Hurghada, and rank as one of the most popular dive destinations in the Red Sea. They are surrounded by a number of spectacular reefs teeming

with marine life, including Hamda, Banana Reef, Sha'ab Sabrina, Erg Somaya and Sha'ab Torfa.

## SHA'AB ABU RAMADA

**Location:** 5km south of the Giftun Islands

**Rating:** Novice

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

Also known as the Aquarium due to the mind-boggling abundance of marine life on display here, Gota Abu Ramada is a popular spot for underwater photographers, snorkellers and night divers. The site comprises two impressive pinnacles on a flat and sandy seafloor in less than 15m of water.

## South Coast

As tourist development expands southwards, so too does the diving, though be advised that high winds and strong currents make the following sites best suited for experienced divers.

Since this part of the coast remains remote, most diving is done from live-aboards, though the lack of tourist crowds more than make up for the difficult access.

### ELPHINSTONE

**Location:** 12km east of Marsa Abu Dabbab

**Rating:** Advanced

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

Elphinstone has steep reef walls that are covered with soft corals, and washed by strong currents that are ideal for sharks – seven species reportedly frequent its waters. Legend has it that a large arch in the reef, between 50m and 70m down, contains the sarcophagus of an unknown pharaoh.

### SHA'AB SAMADAI (DOLPHIN HOUSE)

**Location:** 18km southeast of Marsa Alam

**Rating:** Novice to Intermediate

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

Nicknamed Dolphin Reef, Sha'ab Samadai is wrapped around a shallow lagoon that is home to a school of spinner dolphins. Even if the dolphins don't show up, the site offers beautiful coral ergs along the edges of the lagoon, as well as a series of caves and tunnels that can be explored if you are comfortable with overhead surfaces.

### SHA'AB SHARM

**Location:** 16km northeast of Wadi Gamal

**Rating:** Advanced

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

This large, kidney-shaped offshore reef has steep walls hosting rich corals as well as shallow plateaus on both ends – it is an impressive underwater site in regards to topography. Currents are strong, but marine life is excellent, with hammerheads, barracuda, grouper, snapper and yellowmouth moray eels.

### HAMADA

**Location:** Just north of Marsa Wadi Lahami

**Rating:** Novice

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

Atop an inshore reef lies the wreck of this 65m cargo ship, which was on its way to Jeddah from Suez with a cargo of polyethylene granules (better known as packing peanuts) when she sank on 29 June, 1993. Lying on her side in just 14m of water, the Hamada is a fairly easy, though extremely picturesque, dive site.

### SATAYA (DOLPHIN REEF)

**Location:** 11km south of Sha'ab Mansour

**Rating:** Intermediate

**Access:** Boat or live-aboard

The horseshoe-shaped Dolphin is the main reef of Fury Shoal, and has steep walls leading down to a sandy slope scattered with coral heads. In addition to a great variety of corals, especially in the uppermost 10m, there are also abundant pelagics including frequent schools of dolphins and sharks.

### The Far South

Egypt's southernmost waters are home to four islands, all of which are coveted and highly challenging destinations for experienced divers. Only accessible by live-aboard, the islands of the far south are home to spectacular and rarely visited reefs – as veterans of these parts will tell you, once you've dived here, nothing else will compare.

### BIG BROTHER

**Location:** 67km east of Quseir

**Rating:** Advanced

**Access:** Live-aboard

The most northerly of the two 'brothers', Big Brother has a small lighthouse and two wrecks lying on its walls: one an English freighter (the *Numidia*) and the other an Italian ship (the *Aida II*). Currents are strong, though the soft corals are stunning, and the marine life is varied and plentiful.

### LITTLE BROTHER

**Location:** 67km east of Quseir

**Rating:** Advanced

**Access:** Live-aboard

This magical island has a long reef protruding from its northern end, which is a popular spot for cruising thresher sharks, silver tips, hammerheads and grey reef sharks. Elsewhere, there are huge fan corals, caves and overhangs, though divers tend to simply slow down and be overwhelmed at the sheer number of apex predators about.

### DAEDALUS

**Location:** 96km east of Marsa Alam

**Rating:** Advanced

**Access:** Live-aboard

Lying right in the middle of the Red Sea nearly halfway to Saudi Arabia, this isolated dive spot is marked by a 19th-century British-built lighthouse lying in the centre of the circular reef. As you'd expect from a reef in the middle

## REEF PROTECTION

The Red Sea's natural wonders are just as magnificent as the splendours of Egypt's Pharaonic heritage, and appear all the more stunning when contrasted with their barren desert backdrop. However, care is needed if the delicate world of coral reefs and fish is not to be permanently damaged. Almost the entire Egyptian coastline in the Gulf of Aqaba is now a protectorate, as is the Red Sea coast from Hurgada south to Sudan. Divers and snorkellers should heed the requests of instructors *not* to touch or tread on coral – if you kill the coral, you'll eventually kill or chase away the fish, too.

Overall, the paramount guideline for preserving the ecology and beauty of reefs is to take nothing with you, leave nothing behind. Other considerations:

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. Never ride on the backs of turtles.

of nowhere, the coral here is pristine, and there's nary a dive boat in sight.

### ZABARGAD ISLAND

**Location:** 96km south of Ras Banas

**Rating:** Advanced

**Access:** Live-aboard

This mountainous island emerges majestically from the sea, though its tranquil beauty shouldn't detract from the fact that Zabargad has snared several ships over the years. Fortunately for divers, these wrecks, which include an ill-fated German dive boat known as the *Neptune*, lie at the bottom of a shimmering lagoon of turquoise water.

### ROCKY ISLAND

**Location:** 5km southeast of Zabargad

**Rating:** Advanced

**Access:** Live-aboard

Exposed Rocky Island, with its noisy seabirds and breaking waves, lies just north of the

Sudanese border, and is one of Egypt's most far-flung dive sites. When the dive conditions are perfect, it's possible to see anything here – divers often jump in the water here and find themselves surrounded by everything from pods of dolphins to passing whale sharks.

## DIVE OPERATORS

Whether you choose to plunge into the Red Sea with a small local shop, an established resort or a live-aboard, travellers will have no problem finding a dive operator. As Egypt's Red Sea and Sinai coasts continue to develop, the number of dive operators is mushrooming, and given the huge choice, there is something to suit everyone. Some clubs and live-aboards are laid-back and informal, while others are slick and structured. Regardless of which diving style you choose, however, you're going to get wet – and love every minute of it.

## Dive Clubs

Almost all of the coastal hotels and resorts have a dive centre, though there are also smaller places – some long-standing, others fly-by-night outfits – cashing in on the area's popularity among divers. When deciding which dive club to use, the main considerations should be the club's attention to safety and its sensitivity to environmental issues.

Please be aware that there are literally hundreds of dive clubs along the Red Sea Coast and in the Sinai, so it's simply impossible to list anymore than a fraction of these. With that said, we have chosen dive clubs that have longstanding reputations of excellence, though there are certainly other dive clubs out there worth checking out.

Here are some tips to help you choose a respectable dive club:

- Take your time when choosing clubs and dive sites, and don't let yourself be pressured into accepting something, or someone, you're not comfortable with.
- Don't choose a club based solely on cost. Safety should be the paramount concern; if a dive outfit cuts corners to keep prices low, you could be in danger.
- If you haven't dived for more than three months, take a check-out dive. This is for your own safety (and is required by many operators), and the cost is usually applied towards later dives.
- If you're taking lessons, ensure that the instructor speaks your language well. If you can't understand them, you should request another.
- Check that all equipment is clean and stored away from the sun, and check all hoses, mouthpieces and valves for cuts and leakage.

- Confirm that wet suits are in good condition. Some divers have reported getting hypothermia because of dry, cracked suits.
- Check that there is oxygen on the dive boat in case of accidents.
- If you're in Sinai, ask if the club donates US\$1 per diver each day to the decompression chamber; this is often a reflection of the club's safety consciousness.

### NUWEIBA

**Diving Camp Nuweiba** (Map p482; ☎ 012 249 6002; [www.scuba-college.com](http://www.scuba-college.com)) Located at the Nuweiba Village Hotel in the centre of town.

**Emperor Divers** (☎ 069-352 0321; [www.emperordivers.com](http://www.emperordivers.com)) Situated at the Hilton Nuweiba Coral Resort, this place is part of the multibranch Emperor empire.

### DAHAB

**Desert Divers** (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0500; [www.desert-divers.com](http://www.desert-divers.com); Masbat) A popular place offering a range of diving courses plus extras such as camel safaris, yoga classes and more.

**Fantasea Dive Centre** (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0483; [www.fantaseadiving.net](http://www.fantaseadiving.net); Masbat) This long-standing Australian-Egyptian-owned five-star PADI centre gets consistently good reviews.

**Fish & Friends** (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0720; [www.fishandfriends.com](http://www.fishandfriends.com); Masbat) A small British- and Egyptian-run diving centre that is environmentally conscious and well managed.

**Inmo Divers Home** (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0370; [www.inmodivers.de](http://www.inmodivers.de); Inmo Hotel, Mashraba) Run by Mohammed and Ingrid al-Kabany, this family-friendly outfit was one of the first dive clubs to start operating in Dahab.

**Nesima Dive Centre** (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0320; [www.nesima-resort.com](http://www.nesima-resort.com); Nesima Hotel, Mashraba) PADI. A well-managed and reputable club owned by local environmental activist and veteran diver Sherif Ebeid.

## ACCESSING THE OFFSHORE MARINE PARK ISLANDS

Accessing the waters of Egypt's far south is strictly regulated. Divers must have completed a minimum of 50 dives before entering; night diving or landing on the islands is prohibited; and fishing, spear fishing and the use of gloves are banned.

Due to these restrictions, permission must be given for each trip, and a park ranger will often accompany boats to ensure that the rules are being enforced. In order to carry divers, boats must have special safety equipment, which national-park and Red Sea governorate officials inspect before each trip.

If you've been offered a trip to these remote areas, it's worth checking in with one of the organisations mentioned on p441 to see that the boat is licensed. If you are caught on an unlicensed boat you could have your own equipment or belongings confiscated and find yourself in custody.

## WHERE TO GO?

With so many dive sites and operators to choose from, it can be difficult for first-time Red Sea divers to know where to base themselves. Here are our tips:

- **Nuweiba** (p479) Attracts independent travellers looking for low-key ambience and minimal crowds, though the diving here is not as rich and as varied as other spots in the Sinai and the Red Sea.
- **Dahab** (p479) The preferred base for independent travellers, this Thai-style village is surrounded by spectacular dive sites, and abounds with cheap guesthouses and chilled-out beach bars. It also serves as a quick and easy jumping-off point for diving Ras Mohammad National Park.
- **Sharm el-Sheikh & Na'ama Bay** (p462) Egypt's most famous resort strip is the most accessible base from which to access Ras Mohammed. However, Sharm has gone high-end in recent years, and primarily caters to European package travellers looking for Western-style resorts brimming with four- and five-star amenities.
- **Hurghada** (p422) Egypt's original resort strip, ageing Hurghada has been plagued by over-development and poor environmental management. As a result, serious divers now prefer to base themselves elsewhere, though there are cheap package deals to be had here.
- **Marsa Alam** (p433) This up-and-coming resort town is staking its reputation on its proximity to the south coast dive sites. If you're looking for resort amenities with a remote outpost ambience and the chance for desert excursions, this is your choice.
- **Live-aboards** For on-the-edge diving away from the crowds, true divers know that live-aboards are the only way to travel. If you're looking to explore the far south of the Red Sea (advanced divers only), live-aboards are your only option.

**Penguin Divers** (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 1047; [www.penguindivers.com](http://www.penguindivers.com); Penguin Village, Mashraba) A popular dive club aimed at budget-travellers looking to have fun while saving a few pounds.

**Sunsplash** (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0932; [www.sunsplash-divers.com](http://www.sunsplash-divers.com); Mashraba) PADI. A long-standing German-run diving centre that has trained countless budding divers over the years.

## SHARM EL-SHEIKH & NA'AMA BAY AREA

**Camel Dive Club** (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0700; [www.cameldive.com](http://www.cameldive.com); Camel Hotel, King of Bahrain St, Na'ama Bay) A respected club owned by Sinai diver Hisham Gabr.

**Divers International** (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0865; [www.diversintl.com](http://www.diversintl.com); Sharm–Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay) Large diving outfit offering a wide range of courses and dive excursions.

**Emperor Divers** (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 1734; [www.emperordivers.com](http://www.emperordivers.com); Sharm–Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay) A branch of the five-star outfit offers a courses aimed at families of all ages.

**Oonas Dive Centre** (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0581; [www.oonasdivers.com](http://www.oonasdivers.com); Na'ama Bay) A popular centre at the northeastern end of Na'ama Bay.

**Shark's Bay Diving Club** (off Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0942; [www.sharksbay.com](http://www.sharksbay.com); Shark's Bay) Also known as Umbarak, Shark's Bay is a Bedouin-run centre with years of experience and its own house reef.

**Sinai Divers** (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0697; [www.sinai-divers.com](http://www.sinai-divers.com); Na'ama Bay) Based at the Ghazala Hotel, this is one of Sharm el-Sheikh's most established dive centres.

**Subex** (Map p466; ☎ 069-360 0122; [www.subex.org](http://www.subex.org); Na'ama Bay) CMAS, SSI. Swiss-based dive club at the Mövenpick Hotel with years of experience in the Red Sea.

## HURGHADA

**Aquanaut Red Sea** (Map p426; ☎ 065-354 9891; [www.aquanaut.net](http://www.aquanaut.net); Corniche, Ad-Dahar, Hurghada) Founding member of the Hurghada Quality Dive Club, a group of clubs that tries to maintain basic standards of safety and service.

**Easy Divers** (Map p426; ☎ 065-354 7816; [www.easydivers-redsea.com](http://www.easydivers-redsea.com); Corniche, Ad-Dahar, Hurghada) This British-managed club is active in local environmental conservation.

**Jasmine Diving Centre** (Map p423; ☎ 065-346 0475; [www.jasmin-diving.com](http://www.jasmin-diving.com); Resort Strip, Hurghada) At Jasmine Village, this is another member of the Hurghada Quality Dive Club.

**Red Sea Scuba School** (Map p423; ☎ 065-344 4854; [www.emperordivers.com](http://www.emperordivers.com); Resort Strip, Hurghada) At the Hilton Hurghada Resort, this is a highly reputable dive school.

**Sub Aqua** (Map p423; ☎ 065-346 4101; [www.subaqua-diveteam.de](http://www.subaqua-diveteam.de); Resort Strip, Hurghada) Branch of Diveteam Sub Aqua at the Sofftel Hotel, which specialises in diving around the world.



**Subex** (Map p426; ☎ 065-354 7593; [www.subex.org](http://www.subex.org); Ad-Dahar) A well-known Swiss outfit, based near the California Hotel in Hurghada.

## MARSA ALAM

**Red Sea Diving Safari** (in Cairo ☎ 02-337 1833, 02-337 9942; [www.redsea-divingsafari.com](http://www.redsea-divingsafari.com); Marsa Shagra) PADI. Run by environmentalist and long-time diver Hossam Hassan. Hassan pioneered diving in the Red Sea's deep south, and has years of experience here. He runs three dive camps, at Marsa Shagra, Marsa Nakari and Wadi Lahami (see p434).

## Diving Courses

Most dive clubs in Egypt offer **PADI** ([www.padi.com](http://www.padi.com)) certification, though you'll occasionally find **NAUI** ([www.nauai.org](http://www.nauai.org)), **SSI** ([www.divessi.com](http://www.divessi.com)), **CMAS** ([www.cmas2000.org](http://www.cmas2000.org)) and **BSAC** ([www.bsac.com](http://www.bsac.com)). Generally, PADI open-water dive courses take five (intensive) days, and cost between US\$250 and US\$370. When comparing prices, check to see whether the certification fee and books are included.

Beginner courses are designed to drum into you things that have to become second nature when you're underwater. They usually consist of classroom work, where you learn the principles and basic knowledge needed to dive, followed by training in a confined body of water, such as a pool, before heading out to the open sea. If you've never dived before and want to give it a try before you commit yourself, all dive clubs offer introductory dives for between US\$40 and US\$50, including equipment.

In addition to basic certification, most of the well-established clubs on the coast also offer a variety of more advanced courses as well as professional-level courses or training in technical diving.

## Live-Aboards

The vast majority of the clubs listed can organise dive safaris to remote sites ranging

from one night to two weeks. The cost of these live-aboard dive safaris (also known as marine safaris) varies according to the boat and the destination, with the more remote sites in the far south generally the most expensive. While you won't see much of terrestrial Egypt, they allow you to access a greater range of dive sites, including many more distant destinations that are too far to explore as day trips.

As a general rule, you should always ask to see the boat before agreeing to sail on it. Also, if a trip is very cheap, check whether or not the cost of diving and food are included. Furthermore, the Red Sea Association for Diving & Watersports (RSADW) has the following two rules in place for its jurisdictional area:

- There should be a diver-guide ratio of one guide to every 12 divers (or every eight divers in marine park areas).
- Divers on live-aboards entering marine park areas must be experienced with a minimum of 50 logged dives, as well as insurance coverage.

While it's quite possible to book yourself a basic package on a live-aboard after arriving in Egypt, there are numerous agencies that specialise in Red Sea diving holidays. Here is a small sampling:

**Crusader Travel** (in UK ☎ 020-8744 0474; [www.divers.co.uk](http://www.divers.co.uk)) Diving packages in the Red Sea, including diving for people with disabilities.

**Explorers Tours** (in UK ☎ 0845-644 7090; [www.explorers.co.uk](http://www.explorers.co.uk)) Diving packages and live-aboards around Sharm el-Sheik, Dahab and elsewhere in the northern Red Sea.

**Oonasdivers** (in UK ☎ 01323-648924; [www.oonasdivers.com](http://www.oonasdivers.com)) Diving tours based at Na'ama Bay, Red Sea diving safaris from the Marsa Alam region and live-aboard trips.

**Scubasnacks Diving Safaris** (in UK ☎ 0870-746 1266; [www.scuba-diving.safaris.co.uk](http://www.scuba-diving.safaris.co.uk)) A full range of live-aboard safaris covering northern and southern Red Sea dive sites.

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# Sinai



Here, not for the first time, I fell deeply in love with the landscape...I longed to reach out and stroke the great gaunt flanks of the mountain falling away into bewildering foot-hills and plains of dazzling sand. Africa and Asia might watch with jealous eyes, I heeded them not.

*GW Murray, Dare Me to the Desert (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967)*

Sinai, a region of stark beauty, has been a place of refuge, conflict and curiosity for thousands of years. Wedged between Africa and Asia, it is an intercontinental crossroads *par excellence* – prophets, nomads, exiles and conquerors have all left their footprints here.

Sinai is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, and the Gulfs of Aqaba and Suez to the east and west. From the Red Sea coasts, rows of barren, red-brown mountains fill the southern interior. Heading north, the dry desert plains change into many-hued panoramas under the rays of the morning and evening sun. Sinai abounds with contrasts, but never ceases to captivate.

The majority of international tourists head to the glitzy European-style resorts of Sharm el-Sheikh, of which there are literally hundreds vying for beach space. Most are amenable enough places for sea-and-sand holidays, though independent travellers prefer the eternally laid-back town of Dahab. Sinai is also a convenient jumping-off point for southern Jordan, home to the rose-red city of Petra, one of the New Seven Wonders of the World.

Of course, the real charm of Sinai is its stunning desert and marine environments – among the highlights are snorkelling or diving amid teeming coral reefs, close-up encounters with traditional Bedouin culture and following pilgrims' roads to biblical sites. Whatever captures your fancy, however, a visit to Sinai will be one of the most memorable parts of your Egyptian travels.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Gorge yourself on banana pancakes by the oceanside in the backpacker paradise of **Dahab** (p472)
- Dive everything from coral mountains to ghostly shipwrecks in **Ras Mohammed National Park** (p460)
- Climb **Mt Sinai** (p492), the legendary mountain of biblical proportions
- Follow the footsteps of centuries of pilgrims on a visit to **St Katherine's Monastery** (p490)
- Leave Egypt behind (for a few days) on an excursion to the legendary city of **Petra** (p486)



## History

Some 40 million years ago the African and Arabian continental plates began to move apart, creating the relatively shallow (95m deep) Gulf of Suez and the much deeper (1800m) Gulf of Aqaba. The Gulf of Aqaba, which varies from 14km to 25km in width, is part of a rift (a crack in the top layer of the earth) that extends 6000km from the Dead Sea, on the border between Israel and Jordan, through the Red Sea, Ethiopia, Kenya, and all the way down to Mozambique in southern Africa.

In Pharaonic times the quarries of Sinai provided great quantities of turquoise, gold and copper. The importance of this 'Land of Turquoise' also made it the goal of empire builders as well as the setting for countless wars. Acting as a link between Asia and Africa, it was of strategic value – many military forces marched along its northern coastline as they travelled to or from what is now known as Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

For many people, Sinai is first and foremost the 'great and terrible wilderness' of the Bible, across which the Israelites journeyed in search of the Promised Land, having been delivered from the Egyptian army by the celebrated parting of the Red Sea that allowed the 'Children of Israel' to safely gain access to the dry land of Sinai. It was here that God is said to have first spoken to Moses from a burning bush and it was at the summit of Mt Sinai that God delivered his Ten Commandments to Moses:

Tell the children of Israel; Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians... If ye will obey my voice and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

And Mount Sinai was altogether in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the whole mount quaked greatly... And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai... and called Moses up to the top of the mount... And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

*Exodus 19:4-6; 19:18-20:3*

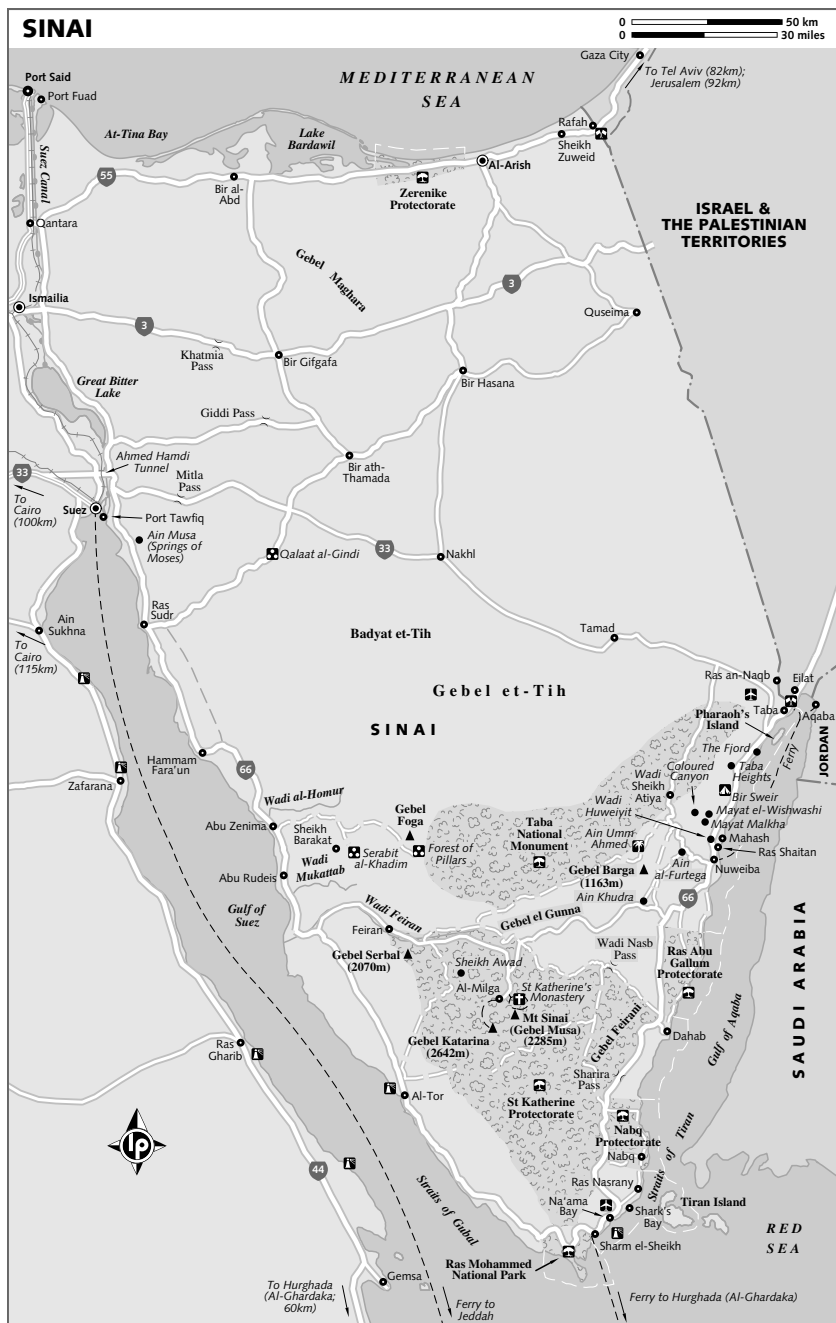
Early in the Christian era, Sinai was a place for Christian Egyptians to escape Roman persecution. Monasticism is thought to have begun here as early as the 3rd century AD, with most hermits settling in the caves of Wadi Feiran, on the assumption that Gebel Serbal, located nearby, was in fact the 'Mountain of God'. By the time the Emperor Justinian founded a monastery at the foot of Mt Sinai (Gebel Musa) in the 6th century, it had been decided that this was the mountain on which God had spoken. For centuries thereafter, the peninsula became a place of pilgrimage. It later became one of the routes taken to Mecca by Muslim pilgrims. Until recently the majority of its inhabitants were Bedouin, the only people who are capable of surviving in the harsh environment of the peninsula.

In recent years Sinai has become the focus of development and 'reconstruction' in much the same way that the New Valley in the Western Desert was during the 1970s and 1980s, when landless *jellaheen* (peasant farmers) from an overcrowded Nile Valley were encouraged to move to the oases. The government has built a new pipeline, called the Al-Salam Canal, to bring fresh water from the Suez Canal to various areas of North Sinai that have been targeted for resettlement. Agriculture is to be expanded dramatically, roads are being paved and desalination plants are being installed in coastal towns.

Tourism, too, has brought great changes, especially around the Gulf of Aqaba. Surveys estimate that the southern tourist town of Sharm el-Sheikh has seen a tenfold population increase in the past 15 years, and the small villages of Dahab and Nuweiba have grown into sprawling beachfront tourist towns. The Bedouin, the traditional inhabitants of Sinai, are now a minority in their native land. Marginalised by Cairo-based tour operators and a suspicious and aggressive police force, they have little means to resist all this change.

## Climate

Sinai's climate is extreme: on one hand it can get very hot, so remember always to carry



water, use copious amounts of sunblock and wear sensible clothes to avoid sunburn (wearing a T-shirt while snorkelling is advisable), as well as a hat or scarf. On the other hand, while summer temperatures can climb to 50°C, it gets very cold at night, and the mountains can be freezing during the day. Come prepared with warm clothing, especially if you'll be trekking or climbing Mt Sinai. Camping out in winter requires a warm sleeping bag and a good jacket – snow is frequent at this time of year.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Because of the peninsula's unique position between cultures and continents, its occasionally tumultuous history, its mountainous terrain and – in more recent times – its tourist masses, Sinai has traditionally had a higher security profile than other parts of the country.

In recent years, the region of Sinai has been thrust into the international spotlight following a string of high-profile bombings. On 7 October 2004, three bomb attacks in the Taba area killed 34 people and injured over 150 people. The worst attack occurred when a truck drove into the lobby of the Taba Hilton and exploded – 10 floors of the hotel collapsed following the blast. According to the Egyptian government, the bombers were Palestinians who had tried to enter Israel to carry out attacks there but were unsuccessful.

On 23 July 2005 a series of coordinated bombings in the tourist market of Sharm el-Sheikh killed 88 people and injured close to 200 people. The bombing coincided with Egypt's Revolution Day, which commemorates Nasser's 1952 overthrow of King Farouk – it was the deadliest terrorist action in the country's history. A group calling itself the 'Abdullah Azzam Brigades' was the first to claim responsibility for the attacks. Additional claims were later made by two other groups calling themselves the 'Tawhid and Jihad Group in Egypt' and 'Holy Warriors of Egypt'.

On 24 April 2006, three bombs exploded in Dahab – two near the bridge in the centre of town and one near the Ghazala Supermarket – which killed 23 people and injured over 75 people. The attacks occurred during a public holiday where crowds were celebrating Sham Al-Nasseim

(Spring festival), and were carried out by Bedouin suicide bombers. The Egyptian government later stated that these attacks were the work of an organisation called Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad).

It is impossible to offer anything other than blind speculation bordering on irrational fear regarding the possibility of a future terrorist attack in Sinai. With that said, it's worth checking your embassy's travel advisory to get an update on the situation before making any plans. However, it's important to remember that the overwhelming majority of travellers to Sinai enjoy their visits without incident.

On a different note, while G-strings and topless sunbathing seem to be *de rigueur* for some tourist groups in Sharm el-Sheikh, women should be aware that Egypt is a conservative country and tourists have been assaulted in Sinai. While rape is rare, it does occur, so do not sunbathe alone in an isolated location, and try to choose a somewhat modest bathing costume (best to leave the string bikini at home!). You should also keep in mind that as well as offending the local people, topless sunbathing is illegal in Sinai, as well as in the rest of Egypt.

## Getting There & Away

Sinai's international air hub is at Sharm el-Sheikh, which receives regular charters from Europe in addition to local flights. There is also an international airport in Taba, though it currently receives only occasional charter flights. For overland travel, the peninsula is linked to the mainland by the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel, and by the Mubarak Peace Suspension Bridge, both of which connect to main arteries to Cairo. The 1.6km-long tunnel, which goes under the Suez Canal near Suez, was completed in 1982 and named after a martyr of the 1973 war. It is open 24 hours. There are frequent buses connecting Cairo and other destinations with all major towns on the Sinai Peninsula. A railway has been built to part of North Sinai, but there are no passenger services.

## Getting Around

Because of Sinai's rugged landscape, paved roads link only the permanent settlements,

## PROTECTING SINAI'S FRAGILE ECOSYSTEMS

Although much of Sinai is made up of hot, dry desert, it is full of life. Craggy mountains are sliced by dry gravel wadis in which sprout the odd acacia tree or clump of gnarled tamarisk, while a surprisingly rich variety of plants tenuously cling to the loose, sandy flanks of coastal dunes. Once every few years, when storm clouds gather over the mountains and dump buckets of water onto this parched landscape, the entire scene is transformed into a sea of greenery as seeds that have lain dormant for months burst into life. For Sinai's wildlife, such as the gazelle and rock hyrax (as well as for the goats herded by local Bedouin people), these rare occasions are times of plenty.

Yet these fragile ecosystems – which depend on a delicate balance of conditions for their survival – have come under increasing threat from the rapid onslaught of tourism. Until relatively recently, the only people to wander through this region were Bedouin on camels. Now adventure seekers in ever-multiplying numbers are ploughing their way through in 4WDs and quad bikes (four-wheeled motorcycles) in search of pristine spots, and in so doing, churning up the soil, uprooting plants and contributing to erosion.

In order to minimise the environmental damage, the government has banned vehicles from going off road in certain areas, including Ras Mohammed National Park and the protected areas of Nabq, Ras Abu Gallum and Taba. Yet enforcement in Sinai's vast wilderness areas is difficult, and while rangers do patrol protectorates, a large part of the responsibility is left with visitors to follow the rules. To do your part, try not to be persuaded by over-eager guides wanting to show you something that's off the beaten track. If you really want to explore the region in depth, do it in the age-old fashion – go on foot or by camel, with the necessary provisions. Also be aware of rubbish, which has become an increasingly serious threat to Sinai's ecosystems. Dive clubs located in Dahab and Sharm el-Sheikh organise regular rubbish dives, and always find far more than they can collect. You should carry out all your litter with you, and dispose of it thoughtfully. And wherever you visit, treat Sinai's ecosystems – both those above and below the sea – with care.

and public transport is not as regular as elsewhere in Egypt. You can get to all major destinations if you travel by bus, but in many cases there are only a couple of connections each day – and sometimes there is only one. Service taxis are a popular means of transport in northern Sinai (primarily along the route connecting Rafah and Al-Arish with Suez and Cairo). Elsewhere on the peninsula, with the exception of the coastal route to Al-Tor, it is only possible to arrange a service taxi by bargaining and paying far more than would be the case over similar distances elsewhere in Egypt.

If you are driving yourself, you will need to exercise caution at all times. Stick to tracks when going off the road, as there are still mines left over from the wars with Israel. When at the wheel in winter, remember that it rains with some frequency in Sinai, and flash floods often wash out paved roads, particularly around Wadi Feiran. Bus drivers are a good source of information on trouble spots.

## COAST

A barren coastline of extraordinary beauty, the Sinai Coast is the meeting spot of choice for the world's political leaders, a booming package-tourism destination and nirvana for the members of the international diving fraternity. Over the past several millennia some of human history's most significant events have played out against these isolated shores, and today the region remains sacred to all the world's major monotheistic religions. Of course, this doesn't alter the simple fact that the majority of international travellers make regular pilgrimages to the coast for its isolated beaches, superb coral reefs and unique Bedouin culture.

### AIN MUSA

Ain Musa or the 'Springs of Moses' is said to be the place where Moses and the Israelites camped after crossing into Sinai, and where Moses – on discovering that the water was too bitter to drink – took the advice of God and threw a special tree into the springs, miracu-



lously sweetening the water. Unfortunately, however, only one of the 12 original springs still exists, and is now sadly filled with litter and surrounded by a stand of date palms.

The site is about 25km south of the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel, just off the main road and signposted only in Arabic. It is watched over by an officer from the antiquities department, together with a group of eager guides. Camping at the site is possible in theory, but unappealing due to the litter, the proximity of the roadway and a nearby settlement. There's also no drinkable water (as the spring water is too brackish, with no sign of Moses' special tree).

It's best to visit with your own vehicle, or on a tour organised through one of the hotels in Ras Sudr (below). All buses heading south pass by here and will drop you off, though it can be difficult to find onward transport.

## RAS SUDR

☎ 069

Ras Sudr (or simply Sudr) was originally developed as the base town for one of Egypt's largest oil refineries, though its coastline and proximity to Cairo have spurred its transition into a resort area. Due to the lack of offshore reefs, the international community has mostly bypassed Sudr, though wealthy Cairene families have been more than happy to snatch up coastal time-share villas. However, with uninterrupted winds blowing at mostly force five or six, Sudr does enjoy a fine reputation among windsurfers.

The town centre, which lies just off the main highway, boasts several small restaurants, a post office, a bank and various small shops. Well away from here, to the south and north, are a handful of ageing resorts interspersed with blocks of holiday villas.

One of the most famous places for wind- and kite-surfing, **Moon Beach** (☎ 581 0088; www.moonbeachretreat.com; 7-night all-inclusive package per person US\$650; ☹ ☹ ) is where the British magazine *Boards* tests equipment each year. Located on the Gulf of Suez just off the main coastal road, Moon Beach has beachfront bungalows with all the trimmings. Additionally, there's a professionally staffed and stocked wind- and kite-surfing centre, as well as a fully licensed school for budding surfers of all kinds. Nightly rates and shorter-stay packages are available – contact Moon Beach for more information.

East Delta has a bus station along the main road about 500m south of the main junction.

Buses to Cairo (££25, two to three hours) depart at 7.30am, 2pm and 4pm. A taxi from the bus station in Ras Sudr to Moon Beach costs about ££25 to ££30.

## HAMMAM FARA'UN

Hammam Fara'un, or Pharaoh's Bath, is the site of a hot-springs complex that is commonly used by local Bedouin as a cure for various ailments ranging from arthritis to rheumatism. The springs are located in a cave beside the beach, but are too hot for all but the most dedicated hot-springs fans. Women who decide to brave the waters should avoid swimming in anything more daring than leggings and a baggy T-shirt.

Hammam Fara'un is about 50km south of Ras Sudr, and signposted only in Arabic. It's best to visit with your own transport or with a tour from Moon Beach (left), especially since there is no place to stay near the springs.

## AL-TOR

☎ 069

Al-Tor, also known as Tur Sinai, has been a significant port since ancient times, though today it primarily serves as the administrative capital of the South Sinai Governorate. With stiff and constant breezes similar to those buffeting the coastline further north around Ras Sudr, Al-Tor has been trying in recent years to establish itself as a wind- and kite-surfing destination.

National Bank of Egypt has a branch with an ATM; it's in the town centre near the post office. If you've overstayed your welcome in Egypt, you can extend your visa at the Mogamma, the large administrative building on the main road in the town centre.

About 5km from town are some hot springs known as **Hammam Musa** (admission ££20), which tradition holds to have been one of the possible stopping points used by Moses and the Israelites on their journey through Sinai. It's possible to bathe in the springs, and there are some paved walkways, a changing area and a small café.

The focal point of wind- and kite-surfing in Al-Tor is the **Moses Bay Hotel** (☎ 377 4343; www.mosesbayeltor.com; 7-night all-inclusive package per person US\$200; ☹ ☹ ), which also happens to be the nicest place in the area. Located approximately 3km from town smack dab on the beach, Moses Bay has its own private stretch of sand, pleasant rooms, a restaurant, and a wind- and kite-surfing centre. Although it's not as upscale as

## HISTORY'S FOOTPRINTS

Sinai's rugged expanses are dotted with traces of early settlements and pilgrimage routes. One of the most impressive sites is **Serabit al-Khadim**, a ruined Pharaonic temple surrounded by ancient turquoise mines and starkly beautiful landscapes. Despite the remoteness of the location, turquoise was mined here as far back as the Old Kingdom. The temple itself dates back to the 12th dynasty and is dedicated to the goddess Hathor. Beside it is a New Kingdom shrine to Sopdu, god of the Eastern Desert. Throughout the temple's many courts, inscriptions list the temple's benefactors, including Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BC) and Tuthmosis III (1479–1425 BC). It is thought to have been abandoned during the reign of Ramses VII.

Serabit al-Khadim can be reached via an unsignposted track just south of the coastal settlement of Abu Zenima or, more interestingly, from a track branching north off the road running east through Wadi Feiran via **Wadi Mukattab** (Valley of Inscriptions), which itself is well worth a visit. Here Sinai's largest collection of rock inscriptions and stelae, some dating back to the 3rd dynasty, give further evidence of ancient turquoise mining activities. Unfortunately, many of the workings and stelae were damaged when the British unsuccessfully tried to revive the mines in 1901.

Heading inland from Serabit al-Khadim, another track takes you through the colourful wadis of **Gebel Foga** to the cliffs that edge Gebel et-Tih and the **Forest of Pillars**, a naturally occurring phenomenon accessible with 4WD and camel via a long track.

All of these destinations require guides and a 4WD. The most straightforward way to visit is to arrange a jeep trip with Moon Beach resort (p459), or with an outfit in Na'ama Bay.

If you're travelling in your own vehicle, you can head into the village of **Sheikh Barakat** and get a guide: coming from Ras Sudr, follow the marked track that leads off into the desert, just south of Abu Zenima, for about 39km. When you see a white dome on your right, take the track to your left. After about 3km you'll come to Sheikh Barakat, where you can camp (the closest hotels are in Al-Tor and Ras Sudr), and organise a guide to take you the remaining 7km to the trail leading up to Serabit al-Khadim. At the end of this you'll need to park your vehicle and climb for about an hour. The track up the mountain is steep at times and involves a bit of scrambling, but can be handled by anyone who is reasonably fit. Coming from Wadi Feiran, you can negotiate for a guide in the village of Feiran.

Moon Beach, it offers great value assuming you're prepared to sacrifice a bit on the glitz.

The East Delta bus station is along the main road at the northern edge of town opposite the hospital, and about 700m from the Delmon Hotel. Buses depart from 7am onwards throughout the day to Sharm el-Sheikh (£12 to £15, 1½ hours). From the bus station, you can hire a pick-up for £10 to take you to the Moses Bay Hotel, or you can arrange transport directly with the hotel.

## RAS MOHAMMED NATIONAL PARK

About 20km west of Sharm el-Sheikh on the road from Al-Tor lies the headland of **Ras Mohammed National Park** (admission per person US\$5, per vehicle additional US\$5; ☎ 8am–5pm), named by local fishermen for a cliff that resembles a man's profile. The waters surrounding the peninsula are considered the jewel in the crown of the Red Sea. The park is inundated with more than 50,000 visitors annually, enticed

by the prospect of marvelling at some of the world's most spectacular coral-reef ecosystems, including a profusion of coral species and teeming marine life. Most, if not all, of the Red Sea's 1000 species of fish can be seen in the park's waters, including sought-after pelagics, such as hammerheads, manta rays and whale sharks.

## History

The most ancient corals at Ras Mohammed are fossil reefs dating back some two million years. Because they are similar in composition and structure to present-day reefs, they are an invaluable source of scientific information about changing sea levels and past climatic conditions.

Ras Mohammed was declared a marine reserve in 1983 and became Egypt's first national park in 1989. At the time of its declaration, the park was the subject of controversy, but since then has proved its value in prevent-

ing the area's fragile environment from being destroyed by the sort of development that has transformed the Sharm el-Sheikh coast. Hotels are not permitted, only 12% of the park is accessible to visitors and limits are applied to the number of dive boats allowed.

### Orientation & Information

Ras Mohammed occupies a total of 480 sq km of land and sea, including the desert in and around the *ras* (headland), Tiran Island, and the shoreline between Sharm el-Sheikh harbour and Nabq Protectorate.

You'll need your passport to enter the park. Visitors on Sinai-only permits cannot go to Ras Mohammed overland as it is beyond the Sharm el-Sheikh boundary, but should not have any problem on dive boat trips – check with the dive clubs if you have any doubts.

The entrance to the park is about 20km from the reefs. A **visitors' centre** (☎ 10am-sunset Sat-Thu) with a restaurant is clearly marked to the left of the main access road in an area known as Marsa Ghoslane. Videos are shown here, and you may be able to pick up a booklet highlighting local fauna. The park is laid out

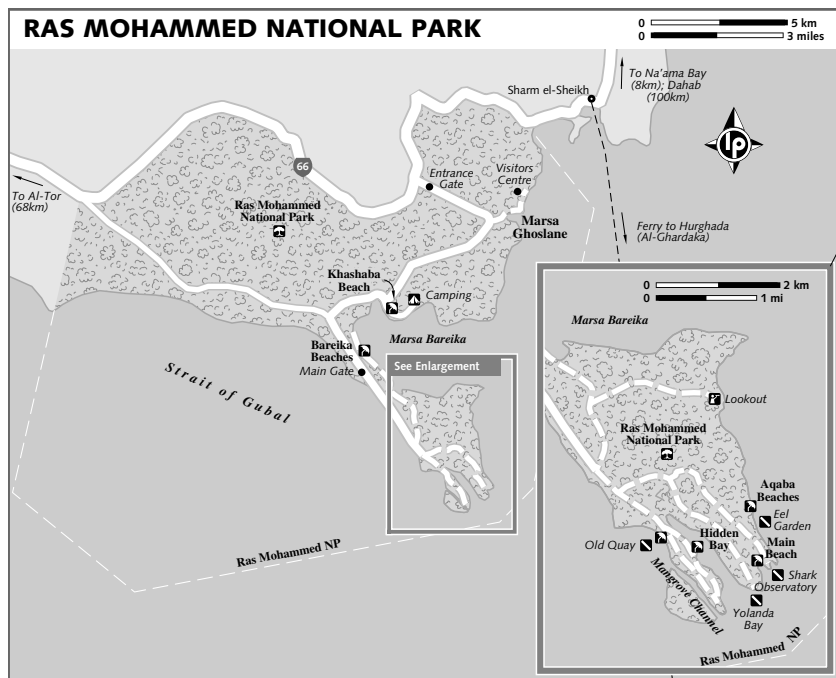
with colour-coded trails and clearly marked pictograms of what each site offers.

### Activities

If you're planning to dive in Ras Mohammed, you will need to arrive via a boat tour or a live-aboard, both of which typically depart from Sharm el-Sheikh (p462) or Dahab (p472). For more information on dive operators, as well as an overview of the best dive sites in the national park, see p447.

If you arrive at the national park by private car, it's possible to hike to a variety of wilderness beaches and go snorkelling on a variety of offshore reefs – you will need to bring your own equipment.

At the park's laboratory, a pink trail leads to **Khashaba Beach** and a camping area. Yellow arrows lead to the sandy beaches and calm waters of **Marsa Bareika**, excellent for snorkelling and safe for children. Blue arrows take you to **Main Beach**, which gets crowded with day visitors, but remains one of the best places to see vertical coral walls. Brown arrows lead to **Aqaba Beaches**, which border the **Eel Garden**, named after a colony of garden eels 20m



down. Just beyond here, orange arrows lead to **Shark Observatory**, a cliff-top area where you can sometimes see sharks as they feed from Ras Mohammed's rich offerings. The red arrows lead to **Yolanda Bay**, another beach with good snorkelling, and green arrows lead to the **Mangrove Channel** and **Hidden Bay** and to **Old Quay**, a spectacular vertical reef teeming with fish and accessible to snorkellers.

## Sleeping

Camping is permitted in designated areas, with permits (per person US\$5) available from the entrance gate. You'll need to bring all supplies with you; the nearest shops are in Sharm el-Sheikh. If you camp, respect the environment and clean up. In particular, don't bury toilet paper or rubbish, as the relentless winds here mean that nothing stays under the sand for long. Camp rules are enforced by rangers and if you're caught violating them, you may be prosecuted.

