

Destination Egypt

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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 dahabiyas, 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 & 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* (falafel), 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: ££12 to ££18

Meal in a good restaurant: ££60 to ££120

Glass of tea: ££2

Short taxi hop: ££6

Average museum admission: ££30

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 (Description de l'Egypte)
- www.touregypt.net (Egypt: The Complete Guide)
- www.lonelyplanet.com (Lonely Planet)
- www.red-sea.com (Red Sea Guide & Search Engine)
- www.sis.gov.eg (State Information Service)
- www.thebanmappingproject.com (Theban Mapping Project)
- www.seat61.com (The Man in Seat 61)

Cleopatra (1963) starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton almost 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) 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) 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) 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) 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) 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) The source for all train-related inquiries in Egypt as well as the rest of the world.

Theban Mapping Project (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

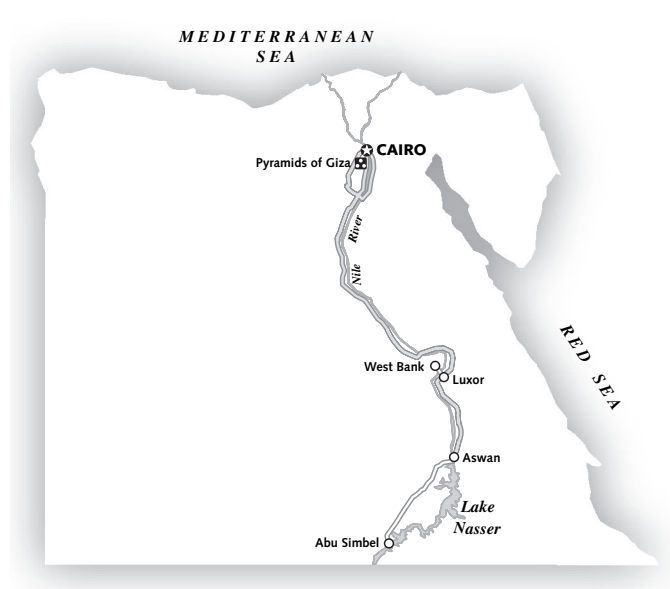
WHISTLE-STOP NILE TOUR One to Two Weeks/Cairo to Abu Simbel

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

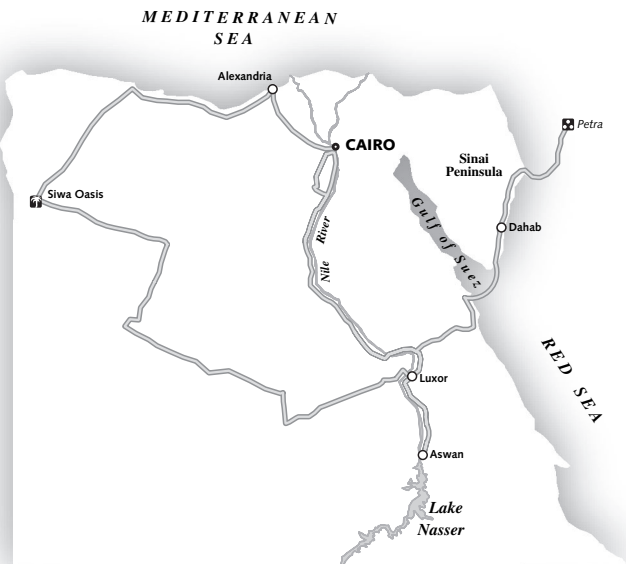
In a month or more you could cover most of Egypt's main sights, and still have time to explore the Western Desert and even southern Jordan.

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.

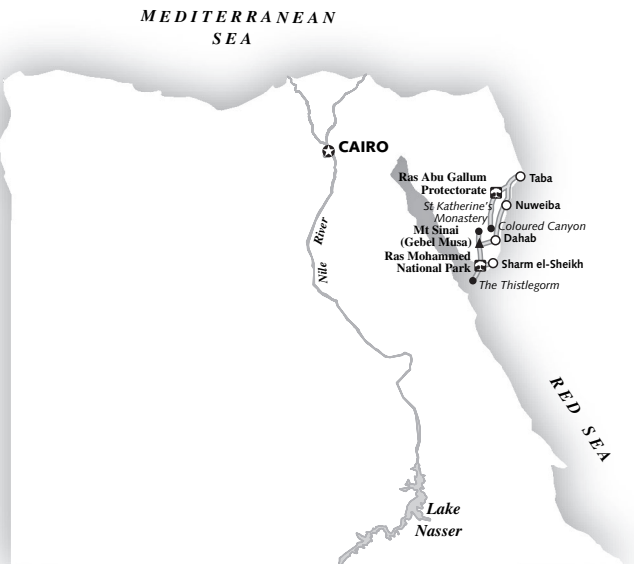
Starting in **Sharm el-Sheikh** (p462), the gateway to Sinai, hop on a bus to **Dahab** (p472), a laid-back town dubbed the 'Koh Samui of the Middle East'. From here, you can easily arrange all of your camel and jeep safaris to such natural wonders as the **Coloured Canyon** (p475) the **Ras Abu Gallum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

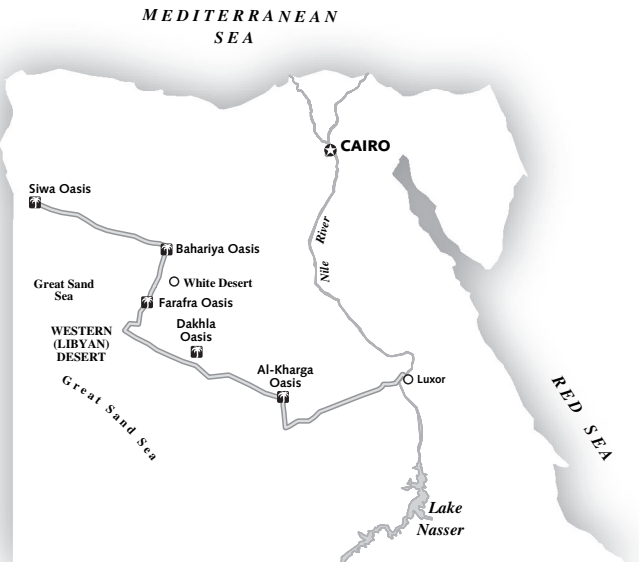
Taking inspiration from films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The English Patient*, would-be desert rovers should opt for two weeks of getting sand-happy in the amazing **Western Desert** (p327).

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 **Farafra 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 getting 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



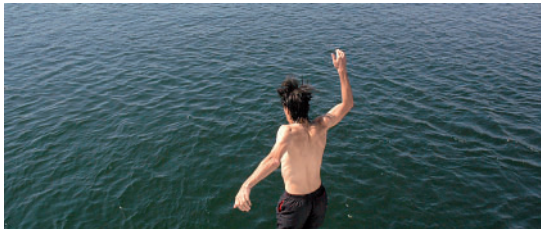
MATTHEW D FIRESTONE *Coordinating Author*

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 technical colour 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).

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