

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)



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 Zaghoul; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu) and a **Bank of Alexandria** (Sharia Sa'ad Zaghoul, just off Midan al-Gomhuriyya; ☎ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu).

Sleeping & Eating

Semiramis Hotel (☎ 232 2092; fax 231 6017; Sharia Safiyya Zaghoul; 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 cornice 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

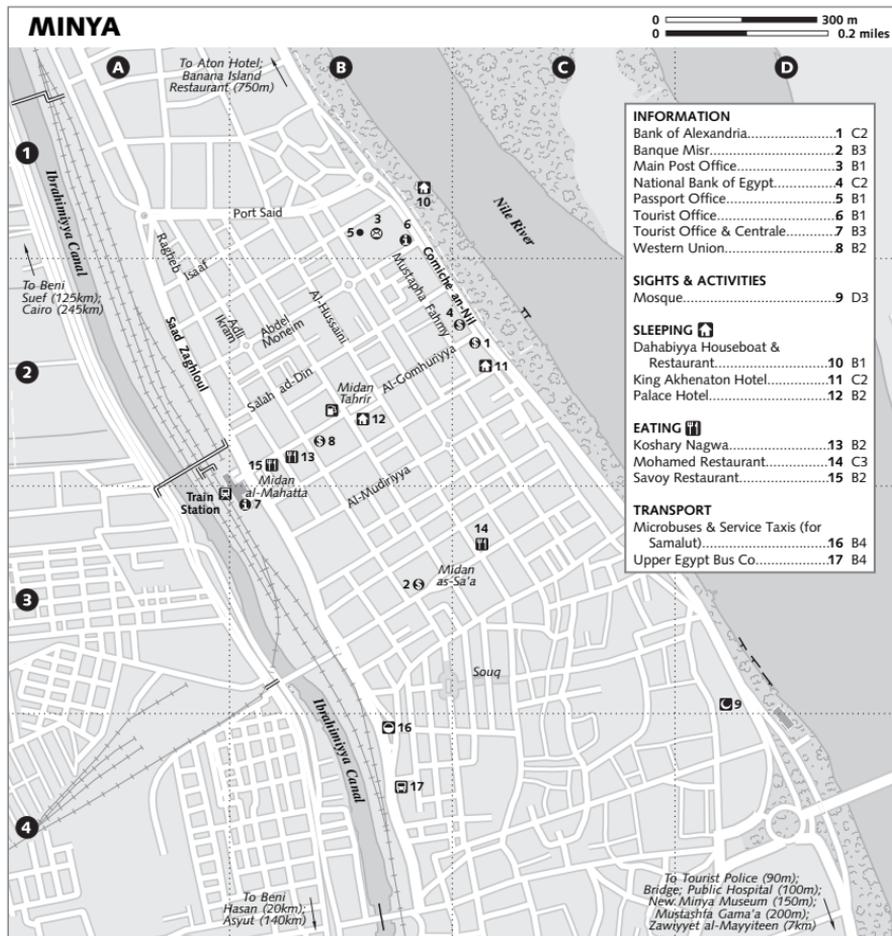
EMERGENCY

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 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...'.
NILE VALLEY: BENI SUEF TO QENA

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 micro-bus 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 baksheesh.

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 E£100 to E£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 E£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.