## Getting There & Around

If you don't have a car, you can hire a taxi from Sharm el-Sheikh to bring you here, but expect to pay at least ££150 for the day. If you don't mind company, the easiest option is to join one of the many day tours by jeep or bus from Sharm el-Sheikh and Na'ama Bay, most of which will drop you at the beaches and snorkelling sites. Expect to pay from ££150. Alternatively, divers are often brought in by boat from tourist centres on the Red Sea.

To move around the park you'll need a vehicle. Access is restricted to certain parts of the park and, for conservation reasons, it's forbidden to leave the official tracks.

## SHARM EL-SHEIKH & NA'AMA BAY

☎ 069

The southern coast of the Gulf of Aqaba, between Tiran Island and Ras Mohammed National Park, features some of the world's most amazing underwater scenery. The crystal-clear waters, rare and lovely reefs and an incredible variety of exotic fish darting in and out of the colourful coral have made this a snorkelling and scuba-diving paradise, attracting visitors from all over the globe. Unfortunately, the brash resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh, which comprises the two adjacent bays of Na'ama Bay and Sharm al-Maya, does not reflect this underwater beauty.

Known simply as Sharm by package travellers the world over, Sinai's largest and most famous resort destination has undergone an ill-fated transformation in recent years. What was once a small village that attracted hardcore divers is now a gated Las Vegas-style strip with all the charm of a shopping mall. Today huge concrete blocks of hotels jockey with each other for prime beach space, while wave upon wave of primarily European holiday-makers splash about in pools ringed by security walls. Even worse is the havoc being wrought on the surrounding area as lots are divvied up for condos, and the urban sprawl threatens to transform more of the coastline.

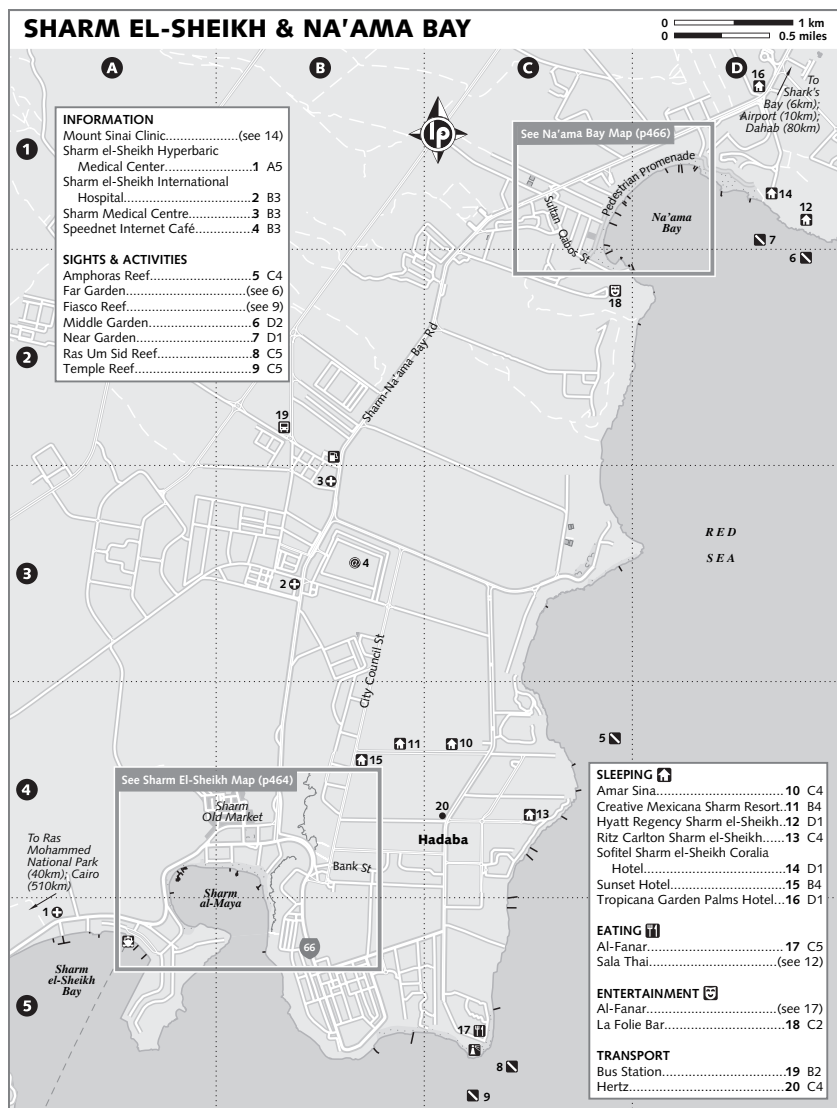
It's easy to criticise Sharm, but it is what it is. If you want to indulge in resort living, party with foreigners into the wee hours of the morning and dine on Western food to your heart's content, welcome to paradise. Sharm is shaping up to be an exclusive European enclave on the edge of Sinai, and it's just a matter of time before any semblance of Egyptian identity is erased. However, if you consider yourself an independent traveller, you'd be wise to skip Sharm, passing through only en route to the more low-key resort town of Dahab (p472).

It's something of a tragedy that Sharm's truly exquisite diving has been overshadowed by irresponsible tourist development. However, offshore dive sites in both Sharm and the adjacent Ras Mohammed National Park are easily accessible by live-aboards, or even from boat trips departing from Dahab. For more information on diving in the Red Sea, see p439.

## Orientation

Most resorts are clustered along or just inland from the beach at Na'ama Bay. If you enjoy being in the centre of the action and don't mind the crush of pedestrians, central Na'ama Bay – consisting of a beachfront promenade and a pedestrians-only area lined with hotels, restaurants and shops – is the most convenient base. The further away from this central strip you go, the quieter things become: most of the resorts lining the coast north of Na'ama Bay are comparatively tranquil upscale retreats with their own patch of sand and easy taxi access to the central area.

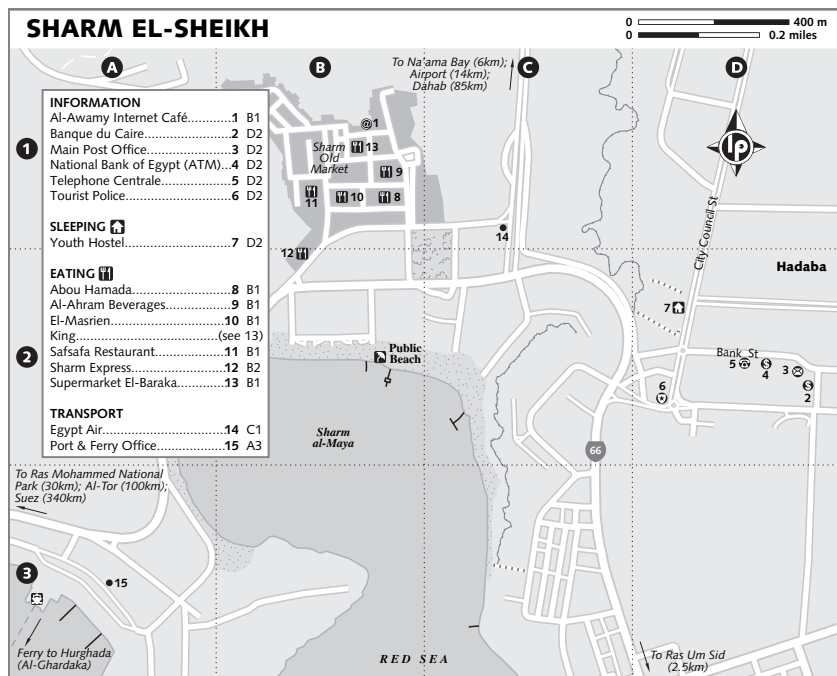
Sharm al-Maya, about 6km west of Na'ama Bay, centres on a large, walled market area known as Sharm Old Market, with a selection



of inexpensive eateries. A large section of the Old Market area was badly damaged in the tragic bombings of July 2005 and has been heavily rebuilt. On the southwestern edge of Sharm al-Maya is the port.

Spread out on a cliff top above Sharm al-Maya is the administrative area of Hadaba, which is rimmed by a barren network of

long, treeless avenues lined with primarily midrange resorts. These are targeted at travellers flying in directly from Europe, and are connected to the beach via shuttle bus. To the southeast of the administrative area is Ras Um Sid, with an agreeable stretch of coastline, a lighthouse and a row of upmarket hotels.



## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Al-Ahram Bookshop** (Map p466; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 6-8pm) Sharm el-Sheikh's best-stocked bookshop, with a reasonable selection of books and magazines.

### EMERGENCY

**Ambulance** (☎ 123)

**Tourist police** Hadaba (Map p464; ☎ 366 0311); Na'ama Bay (Map p466; ☎ 360 0554, 366 0675; booth next to Marina Sharm Hotel)

### INTERNET ACCESS

Many hotels have internet access and there are internet cafés dotted around town.

**Al-Awamy Internet Cafe** (Map p464; Sharm Old Market, Sharm el-Sheikh; per hr EE5; ☎ 24hr)

**Felicitia.Net** (Map p466; Na'ama Bay; per hr EE20; ☎ 24hr) Above the Egyptian American Bank.

**Naama Internet** (Map p466; Na'ama Centre, Na'ama Bay; per hr EE20; ☎ noon-3am)

**Speednet Internet Café** (Map p463; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Sharm el-Sheikh; per hr EE5; ☎ 24hr) In the Delta Sharm complex.

**Yes Business Centre** (Map p466; Na'ama Bay; per hr EE15; ☎ 11am-1am) Between Mall 7 and Avis car rental.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Mount Sinai Clinic** (☎ 012 218 9889; ☎ 24hr); Mövenpick Hotel (Map p466; Na'ama Bay); Sofitel Sharm el-Sheikh Coralina Hotel (Map p463; Na'ama Bay) Specialises in diving-related medical problems as well as ordinary ailments.

**Omar & Omar Pharmacy** (Map p466; ☎ 360 0960; King of Bahrain St, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 24hr) At Shamandura Supermarket.

**Sharm el-Sheikh Hyberbaric Medical Center** (Map p463; ☎ 366 0922/3, 012 212 4292; hyper\_med\_center@sinainet.com.eg; Sharm el-Sheikh; ☎ 24hr)

**Sharm el-Sheikh International Hospital** (Map p463; ☎ 366 0893/4/5; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Sharm el-Sheikh; ☎ 24hr)

**Sharm Medical Center** (Map p463; ☎ 366 1744; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Sharm el-Sheikh; ☎ 24hr) Next to the bus station.

### MONEY

You will find ATMs every few metres in Na'ama Bay, including several in Na'ama Centre (Map p466), as well as ATMs in the



lobbies of most larger hotels. Otherwise, all the major banks have branches in Hadaba.

**Banque du Caire** (Map p464; Hadaba; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu)

**Banque Misr** Hadaba (Map p464; Bank St; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 5-8pm Sun-Thu); Na'ama Bay (Map p466; King of Bahrain St) ATM.

**Commercial International Bank** (Map p466; Na'ama Center, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 9am-1pm & 6-10pm Sat-Thu, 10-11am Fri)

**Egyptian American Bank** (Map p466; ☎ 360 1423; Na'ama Bay; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Mon-Thu) American Express agent; diagonally opposite Cataract Resort.

**National Bank of Egypt** Hadaba (Map p464; Bank St; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm & 6-9pm Fri); Na'ama Bay (Map p466; Na'ama Centre; ☎ 6pm-1am) ATM.

**Thomas Cook** (Map p466; ☎ 360 1808; Gafy Mall, Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-10pm) Just west of Sinai Star Hotel.

**Western Union** (Map p466; ☎ 364 0466; Rosetta Hotel, Na'ama Bay; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-10pm Sat-Thu, 3-10pm Fri)

## POST

**Main post office** (Map p464; Bank St, Hadaba; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

## TELEPHONE

There are several cardphones in Na'ama Bay and at least two on the beachfront promenade. Cards can be bought everywhere, but watch out for overcharging by shopkeepers. There are also several call centres where you can dial internationally for ££4 to ££7 per minute.

**Telephone centrale** (Map p464; Bank St, Hadaba; ☎ 24hr).

## Dangers & Annoyances

In July 2005, three terrorist bombs exploded in Sharm el-Sheikh, killing 88 people and injuring over 200. The worst damage was in the Sharm Old Market area and near the Ghazala Hotel in Na'ama Bay. In the wake of the bombings, the Egyptian government increased security at all Sharm el-Sheikh hotels and began building a fence around the town. The government has also been working to revive tourism to the city with incentives ranging from discounted flight prices to free concerts. At the time of writing, reconstruction of the affected establishments was nearly complete, and tourist numbers were returning to normal, although the scars of the attack clearly remain.

For an overview of the history of terrorism in Sinai, see p457.

## Activities

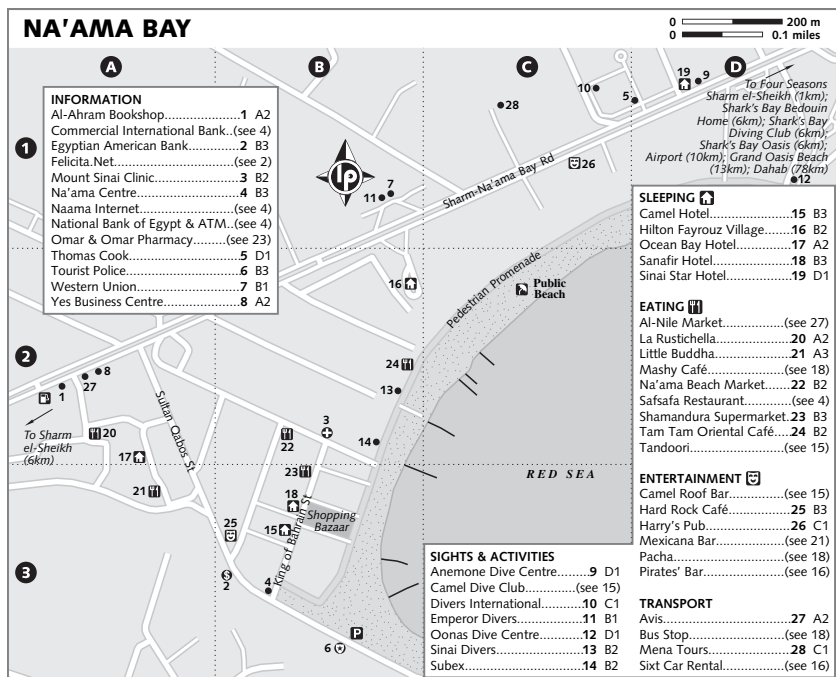
### SNORKELLING & DIVING

Snorkelling in the waters around Sharm is excellent. While there are some easily accessed reefs in central Na'ama Bay, it's better to make your way to the more impressive **Near and Middle Gardens** (Map p463), or the even more beautiful **Far Garden** (Map p463). The Near Garden is around the point at the northern end of the bay just below the Sofitel hotel, and the Middle and Far Gardens are below the Hyatt Regency hotel. All can be reached on foot, or you can take a boat organised by one of the diving centres; bring plenty of drinking water and sunblock along.

Another prime spot for snorkelling is **Ras Um Sid Reef** (Map p463), near the lighthouse at Sharm el-Sheikh, which is known for its fan corals and plethora of fish, although the small beach is parcelled up between several resorts and can get quite crowded. Apart from Ras Um Sid Reef, the popular **Temple and Fiasco Reefs** (Map p463) are within easy swimming distance, and while they're primarily dive destinations, snorkellers can still get a taste of their flora and fauna. Beside the Ritz Carlton hotel is **Amphoras Reef** (Map p463), another popular snorkelling spot. On the road to the airport, **Shark's Bay** also has a good reef, which is frequented by large rays in springtime. Tickets for beach use cost ££15, and are issued at the camps on the left side of the beach.

It's possible to get to more distant sites by joining a dive boat, which can be arranged at most local dive clubs; expect to pay US\$25 to US\$50 for a day trip. Many of the clubs also do snorkelling trips to Ras Mohammed National Park (p461), with prices starting at about US\$50. While there is some excellent snorkelling in the park, be sure that you'll be taken to a suitable site, as some dive destinations are not always ideal for snorkellers, and some areas have strong currents that are not for the faint-hearted.

Most dive clubs rent out masks, snorkels and fins. Remember that the same reef-protection rules apply to snorkellers as to divers. As snorkellers tend to stick to shallower waters, their fins often do more damage to reefs than those of divers, so take care to keep your distance from the corals. For more on reef-protection measures, see the boxed text (p450).



For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, including recommended operators and dive sites, see p439.

## WATER SPORTS

Most major hotels offer a range of other water sports, including sailing lessons, windsurfing, parasailing, pedalos, banana boats and glass-bottom boats. Most hotels also have beach access – either their own stretch of waterfront, or by agreement with another resort. Check when booking, as the beaches of some hotels are fairly distant (up to 10km) from the hotel itself and can only be accessed via shuttle. There is a narrow stretch of public beach diagonally opposite Hilton Fayrouz Village on Na'ama Bay, but it is so crowded with rental chairs that it is difficult to see the sand. Keep in mind that it's illegal to swim off Na'ama Bay after 11pm, and that despite all the development, the beaches and waters of Na'ama Bay are part of the Ras Mohammed National Park and its regulations apply here.

In Sharm al-Maya there is also a stretch of public beach. However, there's no reef,

and women swimming here are likely to be ogled by young Egyptian men.

## CAMEL RIDES

Camel rides to 'traditional Bedouin villages' can be easily arranged with most hotels, but it's usually a better and more authentic experience if you can negotiate treks directly with the Bedouin in Dahab (p475) or Nuweiba (p481). If you decide to try one from Sharm, expect to pay US\$40 to US\$60, and to find yourself in the midst of a large group.

## HORSE RIDING

Several top-end hotels, including **Sofitel Sharm el-Sheikh Coralina Hotel** (Map p463; ☎ 360 0081; [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com); Na'ama Bay), offer horse riding from about US\$20 to \$30 per hour.

## Tours

Almost all travel agencies and large hotels organise jeep or bus trips to St Katherine's Monastery (p490), and to desert attractions such as the Coloured Canyon (p475). However, most of the guides are Nile Valley dwellers, not Bedouin, and the groups are

often large. Better, more sensitive trips can be arranged from Dahab and Nuweiba.

## Sleeping

Sharm el-Sheikh and the surrounding area has one of the greatest concentration of hotels in Egypt, though you're going to have to pay to play here. Budget accommodation is virtually nonexistent, and the variety of options isn't much better if you're not a fan of the all-inclusive resort.

If you're travelling on a budget, there's little choice beyond the youth hostel in Sharm el-Sheikh and a camp in Shark's Bay. Again, Sharm is unashamedly budget unfriendly, so if you're serious about pinching your pennies, it's probably wise to continue on to Dahab.

If you're looking for a decent hotel that won't break the bank, a cluster of midrange hotels has sprung up in the area rimming Hadaba. While lacking ambience – most hotels are spread along or near a wide concrete strip – prices are more reasonable than on the waterfront, and most places have shuttle buses to take guests to the beach at Ras Um Sid or to Na'ama Bay. Beachfront hotels in Na'ama Bay are generally pricey affairs, though for a better deal, choose one that's set back a bit.

The entire coast from Na'ama Bay northwards towards the airport has been the target of a massive construction boom in recent years, and is now home to a large number of five-star resorts. Flaunting luxury names, all are geared to visitors on all-inclusive tours, and are usually booked from outside Egypt or as part of a package.

The Shark's Bay area, about 6km north-east of Na'ama Bay, was once home to a quiet Bedouin village, though over the past decade has been developed with amazing rapidity. Today this stretch of coast is now a row of exclusive luxury hotels – if you're staying at any of these top-end resorts, your every whim will be catered for.

Be advised that the hotel scene in Sharm is changing rapidly, which means that the following information is likely to become outdated quickly. Also keep in mind that prices in Sharm are more volatile than other parts of the country, and are subject to wild fluctuations depending on the number of tourists in town. Although we've tried to give approximate prices for hotels, it's worth noting that cheaper rate are nearly always

available if you book in advance, especially as part of an all-inclusive package.

## BUDGET

**Youth Hostel** (Map p464; ☎ 366 0317; City Council St, Hadaba; r from E£60; ☺) The only attraction of this shabby affair is that it's the cheapest place to stay in the area. Rooms are utterly soulless, but at least a night here won't put you in the poorhouse. It's up on the hill in Hadaba, near the police station and mosque and away from the beach, though frequent minibuses pass by that can take you to Na'ama Bay or Ras Um Sid.

**Shark's Bay Bedouin Home** (off Map p466; ☎ 360 0942; [www.sharksbay.com](http://www.sharksbay.com); sea-view huts s/d/tr US\$12/15/18, cabin s/d from US\$15/20, room s/d/tr US\$30/40/50; ☺) This long-standing Bedouin-owned camp, also known as Shark's Bay Umbi, has a relaxed ambience, simple but clean huts with shared bathrooms up on the cliff, and pricier huts down below with air-con and bathroom. There's also the Bedouin-style tented Shark's Bay Umbi Restaurant (mains E£20 to E£35) overlooking the water. To reach the camp, just tell the taxi driver 'Shark's Bay Bedouin'; expect to pay about E£25 from Na'ama Bay and E£50 from the port at Sharm. If you're driving, take the airport road from town to a right-hand turn-off for the Savoy and Conrad Concorde hotels, follow this road for 400m to the right-hand turn-off for Gardenia Plaza, then turn and continue 2km further to Shark's Bay.

## MIDRANGE

**Sunset Hotel** (Map p463; ☎ 366 1673/4; [www.sharmsun.net](http://www.sharmsun.net); Hadaba; r from US\$50; ☺ ☑ ☒) An affordable midrange hotel, the three-star Sunset is a good deal assuming you don't mind being off the beach. Slightly ageing rooms are spruced up a bit with the careful addition of a few well-placed rugs, though the large pool is as inviting as it's ever been. If you start to get a little cabin fever, you can easily access the beach at Ras Um Sid.

**Ocean Bay Hotel** (Map p466; ☎ 360 1012; r from US\$55; ☺ ☑ ☒) This relatively characterless concrete box is not exactly one of the most atmospheric hotels on the block. But, in the rapidly expanding sprawl that is Sharm, location is everything, and the Ocean Bay is within easy walking distance of Na'ama Bay's beachfront promenade. Although you might not want to linger on the hotel grounds for

too long, the beach is right there whenever you want it.

**Sinai Star Hotel** (Map p466; ☎ 360 0652; www.tropicanahotels.com; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd; r from US\$55; ☼ ☐ ☐) This fairly plain but well-run three-star hotel isn't a bad choice if you're looking for an affordable base in an expensive neighbourhood. Set back from the road behind Na'ama Bay, it isn't on the beach, but you're not that far away if you don't mind walking. And, of course, there are several daily shuttles to/from Grand Oasis beach near the airport if you're looking for a change of scene.

**Amar Sina** (Map p463; ☎ 366 2222/9; www.minasegypt.com; Hadaba; r from US\$75; ☼ ☐ ☐) With soaring domes, graceful arches and whitewashed walls adorned with brick ornaments, this *Arabian Nights*-styled hotel upholds Sharm's renowned kitsch factor. Of course, guests don't seem to be bothered by this one bit, especially when sunning themselves with drink in hand beside the palm-fringed free-form swimming pool. Although it's set a bit back from the shore, guests have access to beach space at Ras Um Sid.

**Tropicana Garden Palms Hotel** (Map p463; ☎ 360 1290/1; www.tropicanahotels.com; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd; r from US\$75; ☼ ☐ ☐) Located on the inland side of the main road in Na'ama Bay, several kilometres east of the central strip, this family-friendly hotel comes complete with two pools, views to the mountains and a children's play area. Spacious rooms are decorated in bold colours and natural tiling, and look out onto the attractive grounds. Although you're away from the beach, there is a free hourly shuttle service to the beach at Shark's Bay.

**Creative Mexicana Sharm Resort** (Map p463; ☎ 02-257 7029; www.worldofcreative.com/hotels/maxicana/max\_home.htm; Hadaba; r from US\$85; ☼ ☐ ☐) Looking for a little Latin flavour in your Middle Eastern beach holiday? Why not, this is Sharm after all! Well-appointed rooms are decorated in natural hues, and surround the lush grounds and sculpted infinity-edge pool. There are plenty of restaurants on the grounds, including the obligatory Mexican spot. However, don't eat too much as guests can take advantage of two nearby stretches of sand, and it's not good to swim on a full stomach!

**Sanafir Hotel** (Map p466; ☎ 360 0197; reservation@sanafirhotel.com; King of Bahrain St; r from US\$95; ☼ ☐ ☐) Located smack dab in the nerve centre of Na'ama Bay, the Sanafir was one of

the first hotels to be built here. Over the years, however, the Sanafir has undergone extensive renovations to keep up with the rapidly increasing competition, though the Bedouin-style rooms that made this place so memorable are still intact. The Sanafir has also expanded its offerings of restaurants, lounges and bars, though with its nearly unbeatable location, Na'ama Bay is literally at your doorstep.

**Camel Hotel** (Map p466; ☎ 360 0700; www.cameldive.com; King of Bahrain St; r from US\$95; ☼ ☐ ☐) This attractive, small and well-appointed four-star hotel is attached to a dive centre of the same name in the heart of Na'ama Bay. Needless to say, diving is the main attraction here – even the swimming pool is tiered, allowing for open-water skills to be practised in a confined environment. If you're looking to take a course or book a bunch of dives, you can save a bit of cash if you arrange a package in advance.

## TOP END

**Hilton Fayrouz Village** (Map p466; ☎ 360 0137; www.hiltonworldresorts.com; r from US\$150; ☼ ☐ ☐) This sweep of deluxe bungalows along the promenade somehow manages to capture a degree of intimacy absent from its giant neighbours. Although piling in comparison to the shows of wealth and privilege found at competing hotels, you can easily bask in the lap of luxury here without being a millionaire. As you'd expect of any Hilton, the Fayrouz Village has the usual assortment of infinity pools, gourmet restaurants and top-notch resort facilities.

**Hyatt Regency Sharm el-Sheikh** (Map p463; ☎ 360 1234; www.sharm.hyatt.com; r from US\$225; ☼ ☐ ☐) Luxuriously perched above the rich corals of the Near Garden reef, this five-star charmer is perfectly positioned to take in the rich turquoise and cobalt blue hues of the Red Sea. Even if you never leave the resort, the entire property is awash with panoramic views, giving the Hyatt an open feeling rarely found at resorts. And there's little reason to leave, as the Hyatt overwhelms guests with opulence, from the classically decorated rooms to the perfectly manicured gardens and lashings of marble at every turn.

**Sofitel Sharm el-Sheikh Coralina Hotel** (Map p463; ☎ 360 0081; www.sofitel.com; r from US\$235; ☼ ☐ ☐) Dominating the bay's northern cliffs, this whitewashed hotel terraces majestically down towards the sea like a Sultan's palace from a children's fairy tale. The distinctly Middle

Eastern-style rooms are decked out in exotic wooden furniture, and boast stunning views over the bay. True to its name, the Sofitel offers an incredibly sophisticated resort experience to the guests privileged enough to be staying here.

**Ritz Carlton Sharm el-Sheikh** (Map p463; ☎ 366 1919; www.ritzcarlton.com; Ras Um Sid; r from US\$245; ☼ ☼ ☼ ☼) Despite the smooth lines and spotless glass of its architecturally distinct but decidedly modern exterior, the Ritz brims with Old World elegance from the moment you step inside. Expansive rooms and suites are decorated in the finest European furnishings, transporting guests to some forgotten time. Although the entire affair is decidedly un-Egyptian, it's difficult to complain when you're suckling the bosom of luxury.

**Four Seasons Sharm el-Sheikh** (off Map p466; ☎ 360 3555; www.fourseasons.com/sharmel Sheikh; r from US\$450; ☼ ☼ ☼ ☼ ☼) Unmatched in elegance and sophistication, the Four Seasons is an Arabesque-style pleasure palace built around palm-ringed courtyards and overlooking the Strait of Tiran. From the towering whitewashed walls and intricate geometric lattice workings to the ornate bronze fixtures and richly dyed Persian rugs, the Four Seasons is a model of perfection straight down to the last detail. Of course, you're going to need a small fortune to spend some time here, but it's difficult to put a price on over-the-top indulgence.

## Eating

As the unashamed tourist capital of Sinai, Sharm has literally hundreds of restaurants spanning the culinary globe. Though most tourists on all-inclusive packages never seem to stray from their resort, it's certainly worth venturing outside the hotel walls. Although restaurants in Sharm are by no means cheap, the quality is extremely high, particularly the local seafood brought straight to your plate from the Red Sea. And, of course, if you've been in Egypt for any significant amount of time, the sight of international favourites, including Italian, Thai, Indian and Japanese, is likely to get the mouth watering.

Rebuilt after the 2005 bombings, the Old Market in Sharm el-Sheikh functions as the culinary hub of the town. Small, friendly, local-style restaurants predominate, the food is good and the service usually efficient. Na'ama Bay has a large selection of eateries, and it's easy to while away a few hours

each evening walking along the beachfront promenade and sampling different places. Although it's easy to get suckered into the first restaurant you spot, shop around, compare prices and don't be afraid to let your stomach guide you.

If you're staying in the resort strip or in Shark's Bay, you'll either be dining in luxury at your five-star all-inclusive resort, or self-catering at your Bedouin camp. Of course, frequent taxis and shuttles ply the coastal road, so you're never that far from the action in Sharm el-Sheikh and Na'ama Bay.

There are several small but well-stocked supermarkets in Sharm Old Market, including Supermarket El-Baraka (Map p464) next to the King restaurant, and the large Sharm Express (Map p464). Beer and wine can be bought at **Al-Ahram Beverages** (Map p464; ☎ 366 3133), next to Sinai Star restaurant.

There are numerous supermarkets in central Na'ama Bay, including **Al-Nile Market** (Map p466; ☎ 24hr), next to Avis, and **Na'ama Beach Market** (Map p466; ☎ 9am-2am) opposite the Mövenpick.

**King** (Map p464; dishes E£2-7; ☎ from 7am) A clean and popular *fuul* (fava bean paste) and falafel takeaway in the centre of the Old Market, with a range of snacks and the additional advantage of being open early in the morning.

**El-Masrien** (Map p464; dishes E£5-25) Another popular neighbourhood-style restaurant, El-Masrien offers savoury kebabs and *kofta* (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer) to hungry locals and travellers alike – consider this spot the perfect antidote if you've been hitting the booze a bit too hard.

**Tam Tam Oriental Café** (Map p466; Ghazala Hotel; dishes E£20-60) This popular Egyptian restaurant along the waterside promenade is a laid-back place where you can delve into a range of Egyptian fare, including mezze, kushari and roast pigeon, while relaxing on cushions overlooking the beach and puffing on a *sheesha* (water pipe).

**Safsafa Restaurant** (Map p464; dishes E£20-50; ☼ ☼) A small establishment offering some of the freshest and cheapest fish in Sharm (whole fish is priced from E£40 to E£50 per kilo) – don't skip on the homemade tahini and *baba gh-anoug* (puree of grilled eggplants with tahini and olive oil).

**Abou Hamada** (Map p464; mains E£25-35) This unpretentious seafood lover's spot offers an affordable catch of the day special, though you can always settle on the mixed grill if



the sea hasn't been generous – regardless of what you choose, round it out with a selection of mezze.

**Mashy Café** (Map p466; Sanafir Hotel; dishes E£35-75) Lebanese is the undisputed king of the Middle Eastern gastronomic world, and this low-key open-air spot outside the Sanafir Hotel is as good a place as any to sample the full bounty of this refined cuisine.

**La Rustichella** (Map p466; pizza E£25-40, mains E£40-75; ☼) This Sharm institution serves a variety of delectable meals, including Italian-style seafood dishes, brick-oven roasted pizzas, and a good variety of chicken and beef dishes – stop by in the afternoon and cool off with an ice coffee and a creamy gelato.

**Tandoori** (Map p466; Camel Hotel, King of Bahrain St; dishes E£25-100; ☼ 6.30-11.30pm) This small place in the courtyard of the Camel Hotel has what many consider to be Sharm's best Indian food, including a selection of tandoori dishes and an excellent *dhal makhani* (dish of black lentils and red kidney beans).

**Little Buddha** (Map p466; Naama Bay Hotel; mains E£45-115; ☼) One of the most popular Asian restaurants in Sharm, the Little Buddha serves excellent Asian fusion cuisine alongside a fresh and varied sushi bar – it's also a loungey bar (below).

**Sala Thai** (Map p463; Hyatt Regency Sharm el-Sheikh; dishes E£40-120; ☼) Delicious Thai food (fiery curries and delicately spiced noodle dishes) and pleasing aesthetics (teak décor and an outdoor terrace) are yours to enjoy at this comfortable spot overlooking the sea.

**Al-Fanar** (Map p463; Ras Um Sid; dishes E£40-150; ☼ 10am-10.30pm; ☼) This upscale restaurant boasts an excellent seafront location at the base of the lighthouse, cosy alcoves overlooking the water, Bedouin-influenced décor, indoor and outdoor dining, and a large Italian menu featuring thin-crust pizza and home-made pasta dishes.

## Entertainment

With a young resident population and a large number of relatively wealthy tourists, Sharm el-Sheikh has one of Egypt's liveliest bar and club scenes. Drinking starts during the day along the promenade, intensifies during the early evening happy hours and starts to really take off once the sun goes down. Dancing gets going around midnight and ends at dawn, with a fair number of revellers passing out on the sand.

For the most part, nightlife in Sharm is casual – a clean shirt and a pair of decent sandals is perfectly acceptable – though the town's rising prosperity is drawing in greater numbers of the rich and beautiful. With that said, you won't be out of place if you dress to the nines; however, women travellers should keep in mind that they will attract a lot of attention. Egyptian men in Sharm have a penchant for Western women, though the attraction seems to go the other way as well.

Considering that Egypt is a fairly conservative country that typically shuns alcohol and excess pleasures of the flesh, Sharm can either be a shock to the senses or a welcome relief – depending on your own vices, of course. Needless to say, the entire charade is wholly un-Egyptian, but after a few beers and a couple of uninhibited dancing sessions, fun is usually had by all.

**Al-Fanar** (Map p463; Ras Um Sid) Superb views, drinks nightly and an open-air party dance floor make this one of the most exciting bars around.

**Camel Roof Bar** (Map p466; Camel Hotel, Na'ama Bay) A favourite among dive instructors, this is the optimal place to start off the evening, especially if you've been diving all day and looking to swap stories from down under.

**Hard Rock Café** (Map p466; Sultan Qabos St, Na'ama Bay) A late-night disco-bar with dancing, and one of Sharm's most popular nightspots. Dancing starts at midnight and goes until the wee hours of the morn'.

**Harry's Pub** (Map p466; Marriott Beach Resort, Na'ama Bay) This English pub has a large selection of beers on tap and occasional special nights with unlimited draught beer at a very reasonable price.

**La Folie Bar** (Map p463; Iberotel Lido, Na'ama Bay; ☼ 2pm-2am) For a more sedate start to your evening, head to this quiet, pleasant bar on the water overlooking the bright lights of Na'ama Bay.

**Little Buddha** (Map p466; Na'ama Bay Hotel, Na'ama Bay; ☼ 11pm-3am) With dim lights, big, cushiony chairs and a mellow ambience, the bar at this Asian fusion restaurant gets going after the kitchen closes.

**Mexicana Bar** (Map p466; Na'ama Bay Hotel, Na'ama Bay) A small and sometimes happening bar close to the promenade, this is a great place to down a few bowls of nachos followed by some expertly mixed margaritas.



**Pacha** (Map p466; Sanafir Hotel, King of Bahrain St, Na'ama Bay) The hub of Sharm's nightlife, the Pacha goes wild pretty much every night of the week. Owner Adli Mestakawi also holds Echo Temple Concerts in the desert outside Sharm on Fridays during the high season (££145), bringing big-name singers to play to audiences of thousands under the stars – watch for Pacha's advertising around town to see what's playing.

**Pirates' Bar** (Map p466; Hilton Fayrouz Village, Na'ama Bay) A cosy, pub-style bar where divers congregate for an early evening drink or bar meal. Happy hour is from 5.30pm to 7.30pm.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Daily flights to Cairo and Luxor are available with **Egypt Air** (Map p464; ☎ 366 1056; Sharm al-Maya; ☎ 9am–9pm), though prices tend to fluctuate wildly depending on the season and availability. If you book in advance, it is sometimes possible to snag a ticket for as little as ££400, though prices can climb as high as ££1000 during the busy summer and winter holiday seasons.

If you book a package holiday in either the UK or Europe, it's likely that your travel agent will arrange a charter flight directly to Sharm for you. Even if you're an independent traveller, it's worth visiting a few travel agents before booking your ticket to Egypt – charter flights to Sharm are often significantly cheaper than a round-trip airfare to Cairo, and the city is a quick and easy jumping-off point for the Sinai Peninsula, Luxor and the Nile Valley.

### BOAT

Tickets for the high-speed ferry to Hurghada from Sharm el-Sheikh can be bought from various travel agencies in town, including **Mena Tours** (Map p466; ☎ 260 0190; Marriott Beach Resort, inland side of Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay). They are also sold at the ferry office (Map p464) at the port on days that the ferry runs. Boats leave from the port west of Sharm al-Maya, and it's best to arrive at the ferry port at least one hour prior to departure.

The ferry to Hurghada departs from Sharm el-Sheikh at 5pm on Monday, Thursday and Saturday and at 3am on Wednesday (one way ££250/US\$40, round trip ££450/US\$70, 1½ hours). The rate of the dollar against the Egyptian pound and the whim of the ferry officials determines which currency you'll need

to use for the Sharm ferry ticket. Also note that the ferry is often cancelled during winter because of windy conditions – if the ferry is likely to be cancelled for a few days, you can then make alternative arrangements to get to Sharm by bus or service taxi.

A few words of caution about the ferry – the Red Sea can get very rough, so much so that the staff on board hands out Dramamine (an antihistamine that can help with seasickness) prior to departure. See p536 for more information. If you've never had the pleasure of witnessing dozens of people simultaneously emptying out their stomach contents, you're in for a memorable trip. With that said, try to get a seat by the window, and keep your eyes fixed on the horizon – this is a great way to beat seasickness. Also note that if the seas are particularly rough, the advertised 1½-hour journey can take as long as three hours.

### BUS

The bus station (Map p463) is along the Sharm-Na'ama Bay road behind the Mobil petrol station. Seats on the buses to Cairo should be reserved in advance. Buy tickets from the following bus companies at the bus station.

**Superjet** (☎ 366 1622, in Cairo 02-290 9017) runs buses to Cairo (££60 to ££70, six hours) at noon, 1pm, 3pm, 5pm and 11pm, with the 3pm bus continuing on to Alexandria (££100, nine hours).

**East Delta Travel Company** (☎ 366 0660) has buses to Cairo (££60 to ££70, six to eight hours) at 7am, 10am, 11am, noon, 1pm, 2.30pm, 4.30pm and 5.30pm. There are daily buses to Suez (££30 to ££35, five hours) at 7am, 9am and 10am; to Dahab (££15 to ££20, 1¼ hours) and Nuweiba (££20 to ££25, three hours) at 9am, 2.30pm and 5pm; and to Taba (££25 to ££30, 4½ hours) at 9am. A bus to St Katherine's departs at 7.30am (££30, 3½ hours), and a direct bus to Luxor (££110, 12 to 15 hours) via Hurghada leaves at 6pm.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Sharm el-Sheikh International Airport is about 10km north of Na'ama Bay at Ras Nasrany; taxis generally charge from ££20 to ££25 from the airport to Sharm or Na'ama Bay.

**BICYCLE**

Standard and cross-country bicycles can be rented from stands along the promenade in Na'ama Bay from £25 per day.

**CAR**

Car-rental agencies in Na'ama Bay include **Aviss** (Map p466; ☎ 360 2400, 360 0979; Sharm-Na'ama Bay rd, Na'ama Bay), just west of Mall 7; **Hertz** (Map p463; ☎ 366 2299; Bank St, Hadaba) and **Sixt Car Rental** (Map p466; ☎ 360 0137; Hilton Fayrouz Village). All charge about US\$80 for a basic saloon, and US\$120 and up for a roomier 4WD. Unlimited kilometre arrangements generally require a minimum three- to four-day rental.

**MICROBUS & TAXI**

Toyota pick-ups and minibuses regularly ply the stretch between central Na'ama Bay and Sharm el-Sheikh. The going fare is £2, though foreigners are often charged £5. Taxis charge a minimum of £10 between the two centres, and between Hadaba and Na'ama Bay, and from £5 within Na'ama Bay. Many of the hotels above Ras Um Sid have their own shuttles to Na'ama Bay.

The usual warnings about hitching apply, and women should avoid it completely.

**NABQ**

Thirty-five kilometres north of Sharm el-Sheikh is Nabq, the largest coastal protectorate on the Gulf of Aqaba. Named after an oasis that lies within its boundaries, Nabq straddles 600 sq km of land and sea between the Strait of Tiran and Dahab. Because it is less frequently visited than Ras Mohammed, Nabq is a good place to see Sinai as it was before the arrival of mass tourism.

There is a **visitors' centre** (admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-5pm) located off the road leading from Sharm el-Sheikh past the airport and Ras Nasrany. Within the park itself, you'll find several hiking trails, clearly marked snorkelling spots and designated camping areas.

Nabq's main attraction is its **mangrove forest**, which is along the shoreline at the mouth of Wadi Kid, and is the most northerly mangrove stand in the world. Mangrove root systems filter most of the salt from sea water, and help to stabilise shorelines, while also providing an important habitat for birds and fish. Just inland from the mangrove forest are the dunes of Wadi Kid, which are home to one of the Middle East's largest stands of **arak bushes**

(arak twigs were traditionally used by Bedouin to clean teeth). Gazelles, rock hyraxes and Nubian ibexes can be seen in the protectorate, as well as two villages of Bedouin from the Mizena tribe. Offshore there are rich reefs with easy access, although visibility can be poor because of sediment from the mangroves.

To visit Nabq, you'll need a vehicle or will have to join an organised tour. Most hotels and resorts in Sharm el-Sheikh and Dahab offer safaris, both on the land and in the water. If you drive, remember that vehicles are strictly forbidden to leave the tracks.

**DAHAB**

☎ 069

Long hailed as the Koh Samui of the Middle East, Dahab has a long history of luring travellers – and trapping them for days or weeks on end – with its cheap ocean-side camps, golden beaches and rugged mountain backdrop. In recent years Dahab has expanded beyond its humble origins, and now boasts a smooth fusion of hippie mellowness and resort chic. The banana pancakes, moonlight spliffs and hardcore backpackers still remain, though they now coexist with upscale restaurants, boutique hotels and holidaying European families. However, while the vast majority of Sinai is being packaged and sold for mainstream consumption, Dahab is a place where individual travellers are still the rule rather than the exception.

Meaning gold in Arabic, a reference to the area's sandy coastline, Dahab also boasts some of Egypt's most spectacular diving and trekking. A short walk, jeep ride or even camel trek will bring you to some of the Red Sea's most memorable dive sites, and a boat can bring you within easy striking distance of the world-class reefs in nearby Ras Mohammad National Park (p460). Predominantly a Bedouin enclave at its heart, Dahab is also the preferred base for organising guided excursions into the interior deserts, as well as to the lofty heights of nearby Mt Sinai (p492).

Unlike its air-brushed neighbour of Sharm el-Sheikh, Dahab is still trying to maintain its humble roots, determined to find a compromise between the lure of the tourist dollar and its fishing traditions. The balance isn't always easy, but Dahab remains one of the more authentic tourist towns in Egypt. True, a paved boardwalk now lines the beachfront area of Assalah, and the hard

sell for pricey dinners by pushy restaurateurs can quickly test your nerves. However, Dahab remains what it has always been, namely a tranquil ocean-side refuge from the unrelenting heat of the desert. If Dahab is in your sights, be forewarned – after a few days of crystal-clear diving, desert trekking, ocean-side dinners and countless *sheesha* sessions, you're probably going to want to cancel the rest of your itinerary.

## Orientation

There are two parts to Dahab: the small and newer area of Dahab City, with a smattering of resort hotels, the bus station, post and phone offices, and a bank; and Assalah, which runs north along the beach and is the major tourist stretch. Assalah is further divided into Masbat and Mashraba. Masbat starts at the southern end of Assalah and is made up of a stretch of 'camps', hotels and laid-back restaurants among the palm trees, as well as a busy little bazaar. To the south, starting roughly at the ruins (currently off limits as an excavation site), is the slightly more staid Mashraba, named after the freshwater springs that apparently exist around the beach. In the centre of Masbat is a small pedestrian bridge, which makes a convenient landmark and is a good place to find taxis.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Police** (☎ 364 0213/5; Masbat) Near Ghazala Supermarket.

**Tourist police** (☎ 364 0188; Dahab City)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Download.Net** (Sharia Al-Mashraba, Mashraba; per hr E£4; ☎ 24hr)

**Felopater Internet Cafe** (per hr E£5; Masbat (100m south of police station on beachside promenade; ☎ 10am-midnight); Mashraba (Sharia Al-Mashraba, just north of Nesima Resort; ☎ 24hr)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Dahab Hospital** (☎ 364 0208; Dahab City)

**Dr Sherif Salah** (☎ 012 220 8484) Local doctor recommended by most hotels; office at the Hilton Dahab Resort.

### MONEY

**Banque du Caire** (Sharia Al-Mashraba, Mashraba; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu, 9-11am & 6-9pm Fri) Near Inmo Divers Home.

**Commercial International Bank ATM** (Blue Hole Plaza) About 1.5km northeast of the Hilton Dahab Resort, between the resort strip and Mashraba.

**National Bank of Egypt** Assalah (just north of Shark Club Restaurant; ☎ 9am-10pm); Dahab City (☎ 9am-2.30pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu); Swiss Inn Golden Beach Resort (Resort Strip; ☎ 9am-1pm) The Dahab City and Assalah branches each have an ATM.

### POST

As well as the main post office, post boxes are also outside Ghazala Supermarket and next to Red Sea Relax Terrace Restaurant, both in Masbat.

**Main post office** (Dahab City; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm)

### TELEPHONE

In addition to the telephone centrale and card-phones, you will find numerous call centres along the beachfront in Assalah where you can dial internationally for a few pounds a minute. Phonecards are sold at the Ghazala Supermarket in Masbat and at most small shops.

**Call centre** (Masbat; per min E£7; ☎ 10am-3pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu, 3-9pm Fri)

**Telephone centrale** (Dahab City; ☎ 24hr)

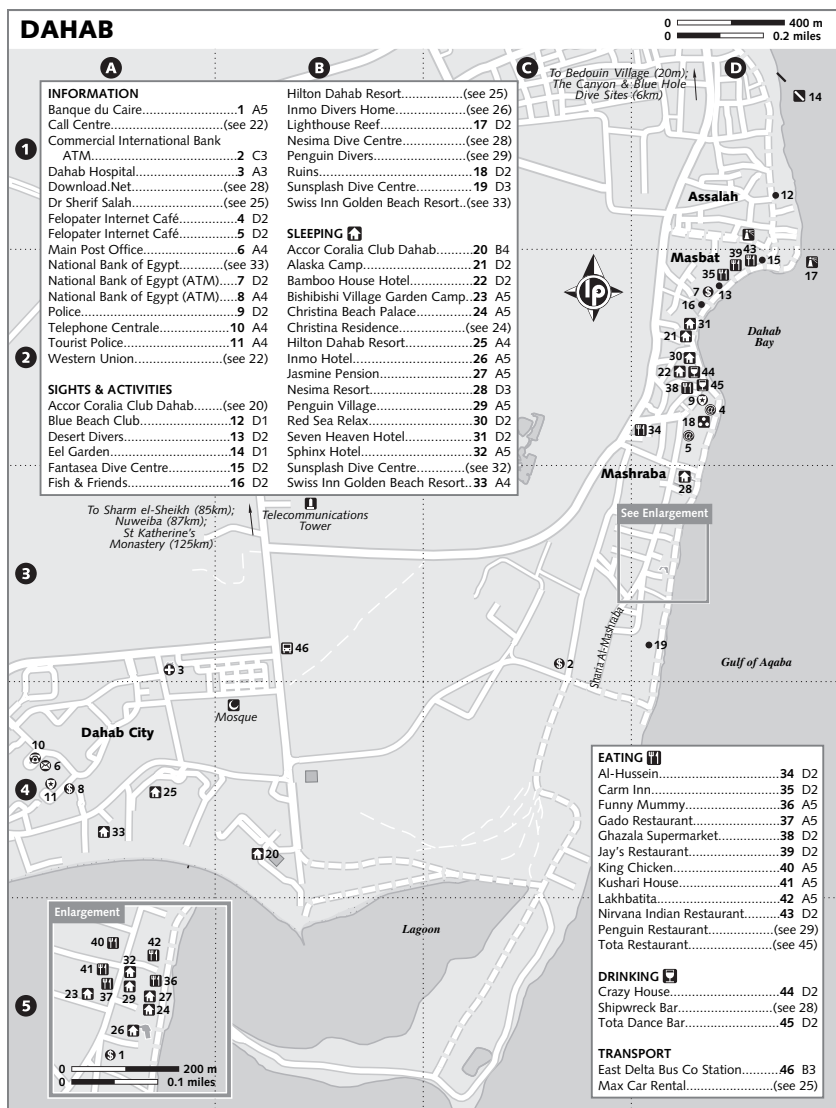
## Dangers & Annoyances

Although Dahab is one of the most relaxed destinations in Egypt, be advised that there is the potential for a future terrorist attack. In April 2006, suicide bombers killed 23 people and injured dozens. Although the government has cracked down on the seeds of Islamic fundamentalism since then, it remains to be seen whether or not their efforts have been effective. However, it is important to emphasise that the overwhelming majority of visitors to Dahab and the greater Sinai enjoy their time immensely, and never experience any sort of problem.

For an overview of the history of terrorism in Sinai, see p457.

It's worth mentioning briefly that Dahab's hippie roots and backpacker-friendly atmosphere go hand in hand with drug use. You will be offered hashish (and possibly harder stuff) wherever you go, and you will see people around you openly using drugs. Although it should go without saying that the penalty for being caught with drugs in Egypt is stiff (to say the least), most tourists have the attitude that hashish is legal – it's not.

The police patrol their drug-sniffing dogs up and down the boardwalk, and are known to bust travellers for smoking dope. Please heed



our advice – if you're going to indulge, do it discreetly. You really don't want to see the inside of an Egyptian prison.

## Activities

### SNORKELLING & DIVING

Other than just lounging around, snorkelling and diving are the most popular activities in

Dahab. The reefs off Assalah are often strewn with litter, but if you can ignore this, the reef at the northern end of Mashraba has table corals and impressive fish life. Also worthwhile are the reefs off the southern end of Mashraba, just before the lagoon; **Lighthouse Reef**, a sheltered snorkelling site at the northern tip of Assalah; and the popular **Eel Garden**, just north

of Assalah, where a colony of eels lives on the sandy sea bed.

About 6km further north are the **Canyon** and **Blue Hole** dive sites. Despite their intimidating reputation as danger zones for careless divers, the tops of the reefs are teeming with life, making them fine snorkelling destinations when the sea is calm. It's easy to find half-day tours to both sites, but watch for hidden 'extras', such as overpriced drinks and gear-minding fees at some of the cafés around the Blue Hole. Many dive centres also organise snorkelling and dive safaris to the nearby Ras Abu Gallum and Nabq Protectorates (p479 and p472 respectively), as well as overnights to Ras Mohammad National Park (p461).

You can hire snorkelling gear from all the dive centres and many other places in Masbat for about ££25 to ££40 per day. Keep in mind that some of the reefs have unexpected currents – drownings have occurred in Dahab – so keep your wits about you. And, although this should go without saying, lay off the drinking and drugging if you're going to be in open seas.

For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, including recommended operators and dive sites, see p439.

### CAMEL & JEEP SAFARIS

Dahab is one of the best places in Sinai to arrange camel safaris into the dramatic mountains lining the coast, especially the spectacular Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate (p479). When choosing who to go with, try to find a Bedouin – or at least an operator that works with the Bedouin. Unfortunately, local communities have been excluded from the tourist industry, which tends to be dominated by migrants from the Nile Valley. A good place to look is the waterfront in the village, where camel drivers tend to congregate. Register with the police before beginning the safari, and don't pay the camel driver until you return to the village. Itineraries – and as a result prices – are generally custom designed, but expect to pay from ££70 per person for an evening trip into the mountains with dinner at a Bedouin camp, and from about ££300 per person per day for a safari including all food and water.

**Centre for Sinai** (☎ 364 0702; www.centre4sinai.com.eg) is one organisation that tries to promote knowledge of the local culture. **Man &**

**the Environment Dahab** (MATE; ☎ 364 1091; www.mate-dahab.com) is an environmental education group that helps arrange treks with Bedouin guides. Contact both organisations via telephone or email in order to arrange tours around Sinai.

One of the most popular jeep safaris is a trip to **Coloured Canyon**, between St Katherine and Nuweiba. The canyon derives its name from the layers of bright, multicoloured stones that resemble paintings on its steep, narrow walls, and is magnificently beautiful. As the canyon is sheltered from the wind, the silence – assuming you aren't there with crowds of other visitors – is one of its most impressive features. Unfortunately, the canyon has become overtouristed in recent years, and many operators have also begun offering trips to other sites, where the rock formations are equally impressive and the sense of wilderness more intact. All of the hotels, dive centres and travel agencies offer jeep safaris, though prices vary considerably depending on the time of year, your destination and the size of your party – don't be afraid to shop around and bargain hard.

### WATER SPORTS

Pedalos, kayaks and jet skis can be rented at the northern end of Masbat and at the holiday villages on the lagoon. Although the golden hills of Saudi Arabia in the distance seem to make for an excellent destination, trust us – you don't want to try to cross. At least one Japanese backpacker we know of managed to touch Saudi soil, only to be rounded up and arrested by some rather unhappy border guards.

Windsurfing is another popular pastime, and the **Hilton Dahab Resort** (☎ 364 0310; www.hilton.com; Resort Strip) and **Swiss Inn Golden Beach Resort** (☎ 364 0054; www.swissinn.net/dahab; Resort Strip) have good windsurfing centres. The centre of the bay boasts the steadiest winds in Dahab, though strong gusts occasionally sweep across the northern end. Kite-surfing is also starting to take off in Dahab, although offshore winds limit the areas where it can be done.

There's no beach to speak of in Assalah itself – instead the rocky coastline leads straight out onto the reef. For the golden sands after which Dahab was named, you'll need to head down to the lagoon area where the resorts are clustered.

## HORSE RIDING

If you want to go riding, just wait on the beach in Mashraba for one of the Bedouin who walk up and down with horses for hire. Rates start at about ££20 to ££40 per hour. You can also ask around the camps. **Blue Beach Club** (☎ 364 0411; reservations@bluebeachclub.com; Assalah) and the **Accor Coral Club Dahab** (☎ 364 0301; www.accorhotels.com; Resort Strip) can also arrange organised horse-riding excursions.

## Sleeping

For a small village perched on the tip of Sinai, Dahab has an incredibly diverse range of accommodation. Most budget travellers head straight for the camps of Assalah, which vary considerably, from Spartan stone, cement or reed huts with a mattress tossed on the floor to attractive backpacker palaces with cushioned seating shaded by palm groves. Generally speaking, long gone are the days of grubby tented camps on the beach. Increased competition has raised the bar in Dahab, and there are some excellent rooms to be had for the price of a decent meal back home.

Dahab's upward push has also resulted in the construction of a good number of mid-range hotels scattered among the budget accommodation in Assalah. And, of course, if you want to enjoy the Dahab vibe in slightly more comfortable surroundings, there are a number of swish boutique hotels and resorts in town, particularly on the beach near Dahab City.

Be advised that the following list is a small sampling of what is available – new places are going up all the time, while older establishments are being knocked down. Also keep in mind that prices are not to be taken at face value – most places drop their prices considerably during the low season, and fixed prices only exist in name in Egypt. If you're looking to arrange any activities, it's best to inquire through your hotel as discounts are readily available for guests.

## BUDGET

**our pick** **Penguin Village** (☎ 364 1047; www.penguindivers.com; Mashraba; r ££20-80; ☹ ☹) This enduring backpacker favourite offers a variety of rooms to suit all budgets – from no-frills fan-cooled concrete boxes to air-con rooms with wooden balconies. Regardless of which room you choose, all guests ultimately congregate in the palm-fringed restaurant, complete with

Bedouin-style pillow lounges overlooking the sea and surf. Whether you desire a dive holiday or a pilgrimage up Sinai, the helpful staff can arrange whatever takes your fancy at a backpacker-friendly price.

**Alaska Camp** (☎ 364 1004; www.dahabescape.com; Mashbat; hammock ££15, r ££30-90; ☹ ☹) One of the cheapest accommodation options in town. True backpackers can save a few pounds by stringing up a hammock for a mere ££15 a night. Of course, if you're a fan of such conveniences as a roof and four walls, a variety of rooms ranging from Bedouin huts to air-con suites are yours for a bit more a night. Alaska Camp is also the base of Sinai Divers Backpackers, which can help you sort out your dive schedule in no time.

**Jasmine Pension** (☎ 364 0852; www.jasminepension.com; Mashraba; r ££35-120; ☹ ☹) Located at the southern end of Mashraba, this low-key pension is a good choice for travellers looking for an intimate but affordable spot. Nine pleasantly decorated rooms overlook the beach, and come complete with balconies perfectly suited for quiet reflection. The on-site restaurant is a good choice for sipping a cold Stella while staring at the starry Sinai sky.

**Sunplash Dive Centre** (☎ 364 0932; www.sunplash-divers.com; Mashraba; r ££40-120; ☹ ☹) A friendly German-run dive centre set on its own at the southern end of Mashraba, Sunplash offers a variety of bungalows and simple but comfortable rooms. Diving is the main attraction on offer here, though the quiet beachfront location is enjoyed by all. There's a good restaurant that offers a healthy mix of Deutschland favourites, as well as the obligatory beachside lounge area.

**Bishbishi Village Garden Camp** (☎ 364 0727; www.bishbishi.com; Sharia Al-Mashraba, Mashraba; r ££50-150; ☹ ☹) Another classic backpacker spot, Bishbishi is a long-standing camp that is set back from the sea on the street parallel to the waterfront. Although you're not directly on the sea, there is an appealing air of privacy to the property. And, of course, this is a great place to meet other backpackers, particularly while sitting in the Bedouin-style lounge area surrounding a fire pit.

**Sphinx Hotel** (☎ 548 8708; www.sphinxdahab.com; Mashraba; r ££85-165; ☹ ☹) One of the most popular hotels in Dahab, the Sphinx follows a simple formula: offer sparkling rooms with modern amenities and ocean views, and the crowds will come. Of course, it's hard to keep



people away when you're attached to one of the best restaurants around, namely the Funny Mummy (p478), which is the perfect spot for a sundown smoke (*sheesha*, of course!). The on-site dive centre also gets good reviews, as does the small but professional massage centre.

## MIDRANGE

**Seven Heaven Hotel** (☎ 364 0080; [www.7heavenhotel.com](http://www.7heavenhotel.com); Masbat; r US\$25-35; ☼ ☼ ☼) This pleasant family-run hotel consists of bright and airy rooms with private modern and tiled bathrooms. Although not as upscale as other midrange options, it's a good place to be if you're looking for a bit of privacy without breaking the bank. The on-site 'Divers Down Under' dive centre can help you get wet within hours of arrival.

**Bamboo House Hotel** (☎ 364 0263; [bamboo@househotels.com](mailto:bamboo@househotels.com); tel@hotmail.com; Masbat; r US\$25-40; ☼ ☼ ☼) Centrally located near the bridge in Masbat, this Asian-themed hotel is styled in cool, crisp lines and soft, pastel colours. The largish rooms positively lighten up when the sun is shining, and are, needless to say, heavy on the bamboo. Although it's lacking the community feeling found at other hotels, it's a good spot if you want to unwind in your own room.

**Red Sea Relax** (☎ 364 1309; [www.red-sea-relax.com](http://www.red-sea-relax.com); Masbat; r US\$25-45; ☼ ☼ ☼) Located near the bridge in Masbat, this intimate hotel offers a variety of rooms ranging from subdued ensuite rooms decked out in soft blues to vibrant ocean-facing suites awash in bright, tropical colours. Ease your mind with a fruit smoothie on the rooftop terrace, or relax your body with a cold beer and a game of pool. Or escape the hotel altogether by booking a dive through the on-site centre.

**Inmo Hotel** (☎ 364 0370; [www.inmodivers.de](http://www.inmodivers.de); Mashraba; r US\$25-65; ☼ ☼ ☼) With colourful rooms, domed ceilings and attractive furniture, this well-run, family-friendly hotel mainly caters to people on diving packages from Europe. With a presence in Dahab dating back over 20 years, Inmo has a well-established reputation in town, especially when it comes to its highly recommended dive shop. Guests can also take advantage of the owners' knowledge of the Bedouin community, which makes for some memorable custom-tailored desert trips.

**Christina Beach Palace & Christina Residence** (☎ Beach Palace 364 0390, Residence 364 0406; [www.christinahotels.com](http://www.christinahotels.com); Mashraba; r US\$50-75; ☼ ☼ ☼)

These small Swiss-run hotels offer a degree of European sophistication that is matched by few other hotels in Dahab. Both hotels offer classically designed rooms – with just a touch of Arabic architectural accents – that boast modern amenities and luxurious bathrooms. Depending on your preference, the Christina Beach Palace is on the beach, while the Christina Residence is just inland.

**Nesima Resort** (☎ 364 0320; [www.nesima-resort.com](http://www.nesima-resort.com); Mashraba; r US\$55-105; ☼ ☼ ☼) Overlooking the beach in Mashraba, this modest resort is a compromise for those who want resort living without feeling as if you're isolated from the town. With pleasing stone and wood overtones and soaring domes, rooms at Nesima induce calm, relaxed feelings for all who stay here. One of the most attractive features is its palm-fringed infinity-edge pool, which overlooks the beach and the boardwalk.

## TOP END

All of the following hotels occasionally offer discounted rates if you book in advance via the internet.

**Accor Coralina Club Dahab** (☎ 364 0301; [www.accorhotels.com](http://www.accorhotels.com); Resort Strip; r from US\$75; ☼ ☼ ☼) One of the most affordable top-end hotels in Dahab, this branch of the Accor Coralina chain offers 140 rooms of varying sizes, shapes and views. Set on 650m of sandy beach, the Club Dahab is one of the few hotels in town where you can lie out on a sandy beach to your heart's content. True to its resort moniker, the hotel is brimming with amenities, including a dive centre, pool complex, spa, and a whole slew of bars and restaurants.

**Swiss Inn Golden Beach Resort** (☎ 364 0054; [www.swissinn.net/dahab](http://www.swissinn.net/dahab); Resort Strip; r from US\$85; ☼ ☼ ☼) This family-friendly four-star resort has well-appointed rooms and a pleasantly unpretentious ambience. Entire days can be spent lounging around the flower-fringed pool and stunning stretch of golden sand, though there's always the on-site dive and windsurfing centre if you want to get active. The Swiss Inn is home to a number of recommendable restaurants, including a pleasant poolside café and a European-inspired bistro.

**Hilton Dahab Resort** (☎ 364 0310; [www.hilton.com](http://www.hilton.com); Resort Strip; r from US\$115; ☼ ☼ ☼) The five-star Hilton is the big boy on the block and easily the swankiest hotel in the Dahab area. Though it's more subdued than some of its flashier cousins around the world, the whitewashed,

domed two-storey villas are still a class act. On offer are two pools, an immaculate beach, a play area for children and a full range of water sports, including a highly professional dive centre.

## Eating

The waterfront in Assalah is lined with restaurants, the majority of which are Bedouin-style beachfront seating areas where you can relax on cushions while gazing out over the sparkling waters of the Gulf of Aqaba. Seafood is on almost all menus, together with a good selection of pizza, pasta, meat and vegetarian dishes. And, of course, all places serve the requisite apple *sheesha* and mint tea, perfect for chilling out and letting Dahab work its magic on you. Although we haven't listed any specific places to eat in the Assalah area, it's not too hard to find a good spot by simply following your nose.

For self-caterers, there are numerous supermarkets dotted around Assalah, including the **Ghazala Supermarket** (Masbat; ☎ 8am-2am), near the main junction at the southern end of Masbat.

**Kushari House** (Sharia Al-Mashraba; meals ££3-5) For the cheapest meal in town, head to the back streets where you can get a large bowl of kushari, that wholly unique Egyptian creation reminiscent of mum's leftovers.

**Gado Restaurant** (Sharia Al-Mashraba; meals ££5-15) We don't know how it's possible to serve such generous portions of hearty cuisine at these prices, but we do know that the traditional Egyptian fare at Gado is damn good, and worth every pound.

**King Chicken** (Sharia Al-Mashraba; meals ££10-15) Half a chicken with rice and all the trimmings can be yours at this local favourite, which lures in penny-pinching backpackers in the know.

**Al-Hussein** (Sharia Al-Mashraba; meals ££15-30) If you want to sample Dahab's legendary seafood without paying tourist prices, this local spot offers the same cuisine you'll find along the waterfront at one-third the price.

**Jay's Restaurant** (Masbat; dishes ££25-40) A Dahab institution serving a mixture of Egyptian and Western fare at very reasonable prices – the menu changes weekly, and dishes such as coconut rice and curried vegetables make a welcome change from the usual offerings.

**Tota Restaurant** (Masbat; dishes ££25-60) This unmissable boat-shaped bar (right) in the heart of Assalah also serves decent Italian cuisine,

including large pizzas and pasta dishes, as well as a range of other meals and desserts.

**Nirvana Indian Restaurant** (☎ 364 1261; Masbat; dishes ££25-65) Dahab's best Indian food will please vegetarians and carnivores alike, especially if you're a fan of spicy curries, fluffy rice pilaffs and flaky naan.

**Carm Inn** (Masbat; dishes ££25-65) This waterfront place is a favourite of local dive instructors, with a varied menu of Western, Indian and Indonesian dishes served in mellow surroundings with a hint of the South Pacific.

**Funny Mummy** (Mashraba; dishes ££35-85) One of the most popular restaurants on the boardwalk, this palm-fringed and pillow-decked spot offers all of your favourite Western and Asian dishes alongside traditional Egyptian delicacies.

**Penguin Restaurant** (Mashraba; dishes ££35-85) A traveller favourite, the ocean-side restaurant at this backpacker hotel serves an eclectic menu ranging from banana pancakes and English fry-ups in the morning to Thai curries and Italian pasta dishes in the evening.

**Lakhbatita** (Mashraba; dishes ££30-100) This eccentric beachfront establishment at the southern end of Mashraba is decorated with old Egyptian furniture, and serves gourmet food drawing on Egyptian, Middle Eastern, Asian and Continental influences.

## Entertainment

In comparison with Hurghada and Sharm el-Sheikh and, Dahab is fairly quiet at night, but there is a good selection of lively bars, some of which turn into discos if the atmosphere is right. Of course, after a long day of diving and desert exploration, most travellers are content with sprawling out in any of Dahab's waterfront restaurants and nursing a few cold Stellas.

**Crazy House** (Masbat) Housed in a historic two-storey wooden building, the Crazy House serves cheap beer, and there's even a billiard table – what more do you need?

**Shipwreck Bar** (Nesima Resort, Mashraba) A popular rooftop bar with great views over the sea, which attracts a sophisticated crowd with its daily happy-hour specials.

**Tota Dance Bar** (Masbat) The centre of nightlife in Dahab, this nautically themed drinking spot has free movies from Sunday to Thursday, and turns into an impromptu disco on Friday and Saturday nights – the top deck is a good place to watch the sunset while sip-

ping a cold beer, especially during the 5pm to 7pm happy hour.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

With its new station in Dahab City, well southwest of the centre of the action, **East Delta Travel Company** (☎ 364 1808; Dahab City) has buses to Sharm el-Sheikh (E£15 to E£20, 1½ hours) departing at 8am, 8.30am, 10am, 11.30am, 12.30pm, 2.30pm, 4pm, 5.30pm, 8.30pm and 10pm. Buses to Nuweiba (E£10 to E£15, one hour) leave at 8.30am and 10.30am, with the 10.30am bus continuing on to Taba (E£20, two hours). There is a 9.30am bus to St Katherine (E£20 to E£25, 2½ hours). Buses heading to Cairo (E£67 to E£80, nine hours) depart at 8.30am, 12.30pm, 2.30pm and 7.30pm. Buses for Suez (E£45 to E£450, 6½ hours) depart at 8am and 4pm. There is also a daily direct bus to Luxor (E£120, 15 to 18 hours) departing at 4pm, which, while long, is a faster and less expensive option than going via Hurgada on a combination of bus and ferry. Most hotels and camps can arrange your bus tickets for you, plus transport to the bus station, for about E£10 to E£15 extra.

### SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis are generally more expensive than buses, and as travellers are a captive market, there's usually not much room for negotiation. Per-person rates (multiply these by seven to charter an entire taxi) average about E£30 to St Katherine, Nuweiba or Sharm el-Sheikh.

## Getting Around

Pick-ups and minibuses go up and down the main street in Assalah and, less frequently, around the resort strip. The usual fare is E£1 for around town, and E£3 if you find one doing the entire stretch between Assalah and Dahab City. In addition to a handful of taxis, a minibus usually meets incoming buses at the East Delta Travel Company's Dahab City station and goes up to Assalah. Departing from Assalah, you'll need to rely on taxis to get to the bus station (E£5 to E£10).

**Max Car Rental** (☎ 364 0310; maxrent@max.com.eg) has a branch at the Hilton Dahab Resort.

## RAS ABU GALLUM PROTECTORATE

The starkly beautiful Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate covers 400 sq km of coastline between Dahab and Nuweiba, mixing coastal

mountains, narrow valleys, sand dunes and fine gravel beaches with several excellent diving and snorkelling sites. Scientists describe the area as a 'floristic frontier', in which Mediterranean conditions are influenced by a tropical climate. This, together with its 165 plant species (including 44 that are found nowhere else in Sinai) and wealth of mammals and reptiles, gives it great environmental importance and makes it a fascinating place to visit.

As in nearby Nabq, Bedouin of the Mizena tribe live within the protectorate confines, fishing here as they have done for centuries (although this is now regulated by the protectorate). There is a designated camping area and several walking trails, and you can hire Bedouin guides and camels through the ranger house at the edge of **Wadi Rasasah**. Otherwise, there are no facilities and no visitors' centre. Popular destinations within the protectorate include **Bir el-Oghda**, a now-deserted Bedouin village, and **Bir Sugheir**, a water source at the edge of the protectorate.

Dive centres and travel agencies in Nuweiba and Dahab offer camel and jeep excursions to Abu Gallum, often as part of a diving safari. Abanoub Travel (p481) is also a good contact for arranging a visit. If you are driving, remember that all vehicles should stick to the tracks. The entry track off the main highway is unsignposted. The protectorate can also be reached by hiking in from north of the Blue Hole near Dahab.

## NUWEIBA

☎ 069

Turquoise waters edged by fine, sandy beaches and rimmed on both sides by barren, rugged mountain chains give Nuweiba one of the most attractive settings among Sinai's resort towns. Stretched randomly over about 15km, however, Nuweiba lacks a defined centre and a cohesive ambience, and functions primarily as a port town rather than a travellers' retreat. As a result, Nuweiba has never managed to attract the cult following of nearby Dahab or the massive development of Sharm el-Sheikh. Indeed, most travellers pass through Nuweiba either on their way to the scenic camps and resorts further up the coast, or to catch the Aqaba-bound ferry en route to Petra in Jordan.

Yet the lack of crowds gives Nuweiba its own appeal, and the town makes a reasonable stop if you're working your way up or down the coast. Nuweiba is also a good place to organise

## THE BEDOUIN OF SINAI

Sinai's rugged tracts are home to the Bedouin (desert dwellers), most of whom live in the north of the peninsula. The Bedouin – whose numbers are variously estimated to be between 80,000 and 300,000 – belong to 14 distinct tribes, most with ties to Bedouin in the Negev, Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia, and each with their own customs and culture. The Sukwarka, who live along the northern coast near Al-Arish, are the largest tribe. Others include the Tarabin, who have territory in both northern and southern Sinai; the Tyaha in the centre of the peninsula who, together with the Tarabin, trace their roots to Palestine; and the Haweitat, centred in an area southeast of Suez, and originally from the Hejaz in Saudi Arabia.

The seven Bedouin tribes in southern Sinai are known collectively as the Towara or 'Arabs of Al-Tor', the provincial capital. Of these southern Bedouin, the first to settle in Sinai were the Aleiqat and the Suwalha, who arrived soon after the Muslim conquest of Egypt. The largest southern tribe is the Mizena, who are concentrated along the coast between Sharm el-Sheikh and Nuweiba. Members of the tiny Jabaliyya tribe, centred in the mountains around St Katherine, are descendants of Macedonians sent by the Emperor Justinian to build and protect the monastery in the 6th century.

Thanks to centuries of living in the harsh conditions of Sinai, the Bedouin have developed a sophisticated understanding of their environment. Strict laws and traditions govern the use of precious resources. Water use is closely regulated and vegetation carefully conserved, as revealed in the Bedouin adage, 'killing a tree is like killing a soul'. Local life centres around clans and their sheikhs (leaders), and loyalty and hospitality – essential for surviving in the desert – are paramount. Tea is traditionally taken in rounds of three, and traditional dwellings are tents made of woven goat hair, sometimes mixed with sheep wool. Women's black veils and robes are often elaborately embroidered, with red signifying that they are married, and blue unmarried. Despite their long history and immense knowledge of the peninsula, Sinai's original inhabitants are often left behind in the race to build up the coast. They are sometimes viewed with distrust because of their ties to tribes in neighbouring countries, especially Israel & the Palestinian Territories, and their strong traditions, respect for their environment and proud nomadic past are often given short shrift by Nile Valley dwellers, many of whom treat the peninsula as a gold mine to be exploited. With their coastal landholdings sold out from under them by the state, their fishing grounds polluted by uncontrolled development and their nomadic past often turned into a caricature of packaged camel rides and desert dinners, the Bedouin have become increasingly marginalised in their own land.

In recent years persecution of the Bedouin has sadly increased, particularly in light of their perceived involvement in terrorist cells throughout the Sinai. Although a few misguided individuals were involved in the 2006 Dahab bombings, the government has relentlessly pursued convictions of Bedouins, particularly in Northern Sinai. Fortunately, however, the news isn't all bad – on the contrary, the Bedouin are arguably more organised and unified than they have ever been. This is evident in their recent formation of cooperatives whose aims are to grant the greater community sustained economic independence, and to ensure that their traditional desert environment is protected.

Throughout the world – and especially in Egypt – tourism has the power to shape the destinies of communities. As an informed traveller, you, too, can do your part: frequent Bedouin-owned businesses, always buy locally, stay informed of prevalent issues and never be afraid to ask questions.

jeep and camel safaris into the interior, and its modest diving scene means that its offshore reefs are comparatively uncrowded. Although it's perhaps not a tourist destination in itself, a number of low-key resorts and backpacker-friendly camps make Nuweiba a pleasant enough place to spend a few days.

## History

During the Israeli occupation, Nuweiba was the site of a large *moshav* (farming settlement), which has since been converted into a residence for Egyptian government officials. In the 1990s Israelis formed the bulk of the tourist trade, but the vagaries of the regional

political situation over the past decade and the fallout from the Iraq war have forced many new tourism projects to a halt. Today the outskirts of Nuweiba and the coastline north to Taba is littered with the shells of half-built resorts.

## Orientation

Nuweiba is divided into three parts: to the south is the port, with a bus station, banks and a couple of scruffy hotels; about 8km further north is Nuweiba City, a small but spread-out settlement with a variety of accommodation options, a small bazaar and several cheap places to eat; and about a 10-minute walk north along the beach is Tarabin, Nuweiba's equivalent of Dahab's Assalah area.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Tourist police** Nuweiba City (☎ 350 0231; near Nuweiba Village hotel; ☎ 24hr); Nuweiba Port (☎ 350 0401)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Al-Mostakbal Internet Café** (☎ 350 0090; Nuweiba City; per hr E£6; ☎ 9am-3am)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Nuweiba Hospital** (☎ 350 0302; Nuweiba City; ☎ 24hr) Just off the Main East Coast Highway to Dahab.

### MONEY

Neither of the banks at the port will handle Jordanian dinars.

**Banque du Caire** (Nuweiba Port; ☎ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu) Has an ATM.

**Banque Misr** (Nuweiba Port; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu) Has an ATM.

**National Bank of Egypt** Nuweiba Port (☎ 8.30am-2pm Sun-Thu; Nuweiba Village (☎ 9am-1pm & 7-9pm Sat-Thu, 9-11am Fri) Both branches have an ATM.

### POST

**Branch post office** (Nuweiba Port; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu)

**Main post office** (Nuweiba City; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu)

### TELEPHONE

**Telephone centrale** (Nuweiba City; ☎ 24hr)

## Activities

### SNORKELLING & DIVING

Underwater delights are the feature attraction of Nuweiba, and while not as dramatic as at

other resorts on the Gulf of Aqaba, the dive sites tend to be less busy, with an impressive variety of marine life. There are shallow reefs offshore that are reasonable places to snorkel, but the best snorkelling is the **Stone House Reef** just south of town. Divers sometimes head to nearby Ras Abu Gallum (p479), Ras Mohammed National Park (p461) or other offshore destinations – many of which are also fine for snorkellers – though most diving here is shore based.

For an overview of diving in the Red Sea, including recommended operators and dive sites, see p439.

### CAMEL & JEEP SAFARIS

With the exception of Dahab, Nuweiba is the best place in Sinai to arrange camel safaris into the interior. When planning your trip, keep in mind that camels are a slower and – if budget is a worry – more expensive way of travelling. However, they allow you to reach places that are inaccessible to vehicles, and are the best way to see the area. Almost every camp and shop in Tarabin offers these trips, but take care that whoever you pick is a local Bedouin – not only are they marginalised by tour operators from the Nile Valley and therefore need the work, but there have been some instances of travellers lost in the desert without water because their so-called guides didn't know the routes.

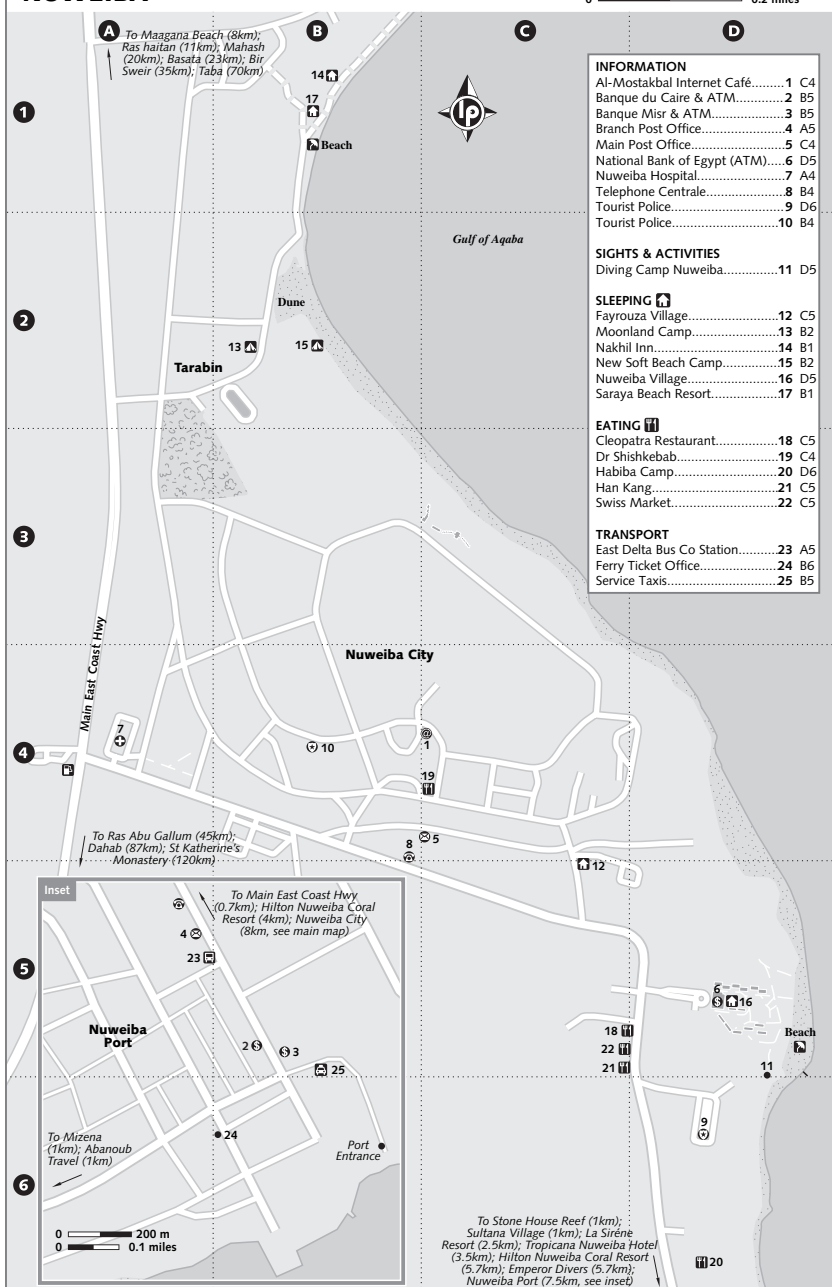
Register with the police before beginning the safari, and don't pay the camel driver until you return to the village. Itineraries – and as a result prices – are generally custom designed, but expect to pay from E£70 per person for an evening trip into the mountains with dinner at a Bedouin camp, and from about E£300 per person per day for a safari including all food and water.

All of the camps and shops also offer jeep safaris, though prices vary considerably depending on the time of year, your destination and the size of your party – don't be afraid to shop around and bargain hard.

In addition to trips to the popular Coloured Canyon (see p475 for more information), other popular destinations are **Ain al-Furtega**, a palm-filled oasis 16km northwest of Nuweiba; and **Mayat el-Wishwashi**, a large cistern hidden between two boulders in a canyon – it used to be the largest cistern in Sinai, but now has only a trickle of water, except after floods. Nearby is **Mayat Malkha**, a palm grove fed by

## NUWEIBA

0 400 m  
0 0.2 miles





the waters of Mayat el-Wishwashi and set amid colourful sandstone.

**Wadi Huweiyit** is an impressive sandstone canyon with lookouts giving panoramic views over to Saudi Arabia. **Ain Hudra** (Green Spring) is where Miriam was supposed to have been struck by leprosy for criticising Moses. The picturesque **Ain Umm Ahmed** is the largest oasis in eastern Sinai, with lots of palms, Bedouin houses and a famous stream that becomes an icy river in the winter months.

Further afield, **Wadi Sheikh Atiya** is named after the father of the Tarabin tribe – the largest tribe in the area – who lies buried here under a white dome. There is an oasis here and Bedouin frequently come on pilgrimage. **Gebel Barga** is a mountain that is difficult to climb, yet affords stunning views over the mountains of eastern Sinai.

## Sleeping

Nuweiba City is the area's principal population centre, and home to a collection of mostly midrange hotels plus a few low-key backpackers' camps. Since Nuweiba primarily serves as a port city, this area is sprawling and decidedly lacking in character – getting around can be a pain, so it's best to grab a taxi and choose a camp instead of going door to door looking for the best price. However, there are a few decent accommodation options here, and it's a convenient place to spend the night if you're catching the ferry to Jordan the following day.

Most backpackers and independent travellers prefer Tarabin, which is essentially a pedestrian-only boardwalk that stretches along the waterfront for 1.5km. In years gone by, Tarabin hosted a laid-back bohemian scene that rivalled Dahab in popularity. Unfortunately, however, Nuweiba has been badly hit by the lack of Israeli tourists since the resurgence of the *intifada* (the Palestinian uprising against Israeli authorities). Today Tarabin is very quiet, although it continues to attract a trickle of visitors. While many of the original camps have either closed or gone upscale, it's still possible to find a number of interesting spots.

Be advised that the following list is a small sampling of what is available – the establishments listed are well-established spots that have weathered the storm in light of decreasing tourism. Also keep in mind that prices are not to be taken at face value – most rooms

are subject to bargaining, especially if there aren't too many tourists in town. If you also want to arrange activities, it's best to inquire through your hotel as discounts are readily available for guests.

## BUDGET

**New Soft Beach Camp** (☎ 010 364 7586; [www.softbeachcamp.com](http://www.softbeachcamp.com); huts from E£20; ☑) Located at the quieter end of Tarabin near the dunes, the New Soft Beach has one of the best settings in Nuweiba. The camp consists of rustic but picturesque huts with communal outdoor showers and attractive gardens. There is also a good restaurant on the premises where you can sample some local Bedouin favourites.

**Moonland Camp** (☎ 350 1229; huts from E£20; ☑) A popular backpacker spot, the Moonland Camp is a few minutes' walk north of Soft Beach at the southern end of Tarabin. Like Soft Beach, accommodation is in a collection of huts built around communal showers and a small restaurant. Though the compound is somewhat closed in and set back from the beach, the friendly management works hard to create a relaxed, communal atmosphere.

**Fayrouza Village** (☎ 350 1133; [fayrouza@sinai4you.com](mailto:fayrouza@sinai4you.com); huts from E£20) Yet another popular camp, the Fayrouza Village stands out with its location on the beach at the edge of Nuweiba City and in front of a reef. Like the competition, the camp consists of simple but spotless huts overlooking the water, communal bathrooms and a small restaurant serving filling, tasty meals. If you're arriving in Nuweiba by bus, ask to be dropped off at the hospital, from where it's a 10-minute walk down to Fayrouza.

**Saraya Beach Resort** (☎ 350 1230; huts from E£20, r from E£150; ☑) Located north of Moonland in the heart of Tarabin, this resort is more of a backpacker camp despite its fancy name. Still, if you're looking for camp ambience and the privacy of a hotel room, its air-con rooms offer good value. Although the Saraya isn't as scenically located as the New Soft Beach and the Moonland, you're right in the centre of the action here.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Nuweiba Village** (☎ 350 0401; [www.nuweibaresort.com](http://www.nuweibaresort.com); s/d huts from US\$15/20, r from US\$40; ☑ ☑ ☑) The Nuweiba Village is a good choice for most budgets – the main hotel area consists of a collection of attached bungalow-style rooms overlooking a central garden area, while

nearby on the beach is a collection of closely spaced wooden huts with shared facilities. Regardless of which room you choose, all guests can take advantage of the three-star amenities, including an attractive pool and a well-stocked water-sports centre. The Village is located at the southern end of Nuweiba City off the main coastal road.

**Nakhil Inn** (☎ 350 0879; [www.nakhil-inn.com](http://www.nakhil-inn.com); r from US\$40; ☼) At the northern end of Tarabin is this charming inn, which consists of attached wooden bungalows fronting a large patio area. Rooms are a soothing mix of stained woods and natural tiles, and are a pleasant alternative to much of the concrete that lines the beachfronts in Egypt. Guests can also take advantage of the on-site yoga studio, which will put you in the right mood to enjoy the relaxing ambience of Nuweiba.

**Tropicana Nuweiba Hotel** (☎ 352 1056; [www.tropicana-hotels.com](http://www.tropicana-hotels.com); r from US\$60; ☼) Located along the coastal road, this four-star hotel offers excellent value, especially considering that it fronts a superb stretch of sandy beach, and it's well landscaped with lush greenery. Rooms of varying shapes and sizes are housed in an attractive whitewashed building, and overlook the deep-blue hues of the Red Sea. Guests can also unwind by the pool, or in any of the Tropicana's inviting restaurants and bars.

**Hilton Nuweiba Coral Resort** (☎ 352 0320; [www.hiltonworldresorts.com](http://www.hiltonworldresorts.com); Nuweiba Port; r from US\$100; ☼) Nuweiba's most sophisticated hotel is this immaculate resort, which boasts lush gardens, a free-form infinity pool, posh restaurants and bars, a private stretch of soft sand and all the usual five-star amenities. Accommodation is in a variety of rooms ranging from contemporary designs with Western-style furnishings to whitewashed bungalows with Bedouin-style interiors. It's located about 2.5km south of the Tropicana, and about 4km via road from the port area.

## Eating

At the port there is a cluster of *fuul* and *ta'amiyya* places in the area behind the National Bank of Egypt and before the ticket office for Aqaba ferries. If you'd prefer a bit more than a quick bite, however, the selection is much better in and around Nuweiba City, where you have a choice of several small eateries or the hotel restaurants. If you're out in Tarabin, you'll probably take most of your meals at your camp or hotel – most of

the camps also have self-catering facilities if you're cooking your own grub.

**Swiss Market** (Nuweiba City) Self-caterers can try this popular local market, which has a good selection of the basics, as well as a decent stock of local produce and fresh cuts of meat.

**Dr Shishkebab** (Bazaar Nuweiba City; dishes E£10-30) This place is just what the doctor ordered, with generous spreads of Egyptian favourites from hearty fried eggplant and hummus to delectable *daoud basha* (meatballs in a rich tomato sauce).

**Han Kang** (Nuweiba City; dishes E£20-40) Although you're a long way from the Far East, this surprisingly good Chinese restaurant hits the spot, especially if you've been on the road for awhile and can't bear to look at another falafel sandwich.

**Cleopatra Restaurant** (Nuweiba City; dishes E£20-50) One of the more popular tourist restaurants in Nuweiba City, this eclectic spot offers up the bounty of the sea, Lebanese-inspired mezze platters, wood-fired pizzas and a few Western fast-food favourites.

**Habiba Camp** (Nuweiba City; buffet from E£50) If you want value for your money, look no further than this all-you-can-eat spot, which offers an especially good buffet lunch – pack in the calories and then spend the afternoon burning them off on a trek (or simply lazing about on the beach).

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

There's an excellent fast-ferry service between Nuweiba in Egypt and Aqaba in Jordan, leaving Nuweiba at 3pm and taking one hour to two hours depending on sea conditions. Heading back to Nuweiba, fast ferries depart from Aqaba at 11am. One-way tickets cost US\$59 for adults and US\$39 for children aged three to 12 years. You must be at the port two hours before departure to get through the shambolic departure formalities in the main ferry terminal building.

Note that there's also a slow ferry (adult/child US\$49/29, 2½ hours) leaving at noon daily, though we can't stress how much more comfortable it is to shell out the extra US\$10 and take the fast ferry.

Tickets must be paid for in US dollars (note that these are not always available at the banks in Nuweiba) and can be purchased on the day of departure only at the **ferry ticket office** (☎ 9am), in a small building near the port.

Note that the only exception to this rule is during the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) when boats are booked weeks prior to departure. During this period, it's necessary to buy your ticket as far in advance as possible.