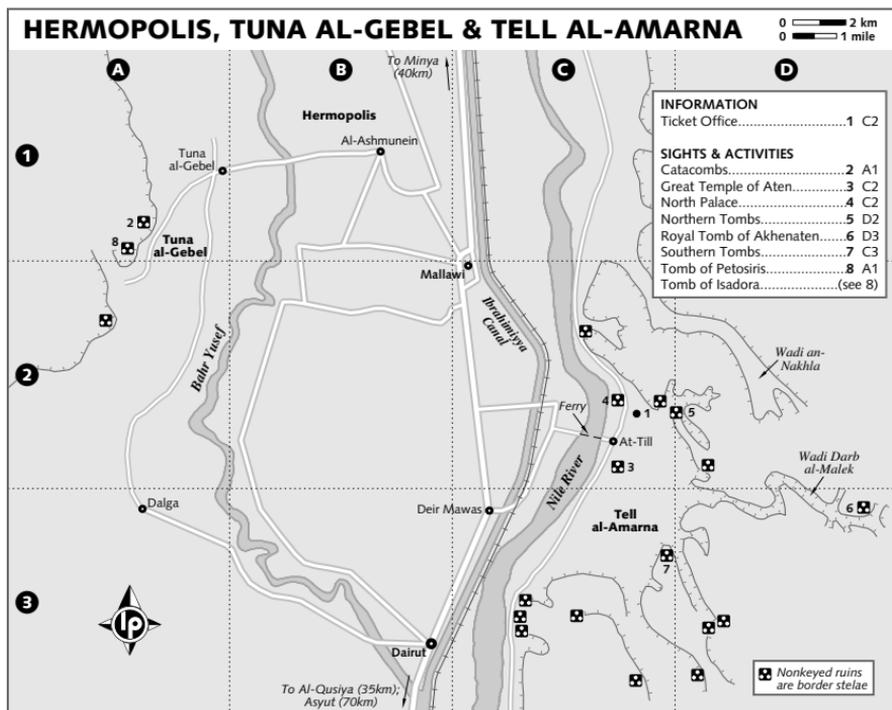
There used to be a bus for touring the site but it was not running at the time of our visit. As the site is so large, the only viable way of visiting is to come by private taxi or with your own car.

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 Tiyi was Nefertiti's wet nurse. The images here reflect the couple's importance, with scenes including Ay and Tiyi 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 E£15). Expect to pay as much as E£100 to E£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-Muharraq. 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-Muharraq. 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-Muharraq, 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.

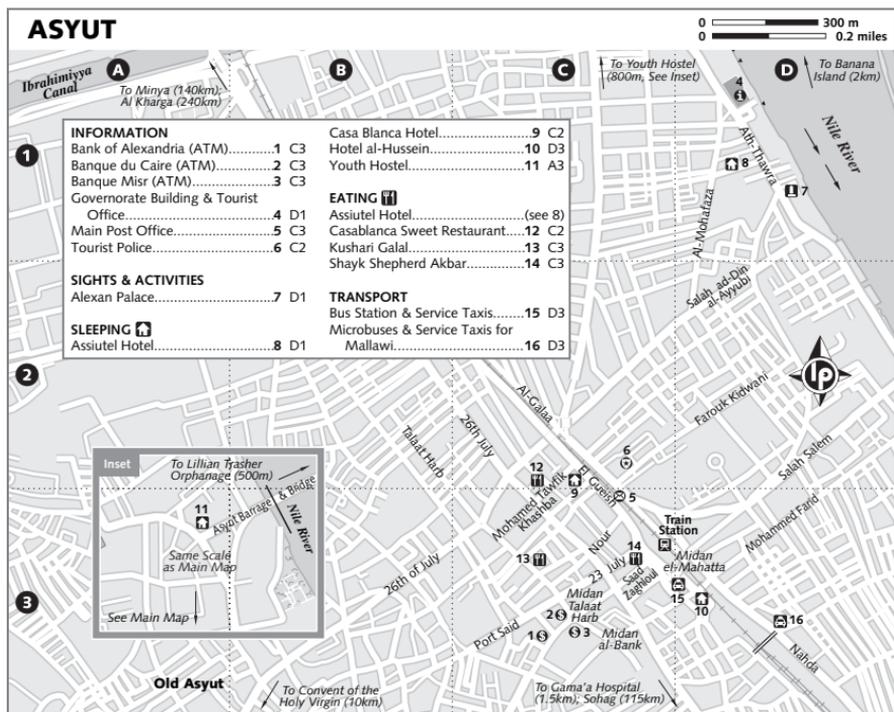
Few vehicles from Al-Qusiya go out to the Tombs of Mir, so you'll have to hire a taxi to take you there. Expect to pay ££25 to ££35, depending on your bargaining skills and how long you spend at the site. Ideally, you could combine this with a visit to the monastery.

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.



Information

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 123)

Police (☎ 122)

Tourist police (☎ 232 3328; Sharia Farouk Kidwani)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Gama'a Hospital (☎ 233 4500; University of Asyut)

MONEY

Bank of Alexandria (Sharia Port Said; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-8pm Sun-Thu) Has an ATM.

Banque du Caire (Midan Talaat Harb; ☎ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu) Has an ATM.