To find the ticket office, turn right when you exit the bus station, walking towards the water, and turn right again after the National Bank of Egypt. Continue along one block, and you'll see the sand-coloured ticket office building ahead to your left. The office stops selling tickets approximately one hour before the ferry leaves.

Free Jordanian visas can be obtained on the ferry if you have an EU, US, Canadian, Australian or New Zealand passport. Fill out a green form on board, give it and your passport to the immigration officers and – hey presto – you can collect your passport and visa when you pass through Jordanian immigration at Aqaba. Other nationalities will need to organise a visa in advance.

## BUS

**East Delta Bus Co** (☎ 352 0371; Nuweiba Port) has buses to Cairo (££70 to ££80, seven to eight hours) at 9am, 11am and 3pm going via Taba (££15 to ££20, one hour); and to Sharm el-Sheikh (££20 to ££25, three hours) at 6.30am, 8.30am, 10am and 4pm going via Dahab (££10 to ££15, one hour). There is a bus to Suez (££45 to ££50, four hours) at 6.30am, and an inconvenient connection from Nuweiba to St Katherine via Dahab departing at 8.30am (££22).

## SERVICE TAXI

There is a service-taxi station by the port, but unless you get there when the ferry has arrived from Aqaba, you'll have to wait a long time for the car to fill up. Per-person fares (multiplied by seven for the entire car) average about ££30 to Sharm el-Sheikh, ££15 to Dahab and ££60 to Cairo (usually changing vehicles in Suez). It's also possible to find service taxis at the outskirts of Tarabin that will take you directly out on the road north towards Taba or south to Dahab, St Katherine's Monastery or Sharm el-Sheikh.

## Getting Around

Since Nuweiba is so spread out, taxis are expensive. Expect to pay ££10 to ££20 for a taxi from the port/bus station to Nuweiba City, depending on your destination and negotiating powers, and from ££5 for the few kilometres between Tarabin and Nuweiba City.

If you're arriving in Nuweiba by bus, you can usually ask to be dropped at the hospital, from where you can walk to Fayrouza Village and nearby camps/hotels.

## NUWEIBA TO TABA

☎ 069

The stunning coastline between Nuweiba and Taba is fringed by aqua waters and rimmed by chains of low, barren mountains. While there are a few pristine spots left, much of it is lined by a string of 'tourist villages' in various stages of completion, interspersed with simple beach camps consisting of reed huts and an eating area. Many of these camps sprung up when the local Bedouin were forced off their land to make way for hotel and resort development, and have since grown into what the Ministry of Tourism terms 'clusters'.

Business, which traditionally has come primarily from visiting Israelis, has suffered greatly with the political turmoil of recent years, and you'll frequently have much of the coastline to yourself. As a result, at most places there's nothing much to do other than relax on the sands while gazing out at the turquoise panoramas stretching before you, or – if you're feeling energetic – organise camel and jeep safaris to the interior.

If you're debating whether or not to stop at any of the places listed here, it's worth asking yourself what kind of traveller you are. If you need constant stimulation, you're likely to go a bit stir-crazy. However, if you want to seriously slow things down, and spend some quality time with an interesting cast of characters, the Nuweiba–Taba coastline will appeal immensely.

## Orientation & Information

Approximately 50km of well-paved coastal highway connects Nuweiba with its northerly neighbour of Taba. About 20km south of Taba is the massive new **Taba Heights development** ([www.tabaheights.com](http://www.tabaheights.com)), one of the lynchpins in Egyptian efforts to create a 'Red Sea Riviera'. When it's finally complete, it will house several luxury hotels, a casino, numerous shops, bars and restaurants, a medical clinic and extensive water-sports facilities. For now, much of the area is still under construction, although a few resorts are open.

The closest places to change money, or to stock up if you want to self-cater, are (unsurprisingly) Taba and Nuweiba.

## LONELY PLANET JORDAN (ABRIDGED)

Planning a brief excursion to Jordan? Wishing you had a bit of info on the ancient city of Petra? Here's a quick guide to one of the 'New Seven Wonders of the World'.

### PETRA

Hewn from towering rock walls of multicoloured sandstone, the imposing façades of its great temples and tombs are an enduring testament to the vision of the desert tribes who sculpted them. The Nabataeans – Arabs who dominated the region in pre-Roman times – chose as their capital a place concealed from the outside world, and fashioned it into one of the Middle East's most remarkable cities. Almost as spectacular as the monuments themselves are the countless shades and Neapolitan swirls formed in the rock. Petra is often called the 'Rose-Red City', but even this hardly does justice to the extraordinary range of colours that blend as the sun makes its daily passage over the site.

### Orientation & Information

The base town for exploring Petra is Wadi Musa (Valley of Moses), a patchy mass of hotels, restaurants and shops located about 3km from the **visitors' centre** (☎ 3-215 6020; ☎ 6am-5.30pm May-Sep, 6.30am-5pm Oct-Apr). Entry fees are JD21/26/31 for one-/two-/three-day passes. Note that at the time of publication, one Jordanian Dinar (JD) was approximately equal to US\$1.42 and ££7.83.

### Sights & Activities

The ancient city is approached via the **Siq**, a canyon-like passage that is actually a single block that has been rent apart by tectonic forces – at various points you can see where the grain of the rock on one side matches the other. The Siq can seem to continue forever, and the sense of anticipation builds as you look around each corner for your first glimpse of the Treasury, Petra's most famous monument.

Tucked away in such a confined space, **Al-Khazneh**, or the Treasury, is where most visitors fall in love with Petra. The Hellenistic exterior is an astonishing piece of craftsmanship, with the sophistication, symmetry, scale and grandeur of the carving enough to take the breath away of first-time visitors. Standing before the Treasury is a magical introduction to the ancient city, especially since the building is the precise location of the Holy Grail – at least according to the Hollywood classic *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Heading towards the ancient city centre are over 40 tombs and houses built by the Nabataeans and colloquially known as the **Street of Façades**. Continuing along you'll reach a Roman-style **theatre**, which was built over 2000 years ago and has a capacity of about 3000 in 45 rows of seats, with three horizontal sections separated by two corridors.

The Wadi Musa river bed widens out after the theatre – to the right (or north), carved into the cliff face, are the impressive burial places known collectively as the **Royal Tombs**. There are more tombs dotted around Petra than any other type of structure, and for years archaeologists assumed that the city was just one vast necropolis. The simple reason why so few dwellings have been discovered is that the Nabataeans lived in tents, much like some Bedouin do today.

One of Petra's most magnificent sights is **Al-Deir**, or the Monastery, which is reached via a one-hour uphill slog from the **Colonnaded Street** (Cardo Maximus). Similar in design to the Treasury, the imposing Monastery – 50m wide and 45m high – is just as impressive. Built in the 3rd century BC as a Nabataean tomb, the Monastery gets its name from the crosses carved on its inside walls, suggesting that the building was used as a church in Byzantine times. The building has towering columns and a large urn flanked by two half-pediments, and like the Treasury has heavy Hellenistic influences. **Petra by Night** (admission JD12; ☎ 8.30-10.30pm Mon & Thu) is a magical

### Sights

About 7km south of Taba and 250m off the Egyptian coast is **Pharaoh's Island** (Gezirat Fara'un; adult/child ££20/10; ☎ 9am-5pm), a tiny islet in turquoise waters, dominated by the much-restored Castle of Salah ad-Din. The castle

is actually a fortress built by the Crusaders in 1115, but captured and expanded by Saladin in 1170 as a bulwark against feared Crusader penetration south from Palestine. At the height of Crusader successes, it was feared that they might attempt to head for

way to see the old city, taking you along the Siq (lined with hundreds of candles) in silence as far as the Treasury, where traditional Bedouin music is played and mint tea is served.

## Sleeping

**Cleopetra Hotel** (☎ 3-215 7090; s/d JD10/14; 🏠) Located in the centre of Wadi Musa, this popular backpacker spot offers the obligatory nightly screening of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Rooms with private bathrooms are fairly simple aside from a few Jordanian textiles strewn about, though the communal atmosphere makes this place a winner.

**Amra Palace Hotel** (☎ 3-215 7070; www.amrapalace.com; s/d JD23/35, half board JD25/40; 🏠 📺) Located in Wadi Musa, this midrange hotel offers bright and modern rooms without breaking the bank. Choice amenities include satellite TV, a heated outdoor pool, Jacuzzi, summer terrace and an excellent Turkish bath (JD15 per person).

**Mövenpick Hotel** (☎ 3-215 7111; www.moevenpick-petra.com; s/d JD92/112; 🏠 📺) Conveniently located just 100m from the entrance to Petra, this is the most luxurious place in town, and as posh as you'd expect from the renowned hotel chain. Heavy on the Mediterranean stylings, the Mövenpick lures in guests, and then holds their attention with a beautiful swimming pool, rooftop gardens, a Middle Eastern library, and a whole slew of on-site bars and restaurants.

## Eating & Drinking

**Al-Afandi Quick Restaurant** (meals from JD1) A simple and friendly place located off the Shaheed roundabout, Al-Afandi caters primarily to locals, and offers hummus, felafel and shwarma at rock-bottom prices.

**Sandstone Restaurant** (mains from JD6) Near the centre of town, this tourist restaurant specialises in Jordanian dishes, including spit-roasted lamb and whole chickens, which are served up to hungry diners in an attractive outdoor beer garden.

**Cave Bar** (drinks from JD2.5) If you've never been to a bar in a 2000-year-old Nabataean rock tomb (and we're guessing you haven't!), then this memorable spot near the visitors' centre is an absolute must.

## Getting There & Away

Fast ferries (one way US\$59) depart from Nuweiba, Egypt, at 3pm and arrive in Aqaba, Jordan, approximately one to two hours later depending on sea conditions. Heading back to Egypt, fast ferries depart from Aqaba for Nuweiba at 11am. Arrive at the ferry terminal at least two hours early, and be sure to have US dollars with you. Egyptian pounds are not accepted, and banks in town rarely have US dollars available. Free Jordanian visas can be obtained on the ferry if you have an EU, US, Canadian, Australian or New Zealand passport, though other nationalities will need to organise a visa in advance. For more information on the ferry crossing, see p484.

From the ferry terminal in Aqaba, share taxis meet arriving ships in order to shuttle tourists to their desired hotel in Wadi Musa. When dealing with taxi drivers, it helps to be a good negotiator – and to have a lot of friends with you to bring down the price. Generally speaking, you can expect to pay approximately US\$15 per person to reach Wadi Musa. The ride takes approximately two hours, and winds through some attractive stretches of open desert.

In Wadi Musa, most hotels offer a free shuttle service to and from the visitors' centre, though a taxi ride from anywhere in Wadi Musa to Petra shouldn't cost you more than JD1 or JD2. Although hikers have little difficulty exploring Petra's sights, donkeys accompanied with guides are available all around Petra for negotiable prices. Camel rides are more for the novelty value, though their photogenic appeal is undeniable, especially if you wrap yourself up like Lawrence of Arabia.

the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Some of the modern restoration is incongruous (concrete was not a prime building material in Saladin's time), but the island is a pleasant place for a half-day trip, with limpid and enticing waters and coral for snorkelling at

the island's southern end. There is also a café serving soft drinks and snacks.

The only boat to the island runs from the Salah ad-Din Hotel, on the coast just opposite. Unfortunately, the service is unreliable, though if the boat is running, a return ticket

costs only US\$4. Tickets are available from the hotel reception, and tickets for the island are available on landing.

## Sleeping

Note that accommodation options are listed from south to north – unless you have your own transport, the only way to reach them is by service taxi or bus. Note also that meals are available at all of the properties we've listed, though a good number of visitors prefer to bring their own food and self-cater. All of the options listed can also arrange desert and diving safaris throughout Sinai.

**Maagana Beach Camp** (☎ 012 795 2402; huts from E£20) Although it's close to the road and exposed to the wind, this stretch of sand is conveniently located just north of Nuweiba. Accommodation is in simple huts that lack much individual personality, though the helpful Bedouin staff really bring this place together. If you want to explore the Nuweiba–Taba coastline, but don't want to venture too far from town, this is a good choice.

**Ayyash Camp** (☎ 012 760 4668; huts from E£20) Located on the rocky point of Ras Shaitan (Satan's Head) about 3km north of Maagana, this strip of coastline was also attacked in the 2004 Taba bombings (see p489). Since then the pace of life has returned to normal, and it's one of the most popular beach areas on the Nuweiba–Taba strip. Owned by a local Bedouin, Ayyash has a placid setting on a wide stretch of sand, canvas tents and simple huts with shared facilities, and no electricity.

**Castle Beach** (☎ 012 739 8495; huts from E£80; 🏠) Just north of Ayyash Camp near the *ras* (headland), Castle Beach is one of the few mid-range camps along this stretch of coastline. Accommodation is in comfortable bungalows that boast dramatic views of the frighteningly named 'Satan's Head'. One of the perks of staying here is the delightful beachside restaurant, which serves delicious meals that make the most of the local seafood.

**ourpick Basata** (☎ 350 0480; www.basata.com; camping per person US\$7, huts from US\$12, 3-person chalet from US\$60) Twenty kilometres north of Nuweiba in the Mahash area is Basata ('simplicity' in Arabic), an ecologically minded and hugely popular travellers' settlement that lives by its name – owner Sherif Ghamrawy's concern for the environment is reflected in the philosophy of the hotel, which uses organically grown produce and recycles its rubbish. There are simple huts

sharing facilities, pleasant chalets with electricity and private bathroom, a large camping area, a kitchen (where you can self-cater or arrange to have prepared meals), a bakery and shower blocks. Any cooking ingredients you could want are available, the ambience is very laid-back and family friendly with a New Age twist, and TVs and loud music are thankfully prohibited.

**Club Aquasun** (☎ 350 1208; www.dubaquasun.com; r from US\$55; 🏠 🏠) Located 30km north of Nuweiba, and set on a 2km-long stretch of sand complete with its own house reef, this 75-room domed resort is an affordable spot for anyone looking for a splash of low-key luxury. Although not as swish as the hotels and resorts going up in Taba Heights, there is a good selection of facilities and amenities on offer, and a night or two definitely won't break the bank. If you want to take advantage of the grounds but prefer a bit more intimacy, the management also operates the nearby Aquasun Ghazaly (huts from US\$35), which consists of a smattering of simple beach huts surrounding a small beach bar and restaurant.

**Hyatt Regency** (☎ 358 0234; www.taba.hyatt.com; r from US\$115; 🏠 🏠 🏠) This tasteful desert-pastel hotel was designed by the famous American designer and architect Michael Graves and seeks to replicate the opulence and elegance typical of the five-star resorts in Sharm. Nestled beside the mountains close to the beach, it has excellent facilities, including lush gardens, several pools, a large health centre, extensive water sports and a rapidly expanding list of gourmet restaurants. The Hyatt Regency is one of the showpieces of the Taba Heights development project, and aims to recapture a slice of the tourist industry that was lost in the 2004 bombings (see p489).

## Getting There & Away

Buses from either Taba or Nuweiba will drop you at any of the places mentioned previously, although you'll probably have to pay the full Nuweiba–Taba fare (E£12, or E£70 from Cairo). When you're ready to leave, staff will help you hail a bus from the road.

## TABA

☎ 069

Taba holds the dubious distinction of being the last portion of Sinai to be returned to Egypt under the terms of the 1979 Israel–Egypt Peace Treaty. It has been a minor point of contention between the two countries for nearly a



decade. Egypt argued that Taba was on the Egyptian side of the armistice line agreed to in 1949, while Israel contended that it was on the Ottoman side of a border agreed between the Ottomans and British Egypt in 1906, and therefore the lines drawn in 1949 and 1979 were in error. After a dispute lasting nearly a decade, the issue was submitted in 1988 to an international commission, which ruled in Egypt's favour – Israel returned Taba to Egypt later that year.

As part of this agreement, Israeli travellers were permitted to visit Taba visa-free for up to 48 hours, which sparked tourism development throughout the town. However, following a series of deadly bomb attacks in 2004 that killed and injured a large number of Israeli travellers, tourism has unfortunately virtually ceased in Taba. Today Taba primarily serves as a border crossing for overland travellers heading between Egypt and Israel & the Palestinian Territories.

### Orientation & Information

There is a **post & telephone office** (☎ 24hr) in the town, along with the Taba Emergency Centre hospital, a bakery and an Egypt Air office (near Taba Hilton; it's often closed and there are currently no flights). Just inside the border are an ATM and several foreign-exchange booths. Cash and travellers cheques can also be exchanged at the Taba Hilton.

### Dangers & Annoyances

On 7 October 2004, three bomb attacks in the Taba area killed 34 people and injured over 150 people – the worst of these attacks occurred when a truck bomb brought down several floors of the Taba Hilton. Although subsequent attacks in Sinai have targeted tourists in Sharm el-Sheikh, the possibility of another attack in Taba is still possible. However, it's worth mentioning that tourism in the town has since then virtually ceased to exist, which means that there are perhaps more likely targets in other parts of the country. Though the Israeli–Egyptian border remains perfectly safe and relatively hassle-free to cross, it's still worth paying attention to warnings.

For an overview of the history of terrorism in Sinai, see p457.

### Sleeping & Eating

Sadly, the tourist potential of Taba was destroyed following the despicable attacks of

2004. Although a handful of tourists stop here en route to Israel, there is little in the town to warrant a visit, and today most of the hotels in Taba have simply closed their doors and shut down. Perhaps things will change in the years to come, though it's unlikely the damage will ever be entirely undone.

**Taba Hilton Nelson Village** (☎ 353 0140; [www.hilton.com](http://www.hilton.com); Taba Beach; r from US\$100; ☎ ☎ ☎) The Hilton gained worldwide attention and sympathy in 2004 when much of it was destroyed in a terrorist attack. Since then, it has been rapidly rebuilding, and now offers a good selection of rooms in its Nelson Village compound, set in lush grounds overlooking the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Aqaba. Although the scars of the attack are still evident, the Taba Hilton stands as a testament to Egypt's resolve to fight domestic terrorism.

**Castle Zaman** (☎ 350 1234, 012 214 0591; [www.castlezaman.com](http://www.castlezaman.com); meals from E£110; ☎ from 10am; ☎) This atmospheric stone castle on a cliff with views over the gulf has the best cuisine along this stretch of coast, featuring huge portions of items such as a full rack of grilled lamb. There's also a bar, a pool, a small private beach and a couple of rooms (available per night from US\$1000 to only those who want to rent the castle out in its entirety). It's a good idea to call in advance to confirm opening times, as the castle is sometimes booked for weddings or other events.

### Getting There & Away

The Taba–Eilat border, which is open 24 hours daily, is the only safe and reliable crossing between Egypt and Israel. For more information, see p524.

#### AIR

Egypt Air has suspended its domestic flights to/from Taba, although it still maintains an office near the Taba Hilton. The airport is at Ras an-Naqb, 38km from Taba town.

#### BUS

**East Delta Travel Company** (☎ 353 0250) has its bus station along the main road about 800m south of the border. Buses to Nuweiba (E£15, one hour) leave at 7am, 9am and 3pm, with the 7am bus continuing to St Katherine (E£25 to E£30, four hours). There's also a bus from Cairo to Nuweiba that passes Taba about noon. Departures to Cairo (E£70 to E£80, six to seven hours) are at 10.30am, 12.30pm and 4.30pm,

and to Suez (££45 to ££50, four hours) at 7.15am. Buses to Dahab (££20, 2½ hours) and Sharm el-Sheikh (££25 to ££30, 3½ hours) leave at 7am (terminating in Dahab), 9am and 3pm (both continuing to Sharm el-Sheikh).

## Getting Around

### CAR

Car rental is available at **Max Car Rental** (☎ 353 0333; tabareservation@max.com.eg; 🕒 6am-8pm), situated just before the border post, opposite the Taba Hilton.

### SERVICE TAXI

Taxis and minibuses wait by the border for passengers. If business is slack, you may have a long wait for the vehicle to fill up – or you can pay the equivalent of all seven fares and leave immediately. Per-person fares are about ££15 to Nuweiba, ££30 to Dahab, ££45 to Sharm el-Sheikh or St Katherine's, and ££55 to Cairo. Your bargaining power increases if the bus is not too far off.

# INTERIOR

Sinai's rugged interior is populated by barren mountains, wind-sculpted canyons and wadis that burst into life with even the shortest rains. The rocks and desert landscapes turn shades of pink, ochre and velvet black as the sun rises and falls, and what little vegetation there is appears to grow magically out of the rock. Bedouin still wander through the wilderness, and camels are the best way to travel, with much of the terrain too rocky even for a 4WD. Against this desolate backdrop some of the most sacred events in recorded human history took place, which has consequently immortalised the Sinai in the annals of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

## ST KATHERINE PROTECTORATE

☎ 069

The 4350-sq-km St Katherine Protectorate was created in 1996 to counteract the detrimental effects of rapidly increasing tourism on St Katherine's Monastery and the adjacent Mt Sinai. In addition to the area's unique high-altitude desert ecosystem, it protects a wealth of historical sites sacred to the world's three main monotheistic religions, and the core part around the monastery has been declared a Unesco World Heritage site. Although at times it can be difficult to pry

yourself away from Sinai's beaches, a visit to the St Katherine Protectorate is not to be missed.

## Orientation

Rising up out of the desert and jutting above the other peaks surrounding the monastery is the towering 2285m Mt Sinai. Tucked into a barren valley at the foot of Mt Sinai is the ancient St Katherine's Monastery. Approximately 3.5km from here is the small town of Al-Milga, which is also called Katreen, and is known as the 'Meeting Place' by local Jabaliyya Bedouin.

## Information

Entry fees are payable at the **St Katherine Protectorate Office** (☎ 347 0032; www.stkpark.gov.eg; admission US\$3), located at the tourist village near the entrance to Al-Milga. Here, you'll also find informative guides to four 'interpretive trails' established in the area, including one for Mt Sinai. These booklets take you through each trail, explaining flora and fauna as well as sites of historical and religious significance.

To allow the local population to benefit from tourism, visitors are also requested to hire a local Bedouin guide. If you haven't arrived on an organised tour from elsewhere in Sinai, this is the best place to inquire about local guides.

The following listings are located in the town of Al-Milga.

**Banque Misr** (beside petrol station; 🕒 10am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu) Cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

**Police** (☎ 347 0046; beside the St Katherine Protectorate Office)

**St Katherine Hospital** (☎ 347 0263) Very basic care only.

**Telephone centrale** (beside the bakery; 🕒 24hr)

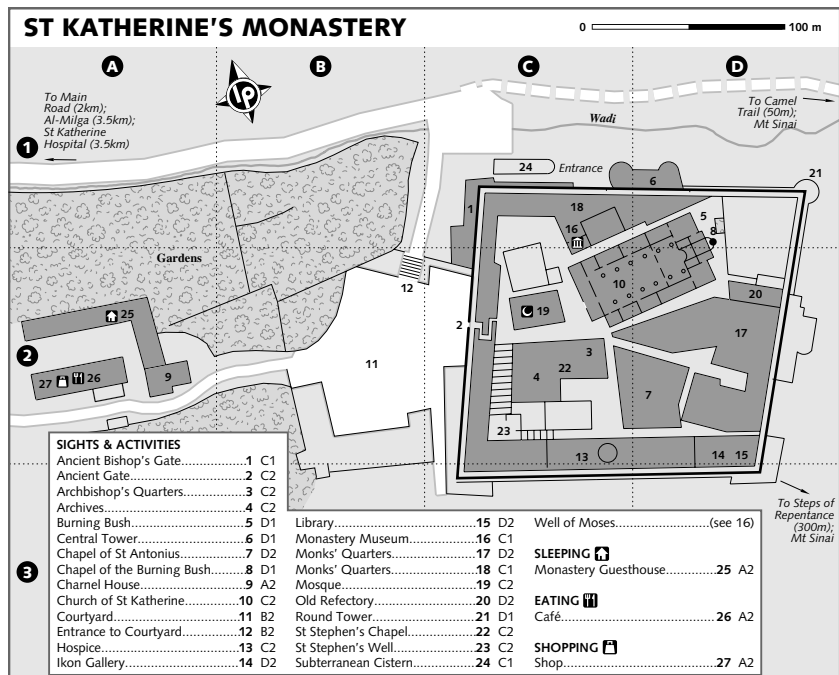
## Tours

The majority of visitors arrive at the St Katherine Protectorate on an organised tour departing from either Sharm el-Sheikh (p466), Dahab (p475) or Nuweiba (p481). However, it's both cheap and easy to sleep within the confines of the protectorate, and to organise everything independently.

## Sights

### ST KATHERINE'S MONASTERY

The ancient **St Katherine's Monastery** (☎ in Cairo 02-482 8513; sinai@tedata.net.eg; admission free; 🕒 9am-noon Mon-Wed, Fri & Sun, except religious holidays) traces



its founding to about AD 330 when the Roman empress Helena had a small chapel and a fortified refuge for local hermits built beside what was believed to be the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses. In the 6th century Emperor Justinian ordered a fortress to be constructed around the original chapel, together with a basilica and a monastery, to provide a secure home for the monastic community that had grown here, and as a refuge for the Christians of southern Sinai. Since then the monastery has been visited by pilgrims from throughout the world, many of whom braved extraordinarily difficult and dangerous journeys to reach the remote and isolated site. Today St Katherine's is considered one of the oldest continually functioning monastic communities in the world, and its chapel is one of early Christianity's only surviving churches.

The monastery – which, together with the surrounding area, has been declared a Unesco World Heritage site – is named after St Katherine, the legendary martyr of Alexandria, who was tortured on a spiked wheel and then beheaded for her faith. Tradition holds that her body was transported

by angels away from the torture device (which spun out of control and killed the pagan on-lookers) and onto the slopes of Egypt's highest mountain peak. The peak, which lies about 6km south of Mt Sinai, subsequently became known as Gebel Katarina. Katherine's body was subsequently 'found' about 300 years later by monks from the monastery in a state of perfect preservation.

Today a paved access road has removed the hazards that used to accompany a trip to the monastery, and both the monastery and the mountain are routinely packed with tour buses and people. It is especially full early in the morning, although somehow the monastery's interior tranquillity manages to make itself felt despite the crowds. When you visit, remember that this is still a functioning monastery, which necessitates conservative dress – no one with shorts is permitted to enter, and women must be sure to cover their shoulders.

Although much of the monastery is closed to the public, it is possible to enter the ornately decorated 6th-century **Church of the Transfiguration**, with its nave flanked by

massive marble columns and walls covered in richly gilded icons and paintings. At the church's eastern end, a gilded 17th-century iconostasis separates the nave from the sanctuary and the apse, where St Katherine's remains are interred (off limits to most visitors). High in the apse above the altar is one of the monastery's most stunning artistic treasures, a 6th-century mosaic of the biblical account of the transfiguration of Christ, although it can be difficult to see past the chandeliers and the iconostasis.

To the left of and below the altar is the monastery's holiest area, the **Chapel of the Burning Bush**. Access is restricted, but it's possible to see what is thought to be a descendant of the original **burning bush** in the monastery compound. According to the monks, this bush was transplanted from the nearby chapel in the 10th century, and continues to thrive centuries later. Near the burning bush is the **Well of Moses**, a natural spring that is supposed to give marital happiness to those who drink from it. Above the well is the superb **Monastery Museum** (adult/child under 12yr/student ££25/free/10), also known as the Sacred Sacristy, which has recently been magnificently restored. It has displays (labelled in Arabic and English) of many of the monastery's artistic treasures, including some of the spectacular Byzantine-era icons from its world-famous collection, numerous precious chalices and gold and silver crosses, and a priceless collection of ancient manuscripts and illuminated Bibles from the monastery's **library**.

Outside the monastery walls is a gift shop selling replicas of icons and other religious items (with branches in the museum and inside the monastery compound just near the entrance), and a café with an array of cold drinks and snacks. The least crowded days for visiting the monastery are generally Tuesday and Wednesday, while Saturday and Monday tend to be the most crowded.

## MT SINAI

Known locally as Gebel Musa, Mt Sinai is revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews, all of whom believe that God delivered his Ten Commandments to Moses at its summit. The mountain is easy and beautiful to climb, and although you'll invariably be overwhelmed with crowds of other visitors, it offers a taste of the magnificence of southern Sinai's high mountain region. For those visiting as part of

## CLIMBING & DIVING: A WORD OF CAUTION

Altitude can kill, particularly if your body is full of residual nitrogen. If you've been diving recently, be advised that Mt Sinai is high enough to induce decompression sickness. As a general rule, avoid climbing the mountain for 12 hours after one dive, or 18 hours if you've been on multiple dives. Although this may complicate your travel plans, trust us – you'll be delayed a lot longer if you end up confined in a hyperbaric chamber. And, of course, decompression sickness is anything but fun.

a pilgrimage, it also offers a moving glimpse into biblical times.

There are two well-defined routes up to the summit – the **camel trail** and the **Steps of Repentance** – which meet about 300m below the summit at a plateau known as Elijah's Basin. Here, everyone must take a steep series of 750 rocky and uneven steps to the top, where there is a small chapel containing paintings and ornaments (although it is usually kept locked). Both the climb and the summit offer spectacular views of nearby plunging valleys and of jagged mountain chains rolling off into the distance, and it's usually possible to see the even higher summit of Gebel Katarina in the distance. Most people make the climb in the pre-dawn hours to see the magnificence of the sun rising over the surrounding peaks, and then arrive back at the base before 9am, when the monastery opens for visitors.

The camel trail is the easier route, and takes about two hours to ascend, moving at a steady pace. The trail is wide, clear and gently sloping as it moves up a series of switchbacks, with the only potential difficulty – apart from sometimes fierce winds – being gravelly patches that can be slippery on the descent. Most people walk up, but it's also possible to hire a camel at the base, just behind the monastery, to take you all or part of the way to where the camel trail meets the steps. If you decide to try a camel, it's easier on the anatomy (especially if you're male) to ride up the mountain, rather than down.

En route are several kiosks selling tea and soft drinks, and vendors renting out blankets (££5) and mattresses (££10) to help ward off the chill at the summit. Trust us – both are

worthy investments as the mattresses will provide a layer of protection from the ice-cold rocks, and the blankets (even though they smell like camels) will protect you from the howling winds. The alternative path to the summit, the taxing 3750 Steps of Repentance, was laid by one monk as a form of penance. The steps – 3000 up to Elijah's basin and then the final 750 to the summit – are made of roughly hewn rock, and are steep and uneven in many places, requiring strong knees and concentration in placing your feet. If you want to try both routes, it's best to take the path on the way up and the steps – which afford impressive views of the monastery – on the way back down.

During summer try to avoid the heat by beginning your hike by 3am. Although stone signs have been placed on the trail as guides, it can be a bit difficult in parts, and a torch (flashlight) is essential. The start of the camel trail is reached by walking along the northern wall of the monastery past the end of the compound. The Steps of Repentance begin outside the southeastern corner of the compound.

Due to the sanctity of the area, and the tremendous pressure that large groups place on the environment, the Egyptian National Parks Office has instituted various regulations. If you spend the night on the mountain, you are asked to sleep below the summit at the small Elijah's Basin plateau. Here you'll find several composting toilets and a 500-year-old cypress tree, marking the spot where the prophet Elijah heard the voice of God. Bring sufficient food and water, warm clothes and a sleeping bag, as there is no space to pitch a tent. It gets cold and windy, even in summer, and in winter light snows are common.

As late as mid-May, be prepared to share the summit with up to several hundred other visitors, some carrying stereos, others Bibles and hymn books. With the music and singing, and people nudging each other for space, it can be difficult to actually sleep, especially in the small hours before sunrise. For more tranquility, the dawn views are just as impressive from the upper reaches of the camel path, shortly before it joins the Steps of Repentance.

## Activities

### TREKKING

St Katherine's Monastery lies in the heart of South Sinai's high mountain region, and the surrounding area is an ideal trekking desti-

nation for anyone with a rugged and adventurous bent. Treks range from half a day to a week or more, and can be done either on camel or on foot. Even if you decide to walk, you'll need at least one camel for your food and luggage.

One of the most common circuits goes to the **Galt al-Azraq** (Blue Pools) and takes three to four days. The trail leaves Al-Milga via the man-made **Abu Giffa Pass** and goes through **Wadi Tubug**, taking a detour around **Wadi Shagg**, where there are springs, water holes and lush, walled gardens (*bustans*). The walk then goes through the picturesque **Wadi Zuweitin** (Valley of the Olives), with ancient olive trees said by local Bedouin to have been planted by the founder of the Jebaliyya tribe. The first night is often spent here, and there is a small stone hut in which hikers can sometimes sleep. The hike continues through **Wadi Gibal**, through high passes and along the valleys of **Farsh Asara** and **Farsh Arnab**. Many hikers then climb either **Ras Abu Alda** or **Gebel Abu Gasba** before heading to the spring of **Ain Nagila** and the ruins of a Byzantine monastery at **Bab ad-Dunya** (Gate of the World). On the third day the trail leads to the crystal-clear, icy waters of the **Galt al-Azraq**, a deep, dramatic pool in the rock, before continuing on the fourth day through more dramatic wadis to a camel pass on **Gebel Abbas Basha**. A one-hour hike up a fairly easy but

### TREDDING LIGHTLY IN THE PROTECTORATE

In order to limit the impact of tourists upon this special place, the following code is now in force:

- Respect the area's religious and historical importance and the local Bedouin culture and traditions.
- Carry your litter out with you, bury your bodily waste and burn your toilet paper.
- Do not contaminate or overuse water sources.

The following acts are illegal:

- Removing any object, including rocks, plants and animals.
- Disturbing or harming animals or birds.
- Cutting or uprooting plants.
- Writing, painting or carving graffiti.

steep path leads to a ruined palace built by the 19th-century viceroy Abbas Hilmi I, with stunning views from the summit (2304m). The trail then goes back to Wadi Zuweitin and retraces its way to Al-Milga.

Other destinations include **Sheikh Awad**, with a Sheikh's tomb and Bedouin settlement; the **Nugra Waterfall**, a difficult to reach, rain-fed cascade about 20m high, which is reached through a winding canyon called **Wadi Nugra**; and **Naqb al-Faria**, a camel path with rock inscriptions. A shorter trip is the hike to the top of **Gebel Katarina**, Egypt's highest peak at 2642m. It takes about five hours to reach the summit along a straightforward but taxing trail. The views from the top are breathtaking, and the panorama can even include the mountains of Saudi Arabia on a clear day. The **Blue Valley**, given its name after a Belgian artist painted the rocks here blue some years ago, is another popular day trip.

All treks must be done with a Bedouin guide and most are arranged through either the **Mountain Tours Office** (☎ 010 641 3575) in Al-Milga, or any of the camps and hotels we've listed (see below). Guided treks typically cost about ££50 to ££100 per day, with an additional ££30 to ££50 per day for food and equipment. You should also buy firewood here in order to discourage destruction of the few trees in the mountains. Whoever you go with, be sure to register with the police prior to leaving.

Make sure you bring water-purification tablets, unless you want to rely on the mountain springs. You'll also need comfortable walking boots, a hat and sunglasses, sunblock, a warm jacket, a good sleeping bag and toilet paper. Keep in mind that it can get very cold at night – frost, and even snow, are common in winter.

## Sleeping

In addition to the aptly dubbed Monastery Guesthouse, which is in fact located at the monastery, there are also several hotels and guesthouses in the village of Al-Milga (Katreen), approximately 3.5km from the monastery. It's also possible to spend the night in either Dahab (p472) or Nuweiba (p479) and then simply access St Katherine's and Mt Sinai as part of a cheap, organised tour.

## BUDGET

**Fox of the Desert Camp** (☎ 347 0344; faragfox2003@yahoo.com; camping per person ££5, dm/d ££15/40) Run by local Bedouin Soliman and Farag al-Gebaly

(also known as the Fox), this is a relaxed budget camp with simple but clean facilities. The owners offer the obligatory treks, though the real treat is their custom-tailored desert safaris from about ££75 per person per day. The camp is in Al-Milga, on the road behind the Catherine Plaza Hotel about 200m from the main round.

**El-Malga Bedouin Camp** (☎ 010 641 3575; www.sheikmousa.com; camping per tent ££10, dm/d ££15/40; ☑ ) Run by the affable Sheikh Musa, who can help you organise treks to Sinai and around the protectorate, this popular camp is a backpacker favourite. El-Malga is a rock-hewn single-storey structure offering a handful of rooms with sleeping mats and shared bathrooms with hot water – a blessing after a chilly night up in the mountains. The camp is located next to the mountain trekking office in Al-Milga, and is an easy 500m walk from the bus stand.

**Safari Moonland Hotel & Camp** (☎ 347 0085, 010 658 9550; mnland2002@yahoo.com; dm ££15, s/d/tr from ££25/50/60) This friendly, Jabaliyya-run budget hotel-camp is located just up from Fox of the Desert Camp. Offering a variety of dorm and private rooms with both shared and private bathrooms, this is a good choice if you're fussy about choosing the right room. As with the other camps, treks and tours throughout the area are on offer here.

**Al-Karm Ecolodge** (☎ 347 0032; ecolodges.saharasafaris.org/alkarm; Sheikh Awaad; camping/r per person ££25/75) A fine, albeit rugged, base for immersing yourself in the beauty of southern Sinai, the Bedouin-owned Al-Karm Ecolodge well outside Al-Milga, is in a remote wadi near the small settlement of Sheikh Awaad. It offers simple rooms, solar-heated shared showers, a kitchen and endless tranquillity. To get here, follow the track from Tarfa village, about 20km from St Katherine on the Wadi Feiran road – if you aren't with a local, call the Protectorate Office (☎ 347 0032) for directions and staff can arrange for someone to meet you.

## MIDRANGE

**Monastery Guesthouse** (☎ 347 0353; St Katherine's Monastery; dm per person half board US\$25, s/d/tr with bathroom & half board US\$35/55/70) If location is your thing, the Monastery Guesthouse can't be beat. It's right next to St Katherine's Monastery, so you can literally roll out of bed and walk to the monastery before having your breakfast. A favourite of pilgrims the world over,



the Monastery Guesthouse offers well-kept rooms with heaters and blankets to keep out the mountain chill, and a pleasant patio area with views towards the mountains. Meals at the on-site cafeteria are filling and tasty, and lunches can be arranged for a few extra dollars per person.

**Daniela Village** (☎ 748 2671; s/d half board from US\$55/80; ⚡) One of the nicest midrange hotels in Al-Milga, this reasonably priced three-star affair is comprised of stone-clad prefab huts that are scattered around attractive grounds. The on-site bar and restaurant is a popular tourist hang-out, especially if you're in need of a Stella (or four) after an all-night trek. It's diagonally opposite the hospital and about 1.5km from the bus station.

**St Catherine's Tourist Village** (☎ 347 0333; s/d half board from US\$85/100; ⚡) This four-star establishment is Al-Milga's plushest accommodation option, with pleasant stone bungalow-style rooms that blend in with the surrounding landscape. If you want to sprawl out in comfort after punishing your body on any of the protectorate's rugged treks, you'll be glad you dished out the extra cash to stay here. It's located along the same road as Daniela Village hotel, about 500m past the hospital and about 2km from the bus station.

## Eating

In Al-Milga, there's a bakery opposite the mosque and several well-stocked supermarkets in the shopping arcade – perfect for stocking up on supplies before hitting the trails. Just behind the bakery are a few simple restaurants, though most tourists either self-cater at the camps or take their meals at their hotel.

**Katrien Rest House** (dishes E£2-15) This popular Bedouin-owned restaurant serves filling chicken, rice and vegetable meals either inside or on a veranda.

**Kafeteria Ikhlas** (dishes E£5-15) This simple and friendly restaurant has carpets and low tables under palm fronds, and serves hearty breakfasts and chicken, rice and vegetable meals.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

St Katherine's Monastery is about 3.5km from the village of Al-Milga (which is where buses from Dahab, Sharm el-Sheikh and Cairo will drop you), and 2km from the large roundabout on the road between the two.

**East Delta Travel Company** (☎ 347 0250) has its bus station and ticket office on the main road near the post office. There is a daily bus to Cairo (E£37, six to seven hours) at 6am, via Wadi Feiran and Suez (E£35, four hours), and another to Dahab at 1pm (E£20 to E£25, two hours), where you can get onward connections to Nuweiba and Taba. For Sharm el-Sheikh, Hurghada and Luxor, it's necessary to change buses in Dahab. East Delta buses from Cairo to St Katherine's depart from Turgoman Garage at 10.30am (and about noon from Al-Maza).

Many hotels and camps in Dahab, Nuweiba and Sharm el-Sheikh, as well as travel agencies in Cairo, also organise trips to the monastery and Mt Sinai.

## SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis usually wait at the monastery for people coming down from Mt Sinai in the morning, and then again around noon when visiting hours end. A lift to the village costs E£10 to E£15. Plan on paying about E£30/45 per person to Dahab/Sharm el-Sheikh. To Cairo, expect to pay about E£400 per vehicle.

## WADI FEIRAN

This long valley serves as the main drainage route for the entire high mountain region into the Gulf of Suez. Sinai's largest oasis, it is lush and very beautiful, containing more than 12,000 date palms, as well as Bedouin communities representing all of Sinai's tribes. Stone walls surround the date palms, and the rocky mountains on each side of the wadi have subtly different colours that stand out at sunrise and sunset, making the landscape even more dramatic.

Feiran also has biblical significance – it is believed to be the place where Moses struck a rock with his staff, bringing forth water, and later became the first Christian stronghold in Sinai. An extensively rebuilt early Christian convent remains from this time, although you need permission from St Katherine's Monastery if you want to visit.

The valley is also an ideal spot from which to trek into the surrounding mountains. To the south, the 2070m **Gebel Serbal** (believed by early Christians to have been the real Mt Sinai) is a challenging six-hour hike along a track also known as **Sikket ar-Reshshah**. Those who persevere are rewarded with fantastic

panoramic views. You must be accompanied by a Bedouin guide for all hikes, though this is most easily arranged in Al-Milga, near St Katherine's Monastery.

## QALAAAT AL-GINDI & NAKHL

In the centre of Sinai, about 80km south-east of the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel, is Qalaat al-Gindi, which features the 800-year-old **Fortress of Saladin** (Salah ad-Din). In the 12th century Muslims from Africa and the Mediterranean streamed across Sinai on their way to Mecca. The three caravan routes they followed all converged at Qalaat al-Gindi, prompting Saladin to build a fortress here to protect the pilgrims making their hajj. He also planned to use the fort, which is still largely intact, as a base from which to launch attacks on the Crusaders, who had advanced as far as Jerusalem. As it turned out, Saladin managed to evict the Crusaders from the Holy City even before the completion of his fortress.

Qalaat al-Gindi is well off the beaten track and seldom visited. From the coast, you must turn off at Ras Sudr and follow the unignposted road from there. As there is no public transport, you'll need to either have your own vehicle or hire a taxi.

Continuing north from Qalaat al-Gindi for about 20km you'll reach the turn-off for Nakhl, another 60km east. This little community sits almost in the centre of the Sinai Peninsula, surrounded by a vast wilderness. It boasts a petrol station, a surprisingly well-stocked supermarket and a bakery. A road leads north from here to Al-Arish, but foreigners are forbidden to use it.

## NORTHERN SINAI

Rarely visited by tourists, Northern Sinai has a barren desert interior, much of which is off limits to foreigners, and a palm-fringed Mediterranean coast backed by soft white sands sculpted into low dunes. As a cross-road between Asia and Africa, the coastal highway follows what must be one of history's oldest march routes. Known in ancient times as the Way of Horus, it was used by the Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Crusaders and Arab Muslims. In fact, the Copts believe that the infant Jesus also passed along

this route with his parents during their flight into Egypt.

## AL-ARISH

☎ 068 / pop 50,000

Much of the north coast of Sinai between Port Fuad and Al-Arish is dominated by the swampy lagoon of Lake Bardawil, separated from the Mediterranean by a limestone ridge. As a result of this inhospitable geography, Al-Arish is the only major city in the region, and by default the capital of North Sinai Governorate. Unsurprisingly, Al-Arish resembles a ghost town for much of the year, aside from the bustling central market that draws in thousands of Bedouin traders from around the peninsula.

In summer, however, the long, palm-fringed coastline of Al-Arish comes alive when holidaying Cairenes arrive en masse. With a modest smattering of holiday villages and beachfront hotels, Al-Arish is a popular alternative to the more upscale (and unashamedly brash) southerly neighbour of Sharm el-Sheikh (p462).

## Orientation

The main coastal road, Sharia Fuad Zikry, forms a T-junction with Sharia 23rd of July, which runs a couple of kilometres south – changing name to Sharia Tahrir on the way – to the main market area.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Ambulance** (☎ 123)

**Tourist police** (☎ 336 1016; Sharia Fuad Zikry; ☎ 24hr)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**El Basha.Net** (per hr E£2; ☎ 11am-3am)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Mubarak Military Hospital** (☎ 332 4018; near Governorate Bldg, Rafah Rd; ☎ 24hr)

**Public Hospital** (☎ 336 0010; Sharia Fuad Zikry; ☎ 24hr) To be avoided except in the direst emergencies.

### MONEY

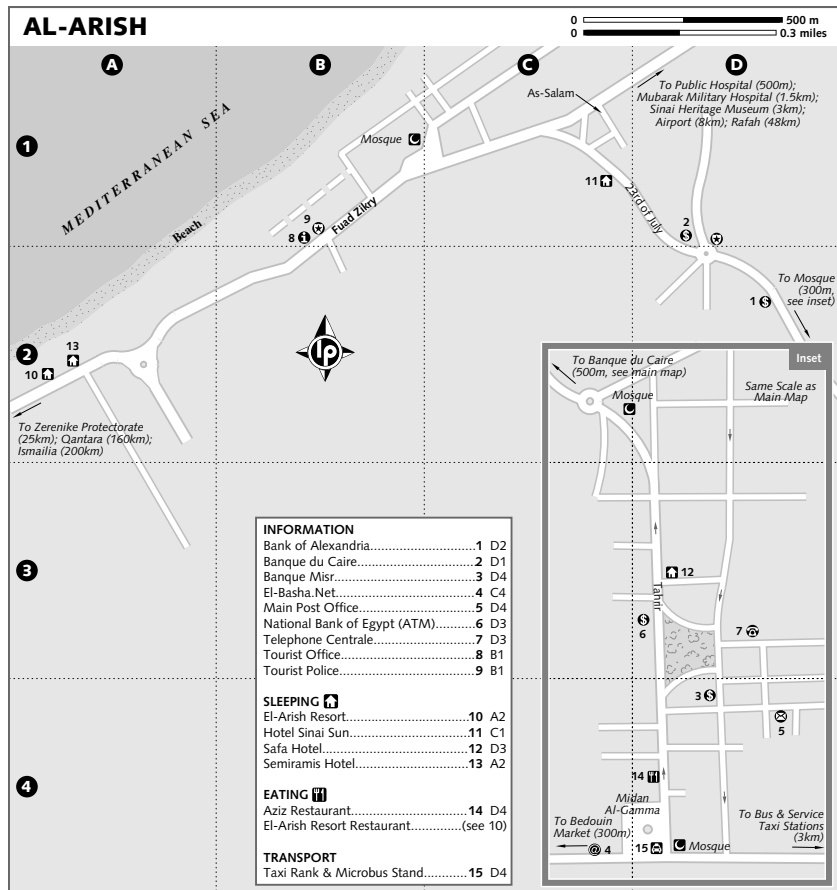
**Bank of Alexandria** (Sharia 23rd of July; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thur)

**Banque du Caire** (Sharia 23rd of July; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thur)

**Banque Misr** (off Sharia Tahrir; ☎ 9am-2.30pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thur)

**National Bank of Egypt** (Sharia Tahrir; ☎ 9am-2.30pm Sun-Thur)

## AL-ARISH



## POST

**Main post office** (off Sharia Tahrir; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

## TELEPHONE

**Telephone centrale** (off Sharia Tahrir; ☎ 24hr)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (☎ 336 3743; Sharia Fuad Zikry; 🕒 9am-2pm Sat-Thu)

## Sights & Activities

Stretched along the Mediterranean coast from the eastern edge of Lake Bardawil until about 25km east of Al-Arish is the 220-sq-km **Zerenike Protectorate** (admission US\$3; ☞ sunrise-sunset), a haven for migrating birds and a good

destination for nature lovers. The entrance to the protectorate, which was established by the Egyptian National Parks Office in 1985, is about 35km east of Al-Arish. Inside the gates there is a **visitors' centre** (☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu), with a cafeteria and information about some of the species of birds that stop here as they migrate between Europe and Africa. There is also a simple **dormitory** (☎ 010 544 2641; per person US\$10) and **camping** (per person US\$5). For both options, you will need to bring all food and drink with you as there is no restaurant, though basic cooking facilities are available on site.

The small **Sinai Heritage Museum** (Coast Rd; admission ££1, camera/video ££5/25; 🕒 9.30am-2pm Sat-Thu), on the outskirts of Al-Arish along the coastal

road to Rafah, was established in order to inform visitors to the peninsula about traditional nomadic life in Sinai. Displays include Bedouin tools, handicrafts, clothing and traditional medicines, with the odd English explanation.

Much livelier is the **Bedouin market** (☎ 9am-2pm Thu), held at the southern edge of town near the main market – note that it's signposted in Arabic and in English as the Souq al-Hamis. It's fascinating to watch as Bedouin come in from the desert in pick-up trucks or occasionally on camels, with the veiled women trading silver, beadwork and embroidered dresses, while the men sell camel saddles. Sometimes you can see the women buying gold after having sold their own handiwork. While some of the crafts are of high quality, you'll need to bargain hard to get these, as the savvy women usually save their best wares for middlemen buying for Cairo shops.

Al-Arish's other attraction is its long **beach**, which packs in the crowds in the hot summer months. With its parade of palms, fine white sand, clean water and the occasional small wave, it is one of the better Mediterranean spots in Egypt, and wonderfully peaceful in the low season. Note that women may feel uncomfortable swimming here unless they're in the confines of the El-Arish Resort. There is a beach curfew after dark, though it is only sporadically enforced.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Safa Hotel** (☎ 335 3798; Sharia Tahrir; s/d E£25/35) Safa is the main budget choice if you want to be near the town centre, though keep in mind that the line between budget and bare-bones is thin to say the least. Rooms at the Safa are small and run-down, and the lack of air-con means you're going to sweat through the night. However, the pleasant rooftop terrace has a distant view of the ocean, and if you're looking for some serious local flavour, you've chosen correctly.

**Hotel Sinai Sun** (☎ 336 1855; Sharia 23rd of July; s/d/tr from E£75/85/90; ☎) Although the rooms at this ageing hotel are starting to show their years, the Sinai Sun is one of the more respectable budget spots in town. Sure, the rooms are nothing to write home about, but you can definitely count on clean linen and no-nonsense management. If you're here in the low season, it's possible to bargain the prices down a bit, which makes it even better value.

**Semiramis Hotel** (☎ 336 4167/8; Sharia Fuad Zikry; s/d from US\$35/45; ☎) One of the more upscale spots in town, the Semiramis takes a distant second place to the El-Arish Resort, though it's still a significant step up from the competition. With an inviting swimming pool surrounded by lounge chairs and leafy palms, it's worth spending a few extra dollars to indulge in a bit of low-key luxury. Be sure to ask for a room near the water as the ones in the compound across the street aren't worth considering.

**El-Arish Resort** (☎ 335 1321; Sharia Fuad Zikry; s/d from US\$65/85; ☎) Formerly the Oberoi Hotel, this faded but pleasant five-star establishment is perfectly located on a long, breezy stretch of white-sand beach. Although it's incredibly understated compared to the resorts in Sharm, all of the rooms have sea views and balconies, enabling you to fall asleep to the sounds of the surf. There's also a restaurant and two large swimming pools on the grounds, though these are only filled during summer.

**Aziz Restaurant** (Sharia Tahrir; dishes E£5-25) With an inviting Bedouin-style inner room, this excellent and affordable restaurant offers filling meals of *fuul* and *ta'amiyya*, as well as grilled chicken, kofta, rice and spaghetti – with advance notice the owner can prepare multicourse meals for you featuring local specialties.

**El-Arish Resort Restaurant** (Sharia Fuad Zikry; dishes E£25-75; ☎) One of the choicest eateries in town, the restaurant at the El-Arish Resort serves an appealing range of Continental-inspired dishes amid a sophisticated but relaxed setting.

## Getting There & Away

The main bus and service-taxi stations are next to each other, about 3km southeast of the town centre (about E£2 in a taxi).

### BUS

Superjet has buses to and from Cairo (E£23 to E£28, five hours) departing in each direction at 8am and 4pm. Similarly priced, **East Delta Travel Company** (☎ 332 5931) has buses to Cairo (E£18 to E£25) departing at 8am, 4pm and 5pm, and departures to Ismailia (E£10, three to four hours) at 7am, 10.30am, 11.30am, 1pm, 2pm, 3pm and 4pm. For Suez, change in Ismailia.

### SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis from Al-Arish to Cairo cost around E£20 to E£25 per person. Service taxis

to Qantara cost E£10 to E£15, to Ismailia E£12 to E£17, and to the border (or vice versa) for anywhere from E£10 to E£20.

## Getting Around

The main taxi rank and microbus stand is at Midan Al-Gamma, near the market at the southern end of town. Microbuses shuttle regularly between here and the beach for 25pt.

## RAFAH

☎ 068

This coastal town, 48km north of Al-Arish, marks the border with the Gaza Strip, the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory that is (to say the least) a world away from the rela-

tive peace and calm of Sinai. Since it's been quite some time since foreigners (or anyone for that matter) were permitted to cross the border with ease into Gaza, Rafah is of little interest to anyone except for the odd journalist or aid worker heading to Gaza. With that said, fears of the volatility of Gaza spilling over into Sinai has led to a heavily policed border crossing, so unless you have all of your documentation in order, it's best to steer clear of Rafah altogether. If you do have a pressing reason to head for the border, however, several service taxis run daily between Al-Arish and the Rafah border crossing for about E£10. For border-crossing details and warnings, see p524.

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## ACCOMMODATION

Egypt offers visitors the full spectrum of accommodation: hotels, flotels (Nile cruisers), all-inclusive resorts, pensions, bed and breakfasts, youth hostels, camping grounds and even ecolodges.

Prices cited in this book are for rooms available in the high season and include taxes. Breakfast is included in the room price unless indicated otherwise in the review. We have roughly defined budget hotels as any that charge up to £120 for a room, midrange as any that charge between £120 and £600 and top end as those that charge £600 or more for a room. However, there is some variation in pricing brackets throughout

the book as certain destinations are pricier than others.

Be advised that rates often go up by around 10% during peak times, including the two big feasts (Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha; see p511), New Year (20 December to 5 January) and sometimes for the summer season (approximately 1 July to 15 September).

Also note that just because a hotel has its rates displayed it doesn't mean they aren't negotiable. In off-peak seasons and during the middle of the week, haggling will often get you significant discounts, even in midrange places.

Resorts in Egypt typically offer half board (two meals), full board (three meals) or all-inclusive rates that usually include most drinks as well as some activities. Although prices are given throughout the book for all-inclusive resorts, it's worth booking these accommodation options in advance as considerable discounts are sometimes available.

Hotels rated three-star and up generally require payment in US dollars, which technically is illegal, though no-one seems to be paying much attention. With that said, upmarket hotels are increasingly accepting credit-card payments, but you shouldn't take this as a given.

Most top-end hotels and a few midrange hotels in Egypt offer nonsmoking rooms, though you can't always count on one being available. The smoking culture is extremely pronounced in Egypt, which is something that nonsmokers will be forced to get used to quickly.

## Camping

Officially, camping is allowed at only a few places around Egypt, such as at Harraniyya near Giza in Cairo, Luxor, Aswan, Farafra and Ras Mohammed National Park. A few private hotels around the country also allow campers to set up in their backyards, such as at Abu Simbel, Al-Kharga, Nuweiba, Basata, Qena and Abydos. Facilities in most of these places, including official sites, are extremely basic. In Sinai the most popular budget choices are beach-side camps – all have electricity and 24-hour hot water unless noted in our reviews.



## PRACTICALITIES

- *Egyptian Gazette* (50pt) is Egypt's flimsy and embarrassingly bad daily English-language newspaper. *Al-Ahram Weekly* (E£1) appears every Thursday and does a much better job of keeping English-readers informed of what's going on. There's an online version at [www.ahram.org.eg/weekly](http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly). *Egypt Today* (E£15) is an ad-saturated general-interest glossy with good listings.
- You can pick up the BBC World Service on various radio frequencies, including 1323AM in Alexandria, the Europe short-wave schedule in Cairo and the Middle East short-wave schedule in Upper Egypt. See [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice) for details. In Cairo, 95FM broadcasts on 557kHz between 7am and midnight daily, including news in English at 7.30am, 2.30pm and 8pm. Nile FM (104.2kHz) is an English-language music station broadcasting out of Cairo.
- Satellite dishes are common in Egypt, and international English-language news services such as CNN and BBC World can be accessed in hotel rooms throughout the country.
- Electrical current is 220V AC, 50Hz in most parts of the country. Exceptions are Alexandria, and Heliopolis and Ma'adi in Cairo, which have currents of 110V AC, 50Hz. Wall sockets are the round, two-pin European type.
- Egypt uses the metric system for weights and measures.

## Hostels

Egypt has 15 hostels recognised by **Hostelling International** (HI; [www.hihostels.com](http://www.hihostels.com)): in Cairo, Alexandria, Al-Fayoum, Aswan, Asyut, Dammanhur, Hurghada, Ismailia, Luxor, Marsa Matruh, Port Said, Sharm el-Sheikh, Sohag, Suez and Tanta. Having an HI card is not absolutely necessary as nonmembers are admitted, but a card will save you a dollar or two depending on the hostel.

Generally speaking, however, HI hostels tend to be noisy, crowded and often a bit grimy. In some there are rooms for mixed couples or families, but on the whole the sexes are segregated. Most of the time you'll be much better off staying at a budget hotel instead. Reservations are not usually needed.

The offices of the **Egyptian Youth Hostels Association** (☎ 02-794 0527; fax 795 0329; 1 Sharia Ibrahimy, Garden City, Cairo) can give you the latest information.

## Hotels

### BUDGET

The two-, one- and no-star hotels form the budget group. Of course, often the ratings mean nothing at all as a hotel without a star can be as good as a two-star hotel, only cheaper. Clearly, luck of the draw often applies – you can spend as little as E£25 a night for a clean single room with hot water, or E£80 or more for a dirty room without a shower. Generally, the prices quoted include breakfast, but don't harbour any great expectations – more often than not, it's usually a couple of

pieces of bread, a frozen patty of butter, a serving of jam, and tea or coffee.

Competition among the budget hotels in cities such as Cairo and Luxor is fierce, which is good news for travellers as it leads to an overall improvement in standards and services offered. Increasingly, hotels are offering rooms with private bathrooms and air-con (this costs an extra E£20 or so), improving the quality of their breakfasts and providing welcoming lounges with satellite TV, internet access and backgammon boards.

Some hotels will tell you they have hot water when they don't. They may not even have warm water. Turn the tap on and check, or look for an electric water heater when inspecting the bathroom. If there's no plug in your bathroom sink and you forgot to bring your own, then try using the lid of a Baraka mineral-water bottle – according to one cluey traveller, they fit 90% of the time.

Many budget establishments economise on sheets. If you aren't carrying your own sleeping sheet, just ask for clean sheets – most hotels will oblige. Toilet paper is usually supplied, but you'll often need to bring your own soap and shampoo.

### MIDRANGE

Egypt has a great range of budget and top-end hotels, but midrange options are surprisingly limited. This is particularly so in Cairo and Alexandria, where foreign investment is channelled into top-end accommodation. In these cities local establishments often pitch

### BOOK YOUR STAY ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at [www.lonelyplanet.com/hotels](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/hotels). You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

themselves as midrange establishments but end up offering no-star facilities at three-star rates. Also, beware the extras: sometimes you'll be charged extra for the fridge, air-con and satellite TV in your room – before agreeing to take the room, always confirm what the quoted cost actually covers. This is particularly important when it comes to taxes, which are as high as 24% in many midrange and top-end establishments.

### TOP END

Visitors are spoilt for choice when it comes to top-end hotels in Egypt. While prices and amenities are usually up to international standards, in some instances service and food can fall short. As always, it's a good idea to inspect your room before handing over any hard-earned cash

## ACTIVITIES

The incredibly varied desert and aquatic landscapes of Egypt are rife with opportunities for a wide range of activities. The following is a brief listing of some of the possibilities.

### Bird-Watching

Egypt is an ornithologist's delight. The country boasts several excellent bird-watching areas holding a plethora of birds, both native and migrant species (p103). The prime bird-watching spot among these areas is Lake Qarun, in the Al-Fayoum region, where species range from the spoonbill to the marsh sandpiper. The saltwater lagoons in the northern Delta and the Zerenike Protectorate on Lake Bardawil in northern Sinai are home to the greater flamingo, white pelican and spoonbill (all winter visitors). It is also possible to see huge flocks of pelicans around the small lakes near Abu Simbel in southern Egypt. In the desert you may see – or hear – eagle owls. In spring the cliffs at Ain Sukhna on the Red Sea coast offer

opportunities for viewing eagles, vultures and other birds of prey.

*A Photographic Guide to Birds of Egypt and the Middle East* by Richard Porter and David Cottridge (££40) and *Common Birds of Egypt* by Bertel Bruun and Sherif Baha el Din (££35) are good illustrated references published by the American University in Cairo Press. Both are available in Egypt. Or visit the website of the Egyptian birding community, [www.birdingegypt.com](http://www.birdingegypt.com), which lists top birding sites, rarities reports and travel tips.

### Cycling

High temperatures, extreme distances and a limited road network don't exactly make for great cycle touring, though it's definitely doable – see p528 for ideas on making the best of what there is.

### Desert Safaris

For desert safaris the options are the Western Desert, with its fantastic sand landscapes, weirdly eroded rocks and Roman ruins, or the more rugged, rocky surrounds of Sinai. Western Desert trips can be arranged cheaply in the oases (particularly Farafra) or, more expensively (involving 4WDs), in Cairo; for details see p329.

Sinai safaris are perhaps easier to arrange. These typically involve a day or two (with overnight camping) trekking through desert canyons on foot, by camel or in a jeep. These expeditions can be organised on the ground at either Dahab or Nuweiba.

A growing number of travellers are choosing to combine an Eastern Desert safari with a diving holiday – see p435 for more details.

### Diving & Snorkelling

Many visitors to Egypt rarely have their heads above water. No wonder, as some of the best diving in the world is to be found along the Red Sea coast (for more information, see 'Diving the Red Sea', p439).

It isn't necessary to dive to enjoy the marine life of the Red Sea. You can see plenty with just a snorkel, mask and flippers. Along the Sinai coast, the reefs are only 15m out, and in some places you don't need to go out of your depth to be among shoals of brightly coloured fish. The best places are Sharm el-Sheikh, Nuweiba and Dahab, all of which have equipment for hire for between ££25 and ££40 per day.

## Fishing

Angling is seen as more a means of living rather than a pastime in Egypt. With that said, sport fishing does occur on Lake Nasser where a couple of outfits organise 'big game' fishing safaris for Nile perch. There is also an annual International Fishing Tournament every February in Hurghada; for more details contact the **Egyptian Federation for Fishing** (☎ 02-395 3953; fax 395 3516).

## Ballooning

**Hod Hod Suleiman** (Map pp244-5; Sharia Televizyon; ☎ 237 0116), **Sky Cruise of Egypt** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 237 6515; Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid) and **Magic Horizons** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 012 226 1697; www.magic-horizon.com; Sharia Khalid ibn al-Walid) offer early morning balloon flights over Luxor's West Bank. When the air is clear, the view over the monuments and the mountains is truly amazing. Changing winds mean that the trips are subject to cancellation at the last minute. The prices are not fixed, varying from US\$70 to US\$120 per person, and it definitely pays to bargain, particularly out of season.

## Horse Riding

Horse riding is possible in Cairo around the Pyramids and in Luxor on the West Bank, where there are a couple of stables just up from the local ferry landing; see the relevant chapters for further details. There are also stables at the Sinai resorts of Sharm el-Sheikh, Dahab and Nuweiba that rent out steeds to tourists by the hour.

Sadly, most of the animals are not very well looked after. If a horse looks obviously unwell, request another.

## Sandboarding

Avid sand-dune buffs can try out sandboarding at some of the Oases in the Western Deserts. Several hotels in Bahariyya and Siwa rent out sandboards (mostly just planks of wood with foot straps) for around E£10 per day and will arrange transport to nearby dunes for some sand-surfing action. Note that sandboarding is considerably more difficult than snowboarding, and clambering back up the steep, sandy hills in the heat of the day can get exhausting pretty fast.

## Windsurfing

If you're keen on windsurfing, Sinai is the place to go. Several resorts and hotels along

the coastline have windsurfing centres on-site, which offer full equipment rental and professional instruction.

## BUSINESS HOURS

The following information is a guide only. The official weekend is Friday and Saturday. Note that during Ramadan, all offices, museums and tourist sites keep shorter hours.

**Banks** From 8.30am to 1.30pm Sunday to Thursday. Many banks in Cairo and other cities open again from 5pm or 6pm for two or three hours, largely for foreign exchange transactions. Some also open on Friday and Saturday for the same purpose. Exchange booths are open as late as 8pm. During Ramadan, banks are open between 10am and 1.30pm.

**Bars and nightclubs** Early evening until at least 3am, often later (particularly in Cairo).

**Government offices** From 8am to 2pm Sunday to Thursday. Tourist offices are generally open longer.

**Post offices** Generally open from 8.30am to 2pm Saturday to Thursday.

**Private offices** From 10am to 2pm and 4pm to 9pm, except Friday and holidays.

**Restaurants and cafés** Between noon and midnight daily. All restaurants except for those in top-end hotels remain closed throughout the day during the month of Ramadan, opening only at sundown. Cafés tend to open earlier and close a bit later. Their business hours are around 7am to midnight in the big cities, earlier in other parts of the country.

**Shops** From 9am to 1pm and 5pm to 10pm in summer, 10am to 6pm in winter. Hours during Ramadan are 9.30am to 3.30pm and 8pm to 10pm. Most large shops tend to close on Friday and holidays; many also close on Sunday.

## CHILDREN

Egypt is a very child-friendly place and having kids with you can be a great icebreaker with locals. There's a lot to keep the under-aged contingent happy – pyramids and temples can be explored by junior archaeologists, felucca rides please all aspiring pirates and beach outings are always popular. Also see p156 for things to see and do with children in Cairo.

Bookshops at most five-star hotels in Cairo and the major tourist centres stock a wide variety of Egyptology-related children's books that will help kids relate to what they're seeing. Locally produced history books, such as Salima Ikram's *The Pharaohs*, are excellent and reasonably priced. For books set in modern Egypt, look for *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* by Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland, a wonderful story of a day in the

life of a small boy who delivers gas canisters in one of Cairo's poor neighbourhoods.

Apart from antiquities, there are the ever-popular camel or donkey rides. And horse riding can be great fun – the stables on Luxor's West Bank (p276) and around the Pyramids in Cairo (p147) have plenty of horses docile enough for young people and hard hats in all sizes.

## Practicalities

There are a couple of things to keep in mind while you're out and about with kids in Egypt. One is that child-safety awareness is minimal. Seat belts and safety seats are nonexistent in the back seats of most cars and taxis; if you're renting a car remember to specify that you want them. Also, don't expect felucca or other boat operators to have children's life-jackets. If you can't do without them, bring your own.

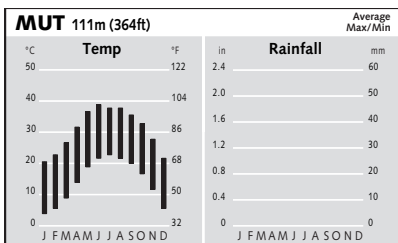
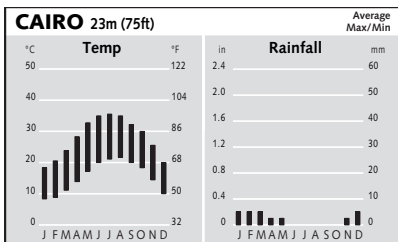
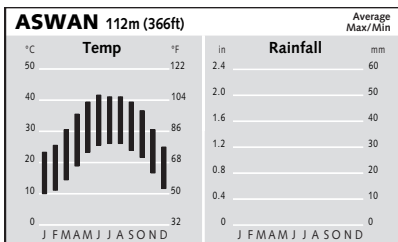
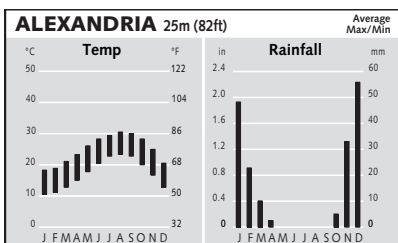
Another potential worry is the high incidence of diarrhoea and stomach problems that hit travellers in Egypt. If children get sick, they tend to dehydrate more quickly than adults, and given the country's dry climate it is crucial to keep giving them liquids, even if they just throw them up again.

It's worth having some rehydration salts on hand. These are available at all pharmacies (ask for Rehydran) and usually cost less than a dollar for a box of six sachets. They can prevent a bad case of the runs from turning into something more serious. Just stir a packet into 200mL of bottled water and keep giving it until the diarrhoea has passed. See p535 for more details on preventing and dealing with potential health problems.

Formula is readily available in pharmacies, and supermarkets stock disposable nappies. Highchairs are often available in restaurants. Baby-sitting facilities are usually available in top-end hotels.

## CLIMATE CHARTS

Egypt's climate is easy to summarise: hot and dry, with the exception of the winter months of December, January and February, which can be quite cold in the north. Average temperatures range from 20°C (68°F) on the Mediterranean coast to 26°C (80°F) in Aswan. Maximum temperatures for the same places can get up to 31°C (88°F) and 50°C (122°F), respectively. At night in winter the temperature sometimes plummets to as low as 8°C in Cairo and along the Mediterranean coast.



In the desert it's even more extreme – often scorching during the day and bitterly cold at night.

Alexandria receives the most rain, approximately 19cm a year, while far to the south in Aswan the average is about 10mm over five years. Al-Kharga in the Western Desert once went 17 years without any rain at all.

Between March and April the *khamisin* (a dry, hot wind) blows in from the parched

Western Desert at up to 150km/h. The sky becomes dark orange and choked with dust and, even when everyone closes all doors and windows tightly, the inside of every house is covered with a patina of grit so that they resemble undisturbed tombs.

For more information on the best time to visit Egypt, see p17.

## COURSES

### Belly Dancing

For information about the belly-dancing courses available in Cairo, see p154.

### Diving

For information on the various dive courses offered in Egypt, see p439.

### Language

If you're serious about learning Arabic, the best option is to sign up at the **Arabic Language Institute** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 02-797 5055; www.aucegypt.edu; 113 Sharia Qasr al-Ainy, Cairo), a department of the American University in Cairo. It offers intensive instruction in both modern standard Arabic and Egyptian colloquial Arabic at elementary, intermediate and advanced levels in semester courses running over five months.

A cheaper option is to study at the **International Language Institute** (ILI; Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-346 3087; www.arabicegypt.com; 4 Sharia Mahmoud Azmy, Sahafayeen, Mohandiseen, Cairo). This offers courses in modern standard Arabic and Egyptian colloquial Arabic over eight levels.

Another highly regarded school, **Kalimat** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-761 8136; www.kalimategypt.com; 22 Sharia Mohamed Mahmoud Shaaban, Mohandiseen, Cairo) offers courses in modern standard Arabic and Egyptian colloquial Arabic over multiple levels.

### Other Courses

The American University in Cairo is one of the premier universities in the Middle East. It offers degree, nondegree and summer-school programmes. Any of the regular courses offered can be taken. Popular subjects include Arabic Language and Literature, Arab History and Culture, Egyptology, Islamic Art and Architecture, Middle East Studies and Social Science courses on the Arab world. Up to 15 unit hours can be taken per semester at the undergraduate level.

The summer programmes offer similar courses. The term lasts from mid-June to

the end of July. Two three-unit courses can be taken and several well-guided field trips throughout Egypt are usually included.

Applications for programmes with the Arabic Language Institute (left) or undergraduate and graduate studies at the university are separate. Specify which you want when you request an application form. A catalogue and programme information can be obtained from the **Office of Admissions** (☎ 212-730 8800; fax 730 1600; American University in Cairo, 420 Fifth Ave, New York, NY 10018-2719, USA), or you can write to the **American University in Cairo** (AUC; ☎ 02-754 2964; www.aucegypt.edu; PO Box 2511, Cairo 11511).

It is also possible to study at Egyptian universities such as Cairo University, Al-Azhar (in Cairo), Ain Shams (in Cairo) and Alexandria University. Courses offered to foreign students include Arabic Language, Islamic History, Islamic Religion and Egyptology. For information on courses, tuition fees and applications, contact the cultural counsellor at the **Egyptian Educational Bureau** (☎ 202-296 3888; 2200 Kalorama Rd NW, Washington DC 20008, USA). In London, contact the **Cultural Affairs Office** (☎ 020-7491 7720).

## CUSTOMS

The duty-free limit on arrival is 1L of alcohol, 1L of perfume, 200 cigarettes and 25 cigars. On top of that, once in the country, you can buy another 3L of alcohol plus a wide range of other duty-free articles, but this must be done within 24 hours of arrival at one of the special Egypt Free shops in the arrival and departure areas of the airport.

Sometimes the Customs Declaration Form D is given to arriving tourists to list all cameras, jewellery, cash, travellers cheques and electronics (personal stereos, computers, radios, VCRs etc). No-one seems to be asked for this form on departure, and few tourists are given it on arrival. Travellers are, however, regularly asked to declare their video cameras and some have reported being hit with a hefty 'import tax'.

There are prohibited and restricted articles, including books, printed matter, motion pictures, photographs and materials that the government considers 'subversive or constituting a national risk or incompatible with the public interest'. Articles for espionage, or 'intelligence activities', and explosives are banned.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The incidence of crime, violent or otherwise, in Egypt is negligible compared with most Western countries. Most visitors and residents would agree that Egyptian towns and cities are safe to walk around in during the day or night. Unfortunately, the hassle factor often means that this isn't quite the case for an unaccompanied foreign woman – for details, see p518.

Apart from the issues discussed here, you should be aware that the Egyptian authorities take a dim view of illegal drug use (see p512).

Terrorist acts against foreign tourists in 1997, 2004, 2005 and 2006 resulted in a great many deaths, and have led to the government giving security the highest possible priority. This can be annoying for travellers, as convoys (see p530) and tourist-police escorts can be a real drag.

That said, we can't blame the government for doing its utmost to convince tourists that

their security is of paramount importance to Egypt. After all, the income derived from tourism constitutes an extraordinary 20% or so of the country's GDP. Generally speaking, we'd say that Egypt is presently no more or less dangerous than any other country, your own included.

## Theft

Theft never used to be a problem in Egypt but it seems to be becoming a bigger one. In the past couple of years we've received a stream of letters from readers concerning money disappearing from locked rooms, even hotel safes. Our advice is to keep your cash and valuables on your person at all times.

There are also a few areas where pickpockets are known to operate, notably on the Cairo metro and the packed local buses from Midan Tahrir to the Pyramids. Tourists aren't the specific targets, but be careful how you carry your money in crowded places.

## SCAMS, HUSTLES & HASSLE

Egyptians take hospitality to strangers seriously. You'll receive a steady stream of *salaams* (greetings) and the odd *ahlan wa sahlan* (hello/welcome) inviting you to sit and have *shai* (tea). A lot of this is genuine, particularly in rural areas, where drink, food and transport are frequently offered with no expectation of remuneration.

But in more touristy places – notably around the Egyptian Museum and Pyramids in Cairo, and all around Luxor – a cheery 'Hello, my friend' is double-speak for 'This way, sucker'. One traveller wrote to us about feeling like a 'walking wallet' in Egypt, and we knew exactly what she meant.

Be warned that you'll become a magnet for instant friends who just happen to have a papyrus factory they'd like to show you. You'll be showered with helpful advice such as 'the museum is closed, take *shai* with me while you wait' – of course the museum isn't closed and refreshments will be taken at a convenient souvenir shop. As an English-speaker you might be asked to spare a moment to check the spelling of a letter to a relative in the USA, and while you're at it how about some special perfume for the lady...

It's all pretty harmless stuff but it can become very wearing. Everyone works out a strategy to reduce the hassle to a minimum. Years ago, we heard a story about a traveller keeping touts away by jabbing his finger at his chest and saying, '*Ya Russki*' (I'm Russian). Not only were the hustlers defeated by the language, everyone knew that the Russians had no money. But now that Egypt is a popular holiday destination for newly rich Muscovites, the street entrepreneurs are just as fluent in Slavic sales patter as they are in English, German, French, Dutch and Japanese.

About the only way to deal with unwanted attention is to be polite but firm, and when you're in for a pitch cut it short with 'Sorry, no thanks'.

Aside from the hustling, there are countless irritating scams. The most common involves touts who lie and misinform to get newly arrived travellers into hotels for which they get a commission – see p158 for examples of their ever-ingenuous strategies.

If you do get stung, or feel one more 'Excuse me, where are you from?' will make you crack, simmer down and wise up – by acting rudely or brusquely you may offend one of the vast majority of locals who would never dream of hassling a foreigner and is only trying to help a guest to the country.



## TRAVEL ADVISORIES

Government websites that offer travel advisories and information on current hot spots:

**Australian Department of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 1300 139 281; [www.smarttraveller.gov.au](http://www.smarttraveller.gov.au))

**British Foreign Office** (☎ 0845-850-2829; [www.fco.gov.uk/countryadvice](http://www.fco.gov.uk/countryadvice))

**Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 800-267 6788; [www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca))

**US State Department** (☎ 888-407 4747; <http://travel.state.gov>)

Generally though, unwary visitors are parted from their money through scams, and these are something that you really do have to watch out for.

## DISCOUNT CARDS

Proof of student status is required before an International Student Identity Card (ISIC) will be issued. That proof must be a university ID card or letter from your own college or university. You'll also need one photo, proof of being a student, a photocopy of the front page of your passport and E£65. There are no age limits.

ISIC works in Egypt exclusively with Cairo-based **Egyptian Student Travel Services** (ESTS; Map p148; ☎ 02-531 0330; [www.estseypt.com](http://www.estseypt.com); 23 Sharia Manial, Midan El Mammalek, El-Roda). ESTS issues the ISIC, the International Teacher Identity Card (ITIC) and the International Youth Travel Card (IYTC). It also provides a full range of student travel services. For more information, contact ESTS.

In Luxor if you're under 30 years old (or have proof of student status) you can get an ISIC card from the ESTS office **Nada Travel Service** (NTS; Map pp244-5; ☎ 095-238 2163; [elnada91@hotmail.com](mailto:elnada91@hotmail.com); Petra Travel Agency Bldg, Sharia Ahmed Orabi; ☎ 8am-11pm) near the Luxor temple.

Most of Cairo's backpacker hotels and budget travel-agencies can also get the cards but require proof of your student status.

Be aware that fake ISIC cards are sold by scam artists in Downtown Cairo. In Luxor you are also likely to be directed to an office issuing ISE (International Student & Youth Exchange) cards. They claim that these cards will give you the same discounts as ISIC cards. They won't – they give discounts in some

shops but will not work for antiquities sites, trains or buses.

It's worth having a student card as it entitles you to a 50% discount on admission to nearly all the antiquities and museums, as well as significant reductions on train travel. The ISIC card may sometimes get you a discount on your bus ticket, but this is quite rare. Still, it's always worth asking.

Travellers have reported using a wide range of other cards to get student discounts for museum entry and transport, from HI cards to Eurail cards.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Egyptian Embassies & Consulates

There is a comprehensive listing of Egyptian diplomatic and consular missions overseas at [www.mfa.gov.eg](http://www.mfa.gov.eg).

**Australia** Canberra (☎ 02-6273 4437/8; fax 02-6273 4279; 1 Darwin Ave, Yarralumla, ACT 2600); Melbourne (☎ 03-9654 8869/8634; [consenged@primus.com.au](mailto:consenged@primus.com.au); 9th fl, 124 Exhibition St, Melbourne VIC 3000); Sydney (☎ 02-9281 4844; [www.egypt.org.au](http://www.egypt.org.au); 3rd fl, 241 Commonwealth St, Surry Hills NSW 2010)

**Canada** Ottawa (☎ 613-234 4931/5; [www.egyptembassy.ca](http://www.egyptembassy.ca); 454 Laurier Ave East, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6R3); Quebec (☎ 514-866 8455; [www.egyptianconsulatemontreal.org](http://www.egyptianconsulatemontreal.org); 1 Place Sainte Marie, 2617 Montreal, H3B 4S3)

**France** Paris (☎ 01 53 67 88 30/2; [www.ambassadeegypte.com](http://www.ambassadeegypte.com); 56 Ave d'Iena, 75116); Marseilles (☎ 04 91 25 04 04; 166 Ave d'Hambourg, Marseilles 13008)

**Germany** Berlin (☎ 30-477 5470; [www.egyptian-embassy.de](http://www.egyptian-embassy.de); Stauffenberg Strasse 6-7, 10785); Frankfurt am Main (☎ 69-955 1340/1; Eyseneckstrasse 34, 60322)

**Ireland** Dublin (☎ 01-660 6566; [www.embegyptireland.ie](http://www.embegyptireland.ie); 12 Clyde Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4)

**Israel** Tel Aviv (☎ 23-546 4151/2; fax 23-544 1615; 54 Rehov Basel St); Eilat (☎ 972-637 6882; fax 972-637 1026; 68 Afrouni St)

**Italy** Rome (☎ 06 84 24 18 96; fax 85 30 11 75; Villa Savoia, Via Salaria 267); Milan (☎ 02 951 6360; fax 02 951 8194; Via Gustavo Modena 3/5)

**Japan** Tokyo (☎ 813-37 70 80 22; [www.embassy-ave.nue.jp/egypt](http://www.embassy-ave.nue.jp/egypt); 1-5-4 Aobadai, Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153-0042)

**Jordan** Amman (☎ 26-560 5175/6; [www.embegyptjordan.com](http://www.embegyptjordan.com); 14 Riyad Mefleh St, Jebel Amman); Aqaba (☎ 23-201 6181; fax 23-201 5159)

**Lebanon** Beirut (☎ 01-867 917; fax 01-863 751; Thomas Edison St, El-Ramla, El-Baida, Beirut)

**Libya** Benghazi (☎ 61-222 3099; fax 61-223 2523; El-Awarsi St, Western Fuwaihat); Tripoli (☎ 21-444 8909; [egyemlib@hotmail.com](mailto:egyemlib@hotmail.com); El-Shatt St)

**Netherlands** The Hague (☎ 70-354 4535; [ambegn@wanadoo.nl](mailto:ambegn@wanadoo.nl); Badhuisweg 92, 2587 CL, The Hague)

**Spain** Madrid (☎ 3491-577 6308/9/10; fax 3491-578 1732; Velazquez 69, 28006, Madrid)  
**Syria** Damascus (☎ 11-333 0756; fax 11-333 7961; Sharia El-Galaa, Abu Roumana, Damascus)  
**UK** London (☎ 020-7235 9777; www.egyptianconsulate.co.uk; 2 Lowndes St, SW1); London (☎ 020-7499 2401; 26 South St, Mayfair W1)  
**USA** Washington DC (☎ 202-895 5400; www.egypt embassy.us; 3521 International Court NW, Washington DC 20008); New York City (☎ 212-759 7120/1/2; 1110 2nd Ave, NY 10022); San Francisco (☎ 415-346 9700/2; 3001 Pacific Ave, CA 94115); Houston (☎ 713-961 4915/6; Ste 2180, 1990 Post Oak Blvd, TX 77056); Chicago (☎ 312-828 9162/4/3; Ste 1900, 500 N Michigan Ave, IL 60611)

## Embassies & Consulates in Egypt

Most embassies and consulates are open from around 8am to 2pm Sunday to Thursday. The addresses of some of the foreign embassies and consulates in Egypt in the following list. If you need to ask directions to find an embassy ask, '*feyn sifarat*' (where's the embassy), followed by the country name.

**Australia** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-575 0444; fax 578 1638; 11th fl, World Trade Centre, 1191 Corniche el-Nil, Cairo)  
**Canada** (Map pp110-11; ☎ 02-794 3110; fax 796 3548; 26 Sharia Kamal el-Shenawy, Cairo)  
**Denmark** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-735 7411; fax 736 1780; 12 Hassan Sabry, Zamalek)  
**Ethiopia** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-335 3696; 3 Sharia al-Misaha, Doqqi)  
**France** Cairo (Map p148; ☎ 02-570 3916; fax 571 0276; 29 Sharia al-Giza, Giza); Alexandria (Map p374; ☎ 487 5615; fax 487 5614; 2 Midan Orabi, Mansheyya)  
**Germany** Cairo (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-735 3687; fax 02-736 0530; 8 Hassan Sabry, Zamalek); Alexandria (Map pp380-1; ☎ 4867 503, fax 484 0977; 9 Sharia el-Fawateem, Azarita)  
**Iran** (Map p148; ☎ 02-748 6400; fax 748 6495; 12 Sharia Rifa'a, off Midan al-Misaha, Doqqi)  
**Ireland** Cairo (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-735 8547; 3 Sharia Abu el-Feda, Zamalek); Alexandria (Map pp380-1; ☎ 03-485 2672; 9 Sharia El-Fawateem)  
**Israel** Cairo (Map p148; ☎ 02-761 0545; fax 02-761 0414; 18th fl, 6 Sharia Ibn al-Malek, Giza); Alexandria (Map pp372-3; ☎ 03-544 9501; fax 544 8136; 15 Rue Mina Kafr Abdou, Rushdy)  
**Italy** Cairo (Map p148; ☎ 02-794 3194; 15 Sharia Abdel Rahman Fahmy, Garden City); Alexandria (Map p374; ☎ 03-487 9470; 25 Sharia Saad Zaghloul)  
**Jordan** (Map p148; ☎ 02-748 5566; fax 760 1027; 6 Sharia Gohainy, Cairo)  
**Kenya** Cairo (Map p148; ☎ 02-345 3628; fax 344 3400; 7 Sharia al-Quds al-Sharif, Mohandiseen)

**Lebanon** Cairo (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-738 2823; fax 738-2818; 22 Sharia Mansour Mohammed St, Zamalek); Alexandria (Map pp380-1; ☎ 03-484 6589; 64 Sharia el-Horreya)  
**Libya** Cairo (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-735 1269; fax 735 0072; 7 Sharia el-Saleh Ayoub, Zamalek); Alexandria (Map pp380-1; ☎ 03-494 0877; fax 494 0297; 4 Sharia Batris Lumomba, Bab Shark)  
**Netherlands** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-736 8752; az-cz@hollandemb.org.eg; 18 Sharia Hassan Sabry, Zamalek)  
**New Zealand** (☎ 02-574 9360; emeco@attmail.com; 4th fl, 2 Talaat Harb, Cairo)  
**Saudi Arabia** Cairo (Map p148; ☎ 02-349 0775; fax 02-349 3495; 2 Sharia Ahmed Nessim, Giza); Alexandria (Map pp380-1; ☎ 03-482 9911; 9 Sharia Batalsa, Alexandria); Suez (Map p415; ☎ 497 7591-2; 12 Sharia el-Guabarty; Port Tawfiq, Suez) The consulate in Suez is around the corner from the tourist office.  
**Spain** (Map pp144-5; ☎ 02-735 6462; Embespeg@mail.mae.es; 41 Sharia Ismail Mohamed, Cairo)  
**Sudan** Cairo (Map pp110-11; ☎ 02-794 9661; fax 354 2693; 3 Sharia al-Ibrahimi, Garden City); Aswan (Map p302; ☎ 097-230 7231; fax 234 2563; Bldg 20, Atlas; h9am-3pm) Both consulates can issue same-day visas to Sudan. You need your passport, four passport photos, a letter from your embassy and US\$100.  
**Syria** Cairo (Map p148; ☎ 749 4528; fax 02-749 4560; 18 Abdel Rahim Sabry, Doqqi)  
**Turkey** Cairo (Map pp110-11; ☎ 02-794 8364; 25 Sharia al-Falaky, Cairo); Alexandria (Map pp380-1; ☎ 03-393 9086; 11 Sharia Kamel el-Kilany)  
**UK** Cairo (Map p148; ☎ 02-794 0852; 7 Sharia Ahmed Ragheb, Garden City); Alexandria (Map pp372-3; ☎ 03-546 7002; 03-546 7001/023; Sharia Mena, Rushdy)  
**USA** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 02-797 3300; fax 797 3200; 8 Sharia Kamal el-Din Salah, Garden City)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

There aren't many events on the Egyptian cultural calendar, and those that are there don't always take place. With that said, the only events worth going out of your way to attend are possibly the *moulids* (saints' festivals; see opposite).

### JANUARY/FEBRUARY

**Book Fair** Held at the Cairo Exhibition Grounds over two weeks, this is one of the major cultural events in the city. It draws massive crowds, but far more burgers, soft drinks and balloons are sold than books.

### FEBRUARY

**Ascension of Ramses II** 22 February – one of the two dates each year when the sun penetrates the inner sanctuary of the temple at Abu Simbel, illuminating the statues of the gods within.

## THE MOULID

A cross between a funfair and a religious festival, a *moulid* celebrates the birthday of a local saint or holy person. They are often a colourful riot of celebrations attended by hundreds of thousands of people. Those from out of town set up camp in the streets, close to the saint's tomb, where children's rides, sideshows and food stalls are erected. In the midst of the chaos, barbers perform mass circumcisions; snake charmers induce cobras out of baskets; and children are presented at the shrine to be blessed and the sick to be cured.

*Tartours* (cone-shaped hats) and *fanous* (lanterns) are made and sold to passers-by and in the evenings local Sufis usually hold hypnotic *zikrs* in colourful tents. A *zikr* (literally 'remembrance') is a long session of dancing, chanting and swaying usually carried out to achieve oneness with God. The *mugzzabin* (Sufi followers who participate in *zikrs*) stand in straight lines and sway from side to side to rhythmic clapping that gradually increases in intensity. As the clapping gains momentum, the *zikr* reaches its peak and the *mugzzabin*, having attained oneness with Allah, awake sweating and blinking. Other *zikrs* are formidable endurance tests where troupes of musicians perform for hours in the company of ecstatic dancers.

Most *mouids* last for about a week and climax with the *leila kebira* (big night). Much of the infrastructure is provided by 'professional' *mawladiyya*, or *moulid* people, who spend their lives going from one *moulid* to another.

For visitors, the hardest part about attending a *moulid* is ascertaining dates. Events are tied to either the Islamic or Gregorian calendars and dates can be different each year. You'll need to be prepared for immense crowds (hold onto your valuables) and females should be escorted by a male.