Banque Misr (Midan Talaat Harb; ☎ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu) Has an ATM.

POST

Main post office (Sharia Nahda; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 231 0010; 1st fl, Governorate Bldg, Sharia ath-Thawra; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Sun-Thu) The very welcoming staff at the tourist office can provide maps of the city and help arrange onward travel.

Sights

For a city of such history, Asyut has surprisingly little to show for itself, partly because most of the city still remains unexcavated and the ancient tombs in the hills on the edge of the irrigation are currently unvisited.

Until the Nile-side **Alexan Palace**, one of the city's finest 19th-century buildings, has been renovated and opened, the most accessible monument to Asyut's period of wealth is the **Asyut barrage**. Built over the Nile between 1898 and 1902 to regulate the flow of water into the Ibrahimiyya Canal and assure irrigation of the valley as far north as Beni Suef, it also serves as a bridge across the Nile. As the barrage still has strategic importance, photography is forbidden, so you should try to keep your camera out of sight.

On the east bank, 200m beyond the barrage, is the **Lillian Trasher Orphanage**. American-born Lillian Trasher came to Egypt in 1910 at the age of 23. The following year she founded an orphanage in Asyut and stayed until her death in 1961. The orphanage is a place of pride in a city with a heavy concentration of Copts. Visitors are welcome,

donations appreciated. Microbuses from the centre of town will take you close for 50pt; a taxi will cost E£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 E£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 Mouldid (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 E£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 E£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 E£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 E£15 to E£25), as well as one of Asyut's only bars.

Casa Blanca Hotel (☎ 233 7762; fax 233 1600; Sharia Mohammed Tawfiq Khashba; s/d E£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 E£4) The most reliable carbohydrate intake in town. Delicious, convenient and open late.

Casablanca Sweet Restaurant (☎ 234 2727; Sharia Tawfek Khashba; dishes E£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 E£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 E£39/22, four to five hours) and Minya (E£16/8, one hour), and about 10 daily south to Luxor (E£44/30, five to six hours) and Aswan (E£54/36, eight to nine hours). All stop in Sohag (E£21/14, one to two hours) and Qena (E£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

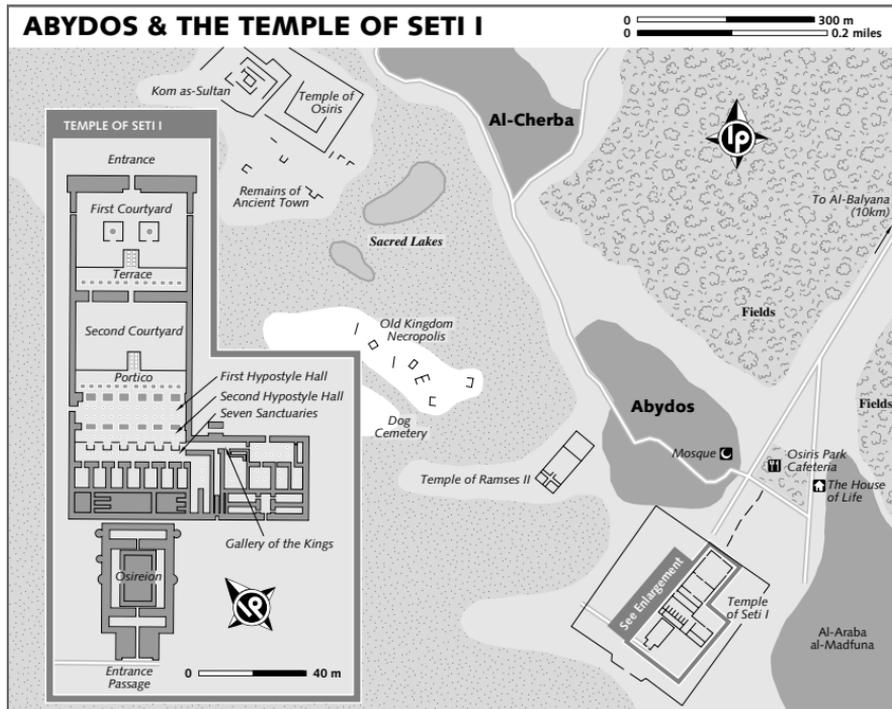
As the main cult centre of Osiris, god of the dead, **Abydos** (ancient name Ibdj; adult/student ££25/15; ☎ 7am–6pm) was *the* place to be buried in ancient Egypt. It was used as a necropolis from predynastic to Christian times (c 4000 BC–AD 600), more than 4500 years of constant use. The area now known 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; 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 (E£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 E£16/13, three hours).