One of the country's biggest *mouids*, the *moulid* of Sayyed al-Badawi, is held in Tanta in October, while Cairo hosts three major *mouids* dedicated to Sayyida Zeinab, Sayyidna al-Hussein and Imam ash-Shafi (held during the Islamic months of Ragab, Rabe' al-Tani and Sha'aban, respectively). You'll need to ask a local for the exact dates in any particular year.

There are a number of smaller *mouids* in the area around Luxor – see p252 for more details on these celebrations.

**International Fishing Tournament** Held at Hurghada on the Red Sea and attended by anglers from all over the world.

**Luxor Marathon** ([egyptianmarathon@egypt.net](mailto:egyptianmarathon@egypt.net)) Held on the West Bank. Competitors race around the main antiquities sites.

**Nitaq Festival** Excellent arts festival centred on Downtown Cairo with two weeks of exhibitions, theatre, poetry and music at galleries, cafés and a variety of other venues.

## APRIL/MAY

**South Sinai Camel Festival** Camel races that prove these animals have fire in their bellies.

## JUNE

**Al-Ahram Squash Tournament** International competitors play in glass courts set up for the occasion beside the Pyramids on the Giza Plateau.

**International Festival of Oriental Dance** ([www.nilegroup.net](http://www.nilegroup.net)) Held in Cairo, this is a festival of belly dancing in which famous Egyptian practitioners give showcase performances and lessons to international attendees.

## AUGUST

**Tourism & Shopping Festival** A countrywide promotion of Egyptian products. Participating shops offer discounted prices.

## SEPTEMBER

**Experimental Theatre Festival** Held over 10 days, this theatre festival brings to Egypt a vast selection (40 at the last outing) of international theatre troupes and represents almost the only time each year when it's worth turning out for the theatre in Cairo.

## OCTOBER

**Alexandrias of the World Festival** A four-day celebration attended by delegations from all the cities bearing the name Alexandria (there are over 40 in the world).

**Birth of Ramses** 22 October – the second date in the year when the sun's rays penetrate the temple at Abu Simbel.

**Pharaohs' Rally** An 11-day, 4800km motor-vehicle (4WDs and bikes) race through the desert, beginning and ending at the Pyramids, that attracts competitors from all over the world.

## NOVEMBER

**Arabic Music Festival** A 10-day festival of classical, traditional and orchestral Arabic music held at the Cairo Opera House early in the month. Programmes are usually in Arabic only but the tourist office should have details.

## DECEMBER

**Cairo International Film Festival** ([www.cairofilmfestival.com](http://www.cairofilmfestival.com)) This 14-day festival, held early in the month, gives Cairenes the chance to watch a vast range of recent films from all over the world. The main attraction is that the films are all supposedly uncensored. Anything that sounds like it might contain scenes of exposed flesh sells out immediately.

## FOOD

In this book, budget eateries are usually defined as those where you can get a meal (no drinks) for less than £15. Midrange restaurants serve up main courses for under £75 and often serve alcohol. Top-end joints are usually in five-star hotels, serve up main courses for over £75, almost always serve alcohol and require diners to dress for dinner. Tipping is appreciated in budget places, advisable in midrange places and essential in all top-end restaurants.

For more information about eating out in Egypt, see p93.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality in Egypt is no more or less prevalent than elsewhere in the world, but it's a lot more ambiguous than in the West. Men routinely hold hands, link arms and give each other kisses on greeting – but don't misread the signals: this is not gay behaviour; it's just the local take on male bonding.

Beyond this a strange double standard goes on whereby an Egyptian man can indulge in same-sex intercourse but not consider himself gay because only the passive partner is regarded as queer. So it's not uncommon for foreign male visitors to receive blatant and crudely phrased propositions of

sex from Egyptian men. But if a lot of man-to-man sex goes on, there's not necessarily any sort of gay scene – any that does exist is strictly underground. The concept of 'gay pride' is totally alien, and bar the occasional young crusader, no Egyptian man would openly attest to being homosexual for fear of being shunned by society and labelled as weak and feminine.

While there is no mention of homosexuality in the Egyptian penal code, some statutes criminalising obscenity and public indecency have been used against gay men in the past. Most recently, in May 2001, 55 Egyptian men were arrested when police raided a floating bar/restaurant moored on the Nile in Cairo. The state prosecutor's office labelled the men 'deviants', and following a retrial in 2003 (the sentences handed down at the first trial weren't tough enough on reconsideration), 21 of the men received prison time of three years.

The bottom line is that Egypt is a conservative society that condemns homosexuality but, at the same time, plenty of same-sex intercourse goes on.

There are no national support groups or gay- or lesbian-information lines but you could try searching the internet. The premier gay and lesbian Egypt site is [www.gayegypt.com](http://www.gayegypt.com).

## HOLIDAYS

Egypt's holidays and festivals are primarily Islamic or Coptic religious celebrations, although all holidays are celebrated equally by the entire population regardless of creed.

The *Hejira* (Islamic calendar) is 11 days shorter than the Gregorian (Western) calendar, so Islamic holidays tend to fall 11 days earlier each Western year. The 11-day rule is not entirely strict though as the holidays can fall from 10 to 12 days earlier. The precise dates are known only shortly before they fall as they're dependent upon the sighting of the moon. See the Islamic Holidays table below

### ISLAMIC HOLIDAYS

Hejira year	Ras as-Sana	Mould an-Nabi	Ramadan begins	Eid al-Fitr	Eid al-Adha
1429	09.01.08	20.03.08	02.09.08	02.10.08	08.12.08
1430	29.12.09	09.03.09	22.09.09	21.09.09	28.11.09
1431	19.12.10	26.02.10	11.09.10	10.09.10	17.11.10

Please note that dates can vary slightly.

**MOHAMMED, MUHAMMAD...MU7AMMAD?**

People have been wrestling Arabic into Roman letters for centuries, and now the rise of mobile phone and internet communication in the Middle East has spawned another method. Once you get over the confusion that it involves numbers, the so-called 'Arabic chat alphabet' might be the most sensible transliteration system to come along in a while. All the sounds peculiar to Arabic have been assigned a number, based very loosely on their shape in Arabic. A 3 for the back-of-the-throat letter 'ayn' is the most common, so you could type 'Assalaam 3aleikum!' as a greeting. A 7 represents the aspirated 'h' ('Al-7amdulillah!'), and a 9 is the emphatic 's'. The system is popping up in ads, names of cool clubs and the like. Who knows – if it really catches on, we might be using it in the next edition of this book.

for the approximate dates of the major holidays for the next few years.

The following list details public holidays in Egypt:

**New Year's Day** 1 January – Official national holiday but many businesses stay open.

**Coptic Christmas** January – Coptic Christmas is a fairly low-key affair and only Coptic businesses are closed for the day.

**Coptic Easter** March/April – The most important date on the Coptic calendar although it doesn't significantly affect daily life for the majority of the population.

**Sham an-Nessim** March/April – A Coptic holiday with Pharaonic origins, it literally means 'smell of the breeze'. It falls on the first Monday after Coptic Easter and is celebrated by all Egyptians, with family picnics and outings.

**Sinai Liberation Day** 25 April – Holiday celebrating Israel's return of Sinai in 1982 (Sinai only).

**May Day** 1 May – Official national holiday.

**Liberation Day** 18 June

**Revolution Day** 23 July – Official national holiday commemorating the date of the 1952 coup, when the Free Officers seized power from the puppet monarchy.

**Wafa'a el-Nil** 15 August – Literally 'the flooding of the Nile'.

**Coptic New Year** 11 September; 12 September in leap years

**Armed Forces Day** 6 October – Official national holiday celebrating Egyptian successes during the 1973 war with Israel. The day is marked by military parades and air displays and a long speech by the president.

**Suez Victory Day** 24 October

**Victory Day** 23 December

**Islamic Holidays**

**Eid al-Adha** Also known as Eid al-Kebir (Great Feast), this marks the time of the *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca). Those who can afford it buy a sheep to slaughter for the feast, which lasts for three days (many businesses reopen on the second day). Many families go out of town, so if you want to travel at this time, book your tickets well in advance.

**Ras as-Sana** Islamic New Year's Day. The entire country has the day off but celebrations are low-key.

**Moulid an-Nabi** This is the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed. One of the major holidays of the year, the streets are a feast of lights and food.

**Ramadan** Observant Muslims fast for a whole month during daylight hours. People are tired, listless and hungry during the day, but they come back to life again when the sun goes down and they can feast and get festive.

**Eid al-Fitr** A three-day feast that marks the end of Ramadan fasting.

**INSURANCE**


A travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is a good idea. There is a wide variety of policies available, so check the small print. Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include scuba diving, motorcycling and trekking. A locally acquired motorcycle licence is not valid under some policies.

Check that the policy covers ambulances and an emergency flight home. For more information on health insurance, see p535.

**INTERNET ACCESS**

Travelling with a laptop is a great way to stay in touch with life back home, but unless you know what you're doing, it's fraught with potential problems. If you plan to carry your notebook or palmtop computer with you, remember that the power-supply voltage may vary from that at home, which may damage your equipment. The best investment is a universal AC adaptor for your appliance, which will enable you to plug it in anywhere without frying the innards.

The good news is that Egypt has taken up the internet in a big way, and there are internet cafés throughout the country. We have listed the best of these throughout the book, and have also indicated which hotels offer

internet access for guests (look for the icon ). Most internet cafés will charge between £5 and £10 per hour for online access, will print for around £1 per page and will burn CDs for between £15 and £25. Unfortunately, outside Cairo, Alexandria and tourist destinations in the Sinai and along the Red Coast, internet connections can be infuriatingly slow at times, a result of too much demand on insufficient international bandwidth.

In recent years, a surprising number of wireless hotspots are starting to appear in major tourist destinations. At the time of writing, wireless hotspots were a good bet to be found at hotels and resorts in major tourist destinations such as Luxor, Sinai and the Red Sea Coast, Western-style cafés in both Cairo and Alexandria, and a select number of airports, cafés and fast food restaurants across the country. Considering that more and more travellers are lugging around their laptops, it's likely that this much-welcomed trend will continue to gain momentum.

## LEGAL MATTERS

Foreign travellers are subject to Egyptian laws and get no special consideration. If you are arrested you have the right to telephone your embassy immediately (see p508).

One of the first signs visitors see when entering the country via Cairo airport is a prominent billboard warning that the possible penalty for drug use in Egypt is hanging. Executions for such offences have been taking place since 1989 and you'll get no exemption from penalties just because you're a tourist – be very careful.

With that said, travellers tend to take a lax attitude towards smoking hashish in Sinai, particularly in the backpacker-friendly towns of Dahab and Nuweiba. Although you will no doubt be offered drugs during your travels, and will be surrounded by other travellers who are indulging in a spliff or two, trust us – there are far better places to spend your golden years than rotting away in an Egyptian prison.

## MAPS

The pick of the country maps available commercially is the Kümmerly & Frey map, which covers all of Egypt on a scale of 1:950,000. The same company also produces a map of Sinai and a pictorial (but fairly useless) map of the Nile. Similarly good is the Freytag & Berndt

map, which includes a plan of the Pyramids of Giza and covers all of Egypt except the western quarter, at a scale of 1:1,000,000. It includes insets of Cairo and central Alexandria.

Nelles Verlag has one of the most complete, though dated, general maps of Egypt (scale 1:2,500,000) including a map of the Nile Valley (scale 1:750,000) and a good enlargement of central Cairo.

*Map of Egypt* (scale 1:1,000,000), published by Macmillan, includes a map of the Nile Valley and a map of the country, plus good maps of Cairo and Alexandria and a variety of enlargements and temple plans.

Clyde Surveys of England has an excellent map of eastern Egypt titled *Clyde Leisure Map No 6: Egypt & Cairo*. It covers the Nile region from the coast to Aswan, and has detailed maps of Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor and Thebes, and the Pyramids, with notes in English, French and German.

## MONEY

The official currency is the Egyptian pound (£) – in Arabic, a *guinay*. One pound consists of 100 piastres (pt). There are notes in denominations of 5pt, 10pt and 25pt, but these are rarely spotted. The 50pt, £1, £5, £10, £20, £50 and £100 notes are widely used. There's also a rarely seen £200 note. Coins in circulation are for denominations of 10pt, 20pt and 25pt, 50pt and £1, but they seem to be almost nonexistent and are sometimes thought of as collector's items. Prices can be written in pounds or piastres; for example, £3.35 can also be written as 335pt. In practice, however, vendors tend to round up, especially if you're a tourist.

There is a severe shortage of small change in Egypt, a reality that quickly becomes a nuisance for travellers frequenting ATMs. The 50pt, £1, £5 and £10 notes, which are useful for tips, taxi fares and avoiding the painfully repetitious incidents of not being given the correct change, are not always easy to come by. Even worse is that staff in businesses including upscale hotels and restaurants will sometimes scowl at you if you pay your bill in £100 notes, thus forcing them to take to the streets to round up change.

As a good rule of thumb in Egypt, make sure you hoard small change wherever possible. Also, be sure to cash out large bills in upscale establishments, even if they initially appear unwilling. These two simple prac-



tices will save you an indescribable amount of frustration.

The black market for hard currency is negligible; few travellers can be bothered hunting it out for the fraction of difference it makes.

Because of the dire state of the national currency, many tour operators and hotels will only accept payment in American dollars or euros. This applies when it comes to purchasing tickets for the Abela Sleeping Car train running between Alexandria, Cairo, Luxor and Aswan; the Nuweiba to Aqaba (Jordan) ferry; and all international buses. Although technically illegal but never enforced, it is also becoming increasingly common for upscale hotels to demand payment in US dollars, though more times than not you can charge your room on a credit card. To be on the safe side, it's a good idea to travel around Egypt with a modest supply of dollars.

Exchange rates for a range of foreign currencies are given on the inside front cover of this book. For information on costs in Egypt, see p18.

## ATMs

It's possible to travel in Egypt now relying solely on plastic as ATMs are becoming more and more widespread. Tourist-friendly cities such as Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurghada are saturated with cash dispensers, and you'll also find them in Alexandria, Dahab, Nuweiba and Aswan. Where you will be hard-pushed to find ATMs is anywhere between Cairo and Luxor (the towns of Minya and Asyut have just the occasional one) and out in the oases (there's just one each in Siwa and Kharga).

Of the numerous types of ATM in Egypt, the vast majority are compatible with Visa, MasterCard and any Cirrus or Plus cards. ATMs at Banque Misr, CIB, Egyptian American Bank (EAB), National Bank of Egypt and HSBC are particularly reliable.

## Credit Cards

Amex, Visa, MasterCard and Diners Club are becoming ever more useful in Egypt. Generally speaking, they are accepted quite widely in foreign-friendly hotels, shops and restaurants, though away from tourist establishments, they are far less common, and in remote areas they remain useless. In many places you will be charged a percentage of the sale (anywhere between 3% and 10%) to use them.

Make sure you retain any receipts to check later against your statements as there have been cases of shop owners adding extra zeros. It's a dumb, easily detected crime, but the swindlers are playing on the fact that they will only be found out once the victim has returned home, and is thousands of kilometres from Egypt.

Visa and MasterCard can be used for cash advances at Banque Misr and the National Bank of Egypt, as well as at Thomas Cook offices.

To report lost cards in Egypt, call **Amex** (☎ 02-870 3152); **MasterCard** (☎ 02-797 1179, 796 2844); **Visa** (☎ 02-796 2877, 797 1149); or **Diners Club** (☎ 02-578 3355).

## International Transfers

Western Union, the international money-transfer specialist, operates jointly in Egypt with Misr America International Bank and IBA business centres.

**Alexandria** (Map pp380-1; ☎ 03-420 1148; 281 Tariq al-Horreyya)

**Alexandria** (Map pp372-3; ☎ 03-492 0900; 73 Tariq al-Horreyya)

**Cairo** Downtown (Map pp118-19; ☎ 02-393 4906; 19 Qasr el-Nil, Cairo); Garden City (Map p148; ☎ 02-357 1385; 1079 Corniche el-Nil, Garden City); Garden City (☎ 02-355 7071; 8 Ibrahim Naguib, Garden City); Heliopolis (☎ 02-249 0607; 67 Sharia Hegaz, Heliopolis); Heliopolis (☎ 02-258 8646; 6 Sharia Boutros Ghali, Heliopolis); Mohandiseen (☎ 02-331 3500; 24 Sharia Syria, Mohandiseen)

**Dahab** (Map p474; ☎ 069-364 0466; just north of Bamboo House Hotel, Masbat)

**Hurghada** (Map p428; ☎ 065-442 772; Unit 19, Redcon Mall, Sheraton Rd, Hurghada)

**Luxor** (Map pp244-5; ☎ 095-372 292; Mina Palace Hotel, Corniche el-Nil, Luxor)

**Port Said** (☎ 066-326 404; Unit 621, Sonesta Shopping Centre, Port Said)

**Sharm el-Sheikh** (Map p466; ☎ 062-602 222; Rosetta Hotel, Na'ama Bay)

The opening hours for these offices are the same as those of the banks. For further details, call the Western Union hotline on ☎ 02-355 5023.

## Moneychangers

Money can be officially changed at Amex and Thomas Cook offices, as well as commercial banks, foreign exchange (forex) bureaux and some hotels. Rates don't tend to

## THE ART OF BARGAINING

Bargaining is part of everyday life in Egypt, and almost everything is open to haggling, from hotel rooms to the price of imported cigarettes. Even in shops where prices are clearly marked, many Egyptians will still try to shave something off the bill. Of course, when buying in souqs such as Cairo's Khan al-Khalili, bargaining is imperative unless you are willing to pay well over the odds. It can be a hassle for anyone not used to shopping this way, but keep your cool and remember it's a game, not a fight.

The first rule is never to show too much interest in the item you want to buy. Second, don't buy the first item that takes your fancy. Wander around and price things up, but don't make it obvious; otherwise, when you return to the first shop, the vendor knows that it's because he or she is the cheapest.

Decide how much you would be happy paying and then express a casual interest in buying. The vendor will state a price. So the bargaining begins. You state a figure somewhat less than the one you have fixed in your mind. The shopkeeper will inevitably huff about how absurd that is and then tell you the 'lowest' price. If it is not low enough, then be insistent and keep smiling. Tea or coffee might be served as part of the bargaining ritual but accepting it doesn't place you under any obligation to buy. If you still can't get your price, walk away. This often has the effect of closing the sale in your favour. If not, there are thousands more shops in the bazaar.

It is considered very bad form to offer an amount, have the shopkeeper agree and then to change your mind or try to get the price even lower – make sure you don't do this.

If you do get your price or lower, never feel guilty – no vendor, no matter what they may tell you, ever sells below cost.

vary much, especially for the US dollar, but if you're keen to squeeze out the last piastre, then the forex bureaux generally offer slightly better rates than the banks, and usually don't charge commission.

Most hard currencies can be changed in Egypt, though US dollars and euros are the easiest to switch out. As a rule of thumb, always look at the money you're given when exchanging, and don't accept any badly defaced, shabby or torn notes (there are plenty of them around) because you'll have great difficulty off-loading them later. The same goes for transactions in shops, taxis etc.

Egyptian pounds can be changed back into hard currency at the end of your stay at some banks, forex bureaux, and Thomas Cook and Amex offices.

It is also possible to have money wired to you from home through Amex. This service operates through most Amex branches, and can be used by anyone, regardless of whether you have an Amex card or not. The charge is about US\$80 per US\$1000, payable in the country from which the money is sent.

## Taxes

Taxes of up to 25% will be added to your bill in most upmarket restaurants. There are also hefty taxes levied on four- and five-star ac-

commodation – these have been factored into the prices we have cited.

## Tippling

For information on tipping, see the boxed text, p63.

## Travellers Cheques

While there is no problem cashing well-known brands of travellers cheques at the major banks such as Banque Misr or the National Bank of Egypt, many forex bureaux don't take them. Cheques issued on post office accounts (common in Europe) or cards linked to such accounts cannot be used in Egypt.

Banks can have a small handling charge on travellers cheques, usually a few Egyptian pounds per cheque. Always ask about commission as it can vary. Forex bureaux that take cheques tend not to charge any commission.

In addition, Amex and Thomas Cook travellers cheques can also be cashed at their offices, found in Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan, Hurghada and Sharm el-Sheikh. A small handling charge usually applies.

## POST

Postcards cost less than a dollar and take four or five days to get to Europe and a week to 10 days to the USA and Australia.

Sending a letter is also less than a dollar, and stamps are usually available at post offices, and some souvenir kiosks, shops, newsstands and the reception desks of major hotels. Sending mail from the post boxes at major hotels instead of from post offices seems to be quicker. If you use the post boxes, blue is for international airmail, red is for internal mail and green is for internal express mail.

Post offices are usually open from 8.30am to 2pm Saturday to Thursday. Poste restante in Egypt functions remarkably well and is generally free (though in Alexandria there's a small fee to collect letters). If you plan to pick up mail there, ensure that the clerk checks under Mr, Ms or Mrs in addition to your first and last names.

If you receive a package, you'll get a card (written in Arabic; you'll need a local to help you) directing you to some far-flung corner of the city to collect it. Take your passport, money and lots of patience and time.

For more information on Egypt Post, contact ☎ 0800-800 2800 or check [www.egyptpost.org](http://www.egyptpost.org).

## Parcels

Packages going by normal sea mail or airmail are sent from the main post office, although in Cairo they can only go from the huge post traffic centre located on Midan Ramses. As an indication of fees, a parcel that weighs 1kg costs between ££100 and ££200 to send via surface mail to the USA, Australia or Europe. Parcels of more than 20kg for Western Europe and Africa, and 30kg for the USA, will not be accepted. Parcels should also not be bigger than 1m long and deep, and 50cm wide.

There is usually a long and complicated process of customs inspection and form filling – don't close the parcel until the process is over. You may have to get export licences or have goods inspected, depending on what they are. Printed matter and audio and visual material will be checked and foodstuffs (except dried food) and medicines also need clearance.

The easiest way to send a package is to pay someone else a small fee and have them do it for you. Some shopkeepers will provide this service, especially if you've bought the article in their bazaar. It should include obtaining an export licence, packaging and mailing.

## SHOPPING

Egypt is a shopper's dream – from traditional papyrus scrolls and original artwork to hand-made jewellery and the obligatory hookah, there is no shortage of trinkets and souvenirs on sale in souqs across the country. Of course, a good portion of tourist offerings tend to be low-quality junk, though anyone with a discerning eye can pick out the diamonds in the rough.

The undisputed shopping capital of Egypt is Khan al-Khalili in Cairo, which is just as much a tourist circus as it is one of the Middle East's most storied and historic markets. Although you're going to have to navigate a gauntlet of slimy touts and rip-off shops, there are some great finds to be had assuming you have the time (and the patience) to shop around.

Other top-notch shopping areas include the tourist markets in Luxor, Aswan and Sharm el-Sheikh. Also, be on the lookout for traditional Siwan, Bedouin and Nubian handicrafts in the Western Desert, Sinai and Aswan, respectively.

## SOLO TRAVELLERS

Other than where common sense dictates – for example, don't go wandering off into the desert on your own, don't go snorkelling or diving unaccompanied – there is nowhere in Egypt that can't be travelled solo, if you are a man, that is. Solo travel for women is slightly more difficult (see p518 and various warnings throughout the book), but is still viable as long as you use sensible caution and dress appropriately.

## TELEPHONE

The country code for Egypt is ☎ 20, followed by the local area code (minus the zero), then the number. Local area codes are given at the start of each city or town section. The international access code (to call abroad from Egypt) is ☎ 00. For directory assistance call ☎ 140 or ☎ 141. The most common mobile phone prefixes in Egypt are ☎ 010 and ☎ 012.

Two companies sell phonecards in Egypt. Menatel has yellow-and-green booths, while Nile Tel's are red and blue. Cards are sold at shops and kiosks and come in units of ££10, ££15, ££20 and ££30. Once you insert the card into the telephone, press the flag in the top left corner to get instructions in English.

Alternatively, there are the old telephone offices, known as centrales, where you can

book a call at the desk, which must be paid for in advance (there is a three-minute minimum). The operator directs you to a booth when a connection is made.

You will find fax services are available at the main centrales in the big cities. A one-page fax costs ££7.65.

## International Calling Cards

The following cards can be accessed through these Cairo numbers: **AT&T** (☎ 02-510 0200), **MCI** (☎ 02-355 5770) and **Global One & Sprint** (☎ 02-356 4777).

## Mobile Phones

Egypt's mobile-phone network runs on the GSM system.

There are two mobile-phone companies in Egypt: **MobiNil** (☎ 02-760 9090; www.mobinil.com) and **Vodafone** (☎ 02-529 2000; www.vodafone.com.eg, www.mobileconnect.vodafone.com). Both sell convenient prepaid cards from their many retail outlets across the country. MobiNil sells its 'Alo Magic Scratch Card' in denominations of ££10, ££25, ££50, ££100, ££200 and ££300; these have a validity period of 30 days and air-time credit is carried over if you recharge the card before the end of the validity period. Vodafone has a similar card available to Vodafone customers only, as well as a Mobile Connect card that enables wireless connection to the internet through your laptop.

## TIME

Egypt is two hours ahead of GMT/UTC and daylight-saving time is observed (it begins on the last Thursday in April and ends on the last Thursday in September). So, without allowing for variations due to daylight saving, when it's noon in Cairo it is 2am in Los Angeles, 5am in New York and Montreal, 10am in London, 1pm in Moscow, and 7pm in Melbourne and Sydney.

## TOILETS

Public toilets, when they can be found, are bad news. Some toilets are of the 'squat' variety. Only in midrange and top-end hotels will toilet paper be provided; most toilets simply come equipped with a water squirter for washing yourself when you're finished. It's a good idea to adopt this practice as toilets in Egypt are not capable of swallowing much toilet paper and it's not uncommon to find toilets absolutely choked with the stuff in

hotels frequented by Westerners. If you do use toilet paper, put it in the bucket that's usually provided.

In cities it's a good idea to make a mental note of all Western-style fast-food joints and five-star hotels, as these are where you'll find the most sanitary facilities.

When trekking in the desert, climbing Mt Sinai or camping on a beach, do not leave used toilet paper lying around. Don't bury it as strong winds can still blow it away. Place the paper in a plastic bag to throw away later or take matches to burn the paper.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

The Egyptian government has tourist information offices throughout the country, some of which are better than others. The usefulness of the offices depends largely on the staff. The Aswan, Luxor, Dakhla, Siwa, Alexandria and Suez offices are staffed by people who have wide-ranging local knowledge and who will go out of their way to help you. Government-produced reference materials, such as maps and brochures, tend to be out of date and too general.

Egyptian tourist offices abroad tend to be well stocked with brochures, free maps and booklets and have fairly helpful staff.

Following is a selected list of tourist offices outside Egypt. Note that there is no office in Australia.

**Canada** (Egyptian Tourist Authority; ☎ 514-861 4420; eta@total.net; Suite 250, 1253 McGill College Ave, Montreal, Quebec H3B 2Y5)

**France** (Bureau de Tourisme; ☎ 01 45 62 94 42; fax 01 42 89 34 81; Ambassade de la RAE, 90 Ave des Champs Élysées, Paris)

**Germany** (Aegyptisches Fremdenverkehrsamt; ☎ 69-25 23 19; fax 23 98 76; 64A Kaiserstrasse, 60329, Frankfurt am Main)

**Italy** (Egyptian Tourist Authority; ☎ 396-482 79 85; fax 487 4156; Via Bissolati 19, Rome)

**Japan** (☎ 03-3589 0653; fax 3589 1372; Annex 2F, 19-18, Akasaka 2-chome, Minato-ku, Tokyo)

**Spain** (Oficina de Turismo Egipto; ☎ 341-559 2121; fax 547 5165; Torre de Madrid Planta 5, Oficina 3, Madrid)

**UK** (Egyptian Tourist Authority; ☎ 020-1493 5282; egypt@freenetname.co.uk; 3rd fl W, Egyptian House, 170 Piccadilly, London W1V 9DD)

**USA** Chicago (Egyptian Tourist Authority; ☎ 312-280 4666; fax -280 4788; Suite 829, 645 North Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL 60611); Los Angeles (☎ 323-653 8815; egypt@etala.com; San Vincente Plaza, Suite 215, 8383 Wilshire Blvd, Beverly Hills, CA 90211); New York (☎ 212-332

2570; [egyptours@aol.com](mailto:egyptours@aol.com); Suite 1706, 630 Fifth Ave, New York, NY 10111)

## TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Egypt is not well equipped for travellers with a mobility problem. Ramps are few and far between, public facilities don't necessarily have lifts, curbs are high (except in Alexandria, which has wheelchair-friendly sidewalks), traffic is lethal and gaining entrance to some of the ancient sites – such as the Pyramids of Giza or the tombs on the West Bank near Luxor – is all but impossible due to their narrow entrances and steep stairs.

Despite all this, there is no reason why intrepid travellers with disabilities shouldn't visit Egypt. In general you'll find locals quite willing to assist with any difficulties. Anyone with a wheelchair can take advantage of the large hatchback Peugeot 504s that are commonly used as taxis. One of these, together with a driver, can be hired for the day. Chances are the driver will be quite happy to help you in and out of the vehicle. Getting around the country should not be too much of a problem as most places can be reached via comfortable internal flights.

We have heard excellent reports of **Egypt for All** (☎ 02-311 3988; [www.egyptforall.com](http://www.egyptforall.com); 334 Sharia Sudan, Mohandiseen, Cairo), an Egyptian company specialises in organising travel arrangements for travellers who are mobility impaired.

## Organisations

See the website **Access-Able Travel Source** ([www.access-able.com](http://www.access-able.com)) for general information for travellers with disabilities. Before leaving home, travellers can also get in touch with their national support organisation. Ask for the 'travel officer', who may have a list of travel agencies that specialise in tours for people with disabilities.

**Access, The Foundation for Accessibility by the Disabled** (☎ 516-887 5798; PO Box 356, Malverne, NY 11565, USA)

**CNFLRH** (☎ 01 53 80 66 66; 236 Rue de Tolbiac, Paris, France)

**Radar** (☎ 020-7250 3222; [www.radar.org.uk](http://www.radar.org.uk); 12 City Forum, 250 City Rd, London EC1V 8AF, UK) Produces holiday fact-packs that cover planning, insurance, useful organisations, transport, equipment and specialised accommodation.

**Society for the Advancement of Travel for the Handicapped** (SATH; ☎ 212-447 7284; [www.sath.org](http://www.sath.org); 347 Fifth Ave, No 610, New York, NY 10016, USA)

## VISAS

Most foreigners entering Egypt must obtain a visa. The only exceptions are citizens of Guinea, Hong Kong and Macau. There are three ways of doing this: in advance from the Egyptian embassy or consulate in your home country, at an Egyptian embassy abroad or, for certain nationalities, on arrival at the airport. This last option is the cheapest and easiest of the three.

Visas are available on arrival for nationals of all Western European countries, the UK, the USA, Australia, all Arab countries, New Zealand, Japan and Korea. At the Cairo airport, the entire process takes only 20 minutes or so, and costs US\$25 – the seriously old-school stamps are bought from one of the 24-hour bank exchange-booths just before passport control. No photo is required.

Nationals from other countries must obtain visas in their countries of residence. Processing times and costs for visa applications vary according to your nationality and the country in which you apply.

If you are travelling overland, you can get a visa at the port in Aqaba, Jordan before getting the ferry to Nuweiba. However, if you are coming from Israel, you *cannot* get a visa at the border unless you are guaranteed by an Egyptian Travel Agency. Instead, you have to get the visa beforehand at either the embassy in Tel Aviv or the consulate in Eilat.

A single-entry visa is valid for three months and entitles the holder to stay in Egypt for one month. Multiple-entry visas (for three visits) are also available, but although good for presentation for six months, they still only entitle the bearer to a total of one month in the country.

## Sinai Entry Stamps

It is not necessary to get a full visa if your visit is confined to the area of Sinai between Sharm el-Sheikh and Taba (on the Israeli border), including St Katherine's Monastery. Instead you are issued with an entry stamp, free of charge, allowing you a 15-day stay. Note that this does not allow you to visit Ras Mohammed National Park. Points of entry where such visa-free stamps are issued are Taba, Nuweiba (port), St Katherine's airport and Sharm el-Sheikh (airport or port).

## Visa Extensions & Re-entry Visas

Six-month and one-year extensions of your visa for tourist purposes can easily be obtained

at passport offices, and only cost a few dollars. You'll need one photograph and photocopies of the photo and visa pages of your passport. You have a short period of grace (usually 14 days) to apply for an extension after your visa has expired. If you neglect to do this there's a fine of approximately ££100, and you'll require a letter of apology from your embassy.

If you don't have a multiple-entry visa, it's also possible to get a re-entry visa that is valid to the combined expiry dates of your visa and any extensions. A re-entry visa for one to several entries costs less than US\$5.

## Travel Permits

Military permits issued by either the Ministry of Interior or Border Police are needed to travel in the Eastern Desert south of Shams Allam (50km south of Marsa Allam), on or around Lake Nasser, off-road in the Western Desert and on the road between the oases of Bahariyya and Siwa. These can be obtained through a safari company or travel agency at least a fortnight in advance of the trip.

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Egyptians are conservative, especially on matters concerning sex and women – Egyptian women that is, not foreign women.

An entire book could be written from the comments and stories of women travellers about their adventures and misadventures in Egypt. You're almost certain to hear chat-up lines such as 'I miss you like the desert misses the rain', which might be funny if they weren't so constant and intimidating. Most of the incidents are nonthreatening nuisances, like a fly buzzing in your ear: you can swat it away and keep it at a distance, but it's always out there buzzing around.

The presence of foreign women presents, in the eyes of some Egyptian men, a chance to get around these norms with ease and without consequences. This belief is reinforced by distorted impressions gained from Western TV and by the inappropriate clothing worn by some female tourists. As a woman traveller you may receive some verbal harassment at the very least. Serious physical harassment and rape do occasionally occur, but more rarely than in most Western countries.

## Attitudes Towards Women

Some of the biggest misunderstandings between Egyptians and Westerners occur over

the issue of women. Half-truths and stereotypes exist on both sides: many Westerners assume all Egyptian women are veiled, repressed victims, while a large number of Egyptians just see Western women as sex-obsessed and immoral.

For many Egyptians of both genders, the role of a woman is specifically defined: she is mother and matron of the household. The man is the provider. However, as with any society, generalisations can be misleading and the reality is far more nuanced. There are thousands of middle- and upper-middle-class professional women living in Egypt who, like their counterparts in the West, juggle both work and family responsibilities. Among the working classes, where adherence to tradition is the strongest, the ideal may be for women to concentrate on the home and family, but economic reality means that millions of women are forced to work (but are still responsible for all the domestic chores).

The issue of sex is where the differences between Western and Egyptian women are most apparent. Premarital sex (or, indeed, any sex outside marriage) is taboo in Egypt. However, as with anything forbidden, it still happens. Nevertheless, it is the exception rather than the rule – and that goes for men as well as women.

For women, however, the issue is potentially far more serious. With the possible exception of the upper classes, women are expected to be virgins when they marry and a family's reputation can rest upon this point. In such a context the restrictions placed on a girl – no matter how onerous they may seem to a Westerner – are to protect her and her reputation from the potentially disastrous attentions of men.

## What to Wear

Away from the Sinai and Red Sea beaches, Egyptians are quite conservative about dress. As with anywhere, take your cues from those around you: if you're in a rural area and all the women are in long, concealing dresses, you should be conservatively dressed. If you're going out to a hip Cairo nightspot, you're likely to see middle- and upper-class Egyptian girls in the briefest designer gear and can dress accordingly – just don't walk there.

It is particularly important to cover up when visiting mosques and churches – you'll



## TIPS FOR WOMEN TRAVELLERS

- Wear a wedding ring. Generally, Egyptian men seem to have more respect for a married woman.
- If you are travelling with a man, it is better to say you're married rather than 'just friends'.
- Avoid direct eye contact with an Egyptian man unless you know him well; dark sunglasses help, mirrored ones are even better.
- Try not to respond to an obnoxious comment from a man – act as if you didn't hear it.
- Be careful in crowds and other situations where you are crammed between people as it is not unusual for crude things to happen behind you.
- On public transport, sit next to a woman if possible. This is not difficult on the Cairo metro where the first compartment is reserved for women only.
- If you're in the countryside (off the beaten track) be extra conservative in what you wear.
- Keep your distance. Remember that even innocent, friendly talk can be misconstrued as flirtation by men unused to close interaction with women. Ditto for any physical contact.
- If you need help for any reason (directions etc), ask a woman first.
- Be wary when horse or camel riding, especially at touristy places. It's not unknown for a guy to ride close to you and grab your horse, among other things. Riding with an unknown man on a horse or camel should be avoided.
- Egypt is not the place for acquiring a full suntan. Only on private beaches in the top-end resorts along the Red Sea and in southern Sinai are you likely to feel comfortable stripping down to a bikini. Along the Mediterranean coast and in oasis pools, you'll have to swim in shorts and a T-shirt at the very minimum, and even then you'll attract a flock of male onlookers. Egyptian women rarely go swimming at public beaches; when they do, they swim fully clothed, scarf and all.
- You may find it handy to learn the Arabic for 'don't touch me' (*la' tilmasni*). Also worth memorising are *ihtirim nafsak* (literally 'behave yourself') or *haasib eedak* (watch your hand). Swearing at would-be Romeos will only make matters worse.
- If you do get groped, don't expect people to be ashamed or apologise if you call them out. Most guys will just sort of stare at you blankly and wander away. So all the advice to ignore, ignore, ignore is really wiser – you won't be standing there with your adrenaline running, shouting and feeling like an idiot.
- Being befriended by an Egyptian woman is a great way to learn more about life in Egypt and, at the same time, have someone totally nonthreatening to guide you around. Getting to know an Egyptian woman is, however, easier said than done. All we can say is seize on whatever opportunities you get.

find that carrying a shawl to use as a head covering will come in very useful, particularly when visiting areas such as Islamic and Old Cairo.

Unfortunately, although dressing conservatively should reduce the incidence of harassment, it by no means guarantees you'll be left alone. Although it may or may not be comforting, Egyptian women get verbal and physical harassment as well – it's not just because you're foreign (see [www.ecwr.org](http://www.ecwr.org) for info on sexual harassment surveys in Egypt).

## WORK

More than 40,000 foreigners live and work in Egypt. It is possible to find work with one of the many foreign companies, especially if you begin your research before you leave home. *Cairo: A Practical Guide*, edited by Claire E Francy and published by the American University in Cairo Press (££60), has lots of information about working in Cairo. Once you have an employer, securing a work permit through an Egyptian consulate or from the Ministry of the Interior (if you are in Egypt) should not be difficult.

The most easily available work for native or fluent English-speakers is teaching the language to the locals. The best places to do this are reputable schools such as the ILI in Cairo (see p505). However, all of these places require qualifications and the minimum requirement is a Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (Celta). The ILI runs several one-month intensive Celta courses each year and sometimes employs course graduates.

If you have no qualifications or experience, you could try one of the 'cowboy schools' such as central Cairo's **International Living Language Institute** (ILLI; 34 Talaat Harb, Cairo), which is on the top floor above El-Abd bakery. These are fly-by-night places (that said, the ILLI has been around for nearly 20 years) that take on unqualified staff and work them hard for little financial return. But they do pay enough to allow you to stay on and maybe earn enough to take the Celta and gravitate to better-paid employment.

If you are a dive master or diving instructor you can find work in Egypt's diving resorts fairly easily. As many divers fund their travels

through such work the turnover is high and you're likely to find an opening if you can hang around for a couple of weeks. Owners say that apart from the basic diving qualifications, they look for languages and an ability to get along with people. If you're interested in a job, a dive centre will usually take you along on a few dive trips to assess your diving skills and to see how you interact with others before offering you work.

It is sometimes possible to find other types of work in resort towns. Sharm el-Sheikh and Dahab in particular have a relatively large number of travellers who find short-term work as bartenders or workers in the many hotels and dive centres dotted along the beach. There are also a few enterprising travellers who've financed their stay by setting up shop as masseurs, acupuncturists and herbalists.

Away from the beaches, some of the larger hotels in Luxor and Aswan occasionally take on foreigners as entertainment directors, but many of the large chains have their own staff sent in from abroad.

# Transport

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## GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you're heading to Egypt from Europe, the easiest way to get there is to fly direct. If you're coming from any other continent, it can sometimes be cheaper to fly first to Europe and then make your way to Egypt. And, of course, there are also the overland combinations of bus, taxi and ferry from other European, African and Middle Eastern countries to consider.

### ENTERING THE COUNTRY

If you enter the country via Cairo International Airport, there are a few formalities. After walking past the dusty-looking duty-free shops, you'll come to a row of exchange booths. If you haven't organised a visa in advance, you'll need to pay US\$25 to receive a visa stamp (see p517). You then fill in one of the pink immigration forms available on the benches in front of the immigration officials before queuing to be processed. The whole procedure usually takes about 20 minutes, but this being Egypt, it's probably best to expect delays.

Entering overland or by ferry is more arduous as baggage checks are routine, and there are departure and entry taxes to be

paid. Although formalities vary depending on which border you're crossing, generally speaking it's fairly straightforward to enter Egypt by land or sea.

Regardless of the means by which you enter Egypt, be sure that you have a passport that is valid for at least six months from the date of entry into the country.

If you're leaving Egypt by air, your departure tax will usually have been prepaid with your airfare. If you're departing by land, you'll need to pay E£2 (travellers who entered Egypt on a Sinai-only visa are exempt). Also note that Egyptian international ferries charge E£50 port tax per person on top of the ticket price.

### AIR

#### Airports & Airlines

Egypt has quite a few airports, but only seven of these are official international ports of entry: Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan, Hurghada, Sharm el-Sheikh and Marsa Alam. With that said, most air travellers enter Egypt through Cairo, Alexandria or Sharm el-Sheikh, while the other airports tend to be used by charter and package-deal flights only.

Most tickets are sold for flights in and out of Cairo, but sometimes it's possible to get cheaper deals to the airports serving resorts, such as Sharm el-Sheikh. While you could use Sharm as a starting point for travelling around the country, it is a good six-hour bus ride from Cairo, and the loss of time may outweigh any potential savings in money. However, Sharm serves as an excellent base for exploring Sinai or as a jumping-off point for Jordan and Israel & the Palestinian Territories.

Egypt's international and national carrier is **EgyptAir** (MS; ☎ national call centre 0900 70000; www.egyptair.com.eg; ✉ 8am-8pm), which has its hub at Cairo International Airport. Humorously (or perhaps terrifyingly) dubbed 'Egypt Scare' or 'Insh'allah Air' by jaded travellers the world over, EgyptAir's service isn't particularly good, and its fleet is in serious need of an upgrade, unless of course, you're a fan of rapidly ageing Russian planes. If you're looking for an international flight to Egypt, you'd do better flying with a different airline – anyone will do.

**WARNING – THINGS CHANGE**

The information contained in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change: prices for international travel are volatile, routes are introduced and cancelled, schedules change, special deals come and go, and rules and visa requirements are amended. Airlines and governments seem to take pleasure in making price structures and regulations as complicated as possible. You should check directly with the airline or your travel agency to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works. In addition, the travel industry is highly competitive, and there are many lurks and perks.

The upshot of this is that you should get opinions, quotes and advice from as many airlines and travel agencies as possible before parting with your hard-earned cash. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

For details of Egypt Air offices in Egypt, see the Getting There & Away sections of destination chapters throughout the book. For airport details, see To/From the Airport in the Getting Around section of destination chapters throughout the book.

If you're planning on booking your accommodation online, be sure to check out [www.lonelyplanet.com/travel\\_services](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services).

Airlines that fly to/from Egypt include the following:

**Air France** (AF; ☎ in Cairo 02-575 8899; [www.airfrance.com](http://www.airfrance.com); 2 Midan Talaat Harb, Downtown) Hub: Charles de Gaulle Airport, Paris.

**Alitalia** (AZ; ☎ in Cairo 02-578 5823; [www.alitalia.it](http://www.alitalia.it); Nile Hilton, 1113 Corniche el-Nil, Downtown) Hub: Fiumicino, Rome.

**British Airways** (BA; [www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)) Cairo (☎ 02-578 0741-6; 1 Sharia Abdel Salam Aref, Midan Tahrir, Downtown); Cairo International Airport (☎ 02-690 1690) Hub: Heathrow Airport, London.

**BMI** (BMI; ☎ in the UK 0870 6070 555; [www.flybmi.com](http://www.flybmi.com)) Hub: Heathrow Airport, London.

**El Al Israel Airlines** (LY; ☎ in Cairo 02-736 1620; [www.elal.com](http://www.elal.com); 5 Sharia al-Maqrizi, Zamalek) Hub: Ben-Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv.

**Emirates Airlines** (EK; [www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com)) Cairo (☎ 02-336 1555; 18 Sharia Wizeraat El Zeraah, Mohandiseen); Cairo International Airport (☎ 02-418 0305) Hub: Dubai International Airport, UAE.

**KLM** (KL; [www.klm.ae](http://www.klm.ae)) Cairo (☎ 02-580 5700; 11 Sharia Qasr el-Nil, Downtown); Cairo International Airport (☎ 02-418 2386) Hub: Amsterdam International Airport.

**Lufthansa** (LH; ☎ in Cairo 02-739 8339; [www.lufthansa.com](http://www.lufthansa.com); 6 Midan Sheikh al-Marsafy, Zamalek) Hub: Munchen Airport, Frankfurt.

**Malaysia Airlines** (MH) Cairo (☎ 02-576 6777; Nile Hilton, 1113 Corniche el-Nil, Downtown); Cairo International Airport (☎ 02-266 3146) Hub: Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

**Middle East Airlines** (ME; ☎ in Cairo 02-574 3422; [www.mea.com.lb](http://www.mea.com.lb); 12 Sharia Qasr el-Nil, Downtown) Hub: Beirut International Airport.

**Olympic Airways** (OA; ☎ in Cairo 02-393 1277; [www.olympic-airways.gr](http://www.olympic-airways.gr)) Hub: Eleftherios Venizelos International Airport.

**Royal Jordanian** (RJ; ☎ in Cairo 02-575 0905; [www.rja.com.jo](http://www.rja.com.jo); 6 Sharia Qasr el-Nil, Downtown) Hub: Amman International Airport.

**Singapore Airlines** (SQ; ☎ in Cairo 02-575 0276; [www.singaporeairlines.com](http://www.singaporeairlines.com); Nile Hilton, 1113 Corniche el-Nil, Downtown) Hub: Changi Airport, Singapore.

**Syrian Arab Airlines** (RB; ☎ in Cairo 02-392 8284/5; [www.syrianair.com](http://www.syrianair.com); 25 Sharia Talaat Harb, Downtown) Also known as Syrianair; hub: Damascus Airport.

**Africa**

**Rennies Travel** ([www.renniestravel.com](http://www.renniestravel.com)) and **STA Travel** ([www.statravel.co.za](http://www.statravel.co.za)) have offices throughout Southern Africa. Check their websites for branch locations.

**Asia**

**STA Travel** ([www.statravel.com/worldwide.htm](http://www.statravel.com/worldwide.htm); Bangkok ☎ 02-236 0262; [www.statravel.co.th](http://www.statravel.co.th)); Hong Kong ☎ 2736 1618; [www.statravel.com.hk](http://www.statravel.com.hk); Japan ☎ 03 5391 2922; [www.statravel.co.jp](http://www.statravel.co.jp); Singapore ☎ 6737 7188; [www.statravel.com.sg](http://www.statravel.com.sg)) proliferates in Asia. Check its website for a complete list of locations. Another resource in Japan is **No 1 Travel** (☎ 03-3205 6073; [www.no1-travel.com](http://www.no1-travel.com)); in Hong Kong try **Four Seas Tours** (☎ 2200 7760; [www.fourseastravel.com/english](http://www.fourseastravel.com/english)).

**Australia**

For the location of **STA Travel** ([www.statravel.com.au](http://www.statravel.com.au)) branches call ☎ 1300 733 035 or visit its website. **Flight Centre** (☎ 133 133; [www.flightcentre.com.au](http://www.flightcentre.com.au)) has offices located throughout Australia. For online bookings, visit **Travel** ([www.travel.com.au](http://www.travel.com.au)).

## Canada

Canada's national student travel agency is **Travel Cuts** (☎ 800-667-2887; [www.travelcuts.com](http://www.travelcuts.com)). For online bookings try **Expedia** ([www.expedia.ca](http://www.expedia.ca)) and **Travelocity** ([www.travelocity.ca](http://www.travelocity.ca)).

## Continental Europe

### FRANCE

Recommended travel agencies:

**AnyWay** (☎ 08 92 89 38 92; [www.anyway.fr](http://www.anyway.fr))

**Lastminute** (☎ 08 92 70 50 00; [www.lastminute.fr](http://www.lastminute.fr))

**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 08 25 00 07 47; [www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr](http://www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr))

**OTU Voyages** ([www.otu.fr](http://www.otu.fr)) Specialises in student and youth travellers.

**Voyageurs du Monde** (☎ 01 40 15 11 15; [www.vdm.com](http://www.vdm.com))

### GERMANY

Recommended travel agencies:

**Expedia** ([www.expedia.de](http://www.expedia.de))

**Just Travel** (☎ 089 747 3330; [www.justtravel.de](http://www.justtravel.de))

**Lastminute** (☎ 01805 284 366; [www.lastminute.de](http://www.lastminute.de))

**STA Travel** (☎ 01805 456 422; [www.statravel.de](http://www.statravel.de)) For travellers under 26 years.

### ITALY

A recommended travel agent is **CTS Viaggi** (☎ 06 462 0431; [www.cts.it](http://www.cts.it)), for student/youth deals.

### THE NETHERLANDS

A recommended travel agency is **Airfair** (☎ 020 620 5121; [www.airfair.nl](http://www.airfair.nl)).

### SPAIN

Recommended travel agencies include **Barcelo Viajes** (☎ 902 116 226; [www.barceloviajes.com](http://www.barceloviajes.com)) and **Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 90 217 09 79; [www.nouvelles-frontieres.es](http://www.nouvelles-frontieres.es)).

### India

**STIC Travels** ([www.stictravel.com](http://www.stictravel.com) Delhi ☎ 11-233 57 468; Mumbai ☎ 22-221 81 431) has offices in dozens of Indian cities. Check its website for a complete list of locations. Another agency is **Transway International** ([www.transwayinternational.com](http://www.transwayinternational.com)).

### Middle East

Recommended travel agencies:

**Al-Rais Travels** ([www.alrais.com](http://www.alrais.com)) In Dubai.

**Egypt Panorama Tours** (☎ 02-359 0200; [www.eptours.com](http://www.eptours.com)) In Cairo.

**Israel Student Travel Association (ISTA)** (☎ 02-625 7257) In Jerusalem.

**Orion-Tour** ([www.orientour.com](http://www.orientour.com)) In Istanbul.

## New Zealand

Both **Flight Centre** (☎ 0800 243 544; [www.flightcentre.co.nz](http://www.flightcentre.co.nz)) and **STA Travel** (☎ 0508 782 872; [www.statravel.co.nz](http://www.statravel.co.nz)) have branches throughout the country. Try **Travel** ([www.travel.co.nz](http://www.travel.co.nz)), which is recommended for online bookings.

## South America

Recommended travel agencies:

**ASATEJ** (☎ 54-011 4114-7595; [www.asatej.com](http://www.asatej.com)) In Argentina.

**IVI Tours** (☎ 0212-993 6082; [www.ividiomas.com](http://www.ividiomas.com)) In Venezuela.

**The Student Travel Bureau** (☎ 3038 1555; [www.stb.com.br](http://www.stb.com.br)) In Brazil.

## UK & Ireland

Discount air travel is a huge business in the UK and Ireland. Advertisements for many travel agencies appear in the travel pages of the weekend broadsheet newspapers, in *Time Out*, the *Evening Standard* and in the free online magazine *TNT* ([www.tntmagazine.com](http://www.tntmagazine.com)).

Recommended travel agencies:

**Bridge the World** (☎ 0870 444 7474; [www.b-t-w.co.uk](http://www.b-t-w.co.uk))

**Flightbookers** (☎ 0870 814 4001; [www.ebookers.com](http://www.ebookers.com))

**Flight Centre** (☎ 0870 890 8099; [flightcentre.co.uk](http://flightcentre.co.uk))

**North-South Travel** (☎ 01245 608 291; [www.northsouthtravel.co.uk](http://www.northsouthtravel.co.uk)) Donates part of its profit to projects in the developing world.

**Quest Travel** (☎ 0870 442 3542; [www.questtravel.com](http://www.questtravel.com))

**Soliman Travel** (☎ 020 7370 5130; [www.solimantravel.co.uk](http://www.solimantravel.co.uk)) A long-established Egypt specialist.

**STA Travel** (☎ 0870 160 0599; [www.statravel.co.uk](http://www.statravel.co.uk)) For travellers under 26 years.

**Trailfinders** ([www.trailfinders.co.uk](http://www.trailfinders.co.uk))

**Travel Bag** (☎ 0870 890 1456; [www.travelbag.co.uk](http://www.travelbag.co.uk))

## USA

Discount travel agents in the USA are known as consolidators (although you won't see a sign on the door saying 'Consolidator'). San Francisco is the ticket consolidator capital of the USA, although some good deals can be found in Los Angeles, New York and other big cities.

The following travel agencies are recommended for online bookings:

**Cheap Tickets** ([www.cheaptickets.com](http://www.cheaptickets.com))

**Expedia** ([www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com))

**Kayak** ([www.kayak.com](http://www.kayak.com))

**Lowest Fare** ([www.lowestfare.com](http://www.lowestfare.com))

## CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

### Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motorised travel generates CO<sub>2</sub> (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

### Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, support the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com).

**Orbitz** ([www.orbitz.com](http://www.orbitz.com))

**STA Travel** ([www.sta.com](http://www.sta.com)) For travellers under 26 years.

**Travelocity** ([www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com))

## LAND

### Israel & the Palestinian Territories

The two official borders with Israel & the Palestinian Territories are Rafah and Taba.

#### RAFAH

At the time of research the Rafah border crossing, which services a direct route from Cairo to Tel Aviv through the Gaza Strip, was closed to individual travellers. Responsibility for policing the border was relinquished by the Israelis after their withdrawal from Gaza in September 2005, and the border is now jointly policed by the Palestinian Authority and the Egyptian government. At the time of writing there were problems with border security – large groups of Palestinians illegally crossed into Egypt to shop and visit extended family as soon as the security handover took place, greatly upsetting the Egyptians. As a result, the situation is unsettled and foreigners are unlikely to be able to use the border crossing in the near future.

#### TABA

The border crossing at Taba is used for the majority of travel between Egypt and Israel

& the Palestinian Territories. Travellers make their way to Taba from destinations across Egypt, and then walk across the border, which is open 24 hours, into Israel & the Palestinian Territories. An Israeli visa is not required for most nationalities. Once the border is crossed, taxis or buses (city bus E£15) can be taken the 4km to Eilat, from where there are frequent buses onward to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Keep in mind that there are no buses operating in Israel & the Palestinian Territories on Friday evenings or before sundown Saturday, the Jewish holy day of Shabbat.

Heading back to Egypt, you must have a visa in advance unless your visit is limited to eastern Sinai or you have prearranged your entry with an Egyptian tour operator (see p517). If you don't have a visa, there is an **Egyptian embassy** (☎ 03-546 4151; Rehov Basel 54; ☎ applications 9-11am Sun-Thu) in Tel Aviv and a **consulate** (☎ 972-637 6882; fax 637 1026; 68 Afrouni St; ☎ 9-11am Sun-Thu) in Eilat. An Egyptian visa sourced through either of these offices will cost 65NIS for US and German citizens and 100NIS for everyone else. Deliver your passport, application and one passport-sized photo during opening hours in the morning and you'll be able to pick up the visa around 2pm on the same day.



At the **border crossing** (☎ 08-637 2104, 636 0999) you'll need to pay a 68NIS fee to leave Israel & the Palestinian Territories. Once you've crossed the border, you'll need to pay an Egyptian entry tax of E£30 at a booth about 1km south of the border on the main road. Alternatively, you can pick up a free Sinai-only entry permit (see p517).

Vehicles can be brought into Egypt from Eilat (you will pay around 32NIS on the Israel & the Palestinian Territories side and E£180 on the Egyptian side), but no private vehicles are permitted to cross at Taba *from* Egypt to Israel & the Palestinian Territories.

At the time of research **Misr Travel** (☎ 02-335 5470; Cairo Sheraton, Midan al-Galaa, Doqqi) and **Mazada Tours** (☎ 972 3 544 4454; www.mazada.co.il; 141 Ibn Guiri St, Tel Aviv) were both running an express service (US\$55, 12 to 14 hours) leaving the Cairo Sheraton hotel on Sunday, Monday and Thursday at 9am, travelling via Taba to Tel Aviv and then heading on to Jerusalem. Contact the companies for details.

The **East Delta Travel Company** (☎ 02-2574 2814) runs several daily buses to Taba (E£70 to E£80, nine hours) from Cairo's Turgoman Garage. If you're at one of the south Sinai resorts, such as Dahab, Nuweiba or Sharm el-Sheikh, there are plenty of buses heading north up the coast or you can jump in a service taxi if no other means are available.

## Jordan

From Cairo, there's a twice-weekly **Superjet** (☎ 02-2290 9017) service to Amman (US\$85) leaving from Al-Mazah Garage on Sunday and Thursday at 5am. There is also a daily East Delta Bus Co service from Cairo to Aqaba (US\$45) at 8pm.

From Alexandria, there's one daily Superjet service to Amman (US\$80) at 4pm and one service to Aqaba (US\$40) at 6pm.

Both of these bus services use the ferry between Nuweiba and Aqaba, so you will be liable for the port tax and the cost of a ferry ticket (see p526).

## Libya

The border-crossing point of Amsaad, just n **Libya** orth of Halfaya Pass, is 12km west of Sallum. Service taxis run up the mountain between the town and the Egyptian side of the crossing for E£5. Once you've walked through passport control and customs, you can get a Libyan service taxi on to Al-Burdi for

about LD1. From there, buses run to Tobruk and Benghazi.

Be advised that at the time of writing it was still not possible to get a Libyan visa at the border. However, you should check with the Libyan embassy in Cairo (p508) as the regulations do seem to be becoming more user-friendly. It is also not possible to get an Egyptian visa at the border, but this may change in the near future. Departure tax from Egypt is E£20; there is no Libyan departure tax.

Superjet has buses to Benghazi leaving on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 11am (E£135, 17 hours), as well as buses to Tripoli leaving on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday at 10am (E£250, 24 hours). East Delta Bus Co also has buses to Benghazi, which leave at noon on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday (E£120, 17 hours). East Delta has 11am buses to Tripoli on Tuesday and Friday (E£230, 24 hours).

## Sudan

Despite sharing an enormous land border, the only way to travel between Egypt and Sudan is to fly or take the Wadi Halfa ferry (see p526).

## SEA Cyprus

From Port Said, boats to Limassol in Cyprus depart twice weekly from May to November (one-way US\$120). For information and tickets, visit one of the many shipping agents in town. These include **Canal Tours** (☎ 066-332 1874, 012 798 6338; canaltravels@bec.com.eg; 12 Sharia Palestine, Port Said; ☎ 8am-3pm & 7pm-midnight), a few blocks up from the tourist office. Note that some nationalities (mainly those from the subcontinent) must be in possession of a valid visa for Cyprus to be allowed on board the boats.

## Europe

**Mena Tours** (☎ 066-322 5742, 323 3376; Sharia al-Gomhuriyya, Port Said) acts as the agency for the limited passenger-ship services that operate between Port Said and various Mediterranean destinations, including Beirut (Lebanon) and Antalya (Turkey). At the time of research no passenger boats were operating between Egyptian ports and any ports in Europe.

## Israel & the Palestinian Territories

There's been talk about resuming the boat service from Port Said to Haifa in Israel & the

**PORT TAX**

All Egyptian international ferries charge ££50 port tax per person on top of the ticket price.

Palestinian Territories. At the time of writing, however, this service was still nonexistent.

**Jordan**

There's an excellent fast-ferry service between Nuweiba in Egypt and Aqaba in Jordan leaving Nuweiba at 3pm and taking one to two hours depending on sea conditions. Heading back to Egypt, fast ferries depart from Aqaba and head back to Nuweiba at 11am. One-way tickets cost US\$59 for adults, US\$39 for children aged three to 12 years. You must be at the port two hours before departure in order to get through the shambolic departure formalities in the main ferry terminal building.

Note that there's also a slow ferry (adult/child US\$49/29, 2½ hours) leaving at noon daily, though we can't stress how much more comfortable it is to shell out the extra US\$10 and take the fast ferry.

Tickets must be paid for in US dollars (note that these are not always available at the banks in Nuweiba) and can be purchased on the day of departure only at the **ticket office** (☎ 9am-noon), in a small building near the port. Note that the only exception to this rule is during the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) when boats fill up weeks prior to departure. During this period, it's necessary to buy your ticket as far in advance as possible.

Free Jordanian visas can be obtained on the ferry if you have an EU, US, Canadian, Australian or New Zealand passport. Fill out a green form on board, give it to the immigration officers along with your passport and – hey presto – your passport and visa are collected when you pass through Jordanian immigration at Aqaba. (Visas are free only for travellers entering via Aqaba. For travellers entering via other borders, fees are payable.) Other nationalities will need to organise a visa in advance.

**Saudi Arabia**

Telestar Tours runs an irregular service on its *El-Salaam* ferry between Suez and Jeddah (about 36 hours). Tickets (one way) cost ££300 for deck class, ££400 for

3rd class, ££500 for 2nd class and ££600 for 1st class (or the US dollar equivalent). Once in Jeddah, you can arrange an onward ticket to Port Sudan. Note that getting a berth during the hajj is virtually impossible.

**Mena Tours** (☎ 062-322 8821, 322 0269, 010 516 9841; Sharia Al-Marwa; ☎ 9am-3pm Sat-Thu) in Suez can organise tickets.

There is a daily fast ferry that runs between Hurghada and Duba (three hours), though prices and schedules vary depending on the time of year. For more information, it is recommended that you contact **International Fast Ferries Co** (☎ 065-344 7571; [www.internationalfastferries.com](http://www.internationalfastferries.com)) or inquire at the Hurghada port. Note that you will not be allowed to board this ferry unless you have a valid Saudi visa in your passport.

**Sudan**

The **Nile River Valley Transport Corporation** (Aswan ☎ 097-303 348; in the shopping arcade behind the tourist police office; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu; Cairo ☎ 02-575 9058; next to the 3rd-class ticket window at Ramses station) runs one passenger ferry per week from Aswan to Wadi Halfa. One-way tickets cost ££385 for 1st class with bed in a cabin, ££240 for an airline seat and ££165 for deck class. At the time of research, the ferry was departing on Monday at around noon, though departure times regularly change. Tickets are also issued on Monday at the company's **office** (☎ 097-480 567) in Aswan Port. No tickets will be issued, nor will you be able to board the ferry, unless you have a valid Sudanese visa in your passport.

The trip takes between 16 and 24 hours (usually closer to 24), though tea, soft drinks and snacks are available on board. Passengers should arrive at about 8.30am to allow time to clear customs and fight for a decent seat. Some of the Sudanese immigration formalities are carried out on the boat, and you will occasionally be asked for a yellow-fever certificate. The return trip departs from Wadi Halfa on Wednesday.

The Nile Navigation Company attaches a pontoon to the ferry whenever it is needed. Prices are ££400 for a motorcycle and ££2500 for a car or 4WD. Drivers and passengers travel inside the ferry, for which they must also buy tickets. If you are taking a vehicle, you must have the usual *carnet de passage en douane* and allow plenty of time for customs procedures.

## Other Destinations

It's sometimes possible to find passage on private yachts from Suez to destinations such as India, South Africa and even Australia. Mohamed Moseilhy at **Canal Tours** (☎ 066-332 1874, 012 798 6338; canalstours@bec.com.eg; 12 Sharia Palestine, Suez; ☎ 8am-3pm & 7pm-midnight) is a good contact if you are keen to investigate this.

## TOURS

There are countless possibilities for arranging organised tours in Egypt, with a plethora of agencies dealing with everything from guided trips and overland safaris to Nile cruises (see p78) and dive trips (see p439). The programmes on such trips are usually fairly tight, leaving little room for roaming on your own. However, the advantages are that many of the time-consuming hassles, such as waiting for public transport and finding accommodation, are taken care of, maximising time for exploring and sightseeing. There's also the security that comes with being in a group, which allows you to do things such as camping in the desert or participating off-the-beaten-track activities that might be unsafe for individuals or couples.

It pays to shop around. When considering a tour, ask what the price includes (ie flights, admission fees, food etc) – some companies include these in their prices, while others don't – you need to be aware of what you're paying for when you compare prices.

For updated listings of recommended tour operators, be sure to check out [www.lonelyplanet.com/travel\\_services](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services).

## Adventure & Overland Safaris

In this kind of tour, you travel in a specially adapted 'overland truck' with anywhere from 16 to 24 other passengers and your group leader-cum-driver/navigator/nurse/mechanic/guide/fixer/entertainer. Accommodation is usually a mix of camping and budget hotels. Food is bought along the way and the group cooks and eats together, though you are expected to chip in with the chores.

Recommended tour companies:

**African Trails** (☎ 020-7706 7384; [www.africantrails.co.uk](http://www.africantrails.co.uk)) Offers a three-week Istanbul-to-Cairo trip, a five-week 'Middle East Trail' trip and a two-week Egypt tour. Offices in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Europe.

**Dragoman** (☎ 870-499 4475; [www.dragoman.co.uk](http://www.dragoman.co.uk)) A UK-based overland specialist with numerous itineraries throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

## Other Tours

Following is a list of specialist operators that organise Egypt packages tailored for independently minded travellers looking for more than just two weeks in the sun.

### AUSTRALIA

**Intrepid Travel** (☎ 03-8602 0500; [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com)) Highly regarded small-group tours with an emphasis on responsible tourism. Also has a London office.

**Peregrine Adventures** (☎ 03-9663 8611; [www.peregrineadventures.com](http://www.peregrineadventures.com)) An agent for the UK's Dragoon, Exodus and the Imaginative Traveller.

### EGYPT

**Abercrombie & Kent** (☎ in the US 800-554-7094, 630-954-2944, [www.abercombiekent.com](http://www.abercombiekent.com)) Offers first-class packages using top-end hotels, domestic flights and its own custom-built Nile cruisers.

**Egypt Panorama Tours** (☎ 02-359 0200; [www.eptours.com](http://www.eptours.com); 4 Rd 79, Ma'adi, Cairo) One of the best and most reputable agencies in Egypt; accepts bookings from overseas.

**Experience Egypt** (☎ 02-302 8364; [www.experience-egypt.com](http://www.experience-egypt.com); 42 Sharia Abu el-Mahassen el-Shazly, Mohandiseen, Cairo) Part of Lady Egypt Tours. Organises small-group tours of Sinai, Alexandria and the Nile Valley that are marketed in the UK and Canada.

### UK

**Bales Tours** (☎ 0870 752 0780; [www.balesworldwide.com](http://www.balesworldwide.com)) Runs upmarket tours using five-star accommodation.

**Egypt On The Go** (☎ 020-7371 1113; [www.egyptonthego.com](http://www.egyptonthego.com)) Tours of Egypt and PADI diving-course holidays. Also has an Australian office.

**Exodus** (☎ 0870 240 5550; [www.exodus.co.uk](http://www.exodus.co.uk)) Includes Nile cruises and tours around Sinai and through the Western Desert.

**Explore Worldwide** (☎ 0800 227 8747; [www.exploreworldwide.com](http://www.exploreworldwide.com)) A variety of short and long itineraries.

**Hayes & Jarvis** (☎ 0870 366 1636; [www.hayes-jarvis.com](http://www.hayes-jarvis.com)) A respected Egypt specialist.

**Imaginative Traveller** (☎ 0800 316 2717; [www.imaginative-traveller.com](http://www.imaginative-traveller.com)) Small-group tours.

**Wind, Sand & Stars** (☎ 020-7359 7551; [www.wind-sandstars.co.uk](http://www.wind-sandstars.co.uk)) A Sinai specialist that organises trips involving climbing and walking, desert camping, bird watching and snorkelling.

### USA & CANADA

**Bestway Tours & Safaris** (☎ 604-264 7378; [www.bestway.com](http://www.bestway.com)) Canadian company offering small-group tours, including a tour from Siwa to Ghadames in Libya and one visiting Egypt, Israel & the Palestinian Territories and Jordan.

## GETTING AROUND

Egypt has a very extensive public and private transport system, and you can travel just about anywhere in Egypt relatively cheaply. However, it's worth mentioning that most of Egypt lacks street names, which can make navigating on your own difficult. Fortunately, locals – when they do speak English – are usually more than willing to help you find your way (for a little baksheesh, of course!).

In recent years there have been a number of highly publicised bus crashes and ferry disasters that have claimed local and foreign lives alike. Although there is no cause for alarm, it's worth keeping this in mind, particularly when debating the merits of questionable transport options, such as night buses or dodgy-looking taxis.

### AIR

EgyptAir is the main domestic carrier, and flights – however dodgy they may be – are a surprisingly cheap and convenient means of bypassing countless hours on buses or

trains. Fares vary considerably depending on season and availability, but sometimes it's possible to snag domestic one-way fares for as low as US\$35. Keep in mind, however, that prices can increase dramatically during the high season (October to April), and high-demand means that it's wise to book as far in advance as possible. For EgyptAir contact details, see the Getting There & Away sections of individual cities and towns throughout this book.

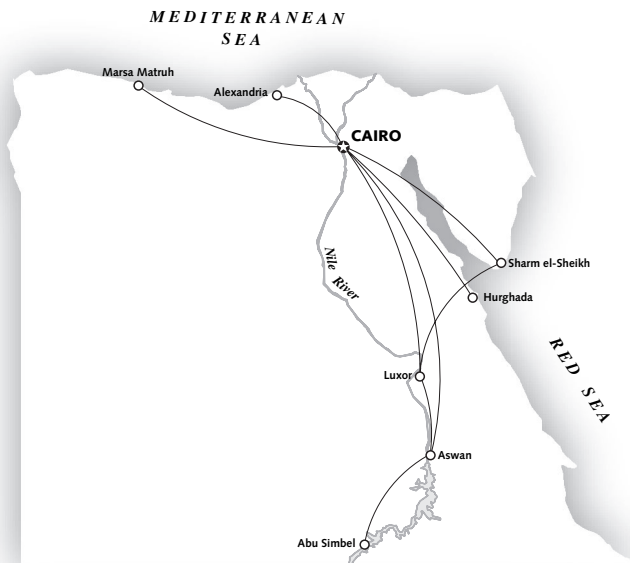
### BICYCLE

You meet very few cyclists touring Egypt – long distances combined with intense heat is the main deterrent. The blazing sun is at its worst from June to August, and even from May to mid-June and September to October, it's necessary to make an early morning start and finish by early afternoon.

Carrying a full kit with you is recommended, as spares are hard to come by, although in a pinch, Egyptians are generally excellent 'bush mechanics'.

Members of **Cairo Cyclists** (☎ 02-519 6078) reckon the best place in Cairo for repairs is

### DOMESTIC AIRLINES



Ghoukho Trading & Supplies near St Mark's Cathedral, 800m south of Midan Ramses. It's quite hard to find, so be prepared to ask for directions.

If you are considering cycling Egypt but have a few pressing questions that first need answering, check the Thorn Tree on Lonely Planet's website ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)). Post your query on the Activities branch and there's a strong likelihood that somebody will respond with the information you're looking for.

Alternatively, you could contact the **Cyclists' Touring Club** (CTC; ☎ 01483-417 217; [www.ctc.org.uk](http://www.ctc.org.uk)), a UK-based organisation that, among other things, produces information sheets on cycling in different parts of the world. At the time of research it had a dossier on Egypt. The club also publishes a good, glossy bi-monthly magazine that always carries one or two travel-type cycling pieces.

## BOAT

No trip to Egypt is complete without a trip down the Nile River. Egyptians have been plying these muddy waters for countless generations, and you can still take the trip on a felucca (a traditional sailing vessel) or opt for a modern steamer or cruise ship. For information on Nile cruises and felucca trips, see p78.

Travellers heading to the Sinai can bypass hours of bumpy roads and frustrating police checkpoints by taking the speedboat from Hurghada to Sharm el-Sheikh. Although you may have to deal with a bit of sea sickness on this route, the journey is safe and reasonably affordable. It's also one of the few chances you have to boat from Africa to Asia! For more information on the ferry, see p430.

## BUS

Buses service just about every city, town and village in Egypt. Ticket prices are generally comparable with the cost of 2nd-class train tickets. Intercity buses, especially on shorter runs and in Upper Egypt, tend to become crowded, and even if you're lucky enough to get a seat in the first place, you'll probably end up with something or somebody on your lap. The prices of tickets for buses on the same route will usually vary according to whether or not they have air-con and video, how old the bus is and how long it takes to make the journey – the more you pay, the more com-

fortable you travel and the quicker you get to your destination.

Relatively comfortable, air-con 'deluxe' buses travel between Cairo, Alexandria, Ismailia, Port Said, Suez, St Katherine's Monastery, Sharm el-Sheikh, Hurghada and Luxor. Tickets cost a bit more than those for standard buses but they're still cheap. The best of the deluxe bus companies is Superjet – try to travel with them whenever possible.

The bulk of buses servicing other routes are uncomfortable, dirty and noisy. Arabic videos, pop music or Quranic dirges are played at ear-splittingly loud levels – it's a good idea to take earplugs. You might also find a sweater or scarf handy on overnight buses as the air-con brings the temperature way down.

Today most buses have a strict no-smoking rule. On some trips passengers are offered water (no charge, but remember that it's from the tap) and on the deluxe or VIP services snacks and tea are sometimes offered (beware: these are not included in the price of the ticket). These buses also sometimes have toilets on board, but they are often filthy – you're usually better off waiting for the designated toilet stop en route.

Tickets can be bought at bus stations or often on the bus. Hang on to your ticket until you get off, as inspectors almost always board to check fares. You should also always carry your passport, as buses are often stopped at military checkpoints for random identity checks. This is particularly common on the bus between Aswan and Abu Simbel, and on all Sinai buses.

It is advisable to book tickets in advance, at least on very popular routes (such as from Cairo to Sinai) and those with few buses running (from Cairo to the Western Desert). An International Student Identification Card (ISIC) now enables passengers to get discounts on some bus routes, so always remember to ask. Where you are allowed to buy tickets on the bus, you generally end up standing if you don't have an assigned seat with a booked ticket. On short runs there are no bookings and it's a case of first on, best seated.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Driving in Cairo is a crazy affair, so think seriously before you decide to hire a car there.

### THE CURSE OF THE CONVOYS

If you're planning on travelling by road in the Nile Valley or along parts of the Red Sea coast, you have no choice but to do so in a police-escorted convoy. A legacy of the Islamist insurgency of the 1990s, which reached its apogee with the 1997 terrorist attack at the Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor, the convoy system was introduced by the Egyptian government so as to give foreign tourists a sense of personal security when travelling through the Nile Valley and across to Hurghada. Fast forward to the present day, and what the government is providing for these valuable tourists is just one enormous pain in the neck. Put simply, the convoys are a farce, with their only real purpose being to provide much-needed duties for the country's large and underemployed tourist police force.

Take the daily convoy from Aswan to Abu Simbel, for instance, which comprises a long line of coaches, minibuses and taxis all driving dangerously fast on poor roads at the same time every morning of every day of every week. All this convoy does is ensure that any would-be terrorists will know exactly when and where large groups of foreign tourists can be targeted. The few police who do accompany the convoys are inadequately armed and spend all of their time driving faster than the average Formula One competitor, which in turn forces every driver in the convoy to drive in the same irresponsible way. It's like the *Wacky Races*, with minibuses overtaking coaches and the occasional clapped-out Peugeot that is trying to assert itself by dodging dangerously between the bigger vehicles. And having braved the convoy, its frustratingly rigid schedule means that all tourists only get two hours or so at one of the most significant sites Egypt has to offer.

The convoys between Luxor and Aswan and Luxor and Hurghada are equally ridiculous, and are also frustrating in that they end up dictating whole itineraries – most only leave a couple of times per day, and don't allow stops at major sites in the afternoon (no doubt so the tourist police can knock off work early; see also the boxed text, p220). This results in many tourists missing sites such as Abydos altogether purely because the convoy won't stop en route. Appalling.

We say it's high time that this curse is lifted.

Driving in other parts of the country, at least in daylight, isn't so bad, though you should avoid intercity driving at night. And having a car – or better still a 4WD – opens up entire areas of the country where public transport is nonexistent.

A motorcycle would be an ideal way to travel around Egypt. The only snag is that you have to bring your own, and the red tape involved is extensive. Ask your country's automobile association and Egyptian embassy about regulations.

Petrol and diesel are readily available and very cheap, though unleaded petrol is only available at a handful of pumps in Cairo (mainly in Mohandiseen, Zamalek and Ma'adi) and Alexandria. When travelling out of Cairo, remember that petrol stations are not always that plentiful – as a rule, when you see one, fill up.

### Bringing Your Own Vehicle

If you're bringing a car or motorcycle into the country, you'll need the vehicle's registration papers, liability insurance and an

International Driving Permit in addition to your domestic driving licence. You will also need multiple copies of a *carnet de passage en douane*, which is effectively a passport for the vehicle, and acts as a temporary waiver of import duty. The carnet may also need to list any expensive spare parts that you're planning to carry with you, such as a gearbox. If you're driving a car, you'll also need a fire extinguisher. Contact your local automobile association for details about all documentation.

At the Egyptian border, you'll be issued with a licence valid for three months (less if your visa is valid for less time). You can renew the licence every three months for a maximum of two years, but you'll have to pay a varying fee each time. There is a customs charge of approximately US\$200, and you must pay another US\$50 for number-plate insurance.

If you plan to take your own vehicle, check in advance which spares are likely to be available. You may have trouble finding some parts for your car.



## Driving Licence

Drivers with non-Egyptian licences need an International Driving Permit to drive in Egypt. Ensure that you keep this with you at all times while you are driving – if you cannot supply it when stopped, a hefty fine will be levied, and you may have to leave your vehicle with the police until you can produce your permit. Likewise, ensure that you always have all car registration papers with you while driving.

## Hire

Several international car-hire agencies have offices in Egypt, including Avis, Hertz, Thrifty, Europcar and Budget. See p182 for details of car-hire firms in Cairo. Their rates match international charges and finding a cheap deal with local agencies is virtually impossible. No matter which company you go with, make sure you read the fine print. If you choose to hire a car, rates are around US\$50 to US\$100 a day for a small Toyota to US\$100 to US\$200 a day for a 4WD.

An International Driving Permit is required and you can be hit with a heavy fine if you're

caught hiring a car without one. Drivers should be over the age of 25.

## Road Rules

Driving is on the right-hand side. The official speed limit outside towns is 90km/h (though it is often less in some areas) and 100km/h on four-lane highways, such as the Cairo–Alexandria Desert Hwy. If you're caught speeding, the police will confiscate your driving licence and you have to go to the traffic headquarters in the area to get it back – a lengthy and laborious process. A few roads, such as the Cairo–Alexandria Desert Hwy, the Cairo–Fayoum road and the road through the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel (which goes under the Suez Canal near Suez), are subject to tolls.

Many roads have checkpoints where police often ask for identity papers, so make sure you've got your passport and International Driving Permit on hand or you may be liable for a US\$100 on-the-spot fine.

Although city driving may seem chaotic, there is one cardinal rule: whoever is in front has the right of way – even if a car is only 1cm

### ROAD DISTANCES (km)

Al-Arish	---
Al-Fayoum	431 ---
Alexandria	451 327 ---
Aswan	1238 822 1133 ---
Asyut	712 296 607 526 ---
Beni Suef	453 37 346 785 259 ---
Cairo	325 106 220 913 387 128 ---
Giza	333 98 228 903 377 118 8 ---
Hurghada	668 636 754 496 478 532 530 538 ---
Ismailia	185 246 266 1053 527 268 140 148 483 ---
Luxor	955 608 919 209 322 571 699 689 287 770 ---
Marsa Matruh	741 617 290 1423 897 638 510 518 1040 556 1209 ---
Minya	579 163 473 659 133 126 254 244 611 394 455 764 ---
Port Said	200 331 354 1138 612 353 225 233 563 85 850 644 479 ---
Sharm el-Sheikh	638 610 710 1279 909 632 504 512 783 444 1070 1000 758 529 ---
Suez	287 273 354 1047 521 262 134 142 395 88 682 644 388 168 388 ---

ahead of you and cuts across your path suddenly, you'll be liable if you hit it.

When driving through the countryside, keep in mind that children and adults are likely to wander onto your path, even on main roads. If you do have an accident, get to the nearest police station as quickly as possible and report what happened.

## HITCHING

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country in the world, and it is not recommended. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. People who do choose to hitch will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they are planning to go. Women must never hitch on their own in Egypt, as the general assumption about such behaviour is that only prostitutes would do such a thing.

## LOCAL TRANSPORT

As well as the local transport services described here, some cities and towns have their own options – most are variations on the pony-and-trap theme.

### Bus & Minibus

Cairo and Alexandria are the only cities with their own bus systems. Taking a bus in either place is an experience far beyond simply getting from A to B. Firstly there's getting on board. Egyptians stampede buses, charging the entrance before the thing has even slowed. Hand-to-hand combat ensues as they run alongside trying to leap aboard. If you wait for the bus to stop, the pushing and shoving to get on is worse. Often several passengers don't quite manage to get on and they make their journey hanging off the back doorway, clinging perilously to the frame or to someone with a firmer hold.

The scene inside the bus in this case usually resembles a *Guinness World Record* attempt on the greatest number of people in a fixed space. At some point during the trip, a man will somehow manage to squeeze his way through to sell you your ticket.

The buses rarely completely stop to let you off. You stand in the doorway, wait for the opportune moment and launch yourself onto the road.

Taking a minibus is an easier option. Passengers are not allowed to stand (although

this rule is frequently overlooked), and each minibus leaves as soon as every seat is taken.

### Metro

Cairo is the only city in Egypt with a metro system (for more details, see p182).

### Microbus

Privately owned and usually unmarked microbuses shuttle around all the larger cities. For the average traveller they can be difficult to use, as it is unclear where most of them go. However, quite often there's a small boy hanging out of the doorway yelling the destination. In Cairo, you might have occasion to use a microbus to get out to the Pyramids, while in Alexandria they shuttle the length of Tariq al-Horreyya and the Corniche to Montazah, and in Sharm el-Sheikh they carry passengers between Old Sharm, Na'ama Bay and Shark's Bay. Most of the smaller cities and towns have similar microbuses doing set runs around town.

### Pick-Up

As well as servicing routes between smaller towns, covered pick-up trucks are sometimes used within towns as local taxis. This is especially so in some of the oases towns, on Luxor's West Bank and in smaller places along the Nile. Should you end up in one of these, there are a couple of ways you can indicate to the driver that you want to get out: if you are lucky enough to have a seat, pound on the floor with your foot; alternatively, ask one of the front passengers to hammer on the window behind the driver; or, lastly, use the buzzer that you'll occasionally find rigged up.

### Taxi

Almost every second car in Egypt (whether labelled or not) is a taxi, and they are by far the most convenient way of getting about. Stand at the side of the road, stick your hand out, shout your destination and get ready for some potential Indy race-car driving.

As a general rule in Egypt, taxi etiquette is that you get in knowing what to pay, and when you arrive, you get out and hand the money through the window. With that said, if a driver suspects you don't know what the correct fare is, you're fair game for fleecing. Since most travellers in Egypt don't speak fluent Arabic, it's probably best to agree on a price before getting into the taxi.

**'TAXI!'**

Taxis are at once a blessing and a curse. They're a remarkably convenient and easily affordable way of getting around the city, but they can also be a frequent source of unpleasantness when it comes to paying the fare. The problem stems from the unmetered system of payment, which can lead to discontent. Passengers frequently feel that they've been taken advantage of (which they often have), while drivers are occasionally genuinely aggrieved by what they see as underpayment. So why don't the drivers use the meter? Because they were all calibrated at a time when petrol was ludicrously cheap. That time has long passed and any driver relying on his meter would now be out of pocket every time he came to fill up.

Taxi driving is far from being a lucrative profession. Of the more than 60,000 taxis on the road in Cairo, it would be a safe bet to assume that none of the drivers are yet millionaires. Average earnings after fuel has been paid are about ££8 per hour. Consider, too, that many drivers don't even own their car and have to hand over part of their earnings as 'rent'.

Which isn't to say that the next time you flag a taxi for a short hop across town and the driver hisses '10 pounds' that you should smile and say 'OK', but maybe you can see that from a certain point of view, it was worth his while trying. After all, if you can afford to make it all the way to Egypt, you can probably afford to pay a bit more than the going rate for a taxi and help make the taxi driver's hard slog of a life just that tiny bit easier.

Often when it comes to bargaining, a driver will demand absurd amounts of money – don't be intimidated, and don't be drawn into an argument. It's nothing but bluster, and the driver is playing on the fact that you're a *khwaga* (foreigner) and don't know better. Eventually, the driver is likely to accept your offer if it's appropriate, though you can always walk away if you feel like you're being taken advantage of and try again with another taxi.

**Tram**

Cairo and Alexandria are the only two cities in the country with tram systems. While Alexandria still has a fairly extensive and efficient network, Cairo now only has a handful of lines. See p184 for more details.

**MICROBUS**

A slightly bigger version of the service taxi, the *meecrobus* is a Toyota van that would normally take about 12 people, but in Egypt takes as many as 22. These run on the same principle as service taxis and cost about the same, but operate on fewer routes.

**PICK-UP**

Toyota and Chevrolet pick-up trucks cover a lot of the routes between the smaller towns and villages off the main roads. The general rule is to get 12 people inside the covered rear of the truck, often with an assortment of goods squeezed in on the floor. After that,

it's a matter of how many can and want to scramble on to the roof or hang off at the rear.

**SERVICE TAXI**

Travelling by *servees* is one of the fastest ways to go from city to city. Service taxis are generally big Peugeot 504 cars that run intercity routes. Drivers congregate near bus and train stations and tout for passengers by shouting their destination. When the car's full, it's off. A driver won't leave before his car is full unless you and/or the other passengers want to pay for all of the seats. Fares are usually cheaper than either the buses or trains and there are no set departure times, you just turn up and find a car.

**TRAIN**

Although trains travel along more than 5000km of track to almost every major city and town in Egypt, the system is badly in need of modernisation (it's a relic of the British occupation). Most services are grimy and battered and are a poor second option to the deluxe bus. The exceptions are the *Turbini* and *Espani* services from Cairo to Alexandria and the tourist and sleeping trains from Cairo down to Luxor and Aswan – on these routes the train is the preferred option over the bus.

If you have an International Student Identification Card (ISIC), discounts are granted on all fares, except those for the sleeping-car services.

## Classes & Services

Trains with sleeping cars are the most comfortable and among the fastest in Egypt. The cars, which are run by Abela Egypt, are the same as those used by trains in Europe. At least one sleeping train travels between Alexandria, Cairo, Luxor and Aswan daily. For details, see the Getting There & Away sections of those cities.

The Abela sleeping trains are 1st class only and reservations must be made in advance. Compartments come with a seat that converts into a bed, a fold-down bunk (with clean linen, pillows and blankets) and a small basin with running water. Beds are quite short, and tall people may spend an uncomfortable night as a result. It is worth requesting a middle compartment, as those at the ends of the carriages are located near the toilets and can sometimes be noisy. Shared toilets are generally clean and have toilet paper. Aircraft-style dinners and breakfasts are served in the compartments, but you

should not expect a gourmet eating experience. Drinks (including alcohol) are served by the steward.

Regular night trains with and without sleeper compartments and meals included leave for Luxor and Aswan daily and cost much less than the sleeping trains. Reservations must be made in advance at Ramses Station in Cairo. Unless you specify otherwise, you'll be issued with a ticket that includes meals on board. You may want to flout the rules and bring your own food. Both 1st- and 2nd-class compartments have air-con and they can get chilly at night; bring something warm to wear.

Trains without air-conditioning are next down the scale. Classes are divided into 2nd-class ordinary, which generally has padded seats, and 3rd class, where seating is of the wooden bench variety. These trains are generally filthy, tend to spend a lot of time at a lot of stations and can be subject to interminable delays.

# Health

Dr Caroline Evans

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Prevention is the key to staying healthy while travelling in Egypt. Infectious diseases can and do occur here, but these are usually associated with poor living conditions and poverty, and can be avoided with a few precautions. The most common reason for travellers needing medical help is as a result of accidents – cars are not always well maintained and poorly lit roads are littered with potholes. Medical facilities can be excellent in large cities, but may be more basic in other areas.

## BEFORE YOU GO

A little planning before departure, particularly for pre-existing illnesses, will save you a lot of trouble later. See your dentist before a long trip; carry a spare pair of contact lenses and glasses (take your optical prescription with you); and carry a first-aid kit.

It's tempting to leave planning to the last minute – don't! Many vaccines don't ensure immunity for the first two weeks, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (also known as the yellow booklet), which lists all the vaccinations you've received. This is mandatory for countries that require proof of yellow-fever

vaccination, but it's a good idea to carry it wherever you travel.

Travellers can register with the **International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers** (IAMAT; [www.iamat.org](http://www.iamat.org)). Its website can help travellers to find a doctor with recognised training. Those heading off to very remote areas may like to do a first-aid course (Red Cross and St John's Ambulance can help) or attend a remote medicine first-aid course such as the one offered by the **Royal Geographical Society** ([www.rgs.org](http://www.rgs.org)).

Bring your medications in their original, clearly labelled containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If you're carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

## INSURANCE

Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures (in many countries doctors expect payment in cash). It's also worth ensuring your travel insurance will cover repatriation home or to better medical facilities elsewhere. Not all insurance covers an emergency flight home or to a hospital in a major city, which may be the only way to get medical attention for a serious emergency. Your insurance company may be able to locate the nearest source of medical help, or you can ask at your hotel. In an emergency contact your embassy or consulate.

## RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that all travellers, regardless of the region they are travelling in, should be vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella and polio, as well as hepatitis B. While making travel preparations, take the opportunity to ensure that your routine vaccination cover is complete. The consequences of these diseases can be very severe and outbreaks do occur in the Middle East.

### TRAVEL HEALTH WEBSITES

It's usually a good idea to consult your government's travel health website before departure, if one is available.

**Australia** ([www.dfat.gov.au/travel](http://www.dfat.gov.au/travel))

**Canada** ([www.travelhealth.gc.ca](http://www.travelhealth.gc.ca))

**UK** ([www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice](http://www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice))

**USA** ([www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel))

### MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Following is a list of other items you should consider packing in your medical kit.