Expect to be picked up by the police and put into a private taxi to the temple (return about E£40 to E£50). There is a train back to Luxor at 5pm (3rd class only E£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).

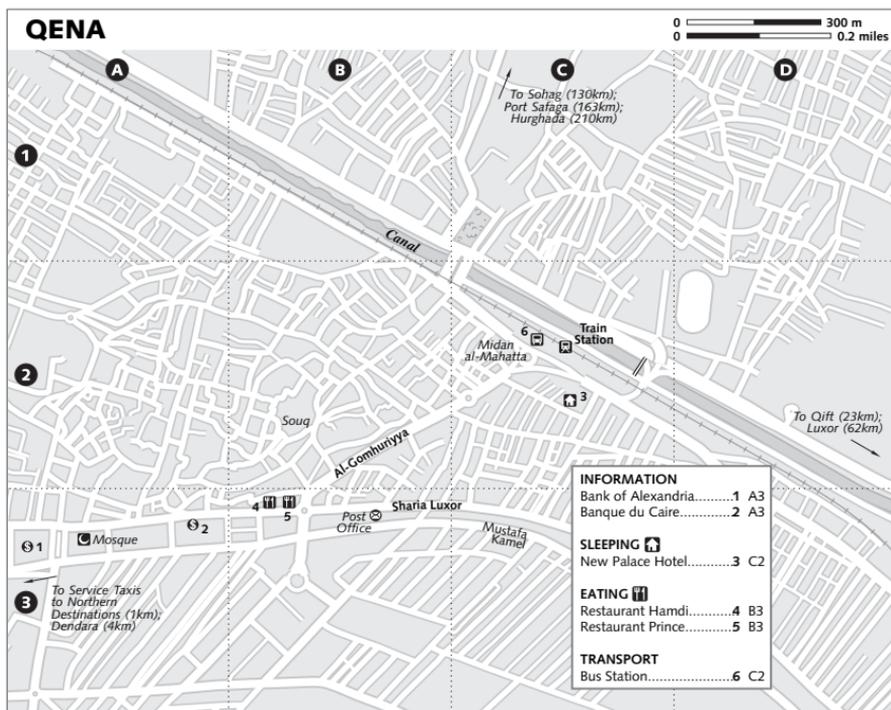
Dendara

Although built at the very end of the Pharaonic period, the **Temple of Hathor** (adult/student E£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.

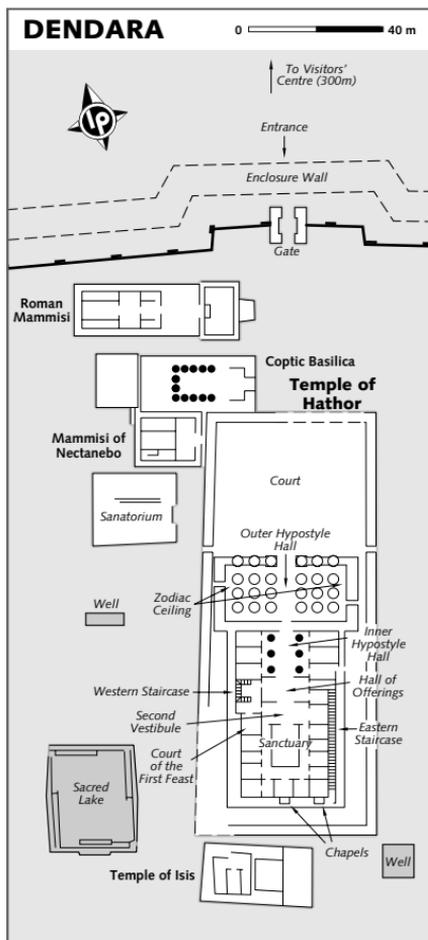
Beyond the towering gateway and mud walls, the temple was built on a slight rise.

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**.

Dendara 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 Dendara 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 Dendara should cost ££5, but with police help is currently double the rate.