- Acetaminophen/paracetamol (Tylenol) or aspirin
- Adhesive or paper tape
- Antibacterial ointment (eg Bactroban) for cuts and abrasions
- Antibiotics (if travelling off the beaten track)
- Antidiarrhoeal drugs (eg loperamide)
- Antihistamines (for hay fever and allergic reactions)
- Anti-inflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- Bandages, gauze, gauze rolls
- DEET-containing insect repellent for the skin
- Iodine tablets (for water purification)
- Oral rehydration salts
- Permethrin-containing insect spray for clothing, tents, and bed nets
- Pocket knife
- Scissors, safety pins, tweezers
- Steroid cream or cortisone (for allergic rashes)
- Sun block
- Syringes and sterile needles (if travelling to remote areas)
- Thermometer

### INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the internet. For further information, the **Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) website is a good place to start. The **World Health Organization** ([www.who.int/ith](http://www.who.int/ith)) publishes a superb book, *International Travel and Health*, which is revised annually and is available online at no cost. Another website of general interest is **MD Travel Health** ([www.mdtravelhealth.com](http://www.mdtravelhealth.com)), which provides complete travel-health recommendations for every country, updated daily, also at no cost. The **Centers for Disease Control & Prevention** ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov))

website is also a useful source of travel-health information.

### FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel* is packed with useful information including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information, as well as what to do if you get sick on the road. Other recommended references include *Travellers' Health* by Dr Richard Dawood (Oxford University Press); *International Travel Health Guide* by Stuart R Rose, MD (Mosby); and *The Travellers' Good Health Guide* by Ted Lankester (Sheldon Press), an especially useful health guide for volunteers and long-term expatriates working in the Middle East.

## IN TRANSIT

### DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. Though most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they may cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should seek medical attention immediately.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights, you should walk around the cabin, contract the leg muscles while sitting, drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

### JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try drinking plenty of fluids (nonalcoholic) and eating light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treat-



ing motion sickness. Their main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

## IN EGYPT

### AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

The health care systems in Egypt are varied. Care can be excellent in private hospitals and those associated with universities, but patchier elsewhere. Reciprocal payment arrangements with other countries rarely exist and you should be prepared to pay for all medical and dental treatment.

Medical care is not always readily available outside major cities. Medicine, and even sterile dressings or intravenous fluids, may need to be bought from a pharmacy. Nursing care may be limited or rudimentary, as this is something families and friends are expected to provide. The travel assistance provided by your insurance may be able to locate the nearest source of medical help, otherwise ask at your hotel. In an emergency contact your embassy or consulate.

Standards of dental care are variable and there is an increased risk of hepatitis B and HIV transmission via poorly sterilised equipment. Keep in mind that your travel insurance will not usually cover you for anything other than emergency dental treatment.

For minor illnesses such as diarrhoea, pharmacists, who are well qualified, can often provide valuable advice and sell over-the-counter medication. They can also advise whether more specialised help is needed.

### INFECTIOUS DISEASES

The following diseases are all present within Egypt.

#### Diphtheria

Spread through close respiratory contact, diphtheria causes a high temperature and severe sore throat. Sometimes a membrane forms across the throat requiring a tracheostomy to prevent suffocation. Vaccination is recommended for those who are likely to be in close contact with the local population in infected areas. The vaccine is given as an injection alone or with the tetanus vaccine, and lasts 10 years.

#### Hepatitis A

This is spread through contaminated food (particularly shellfish) and water. It causes jaundice and, although it is rarely fatal, can cause prolonged lethargy and delayed recovery. Symptoms include dark urine, a yellow colour to the whites of the eyes, fever and abdominal pain. Hepatitis A vaccine (Avaxim, Vaqta, Havrix) is given as an injection: a single dose will give protection for up to a year, while a booster 12 months later will provide a subsequent 10 years of protection. Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines can also be given as a single-dose vaccine (Hepatyrix or ViATIM).

#### Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is transmitted by infected blood, contaminated needles and sexual intercourse. It can cause jaundice and affects the liver, occasionally causing liver failure. All travellers should make this a routine vaccination. (Many countries now give hepatitis B vaccination as part of routine childhood vaccination.) The vaccine is given alone, or at the same time as the hepatitis A vaccine (Hepatyrix). A course will give protection for at least five years. It can be given over four weeks or six months.

#### HIV

HIV is spread via infected blood and blood products, sexual intercourse with an infected partner and from an infected mother to her newborn child. It can be spread through 'blood to blood' contacts such as contaminated instruments during medical, dental, acupuncture and body-piercing procedures, and sharing used intravenous needles.

#### Malaria

Malaria is found in certain parts of some oases; risk varies seasonally. Risk of malaria in most cities is minimal, but check with your doctor if you are considering travelling to any rural areas. It is important to take anti-malarial tablets if the risk is significant. For up-to-date information about the risk of contracting malaria, contact your local travel health clinic.

Anyone who has travelled in a country where malaria is present should be aware of the symptoms of malaria. It is possible to contract malaria from a single bite from an infected mosquito. Malaria almost always starts with marked shivering, fever and sweating. Muscle pains, headache and vomiting are common.

Symptoms may occur anywhere from a few days to three weeks after the infected mosquito bite. The illness can start while you are taking preventive tablets if they are not fully effective, and may also occur after you have finished taking your tablets.

### **Poliomyelitis**

This generally spreads through contaminated food and water. The vaccine is given in childhood and should be boosted every 10 years, either orally (a drop on the tongue) or as an injection. Polio may be carried asymptotically, but it can cause a transient fever and, in rare cases, potentially permanent muscle weakness or paralysis.

### **Rabies**

Rabies spreads through bites or licks from an infected animal on broken skin. Rabies is fatal. Animal handlers should be vaccinated, as should those travelling to remote areas where a reliable source of postbite vaccine isn't available within 24 hours. Three injections are needed over a month. If you have not been vaccinated, you will need a course of five injections starting within 24 hours or as soon as possible after the injury. Vaccination does not provide you with immunity, it merely buys you more time to seek appropriate medical help.

### **Rift Valley Fever**

This haemorrhagic fever is spread through blood and blood products, including those from infected animals. It causes a flulike illness with fever, joint pains and occasionally more serious complications. Complete recovery is possible.

### **Schistosomiasis**

Also known as bilharzia, this is spread by the freshwater snail. It causes infection of the bowel and bladder, often with bleeding. It is caused by a fluke and is contracted through the skin from water contaminated with human urine or faeces. The Nile is known to be a source of bilharzia, but paddling or swimming in *any* suspect freshwater lakes or slow-running rivers should be avoided. Possible symptoms include a transient fever and rash. Advanced cases of bilharzia may cause blood in the stool or in the urine. However, there may be no symptoms. A blood test can detect antibod-

ies if you have been exposed, and treatment is then possible in specialist travel or infectious-disease clinics.

### **Tuberculosis**

Also known as TB, this is spread through close respiratory contact and occasionally through infected milk or milk products. BCG vaccine is recommended for those likely to be mixing closely with the local population. It is more important for people visiting family or planning on a long stay, and those employed as teachers and health-care workers. TB can be asymptomatic, or symptoms can include cough, weight loss or fever, months or even years after exposure. An X-ray is the best way to confirm if you have TB. BCG gives a moderate degree of protection against TB. It causes a small permanent scar at the site of injection, and is usually only given in specialised chest clinics. As it's a live vaccine it should not be given to pregnant women or immunocompromised individuals. The BCG vaccine is not available in all countries.

### **Typhoid**

This is spread through food or water that has been contaminated by infected human faeces. The first symptom is usually fever or a pink rash on the abdomen. Septicaemia (blood poisoning) may also occur. Typhoid vaccine (Typhim Vi, Typherix) will give protection for three years. In some countries the oral vaccine Vivotif is also available.

### **Yellow Fever**

This vaccination isn't required for the Middle East. However, the mosquito that spreads yellow fever has been known to be present in some parts of the Middle East. It is important to consult your local travel-health clinic for the latest details, as part of your predeparture plans. Any travellers from a yellow-fever endemic area will need to show proof of vaccination against yellow fever before entry. This normally means if arriving directly from an infected country or if the traveller has been in an infected country during the previous 10 days. We would recommend, however, that travellers carry a certificate if they have been in an infected country during the previous month, to avoid any possible difficulties with immigration. There is always the possibility that a traveller without an up-to-date certificate

will be vaccinated and detained in isolation at the port of arrival for up to 10 days, or even repatriated. The yellow-fever vaccination must be given at a designated clinic. It is valid for 10 years. It is a live vaccine and must not be given to immunocompromised or pregnant travellers.

In Cairo, you can obtain a yellow-fever vaccine at the medical clinic in Terminal 1 of Cairo airport (approximately £60). Note that you must show proof of having a yellow-fever vaccination before being allowed entry to or from Sudan.

## TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

To prevent diarrhoea, avoid tap water unless it has been boiled, filtered or chemically disinfected (iodine tablets). Eat only fresh fruits or vegetables if cooked or if you have peeled them yourself, and avoid dairy products that might contain unpasteurised milk. Buffet meals are risky. Food should be piping hot; meals freshly cooked in front of you in a busy restaurant are more likely to be safe.

If you develop diarrhoea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution containing lots of salt and sugar. A few loose stools don't require treatment but, if you start having more than four or five stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinolone drug) and an antidiarrhoeal agent (such as loperamide). If diarrhoea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours, is accompanied by fever, shaking chills or severe abdominal pain, you should seek medical attention.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

### Heat Illness

Heat exhaustion occurs following heavy sweating and excessive fluid loss with inadequate replacement of fluids and salt. It is particularly common in hot climates, if you take unaccustomed exercise before full acclimatisation. Symptoms include headache, dizziness and tiredness. You're already dehydrated by the time you feel thirsty – aim to drink sufficient water so that you produce pale, diluted urine. Treatment consists of fluid replacement with water or fruit juice or both, and cooling by cold water and fans. The treatment of the salt-loss component consists of taking in salty fluids such as soup or broth, and adding a little more table salt to foods than usual.

Heat stroke is much more serious. This occurs when the body's heat-regulating mechanism breaks down. Excessive rise in body temperature leads to sweating ceasing, irrational and hyperactive behaviour and eventually loss of consciousness and even death. Rapid cooling by spraying the body with water and fanning is an ideal treatment. Emergency fluid and electrolyte replacement by intravenous drip is usually also required.

### Insect Bites & Stings

Mosquitoes may not carry malaria but can cause irritation and infected bites. They also spread dengue fever. Using DEET-based insect repellents will prevent bites.

Bees and wasps only cause real problems to those with a severe allergy (anaphylaxis). If you have a severe allergy to bee or wasp stings, you should carry an adrenaline injection or similar.

Sandflies are located around the Mediterranean beaches. They usually only cause a nasty itchy bite, but can also carry a rare skin disorder called cutaneous leishmaniasis. Bites may be prevented by using DEET-based repellents.

Scorpions are frequently found in arid or dry climates. They can cause a painful bite which is rarely life threatening.

Bed bugs are often found in hostels and cheap hotels. They lead to very itchy, lumpy bites. Spraying the mattress with an appropriate insect killer will do a good job of getting rid of them.

Scabies are also frequently found in cheap accommodation. These tiny mites live in the skin, particularly between the fingers. They cause an intensely itchy rash. Scabies is easily treated with lotion available from pharmacies; people who you come into contact with also need treating to avoid spreading scabies between asymptomatic carriers.

### Snake Bites

Do not walk barefoot or stick your hand into holes or cracks. Half of those bitten by venomous snakes are not actually injected with poison (envenomed). If bitten by a snake, do not panic. Immobilise the bitten limb with a splint (eg a stick) and apply a bandage over the site and firm pressure, similar to a bandage over a sprain. Do not apply a tourniquet, or cut or suck the bite. Get the victim to medical

help as soon as possible so that antivenin can be given if necessary.

## Water

Tap water is not safe to drink throughout Egypt. Stick to bottled water or boil water for 10 minutes, use water-purification tablets or a filter. Do not drink water from rivers or lakes, as it may contain bacteria or viruses that can cause diarrhoea or vomiting.

## TRAVELLING WITH CHILDREN

All travellers with children should know how to treat minor ailments and when to seek medical treatment. Make sure the children are up to date with routine vaccinations, and discuss possible travel vaccinations well before departure as some vaccines are not suitable for children aged under one year.

In hot, moist climates any wound or break in the skin may lead to infection. The area should be cleaned and then kept dry and clean. Remember to avoid contaminated food and water. If your child is vomiting or experiencing diarrhoea, lost fluid and salts must be replaced. It may be helpful to take rehydration powders with you, to be reconstituted with boiled water. Ask your doctor about this.

Children should be encouraged to avoid dogs or other mammals because of the risk of rabies and other diseases. Any bite, scratch or lick from a warm-blooded, furry animal should immediately be thoroughly cleaned. If there is any possibility that the animal is infected with rabies, immediate medical assistance should be sought.

## WOMEN'S HEALTH

Emotional stress, exhaustion and travelling through different time zones can all contrib-

ute to an upset in the menstrual pattern. If using oral contraceptives, keep in mind that some antibiotics, diarrhoea and vomiting can stop the pill from working and lead to the risk of pregnancy – remember to take condoms with you just in case. Condoms should be kept in a cool, dry place or they may crack and perish.

Emergency contraception is most effective if taken within 24 hours after unprotected sex. The **International Planned Parenthood Federation** ([www.ippf.org](http://www.ippf.org)) can advise about the availability of contraception in different countries. Tampons and sanitary towels are not always available outside major cities in the Middle East.

Travelling during pregnancy is usually possible, but there are important things to consider. Have a medical checkup before embarking on your trip. The most risky times for travel are during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, when miscarriage is most likely, and after 30 weeks, when complications such as high blood pressure and premature delivery can occur. Most airlines will not accept a traveller after 28 to 32 weeks of pregnancy, and long-haul flights in the later stages can be very uncomfortable. Antenatal facilities vary greatly between countries in the Middle East and you should think carefully before travelling to a country with poor medical facilities or where there are major cultural and language differences from your home country. Taking written records of the pregnancy, including details of your blood group, is likely to be helpful if you need medical attention while in a foreign country. Try to find an insurance policy that covers pregnancy, delivery and postnatal care, but remember that insurance policies are only as good as the facilities available.

# Language

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Arabic is the official language of Egypt. However, the Arabic spoken on the streets differs greatly from the standard Arabic written in newspapers and spoken on the radio (which is known as Modern Standard Arabic or MSA). MSA is the written and spoken lingua franca that is common to all Arabic-speaking countries.

Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA) is fun, but difficult to learn. It's basically a dialect of the standard language, but it's different in so many respects that it's virtually another language. As with most dialects, it's the everyday language that differs the most from that of Egypt's other Arabic-speaking neighbours. More specialised or educated language tends to be pretty much the same across the Arab world, although pronunciation may vary considerably. An Arab from, say, Jordan or Iraq will have no problem having a chat about politics or literature with an Egyptian, but might have more trouble making themselves understood in a Cairo bakery.

There is no official written form of the Egyptian Arabic dialect, although there is no practical reason for this – Nobel Prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz has no trouble writing out whole passages using

predominantly Egyptian (or Cairene) slang. For some reason, though, foreigners who specifically want to learn Egyptian Arabic instead of MSA are told that it can't be written in script, and are then presented with one system or other of transliteration – none of them totally satisfactory. If you're getting a headache now, you'll have some idea of why few non-Arabs and non-Muslims embark on the study of the language.

Nevertheless, if you take the time to learn even a handful of words and phrases, you'll discover and experience much more while travelling through the country. If you'd like a more comprehensive guide to the language, pick up a copy of Lonely Planet's *Egyptian Arabic Phrasebook*, which includes script for Egyptian Arabic (not MSA) throughout.

Arabic uses masculine and feminine forms, which are indicated in this language guide by (m) and (f) respectively, or separated by a slash (m/f) if both forms are given.

## TRANSLITERATION

Converting what for most outsiders is just a bunch of squiggles into meaningful words (ie those written using the Roman alphabet) is a tricky business – in fact, no satisfactory system of transliteration has been established, and probably never will be. For this book, an attempt has been made to standardise some spellings of place names and the like.

There is only one article in Arabic: *al* (the). It's also sometimes written as 'il' or 'el' and sometimes modifies to reflect the first consonant of the following noun. For example, in Saladin's name, *Salah ad-Din* (righteousness of the faith), the 'al' has been modified to 'ad' before the 'd' of 'Din'. The article *el* is used only in a few instances in this book, such as well-known places (El Alamein, Sharm el-Sheikh) or where locals have used it in restaurant and hotel names.

The whole business of transliteration is fraught with pitfalls, and in a way there are no truly 'correct' systems. The locals themselves can only guess at how to make the conversion – often with amusing results. The fact that French and English have had a big

## THE STANDARD ARABIC ALPHABET

Final	Medial	Initial	Alone	Transliteration	Pronunciation
ا			ا	ā/aa	as in 'father'/as the long 'a' in 'ma'am'
ب	ب	ب	ب	b	as in 'bet'
ت	ت	ت	ت	t	as in 'ten'
ث	ث	ث	ث	th	as in 'thin'
ج	ج	ج	ج	g	as in 'go'
ح	ح	ح	ح	H	a strongly whispered 'h', like a sigh of relief
خ	خ	خ	خ	kh	as the 'ch' in Scottish <i>loch</i>
د			د	d	as in 'dim'
ذ			ذ	dh	as the 'th' in 'this'
ر			ر	r	a rolled 'r', as in the Spanish word <i>caro</i>
ز			ز	z	as in 'zip'
س	سد	سد	س	s	as in 'so', never as in 'wisdom'
ش	شد	شد	ش	sh	as in 'ship'
ص	صد	صد	ص	ṣ	emphatic 's'
ض	ضد	ضد	ض	ḍ	emphatic 'd'
ط	ط	ط	ط	ṭ	emphatic 't'
ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ	ẓ	emphatic 'z'
ع	ع	ع	ع	ʿ	the Arabic letter 'ayn'; pronounce as a glottal stop – like the closing of the throat before saying 'Oh-oh!' (see p543)
غ	غ	غ	غ	gh	a guttural sound like Parisian 'r'
ف	ف	ف	ف	f	as in 'far'
ق	ق	ق	ق	q	a strongly guttural 'k' sound; in Egyptian Arabic often pronounced as a glottal stop
ك	ك	ك	ك	k	as in 'king'
ل	ل	ل	ل	l	as in 'lamb'
م	م	م	م	m	as in 'me'
ن	ن	ن	ن	n	as in 'name'
ه	ه	ه	ه	h	as in 'ham'
و			و	w	as in 'wet'; or
				oo	long, as in 'food'; or
				ow	as in 'how'
ي	ي	ي	ي	y	as in 'yes'; or
				ee	as the 'e' in 'ear', only softer; or
				ai/ay	as in 'aisle'/as the 'ay' in 'day'

**Vowels** Not all Arabic vowel sounds are represented in the alphabet. For more information on the vowel sounds used in this language guide, see p543.

**Emphatic Consonants** To simplify the transliteration system used in this book, the emphatic consonants have not been included.



influence (though the latter has all but conquered the former in modern Egypt) has led to all sorts of interesting ideas on transliteration. Egypt's high rate of illiteracy doesn't help either. Don't be taken aback if you start noticing half a dozen different spellings for the same thing.

For some reason, the letters **q** and **k** have caused enormous problems, and have been interchanged willy-nilly in transliteration. For a long time, Iraq (which in Arabic is spelled with what can only be described in English using its nearest equivalent: 'q') was written, even by scholars, as 'Irak'. Other examples of an Arabic **q** receiving such treatment are *souq* (market), often written 'souk'; *qasr* (castle), sometimes written 'kasr'; and the Cairo suburb of Doqqi, often written 'Dokki', although the Egyptian habit of swallowing 'q' and pronouncing the place name 'Do'i' is a dead giveaway. It's a bit like spelling English 'as she is spoke' – imagine the results if Australians, Americans, Scots and Londoners were all given free rein to write as they pronounce!

## PRONUNCIATION

Pronunciation of Arabic can be somewhat tongue-tying for someone unfamiliar with the intonation and combination of sounds. Pronounce the transliterated words and phrases slowly and clearly.

The following guide should help, but it isn't complete because the myriad rules governing pronunciation and vowel use are too extensive to be covered here.

### Vowels

<b>a</b>	as in 'had' (sometimes very short)
<b>aa</b>	like the long 'a' sound in 'ma'am'
<b>ā</b>	as the 'a' in 'father'
<b>e</b>	as in 'bet' (sometimes very short)
<b>ee</b>	as in 'beer', only softer
<b>i</b>	as in 'hit'
<b>o</b>	as in 'hot'
<b>ō</b>	as the 'o' in 'four'
<b>oo</b>	as in 'food'
<b>u</b>	as in 'put'

### Diphthongs

<b>ow</b>	as in 'how'
<b>ai</b>	as in 'aisle'
<b>ay</b>	as in 'day'

## Consonants

Pronunciation of all Arabic consonants is covered in the alphabet table, p542. Note that when double consonants occur in transliterations, each consonant is pronounced. For example, *il-Hammām* (bath-house) is pronounced 'il-ham-maam'.

## Other Sounds

Arabic has two sounds that are very tricky for non-Arabs to produce: the 'ayn and the glottal stop. The letter 'ayn represents a sound with no English equivalent that comes even close – it is similar to the glottal stop (which is not actually represented in the alphabet) but the muscles at the back of the throat are gagged more forcefully and air is allowed to escape, creating a sound that has been described as reminiscent of someone being strangled! In many transliteration systems 'ayn is represented by an opening quotation mark, and the glottal stop by a closing quotation mark. To make the transliterations in this language guide (and throughout the rest of the book) easier to use, we have not distinguished between the glottal stop and the 'ayn, using the closing quotation mark to represent both sounds. You'll find that Arab speakers will still understand you.

## ACCOMMODATION

<b>I'm looking for a ...</b>	<i>a-na ba-daw-war 'a-la ...</i>
<b>pension</b>	<i>ban-syon</i>
<b>hotel</b>	<i>fun-du'</i>
<b>youth hostel</b>	<i>bait sha-bāb</i>

### Where can I find a cheap hotel?

*'a-la-'ee fun-du' ra-khees fayn?*

### What is the address?

*il 'un-waan ey?*

### Could you write the address, please?

*mum-kin tik-tib/tik-ti-bee il 'un-waan min fad-lak? (m/f)*

### Do you have rooms available?

*'an-dak/'an-dik ghu-raf fad-ya? (m/f)*

### I'd like (a) ...

*a-na 'aiz/'ai-za ... (m/f)*

### I'd like to book (a) ...

*'aiz aH-gaz ... low sa-maHt (m)  
'aiz aH-gaz ... low  
sa-maH-tee (f)*

#### bed

*si-reer*

#### single room

*ghur-fa li waa-Hid*

#### double room

*ghur-fa bi si-reer muz-dow-ag*

#### room with two beds

*ghur-fa bi si-reer-ain*

room with a bathroom	<i>ghur-fa bi Ham-mām khās</i>
room with air-con/fan	<i>ghur-fa bi tak-yeef/mar-wa-Ha</i>
bed in a dorm	<i>ghur-fa mush-ta-ri-ka</i>

in the name of ...	<i>bi 'ism ...</i>
date	<i>ta-reekh</i>
from (date) to (date)	<i>min yom (...) li yom (...)</i>
credit card ...	<i>kre-dit kard ...</i>
number	<i>ra-qm</i>
expiry date	<i>ta-reekh al-'in-ti-ha'</i>

How much is it ...?	<i>bi-kam ...?</i>
per night	<i>li lai-la waa-Hid-a</i>
per person	<i>lil fard</i>

**Do you have any cheaper rooms?***fee ghur-raf ar-khas?***May I see it?***mum-kin a-shuf-ha?***Where is the bathroom?***fayn il Ham-mām?***I'm/We're leaving today.***(a-na Ham-shi/iH-na Ha-nim-shi) inn-har-da.***CONVERSATION & ESSENTIALS**

Arabic is more formal than English, especially with greetings; thus even the simplest greetings, such as 'hello', vary according to when and how they're used. In addition, each greeting requires a certain response that varies according to whether it is being said to a male, female or group of people.

<b>Hello.</b>	<i>sa-lām 'a-lay-kum</i>
(response)	<i>wa 'a-lay-kum es sa-lām</i>
<b>Hello/Welcome.</b>	<i>ah-lan wa sah-lan</i>
(response)	<i>ah-lan beek (to a man)</i>
	<i>ah-lan bee-kee (to a woman)</i>
	<i>ah-lan bee-kum (to a group)</i>
<b>Good morning.</b>	<i>sa-bāH al-khayr</i>
(response)	<i>sa-bāH an-noor</i>
<b>Good evening.</b>	<i>mi-sa' al-khayr</i>
(response)	<i>mi-sa' an-noor</i>
<b>Good night.</b>	<i>tis-baH 'a-la khayr (to a man)</i>
	<i>tis-baH-ee 'a-la khayr (to a woman)</i>
	<i>tis-baH-u 'a-la khayr (to a group)</i>
(response)	<i>wen-ta bi-khayr (to a man)</i>
	<i>wen-tee bi-khayr (to a woman)</i>
	<i>wen-too bi-khayr (to a group)</i>
<b>Goodbye.</b>	<i>ma'as sa-laa-ma</i>
<b>Yes.</b>	<i>ai-wa (or na-'am – more formal)</i>
<b>No.</b>	<i>la'</i>

**Please.**

*min fad-lak/fad-lik/fad-lu-kum (to man/woman/group; used when asking for something in a shop)*  
*low sa-maHt/sa-maH-tee/sa-maH-tu (to man/woman/group; similar, but more formal)*  
*tfad-dal/tfad-da-lee/tfad-da-loo (to man/woman/group; used when offering something or inviting someone)*  
*it-fad-dal/it-fad-da-lee/it-fad-da-loo (to man/woman/group; similar, or can mean 'Please, go ahead and do something')*

**Thank you (very much).***shu-kran (ga-zee-lan)***Excuse me.***'an iz-nak, es-maH-lee (to man)**'an iz-nik, es-ma-Hee-lee (to woman)**'an iz-nu-kum, es-ma-Hoo-lee (to group)***That's fine/You're welcome.***'af-wan (or al-'aff-u)***Sorry. (ie forgive me)***'as-sif***What's your name?***is-ma key? (to man)**is-mi key? (to woman)**is-mee ...***My name is ...****Pleased to meet you.***(when first meeting)**ta-shar-raf-na (pol)**fur-sa sa-'eed-a (inf)***How are you?***iz-zay-yak? (to a man)**iz-zay-yik? (to a woman)**iz-za-yu-kum? (to a group)**kway-yis il-Ham-du lil-lah**(to a man)**kway-yi-sa il-Ham-du lil-lah**(to a woman)**kway-seen il-Ham-du lil-lah**(to a group)***I'm fine.**

(On their own, *kwayyis/a'een* literally mean 'good' or 'fine', but they are rarely heard alone in response to 'How are you?')

**Where are you from?***en-ta/en-tee min-ain? (m/f)***I'm from ...***a-na min ...***I like/don't like ...***a-na ba-Hibb/ma-ba-Hib-bish***Just a minute.***da-'ee-'a waa-Hid-a*

A useful word to know is *imshee*, which means 'Go away'. Use this at the Pyramids or at other tourist sites when you are being besieged by children. Don't use it on adults; instead, just say, *la' shukran* (No thanks).

**DIRECTIONS****Where is ...?***fayn ...?***Go straight ahead.***'a-la too!*

## SIGNS

Entrance	مدخل
Exit	خروج
Open	مفتوح
Closed	مغلق
Prohibited	ممنوع
Information	معلومات
Hospital	مستشفى
Police	شرطة
Men's Toilet	حمام للرجال
Women's Toilet	حمام للنساء

Turn left.  
Turn right.  
at the (next) corner  
at the traffic lights  
behind  
in front of  
far (from)  
near (to)  
opposite

How-id shi-māl  
How-id yi-meen  
'al-al nas-ya (il-li gai-ya)  
'and il i-shā-ra  
wa-ra  
'ud-daam  
ba-'eed ('an)  
'u-ra-yib (min)  
'u-sād

here  
there  
this address  
north  
south  
east  
west

hi-na  
hi-naak  
al-'an-waan da  
shi-maal  
ga-noob  
shark  
gharb

beach  
bridge  
castle  
my hotel  
island  
main square  
mosque  
museum  
old city  
palace  
pyramids  
The Pyramids (of Giza)  
ruins  
sea  
square  
street  
tower  
university  
village

al blaaj/ash-shā-ti  
ku-bri  
al-'a  
il fun-duq be-taa-'ee  
ga-zee-ra  
al-mai-daan ar-ra-'ee-si  
al-gaa-me'  
al-mat-Haf  
al-me-dee-na al-'a-dee-ma  
al-'asr  
ah-ra-māt  
al-ah-rām  
a-sār  
baHr  
mi-daan  
ash-shaa-'ri'  
burg  
al-ga-m'a  
al-qar-ya

## HEALTH

I'm ill.  
My friend is ill.  
It hurts here.

a-na 'ai-yaan/a (m/f)  
sa-dee-qi 'ai-yaan  
bi-yuw-ga-'ni hi-na

I'm ...  
asthmatic  
diabetic  
epileptic

'an-dee ...  
az-mit ra-boob  
is suk-kar  
sa-ra'

I'm allergic ...  
to antibiotics  
to aspirin  
to penicillin  
to bees  
to nuts

'an-dee Ha-sa-siy-ya ...  
min mu-dād Hai-o-wi  
min as-bi-reen  
min bi-ni-si-leen  
min naHl  
min mu-kas-sar-āt

antiseptic  
aspirin  
condoms  
contraceptive  
diarrhoea  
fever  
headache  
hospital  
medicine  
pharmacy  
pregnant  
prescription  
sanitary napkins  
stomach ache  
sunblock cream  
tampons

mu-tah-hir  
as-bir-een  
'aa-zil za-ka-ry (ka-boot, slang)  
wa-sā-'il man-a' il HamI  
is-haal  
su-khao-na  
su-dā'  
mus-tash-fa  
dow-a  
ag-za-khaa-na or sai-da-liy-ya  
Haa-mel  
ro-shet-ta  
fu-wat sa-Hiy-ya  
wa-ga' fil bātñ  
kreym di dish-shams  
tam-bax

## EMERGENCIES

Help!  
There's been an  
accident.  
I'm lost.  
Go away!  
Call a doctor!

el-Ha'-neel  
fee Had-sa!

Call the police!  
I've been robbed.  
Where are the  
toilets?

a-na tā-yih/tāy-ha (m/f)  
im-shee!  
i-tas-sal bi-dok-toor! (m)  
i-tas-sal-ee bi-dok-toor! (f)  
i-tas-sal bil-bo-lee!  
a-na it-sa-ra't  
fayn at-twa-let?

## LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Do you speak English?

en-ta bi-tit-kal-lim in-gee-zee? (to a man)  
en-tee bi-tit-kal-li-mee in-gee-zee? (to a woman)

Does anyone here speak English?

fee Hadd bi-yit-kal-lim in-gee-zee?

How do you say ... in Egyptian Arabic?

iz-zai a-'ool ... bil 'a-ra-bee?

What does ... mean?

ya-'ni ... ey?

I understand.

a-na faa-hem/fah-ma (m/f)

**I don't understand.***a-na mish faa-hem/fah-ma (m/f)***Please write it down.***mum-kin tik-ti-buh/tik-ti-beeh? (m/f)***Can you show me (on the map)?***mum-kin ti-war-ree-ni ('al-al kha-ree-ta)?***NUMBERS**

Arabic numerals are simple to learn and, unlike the written language, run from left to right. Pay attention to the order of the words in numbers from 21 to 99. When followed by a noun, the pronunciation of *miyya* changes to *meet* for the numbers 100 and 300–900, and the noun is always used in its singular form.

0	sifr	٠
1	waa-Hid	١
2	it-nayn	٢
3	ta-laa-ta	٣
4	ar-ba'a	٤
5	kham-sa	٥
6	sit-ta	٦
7	sa-b'a	٧
8	ta-man-ya	٨
9	ti-s'a	٩
10	'ash-a-ra	١٠
11	Hid-'ash-ar	١١
12	it-n'ash-ar	١٢
13	ta-lat-t'ash-ar	١٣
14	ar-ba'-t'ash-ar	١٤
15	kha-mas-t'ash-ar	١٥
16	sit-t'ash-ar	١٦
17	sa-ba'-t'ash-ar	١٧
18	ta-man-t'ash-ar	١٨
19	ti-sa'-t'ash-ar	١٩
20	'ish-reen	٢٠
21	waa-Hid wi 'ish-reen	٢١
22	it-nayn wi 'ish-reen	٢٢
30	ta-la-teen	٣٠
40	ar-ba'-een	٤٠
50	kham-seen	٥٠
60	sit-teen	٦٠
70	sab'-een	٧٠
80	ta-ma-neen	٨٠
90	tisa'-een	٩٠
100	miyya (meet before a noun)	١٠٠
200	mi-tayn	٢٠٠
1000	'alf	١٠٠٠
2000	'alf-ayn	٢٠٠٠

How many? kam waa-Hid?

**PAPERWORK**

name	ism
nationality	gin-siy-ya
date/place of birth	ta-reekh/ma-Hal il mi-laad
sex (gender)	gins
passport	bas-boor or gow-aaz is sa-far
visa	ta'-shee-ra

**QUESTION WORDS**

Who?	meen?
What?	ey?
When?	im-ta?
Where?	fayn?
How?	iz-zay?
Which?	ayy?

**SHOPPING & SERVICES**

I'd like to buy ...	'aiz/'ai-za ash-ti-ri ... (m/f)
How much is it?	bi-kam da?
I don't like it.	mish 'a-gib-ni
May I look at it?	mum-kin a-shoo-fu?
I'm just looking.	bat-far-rag bas
It's cheap.	da ra-khees
It's too expensive.	da ghah-lee 'ow-ee
No more than ...	mish ak-tar min ...
I'll take it.	'a-khud-ha

Can you give me ...?	mum-kin tid-dee-ni ...?
a discount	takh-feed
a good price	sa'r kway-yis

Do you accept ...?	bi-ta-khud ...? (m)
	bi-ta-khu-dee ...? (f)
credit cards	kre-dit kard
traveller cheques	sheek si-yaa-Hi

more	ak-tar
less	a'-all
smaller	as-ghar
bigger	ak-bar

I'm looking for ...	a-na ba-dow-war 'a-la
a bank	bank
the bazaar/market	as-sooq
the city centre	wust al-ba-lad
the (...) embassy	as-si-fa-ra (...)
the post office	al-boos-ta/mak-tab al-ba-reen
the telephone	sen-traal it-te-li-fo-naat
centre	
the tourist office	mak-tab as-si-yaa-Ha

I want to change ...	a-na 'aiz/'ai-za u-sar-raf ... (m/f)
money	fu-loos
travellers cheques	shee-kaat si-ya-Hiy-ya

## TIME & DATES

**What time is it?**

**It's (8) o'clock.**

**in the morning**

**in the afternoon**

**in the evening**

**today**

**tomorrow**

**yesterday**

**day**

**month**

**week**

**year**

**early**

**late**

**daily**

*saa-'a kam?*

*saa'a (ta-man-ya)*

*sa-ba-Han*

*ba'-d id duhr*

*bil layl*

*inn-har-da*

*bo-kra*

*im-be-riH*

*yom*

*shahr*

*us-bu-'a*

*sa-na*

*ba-dree*

*mit-'akh-ar*

*kull yom*

**Monday**

**Tuesday**

**Wednesday**

**Thursday**

**Friday**

**Saturday**

**Sunday**

*(yom) al- it-nayn*

*(yom) at-ta-laaf*

*(yom) al-ar-ba'a*

*(yom) al-kha-mees*

*(yom) al-gu-m'a*

*(yom) as-sabt*

*(yom) al-Hadd*

**January**

**February**

**March**

**April**

**May**

**June**

**July**

**August**

**September**

**October**

**November**

**December**

*ya-nay-ir*

*fi-bra-yir*

*maa-ris*

*ab-reel*

*ma-yu*

*yun-yu*

*yul-yu*

*a-ghus-tus*

*sib-tim-bir*

*'uk-too-bir*

*nu-fim-bir*

*di-sim-bir*

## TRANSPORT

### Public Transport

**When does the ...**

**leave/arrive?**

*im-ta qi-yaam/wu-suul ...?*

**boat**

*al-mar-kib*

**bus**

*al-o-to-bees*

**ferry**

*ma'a-diy-ya*

**plane**

*al-tay-yā-ra*

**train**

*al-'atr*

**I'd like a ... ticket.**

*'ayz/'ayz-a ... taz-kar-it (m/f)*

**one-way**

*zi-haab*

**return**

*'ow-da*

**1st-class**

*da-ra-ga oo-la*

**2nd-class**

*da-ra-ga tan-ya*

**I want to go to ...**

*a-na 'aiz/'ai-za a-rooH ... (m/f)*

**The train has been cancelled/delayed.**

*il-'atr it-'akh-khar/it-la-gha*

**Which bus goes to ...?**

*o-to-bees nim-ra kam ye-rooH ...?*

**Does this bus go to ...?**

*al-o-to-bees da ye-rooH ...?*

**Please tell me when we arrive in ...**

*min fad-lak, 'ul-lee em-ta Ha-noo-sel ...*

**What is the fare to ...?**

*bi-kam at-taz-ka-ra li ...?*

**Stop here, please.**

*wa-'if hi-na, min fad-lak*

**Wait!**

*is-tan-na!*

**the first**

*il aw-wil/oo-la (m/f)*

**the last**

*il aa-khir*

**the next**

*il-li gayy*

**airport**

*ma-tār*

**bus station**

*ma-Hat-tat a-lo-to-bees*

**bus stop**

*maw-'if a-lo-to-bees*

**city**

*al-me-dee-na*

**platform number**

*ra-seef nim-ra*

**station**

*al-ma-Hat-ta*

**ticket office**

*mak-tab at-ta-zaa-ker*

**timetable**

*gad-wal*

**train station**

*ma-Hat-tat al-'atr*

## Private Transport

**I'd like to hire**

*'aiz/'ai-za a-'ag-gār ... (m/f)*

**a/an ...**

**car**

*say-yā-ra/'a-ra-biy-ya*

**4WD**

*'a-ra-biy-yet gharz/jeep*

**motorbike**

*mu-tu-sikl*

**bicycle**

*'a-ga-la*

**camel**

*ga-mal*

**donkey**

*Hu-mār*

**horse**

*Hu-sān*

**Is this the road to ...?**

*i-ta-ree' da yi-was-sil li ...?*

**(How long) Can I park here?**

*mum-kin ar-kin hi-na (ad-di ay)?*

**Where do I pay?**

*ad-fa'a fayn?*

**I need a mechanic.**

*miH-taag/miH-taa-ga me-ka-nee-ki (m/f)*

**The car/motorbike has broken down (at ...)**

*il 'a-ra-biy-ya/mu-tu-sikl 'i-til 'and ...*

**The car/motorbike won't start.**

*il 'a-ra-biy-ya/mu-tu-sikl mish bit-door*

**I have a flat tyre.**

il ka-witsh nay-im

**I've run out of petrol.**

il ben-zeen khi-lis

**I've had an accident.**

kaan 'an-dee Had-sa

**Where's a service station?**

fayn ma-Hat-tet ben-zeen?

**Please fill it up.**

faw-wil-ha, low sa-maHt

**I'd like (30) litres.**

'aiz/'ai-za (ta-la-teen) litr (m/f)

**diesel**

so-lār

**leaded petrol**

ta-ma-neen (regular)

ti-sa-'een (super)

**unleaded petrol**

min ghair ru-sās or

kham-sa wa ti-sa-'een

**TRAVEL WITH CHILDREN****Is there a/an ...?**

fee ...?

**I need a/an ....**

'aiz/'ai-za ... (m/f)

**car baby seat**

kur-si 'a-ra-biy-ya li tiftl

**child-minding**

khd-mat ra-'ai-it tiftl

**service****children's menu**

me-nai lil at-fāl

**nappies/diapers**

bam-bers (brand name)

**formula (milk)**

la-ban mu-ga-faf lil bay-bi

**(English-speaking)**

ga-lis-at at-fāl (bi-tit-kall-im

**babysitter**

in-gee-zee)

**highchair**

kur-si lil at-fāl

**potty**

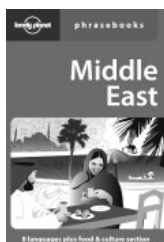
as-riy-ya

**Do you mind if I breastfeed here?**

mum-kin a-rad-da-'a hi-na?

**Are children allowed?**

mas-mooH bis-ti-Haab il at-fāl?



Also available from Lonely Planet:  
*Egyptian Arabic and Middle East Phrasebook*



# Glossary

For a glossary containing Pharaonic terms, see p60, and for food and drink terms, see p100.

**abd** – servant of  
**abeyya** – woman's gown  
**abu** – father, saint  
**ahwa** – coffee, coffeehouse  
**ain** – well, spring  
**al-jeel** – a type of music characterised by a hand-clapping rhythm overlaid with a catchy vocal; literally 'the generation'

**ba'al** – grocer  
**bab** – gate or door  
**baksheesh** – alms, tip  
**baladi** – local, rural  
**bawwab** – doorman  
**beit** – house  
**bey** – term of respect  
**bir** – spring, well  
**burg** – tower  
**bustan** – walled garden

**calèche** – horse-drawn carriage  
**caravanserai** – merchants' inn  
**careta** – donkey cart

**dahabiyya** – houseboat  
**darb** – track, street  
**deir** – monastery, convent  
**domina** – dominoes

**effendi** – gentleman  
**eid** – Islamic feast  
**emir** – Islamic ruler, military commander or governor; literally 'prince'

**fellah** – (plural: fellaheen) peasant farmer or agricultural worker who makes up the majority of Egypt's population; 'fellah' literally means ploughman or tiller of the soil  
**filoos** – money

**galabiyya** – man's full-length robe  
**gebel** – mountain  
**gezira** – island  
**ghawazee** – cast of dancers who travelled with storytellers and poets; they performed publicly or for hire  
**guinay** – pound (currency)

**haikal** – altar area  
**haji** – a man who has made the *hajj* to Mecca (female: *hajia*)  
**hajj** – pilgrimage to Mecca; all Muslims should make the journey at least once in their lifetime  
**hammam** – bathhouse  
**hantour** – horse-drawn carriage  
**haram** – anything forbidden by Islamic law  
**hegab** – woman's headscarf  
**Hejira** – Islamic calendar; Mohammed's flight from Mecca to Medina in AD 622

**ibn** – son of  
**iconostasis** – screen with doors and icons set in tiers, used in Eastern Christian churches  
**iftar** – breaking the fast after sundown during the month of *Ramadan*  
**iwān** – vaulted hall, opening into a central court in a *madrasa* or a mosque

**kershef** – building material made of large chunks of salt mixed with rock and plastered in local clay  
**khamzin** – a dry, hot wind from the Western Desert  
**khan** – another name for a *caravanserai*  
**khanqah** – *Sufi* monastery  
**khedive** – Egyptian viceroy under Ottoman suzerainty  
**khwaga** – foreigner  
**kineesa** – church  
**kuttab** – Quranic school

**leila kebira** – 'big night'; climax of a *moulid*  
**lokanda** – basic, cheap place to doss

**ma'abad** – temple  
**madrasa** – school, especially one associated with a mosque  
**mahattat** – station  
**makwagee** – laundry man  
**malqaf** – angled wind catchers on the roof that direct the prevailing northerly breezes down into the building  
**mammisi** – birthhouse  
**maristan** – hospital  
**mashrabiyya** – ornate carved wooden panel or screen; a feature of Islamic architecture  
**mastaba** – mud-brick structure in the shape of a bench above tombs that was the basis for later pyramids; Arabic word for 'bench'  
**matar** – airport  
**mawladiyya** – people who provide the infrastructure for *moulids*

**midan** – town or city square  
**mihrab** – niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca  
**minbar** – pulpit in a mosque  
**Misr** – Egypt (also means ‘Cairo’)  
**moulid** – festival  
**muezzin** – mosque official who calls the faithful to prayer  
**mufti** – Muslim legal expert or leader of the religious community  
**mugzzabin** – *Sufi* followers who participate in *zikrs*  
**muqarnas** – stalactite-like stone carving used to decorate doorways and window recesses

**nahr** – river  
**nai** – reed pipe

**oud** – a type of lute

**piastre** – Egyptian currency; one Egyptian pound consists of 100 piastres

**qa’a** – reception room  
**qala’a** – fortress  
**qasa’id** – long poems  
**qasr** – castle or palace

**Ramadan** – the ninth month of the lunar Islamic calendar during which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset  
**ras** – headland

**sabil** – public drinking fountain  
**sakia** – water wheel  
**sandale** – modified felucca  
**servees** – service taxi  
**shaabi** – music of the working class  
**shadouf** – water wheel used for irrigation purposes  
**sharia** – road or street  
**sharm** – bay  
**sheesha** – water pipe  
**sig** – a game played in the dirt with clay balls or seeds  
**souq** – market  
**speos** – rock-cut tomb or chapel  
**Sufi** – follower of any Islamic mystical order that emphasises dancing, chanting and trances to attain unity with God

**tabla** – small hand-held drum  
**tahtib** – male dance performed with wooden staves  
**tarboosh** – the hat known elsewhere as a fez  
**tasreeh** – permit for camping  
**towla** – backgammon

**ulema** – group of Muslim scholars or religious leaders; a member of this group  
**umm** – mother of

**wadi** – desert watercourse, dry except in the rainy season  
**waha** – oasis  
**wikala** – another name for a *caravanserai*

**zkr** – long sessions of dancing, chanting and swaying usually carried out by *Sufi mugzzabin* to achieve oneness with God

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